



A series of 29 booklets
documenting workshops
held at the Fifth
International Conference
on Adult Education

CONFINTEA
HAMBURG
1997

3c Social development

Literacy, education and social development



This publication has been produced by the UNESCO Institute for Education within the context of the follow-up to the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), held in Hamburg in 1997.

Readers are reminded that the points of view, selection of facts, and the opinions expressed in the booklets are those that were raised by panellists, speakers and participants during the workshop sessions and therefore do not necessarily coincide with official positions of the UNESCO or of the UNESCO Institute for Education Hamburg. The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the UNESCO Secretariat concerning the legal status of any country or territory, or its authorities, or concerning the delimitations of the frontiers of any country or territory.

Theme 3: Ensuring universal rights to literacy and basic education

Booklets under this theme:

- 3a Literacy in the world and its major regions
- 3b Literacy and learning strategies
- 3c Literacy, education and social development
- 3d Literacy research, evaluation and statistics
- 3e Literacy in multilingual/intercultural settings
- 3f Literacy and technology
- 3g Literacy for tomorrow

UNESCO Institute for Education
Feldbrunnenstrasse 58
D-20148 Hamburg
Germany

Tel.: (+49 40) 44 80 41-0

Fax: (+49 40) 410 77 23

e-mail: uie@unesco.org

homepage: <http://www.education.unesco.org/uie>

ISBN 92 820 10 89-9

Design by Matthew Partridge, Hamburg

Printed by Druckerei Seemann, Hamburg

1999





Foreword

In July 1997 the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education was held in Hamburg, organised by UNESCO and in particular the UNESCO Institute for Education, the agency's specialist centre on adult learning policy and research. Approximately 1500 delegates attended from all regions of the world, with representatives of 140 member states and some 400 NGOs. In addition to the work of the commissions and plenary which debated the official documents of the Conference **The Hamburg Declaration** and **The Agenda for the Future**, there were 33 workshops organised around the themes and sub-themes of the Conference.

As part of its CONFINTEA follow-up strategy, the UNESCO Institute for Education has produced this series of 29 booklets based on the presentations and discussions held during the Conference. The recordings of all the workshops were transcribed and synthesized over one year, edited, and then formatted and designed. A tremendous amount of work has gone into this process. Linda King, coordinator of the monitoring and information strategy for CONFINTEA, was responsible for overseeing the whole process. Madhu Singh, senior research specialist at UIE, undertook the mammoth task of writing almost all the booklets based on an analysis of the sessions. She was helped in the later stages by Gonzalo Retamal, Uta Papen and Linda King. Christopher McIntosh was technical editor, Matthew Partridge designed the layout and Janna Lowrey was both transcriber and translator.

The booklets are intended to draw out the central issues and concerns of each of the CONFINTEA workshops. They are the memory of an event that marked an important watershed in the field of adult learning. We hope that they will be of use both to those who were able to attend CONFINTEA V and those who were not. We look forward to your comments, feedback and continuing collaboration with the UNESCO Institute for Education.

Paul Bélanger,
Director, UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg
and Secretary General of CONFINTEA

Literacy, education and social development

Introduction

This booklet reflects on some of the issues raised at the workshop entitled “Literacy, Education and Social Development” during the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, held in Hamburg in 1997. The workshop challenged the traditional paradigm under which adult literacy is considered primarily as an individual skill and empowering in itself. Rather, literacy needs to be seen as a part of social development. Thus, while advancing uses of literacy, it will be necessary to take into account the dialectics between local culture, societal development and the consolidation of a literate environment.

The panel featured Mamadou Ndoeye, Minister of Basic Education, Literacy and National Languages, Senegal; Malini Ghose, NIRANTAR, a centre for women and education, India; Laila Kamal, Community and International Development, Egypt; Georg Elwert, Free University Berlin, Germany; and David Olson, University of Toronto, Canada. Panellists examined the types and uses of literacy in various aspects of social development, showing how the development of literacy depends critically upon its actual and perceived uses in local vernacular contexts as well in national practices and institutions.

The reason why literacy programmes and projects often fail to secure literate competencies is that they rely upon a notion of literacy that is abstracted from social contexts and cultural practices. People feel motivated to acquire literacy in situations where social relations and institutions require the use of reading and writing. In such a context, literate competencies permit individuals and communities to participate in the shaping of their development.

