

Lifelong literacy: Some trends and issues in conceptualising and operationalising literacy from a lifelong learning perspective

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Abstract In a fast-changing and highly inequitable world, lifelong learning is becoming increasingly important, not only as a key organising principle for all forms of education and learning but also as an absolute necessity for everyone. It is particularly important for disadvantaged individuals and groups who have been excluded from or failed to acquire basic competencies through formal schooling. Within a lifelong learning framework, literacy and numeracy are viewed as foundation skills which are the core of basic education and indispensable to full participation in society. This article discusses recent developments in conceptualising literacy as a foundation of lifelong learning. Starting from the evolving notions of adult literacy, the author identifies some current trends, the most important being that literacy is now perceived as a learning continuum of different proficiency levels. Dichotomous states of being either “literate” or “illiterate” no longer apply. She analyses (1) findings extracted from UNESCO Member States’ national reports submitted to the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) for the *2nd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*; (2) a desk study of national literacy campaigns and programmes as well as (3) some recent developments in formal education. Her suggested three-dimensional analytical framework considers literacy as a lifelong and life-wide learning process and as part of lifelong learning systems. She draws a number of conclusions for policy and practice of literacy as a foundation of lifelong learning. These conclusions are a timely contribution to the ongoing post-2015 education debate, in particular to the challenge of how to mainstream youth and adult literacy into the implementation of the sustainable development agenda for 2015–2030.

Keywords literacy; lifelong learning; adult learning; post-2015 education agenda

Résumé Apprentissage tout au long de la vie : tendances et enjeux dans la conceptualisation et l’opérationnalisation de l’alphabétisation dans une perspective d’apprentissage tout au long de la vie – Dans un monde marqué par une évolution accélérée et une grande inégalité, l’apprentissage tout au long de la vie revêt une importance croissante, en tant que grand principe organisateur de toutes les formes d’éducation et d’apprentissage, mais aussi comme nécessité absolue pour chaque individu. Il est particulièrement important pour les personnes et groupes défavorisés qui ont été privés de l’acquisition des compétences de base dans la scolarité formelle ou y ont échoué. Dans un cadre d’apprentissage tout au long de la vie, la littératie et la numératie sont les compétences fondamentales qui sont au cœur de l’éducation de base et indispensables à une pleine participation à la société. Le présent article analyse l’évolution récente dans la conceptualisation de l’alphabétisation en tant que fondement de l’apprentissage tout au long de la vie. À partir des notions évolutives de l’alphabétisation des adultes, l’auteure identifie quelques tendances actuelles, la plus importante prônant l’alphabétisation comme un processus continu d’apprentissage qui gravit les différents niveaux de maîtrise. La dichotomie entre individus « lettrés » et « illettrés » n’a plus cours. L’auteure analyse les sources suivantes : (1) des conclusions tirées des rapports

nationaux des États membres de l'UNESCO soumis à l'Institut de l'UNESCO pour l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie (UIL) en vue du *second Rapport mondial sur l'apprentissage et l'éducation des adultes*, (2) une étude sur documents des campagnes et programmes nationaux d'alphabétisation, et (3) l'évolution récente dans l'enseignement formel. Le cadre analytique tridimensionnel qu'elle préconise pose l'alphabétisation en processus d'apprentissage couvrant tous les aspects et toutes les phases de la vie et intégré dans les systèmes d'apprentissage tout au long de la vie. Elle tire de nombreuses conclusions pour les politiques et pratiques de l'alphabétisation conçue comme fondement de l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie. Ces conclusions sont une contribution opportune au débat actuel sur l'éducation pour l'après 2015, en particulier au défi d'insérer l'alphabétisation des jeunes et des adultes dans la mise en œuvre du programme pour le développement durable 2015–2030.

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Introduction

Among the United Nations' new set of post-2015 global development goals, termed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the proposed overarching education goal is: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO 2015a, p. 284).¹ Lifelong learning, as a key feature of the post-2015 education agenda, needs to cut across all the proposed education targets. One of these refers to the priority area of youth and adult literacy (UNESCO 2014a): "By 2030, ensure that all youth and at least x% of adults,² both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy" (UN 2014). Since literacy³ is increasingly being perceived as a complex, context-bound and dynamic phenomenon, a major challenge is how to address literacy in the context of a lifelong learning perspective at and beyond the "elementary and fundamental stages of education" (UNESCO 2000a).

Literacy usually refers to a set of skills and practices comprising reading, writing and using numbers as mediated by written materials. It is a core component of the right to

¹ For the full set of 17 SDGs, see the United Nations' online platform for sustainable development at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html> [accessed 4 May 2015].

² A revision of the targets suggested by UNESCO in January 2015 refers to *all* adults instead of a minimum percentage of them. Indeed, in line with previous commitments and the basic right of all adults to literacy and numeracy which is implicit in the right to education of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, this target should strive for *all* adults to achieve literacy and numeracy by 2030.

³ Henceforth, my use of the term "literacy" in this article includes "numeracy", even if this is not explicitly mentioned. The English notion of "literary literacy" related to someone who is "well-read" is not covered in this article.

education as recognised in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UN 1948), since the acquisition, maintenance and continuous further development of literacy skills is a fundamental purpose of basic education. At the same time, its foundational character makes it a right which facilitates the attainment of other human rights. The rationale for recognising literacy as a right is also supported through the human, social, economic, political and cultural benefits it confers on individuals, families, communities and nations (UNESCO 2005, pp. 137–145). Furthermore, as a social practice, literacy has the potential to enhance people’s capability and agency for the pursuit of freedom, and to empower them to interpret and transform their life realities (Sen 1999; Freire 1970 and 1998; Giroux 1997; McLaren 1995).

Literacy definitions and concepts have developed in tandem with new social and pedagogical theories, as well as with technological and other developments, characteristic of the increasingly complex and globalised societies of the 21st century. Changes in the economy, the nature of work, the role of media and digitisation, as well as in society as a whole have considerably increased the importance of literacy for citizens compared to past decades. Increasing amounts of information – including that available online – and the need to select and use knowledge from a range of sources challenge particularly those with poor foundational skills. These people are at risk of being excluded from new and emerging uses of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and other media for different purposes (UIL 2014a). People struggling with reading, writing and operating with numbers are more vulnerable to poverty, social exclusion, unemployment, exploitation, the social effects of demographic changes and aging, displacement and disasters (e.g. European Commission 2012; Cree et al. 2012; Martínez and Fernández 2010; Hartley and Horne 2005). At a time when the pace of change is accelerating, with patterns of living becoming more complex and less predictable, the ability to continuously acquire new knowledge and upgrade one’s skills through independent learning has become critically important. But despite the fact that definitions of literacy have evolved over time, along with societal and other changes, there is currently still no universal consensus on one single definition. The diversity of the contexts in which the term “literacy” is used, combined with the increasing multidimensionality and complexity of literacy⁴ in the interface of oral, written and ICT-

⁴ By bringing together the fields of literacy, bi- or multilingualism, and cognitive development, educational researchers have made important contributions to a better understanding of the complex interrelationships between literacy, language and learning. Moreover, they have developed theoretical frameworks for “biliteracy” and language in education planning which are also significant for transformative and empowering approaches to

supported communication, is thwarting a common understanding of literacy and of what needs to be done to develop “literate” people.

Promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, as suggested in the SDG education goal, involves meeting the “basic learning needs” of every person. This comprises the “essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem solving)” (WCEFA 1990, p. 43, Art. I.1), in addition to “basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes)” (ibid.), required by human beings to do what they need or want to do in their lives, and to continue learning. Youth and adult literacy, which remained a neglected Education for All (EFA) goal (UNESCO 2015a, p. 145), is often regarded as an “unfinished agenda”. While it is appropriate to include a specific target concerning literacy in the post-2015 education agenda in order to highlight its importance, this also entails the risk that literacy may be perceived as a task which can be quickly completed and in isolation from other developments. There is definitely a need to expand the vision by demonstrating the intimate relationship between literacy and lifelong learning and “unpacking” what it means to address literacy from a lifelong learning perspective.