Social development is the capacity of individuals and communities to take upon themselves the direction of their own development. The notion of human resource development becomes central in social development. But there is no causal relationship between education and social development. The old formulation that literacy leads to development is quite different from the new notion that the workshop has tried to promote, namely that literacy is embedded in social practice and has social meanings. Approaching the question of literacy from this perspective is not to consider education as an independent commodity, but to analyse carefully the literate competencies needed in a specific society and to link education and literacy to the social practices people are involved in. Only by approaching literacy in this manner can adult literacy be seen as integral to the development process.

The making of literate societies

In order to understand the relationship between literacy, education and social development, it is necessary to raise the following questions:

- How do societies become literate? How is literacy related to the growth of social complexity and the emergence of institutions? What kinds of social practice create a demand for the acquisition of literacy? Under what conditions does literacy become irrelevant?
- What is the relationship between individual learning and societal context? In what way can the acquisition of literacy contribute to social processes like empowerment, economic development, political and legal accountability?
- What is the role of languages, local knowledge and different types of scripts in the making of a literate society?

The new literacy paradigm

A new literacy paradigm is emerging out of research and practice in adult literacy. It has been shown that, in order to bring about cultural and social transformation, literacy must be seen as an activity embedded in social and cultural practice. Literacy acquisition is concerned with participation in a literate environment at the individual, local, national and regional levels. It is therefore no longer appropriate to regard illiteracy simply as a deficit or to speak of "eradicating illiteracy". The acquisition and use of literacy has to be seen as part of a long-term process, in which a community or a society seeks to effect its own cultural and social transformation. Thus there is a need to revise the traditional paradigm which considered literacy as input for development and which tended to see the issue primarily in terms of measurable literacy skills to be attained and the numbers to be made literate.

The new paradigm is based on the assumption that it is possible for even small communities to begin their own process of literacy, making it part of the fabric of their own way of life. Furthermore, this new approach implies the participation of both literate and non-literates in a textual community.

Societal literacy

Central to the new paradigm is the notion of societal literacy. This means that reading and writing become meaningful social practices when they are backed by social institutions that give legitimacy to written documents. The use of writing and reading has consequences for the way economic relations are formalised. In a literate society, written contracts are legitimised by legal institutions and procedures. Therefore literacy should entail making written laws accessible and transparent so as to promote accountability.

Literate practices in institutional contexts contribute to the evolution of a written language that is structurally different and more complex than oral language. Written language is also an important tool for fostering the rapid circulation of information, enhancing the exchange of ideas and promoting social networking. It also enhances the communication of innovations, technical knowledge and individual and social creativity in general.

Examples of societal literacy

A district officer took someone's land for his wife's business. A **protest note was written** and sent to a legal institution. The arbitrary action of the district officer was reversed and he was fined.

Someone took an advance payment and signed a receipt, but did not deliver the commodity. **A letter was sent to a legal authority**, which ordered the man to pay back the due amount.

These two examples of societal literacy show that a simple letter can have a considerable effect. They show that writing does make the difference. Accountability and the effective functioning of a legal state depend upon societal literacy. Societal literacy implies empowerment for those who want to communicate. It could mean, for example, posting a printed information bulletin for peasants in their own language in the local market.

It is not sufficient to organise lectures, ask for more campaigns, more teachers or better pedagogy. All this misses the point about literacy. Only if the demand exists and there are institutions to sustain this demand, do literacy campaigns, and improvements in pedagogies make sense.

It is often assumed that interaction with power structures is only possible through personal contact rather than by means of the written language. Consequently people often resort to bribes or persuade influential relatives and patrons to interact with officials on their behalf. All this has detrimental consequences for enterprise and business. Many people have been inhibited from starting an enterprise because of lack of access to the power structures and institutions when in fact they could have applied in writing.

It is important to recognise the role of institutions that create and reinforce societal literacy. Institutions are needed for developing languages and enhancing them to the status of a literate medium. Institutions consolidate literate languages by promoting their use in all spheres of human activity, by encouraging intellectual exchange and disseminating information about matters and events of social concern.

Societal literacy can be sustained only when institutions of the legal state work without corruption. Institutions reinforce but are also reinforced by societal literacy. There is a continual process of mutual feedback.

To promote these institutions is less costly than investments in physical infrastructure. But they require empowerment and freedom for action. For example, if societal literacy is to flourish there needs to be a free market for books and periodicals.