This article therefore begins by focusing on current trends in conceptualising literacy, and asking how the broadened understanding of literacy has been translated into policies and practices in different countries. Expanding our vision of literacy by building on available documented discussions, what are the components of an analytical framework for literacy from a lifelong learning perspective? Application of a possible framework to analysis of some examples then leads to a number of relevant conclusions contributing to the ongoing post-2015 education debate.

Current trends in literacy from a lifelong learning perspective: expanding the vision

Along with its various definitions, the concept of “literacy” has evolved over time. The growing complexity of literacy creates a tension vis-à-vis the need to use a terminology which is clear and intelligible to everybody. Rather narrow understandings of literacy coexist with broader ones. It is becoming increasingly difficult to draw clear lines to define the scope of literacy. This is mainly due to the diversity of possible practical uses of literacy, to its being associated with varying contexts which evolve and change over time, and to its being closely intertwined with language, culture, communication, knowledge production, critical

literacy (see Cooper 1989; Hornberger 1989, 2004; Hornberger and Hult 2008; Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2010; Olson et al. 1985; Olson and Torrance 1991; Tollefson 2008; UNESCO 2003).

thinking, opinions, ideas, problem solving and independent learning, just to mention a few dimensions determining the complexity of literacy in the 21st century.

A broader understanding of literacy shows that becoming literate does not only involve knowledge (e.g. of the alphabet, script and language) and skills (e.g. reading fluency⁵ and comprehension), but touches on attitudes, dispositions and motivation (e.g. confident and self-sufficient learners are more likely to use their literacy skills broadly) as well as on values (e.g. to critically assess the purpose of a message or to responsibly use social media to interact with different audiences). In short, literacy refers to the (cap)ability of putting knowledge, skills, attitudes and values effectively into action when dealing with (handwritten, printed or digital) text in the context of ever-changing demands⁶ to make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events.

The evolving notions and widening understandings of the concept of “literacy” reflect changing perspectives and new trends. The notion of literacy as a learning continuum of different proficiency levels has been one of the most significant developments with regard to how literacy is conceptualised. It postulates that there is no definite line between a “literate” and “non-literate” person. These designations merely refer to the two opposite ends of a continuum of proficiency levels⁷ which spans a range of different uses. This notion no longer allows for the simple dichotomy of “literate” versus “illiterate”, which is still reflected in statistical reports on “literacy rates” or “illiteracy rates”.

The proposed *Framework for Action of the Post-2015 Education Agenda* makes explicit that the principles, strategies and actions for the literacy target “are underpinned by a modern understanding of literacy [...] as a continuum of proficiency levels” (UNESCO 2015b, p. 9). However, this involves the challenge of developing a common understanding of how to approach literacy as a continuum and a lifelong learning process.

Rooted in many cultures, traditions and communities, the notion of lifelong learning has always existed in human history. It takes account of the fact that human beings are learning throughout their lives, “from cradle to grave”. As a global educational paradigm,

⁵ Helen Abadzi’s neuro-cognitive research has led to a greater focus on reading speed and accuracy to improve levels of adult literacy (Abadzi 2003).

⁶ “It is generally understood that a competency implies an articulation of knowledge, values, skills, know-how and attitudes that learners can mobilise independently, creatively and responsibly to address challenges, solve problems and carry out a complex activity or task in a certain context” (UNESCO 2012, p. 14).

⁷ While the required proficiency levels and how people apply reading and writing skills depend on specific contexts, the minimum literacy threshold to be reached by all citizens of a country needs to be established at the policy level, if possible based on a broad consensus, and it evolves over time. However, at the global level it is difficult to establish a common standard for this kind of minimum literacy proficiency level: the contexts are simply too diverse.

lifelong learning was mainly shaped by the so-called Faure Report, *Learning to Be*, which recommended lifelong learning as the master concept for educational policies (Faure et al. 1972), and by the so-called Delors Report, *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Delors et al. 1996), both commissioned by UNESCO. The latter envisaged a learning society in which everyone can learn according to her or his individual needs and interests, anywhere and anytime in an unrestricted, flexible and constructive way. Lifelong learning is understood as a principle which rests on four pillars – learning to be, learning to know, learning to do and learning to live together (ibid.).

Based on emancipatory, humanistic and democratic values, the concept of lifelong learning is founded in the integration of learning and living, covering learning activities for people of all ages, in all life contexts (i.e. home, school, community, workplace and so on) and through formal, non-formal and informal modalities which together meet a wide range of learning needs and demands (UNESCO 2014b, p. 2). In a complex and fast-changing world, lifelong learning has become “a philosophy, a conceptual framework and an organising principle of all forms of education” (UIL 2010, p. 5). With the purpose of integrating learning and living, it seeks to create learning opportunities across different settings over an individual’s whole life. Learning and the learner are at the centre of the lifelong learning philosophy, one of the core goals being to “unlock” people’s potential. A culture of learning is promoted through favourable environments and strategies conducive to developing independent, self-responsible, confident and effective lifelong learners.

Education systems which promote lifelong learning adopt a holistic and sector-wide approach⁸ involving all sub-sectors and levels to ensure the provision of learning opportunities for all individuals. Many countries have already developed policies, strategies or mechanisms which aim at the building of lifelong learning systems. These are often guided by the vision of making learning opportunities available to all by developing learning societies, regions, cities, communities or families. Effective lifelong learning policies are characterised by making learning part of citizens’ everyday lives. A number of countries have already taken concrete steps towards implementing such policies (Yang and Valdés-Cotera 2011).

Scholarly attempts to develop theoretical frameworks that reflect the lifelong learning paradigm resulted in models and sets of indicators which are rather broadly focused on

⁸ “The essence of [a sector-wide approach] is that, under government leadership, a partnership of funding agencies [donors and other stakeholders] agrees to work together in support of a clear set of policy directions, often sharing many of the implementation procedures, such as supervision, monitoring, reporting, accounting, and purchasing” (WHO 2000, p. 123).

general education themes (e.g. Delors et al. 1996; CCL 2006; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2010). These may – more or less explicitly – include adult education and literacy, but are not particularly sensitive and responsive to the learning needs of those millions⁹ of young people and adults who have missed out on formal education or failed to acquire the basic competencies required to fully participate in their societies and communities.

While there is a general consensus on the critical role of lifelong learning “in addressing global educational issues and challenges” (UIL 2010, p. 5), applying this principle to tackling the literacy challenge appears to be complicated. There is still a large gap between policy discourse and practical reality. Moreover, literacy is often unfortunately either not explicitly mentioned in lifelong learning laws, legal regulations or public policy initiatives, or lifelong learning is understood as something which only starts after somebody has become “literate” or achieved basic education (UIL 2013).

The recognition of the fact that learning never stops over a person’s lifetime also applies to literacy learning. The same is true for life-wide learning taking place at home, work, school and other spaces in the community. In other words, the development of reading and writing skills should be closely associated with activities which are relevant – or even essential – for human development. Instead of aiming for the “eradication of illiteracy”,¹⁰ ensuring the achievement of literacy (and numeracy) for all entails the development of “literate families”, “literate communities” and “literate societies”. This embraces the challenge of moving away from common misconceptions (Torres 2009) and changing the attitudes of entire societies towards literacy: the consideration of what people do or can do with literacy and the creation of literate environments¹¹ and societies must guide related action, a rationale already reflected in a UNESCO position paper on literacy a decade ago (UNESCO 2004).

Outlining an analytical framework for “lifelong literacy”

⁹ According to the latest data available from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), in September 2014, a worldwide total of 781 million adults were reported as “illiterate”, 126 million of them aged 15 to 24 years (youth) (UIS 2014, p. 1). According to the European Labour Force survey carried out in 2011, many of Europe’s 73 million low-educated adults (25–64 years old) are likely to experience problems with reading and writing (European Commission 2012).

¹⁰ A recent study on the impact of national literacy campaigns since 2000 shows that a number of governments have set the target of “eradicating illiteracy” in their countries (Hanemann 2014a). This is not only over-ambitious but also reflects the traditional dichotomy of “literate” and “illiterate” which should be discontinued.

¹¹ A literate environment (at home, at school, at work, etc.) stimulates and encourages the acquisition and maintenance of literacy skills, by featuring materials and media such as newspapers and books, radios and TVs, phones, computers and the Internet. The availability of further learning opportunities, after the elementary literacy level, also contributes to the creation of a sustainable demand for literacy learning (Easton 2014).