Literacy is embedded in social practice

The extent to which a community uses literacy as an integral part of life varies greatly – depending on the local, national and the international contexts. In the case of many traditional communities, written documents play a very small part in social organisation or activity. There are also many communities, particularly those linked closely with markets, who need numeracy more than writing. Thus regardless of whether or not communities are predominantly literate, they should be given the opportunity to bring into any literacy situation their own knowledge and their own way of constructing reality. Literacy is more than just reading and writing. There is a mistaken but common belief that being able to read and write in itself is the key to all progress. The ability to participate in politics, for example, does not necessarily require the mastery of reading and writing. Rather it demands being part of a literate community and engaging in a debate with that community.

It may also be a mistake to think that rationality is bound up with writing and reading. Among the ancient Greeks there were few people who could read and write. Their real pride lay in the fact that they could think, argue, debate with each other, and honour rules of procedure which allowed other people to express their points of view. There is therefore a need to rethink the concept of literacy as embedded in social practice.

Reading and writing become a meaningful and important part of the dynamics of a specific community or society when people acquire these competencies and are part of an institutional environment which promotes their use, whether it be for highly personal reasons such as writing letters to friends or in more formal situations, such as when dealing with legal matters.

Literacy work with illiterate communities in India shows that women in these communities need numeracy more than reading and writing skills in order to deal with authorities. They have developed skills in order to deal with authorities. They have developed intricate methods of keeping accounts, using embroidery stitches to record relevant information.

Contexts of literacy acquisition and use of literacy

Literacy provision in the past has been characterised by centralised control and a one-way transmission of skills. In future it must reflect the specific and diverse contexts in which literacy is acquired and used. From the learners point of view, these include:

- what the learner already knows, wants and brings to the learning experience;
- the mother tongue of the learner: a critical factor, because through it the learner's own identity and knowledge systems are formed;
- the cultural background of the learner, including family culture, local culture, oral traditions and indigenous knowledge;
- the identity of the learner in terms of gender, class, religion and race;
- the social, economic and cultural context of the learner; for example, where women and marginal groups are concerned it is important to recognise that it is not just illiteracy that is keeping women or marginal groups powerless, but a whole range of factors, such as resources, land and uneven land distribution. Literacy needs to be seen in this context.

All of these contextual factors must be taken into account when delivering or designing programmes or working with communities.

One reason why some campaigns have failed is that they have been carried out without proper regard to the language, prior knowledge and learning needs of the individuals and communities involved. Linguistic

diversity must be acknowledged by developing literacy programmes in local languages. Research has shown that learning to read and write in the mother tongue facilitates not only the acquisition of literacy but also the learning of a second language.

Acquiring literacy in the mother tongue or in the language of one's community also helps to foster a sense of cultural identity. An added complication is that people in many countries face a trilingual situation; first, the local language, second a more widely spoken language of the country or region, and third a former colonial language such as English or French. As English grows as the global language through the explosion of information and communication technology, pressures to learn it increase, creating both opportunities and dangers for communities whose language is not spoken by a large population.

Sustainable literacy is the maintenance of literate practice. A key factor in this is the provision of adequate published material, from local newspapers to academic books and from poetry and fiction to history and folklore. What is important is that people should continually have the opportunity to read, write, interpret and use textual materials. Sustainable literacy therefore requires support to local, national and regional publication and training networks for the exchange of materials and information. It also depends on the establishment of a political climate and institutional structures accountable to learners and communities. It is also important that there should be an adequate supply of materials in local languages to meet the needs and demands of the readers.

The overall message is that adult literacy is not a commodity to be delivered but something that has to be an organic part of social practice and cultural meanings. Any developmental policy must make this perspective an integral part of its programmes.

This document can be freely reproduced. It would be appreciated if a copy of any publication reproducing this text in full or in part could be sent to: Publications Department, UNESCO Institute for Education.



The CONFINTEA logo, designed by Michael Smitheram of Australia, represents the lines on the palm of a hand. These lines are universal and yet different for each subject. They celebrate cultural diversity and the joy of learning.

Theme 3

Ensuring universal rights to literacy and basic education

Booklets under this theme:

- a Literacy in the world and its major regions
- b Literacy and learning strategies
- c Literacy, education and social development
- d Literacy research, evaluation and statistics
- e Literacy in multilingual/intercultural settings
- f Literacy and technology
- g Literacy for tomorrow