In order to examine current trends and issues in policy and practice, it is necessary to develop an analytical framework that helps to identify the features which determine whether a particular literacy policy or programme is (more or less) inspired by a lifelong learning perspective. These features are mainly derived from the concepts of literacy and lifelong learning analysed above. They also build on the available documented discussion of the linkages between literacy and lifelong learning.¹² However, this attempt to apply the concept of lifelong learning to literacy cannot provide a comprehensive and exhaustive coverage of all issues involved. It is rather intended as a contribution to further debate and development of such a framework. It is structured into three dimensions which are closely interrelated: literacy as a lifelong learning process, literacy as a life-wide learning process, and literacy as part of a set of holistic, sector-wide and cross-sector reforms towards lifelong learning systems (Table 1).

Table 1 Outline of an analytical framework to identify lifelong learning features of literacy policies and programmes

Literacy as a lifelong learning process	Literacy as a continuous learning process
	Literacy learning across all ages and generations
	Literacy as a continuum of proficiency levels
Literacy as a life-wide learning process	Literacy as a process going beyond learning in the classroom
	Literacy learning combined with the development of other skills
	Literacy as situated social practice
Literacy as part of a set of holistic, sector-wide and cross-sector reforms towards lifelong learning systems	Literacy as part of a broader set of skills
	Literacy as part of sector-wide reforms
	Literacy as part of national development strategies

Literacy as a lifelong learning process

Consistent with the holistic view of literacy enshrined in the *Belém Framework for Action* (UIL 2010), the lifelong learning approach treats literacy as a process which takes place throughout a person's life and across a continuum of proficiency levels.

¹² To date, the only work available on the linkages between literacy and lifelong learning seems to be a draft paper presented by Rosa Maria Torres at the 2006 Biennale of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) in Libreville, Gabon (Torres 2009).

Literacy as a continuous learning process: While not all learning depends on being able to read and to write, written language has a crucial importance in modern life and (at times) highly literate environments: in schooling and education, in communication, in access to, creation and transmission of knowledge, and not least in self-determined, independent learning. Literacy is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for people to adapt and upgrade knowledge, skills and competencies continuously in response to rapidly changing demands both at work and in social life. Therefore, providing continuous opportunities for the development of literacy and other basic skills or key competencies to everybody is imperative in the 21st century.

In many parts of the world, the labour market is constantly demanding higher proficiency levels of literacy and other core skills to adapt to ever-changing technologies and to master increasingly complex tasks and situations. Being part of basic education, literacy has become an indispensable foundation for many further learning and training opportunities. From a lifelong learning perspective, literacy learning is a continuous activity, since skills (levels) acquired at a given moment in time can be insufficient, outdated or lost in another moment.

However, literacy programmes are often only offered at the lowest levels, and their duration is too short to allow learners to reach a sustainable proficiency level. It is therefore necessary to design systems with courses of different levels which build on each other, so that learners can continue the development of their literacy and numeracy skills step by step after the initial stage of elementary literacy. In tandem with an increase in the scope of course levels, reliable funding and teacher employment arrangements are required to provide sustainability of the provision of these courses, as well as flexibility for adult learners in diverse life situations to learn at their own pace.

Literacy learning across all ages and generations: The acquisition and development of literacy is an age-independent activity. This means that it is never too early and never too late to start with literacy learning, and the development of literacy skills is not limited to and completed with formal schooling. Ideally, it starts before school, continues during and after primary school, and beyond secondary or higher education. Many studies over the past decade have shown that the early years from birth to age two are crucial for setting the foundations for learning. Parents are actually encouraged to start cultivating their children's "pre-literacy" skills as early as possible. This involves reading books to the child (developing print motivation and awareness), building vocabulary and language skills (narrative skills),

and developing letter knowledge and phonological awareness as preparatory steps towards learning to read and to write.

While many people never make it to school, or leave school too early to acquire even basic reading and writing skills, test-based large-scale – national and international – literacy surveys¹³ (UIL 2013, pp. 25–33) have shown that passing through compulsory education does not in fact provide any guarantee that someone is equipped with adequate literacy skills. Many children around the world attend school but do not learn to read, to write and to calculate.¹⁴ The outcome is that while a majority of young people and adults with literacy problems (determined through direct tests) have attended at least compulsory schooling, they have remained without sufficient competencies in reading and writing to fully participate in their society.

Many of these adults experienced such frustration as children that they deliberately avoid literacy-related activities in later life. When they have children of their own, they often communicate their negative attitudes towards literacy and schooling to their children, and thus perpetuate an intergenerational cycle of illiteracy. There is ample research evidence that indicates the strong relationship between parents' education levels and their children's level of literacy acquisition. Several studies emphasise the importance of involving families in literacy programmes by using intergenerational approaches to literacy learning (e.g. Feinstein et al. 2004; Brooks et al. 2008; DeCoulon et al. 2008; Lybolt and Gottfred 2003; Lynch 2004; Morrison et al. 2005, pp. 48–49; Carpentieri et al. 2011). Such approaches should address all aspects of childhood (“childhood-wide”) and focus on “multiple-life-cycles” education, in which children are guaranteed a right to educated and literate parents and grandparents (Hanemann 2014b).

Literacy as a continuum of proficiency levels: Participation in adult literacy programmes is increasingly perceived as one step on a longer road to developing sustainable skills levels in reading and writing, which needs to be supported by literate environments as well as by opportunities for further learning and for obtaining recognised qualifications (e.g. UNESCO 2005; Lind 2008; Oxenham 2008; Hanemann 2012; Easton 2014). The provision of literacy on a continuum through programmes which are structured into levels of graded progression and offer different pathways which meet a diversity of (evolving) learning needs

¹³ Examples are PISA and PIAAC (see footnote 15); the OECD's International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), and Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS); studies carried out by the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) and the Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE), and others.

¹⁴ According to UNESCO estimates, at least 250 million primary school-aged children either do not reach grade four or, if they do, fail to attain the minimum learning standards (UNESCO 2014c, p. 5)

is a requirement for the expanded vision of literacy from a lifelong learning perspective. The same approach needs to be reflected in curriculum frameworks with literacy as a learning continuum across all levels of education (or qualification).

Understanding literacy as a continuum of learning involves the abandonment of a dichotomous way of looking at literacy: a person can no longer be categorised as either “literate” or “illiterate”. It also involves the testing of proficiency levels regularly along a continuum of literacy skills which denotes how well adults use and produce written information to participate in society and economy.¹⁵ Since literacy is not a pre-defined, timeless and context-free set of skills to be acquired, policies should be oriented towards continuously sustaining and improving the development of literacy skills, and also encourage people to learn new skills (i.e. working with digital texts), instead of striving for the “eradication of illiteracy” as a policy goal.

Literacy as a life-wide learning process

The successful development of literacy skills relies not only on a specific teaching–learning setting. It is also dependent on regular and multiple opportunities for practical uses of these skills for a variety of purposes.

Literacy as a process going beyond learning in the classroom: Literacy as a life-wide learning process recognises that the acquisition and development of reading and writing skills does not only take place at school or in an adult literacy course. People use and further develop their reading and writing skills in different ways and a wide range of life spheres. There are many resources in different spaces or places – at home, in the community, at work, in the (electronic) media, on the Internet, in cultural centres, libraries, museums, etc. – which complement and enhance school and adult literacy classes as literacy-stimulating learning environments. Therefore, the creation of a culture of reading and learning supported by fertile and dynamic literate environments – also in local languages – should be a focus of literacy policies and strategies. The *Belém Framework for Action (BFA)* includes an enriched literate

¹⁵ Proficiency levels may “atrophy” or decline in the course of a person’s life if literacy skills are not used on a regular basis. Levels may also rise during one’s life path if tasks at the workplace, at home (e.g. helping one’s child with homework) or in the broader community require higher proficiency levels. Comparing measures of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and OECD’s Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) conducted from 2008 to 2013 (OECD 2013), there is a low association between national averages of PISA and PIAAC. One possible interpretation is that skills can be learned after individuals leave school, and can be lost if the skills are not used regularly. The workplace has been identified as an important context for skills acquisition and retention (UNESCO 2015a, pp. 130–131).

environment as essential support for continuing education, training and skills development beyond basic literacy skills as one of the key elements representing a broad consensus on the concept of literacy today (UIL 2010, p. 7).

Increasingly, there are efforts to amplify the emphasis on the demand side of the literate environment by stressing the economic, social and cultural activities which create requirements and opportunities for the use, improvement and retention of literacy skills to make them sustainable (Robinson-Pant 2010; Easton 2014). This broader notion of a “literate environment” is about linking literacy to activities which people want or need to develop in their daily lives. This can be, for example, in the domain of local management of resources, such as agricultural marketing, public health services, microfinance and banking, or water and natural resources management, among other things. Under certain conditions, engagement of people in such opportunities increases local literacy demand and illustrates “the importance of seeing EFA as essentially and ultimately an issue of ‘lifelong learning’” and “as a means to upgrade in feasible ways the whole local human resource base” (Easton 2015, p. 23).

Literacy learning combined with the development of other skills: There are trends at the international level to link adult literacy to different areas which are important for human development (UNDP 2001) and poverty alleviation. This is the case, for example, when linking literacy to livelihoods (Oxenham 2002), to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and practical skills (Rogers 2014), and to other “life skills” in domains such as health, human rights, citizenship, gender, income generation, environmental conservation, parenting, etc.¹⁶ Such strategies or programmes try to integrate different life spheres and contexts with the development of literacy and numeracy skills. These strategies range from incorporating some skills acquisition into literacy programmes to including some literacy learning into skills development programmes.

The farthest-reaching approach to combining adult literacy with the development of other skills is to incorporate relevant literacy practices in occupational or practical skills training. This approach is based on the recognition that within every occupation there are embedded literacy practices which are often informal and may vary from location to location. These practices are not always closely related to the formal literacy of the classroom (Rogers 2014). This indicates that there is a need to bring literacy training closer to where adults are already using literacy practices in their everyday life. While this approach is likely to increase

¹⁶ Some examples can be found in the “Effective Literacy & Numeracy Practices Database” (LitBase) of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), at <http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/>.

learners' motivation to engage in learning and help them to advance their literacy skills, there are implications which are likely to thwart larger-scale programmes. Research needs to be carried out on the literacy and numeracy requirements used in specific occupational tasks and activities; learning materials need to be designed and produced which are differentiated for learners' varying literacy and numeracy needs; team work needs to be set up between specialist teachers of literacy and numeracy and trainers of vocational skills, to name just a few prerequisites.

Literacy as situated social practice: Literacy is perceived as a key dimension of social practice which is affected by specific settings and interactions of local groups and communities around literacy practices. The "New Literacies Studies"¹⁷ (Gee 1991; Street 1995, 2003 and 2005) hold the view that literacy is more than a set of skills: literacy skills are meaningfully deployed as social practices framing what they actually are. These social practices cannot be grasped if literacy is seen exclusively as skills possessed by an individual (Street 2005). Rather, literacy should be seen as part of social practice which is embedded in collective action. Understanding literacy in its social context acknowledges that literacy is situated and rooted in local activities. It can never be treated as a separate and unvarying activity. The social practice approach to literacy (Barton 2007, Barton et al. 2000, Hamilton and Hillier 2006) looks at literacy events and practices by considering participants, activities, settings, domains and resources as building blocks.

A lifelong learning strategy for adult literacy should pay attention to how literacy fits into learners' lives, what it means to them and where potential sources of difficulty or interest might lie. It should not only respond to the needs of government and other institutions with the power to decide which kind of literacy practices are valued, supported and legitimised, but also recognise literacy practices and sources of knowledge which already exist in civic life and at the local level. It should open up and strengthen different access points for literacy (e.g. libraries, Internet cafés, health centres, unemployment offices, etc.) and create structured learning opportunities along with other (informal) activities designed to develop and sustain literacy.

Literacy as part of a set of holistic, sector-wide and cross-sector reforms towards lifelong learning systems

¹⁷ Sometimes also referred to as the "New Literacy Studies" (NLS), this somewhat loosely defined term can refer to either a psycholinguistic or a sociocultural approach to new forms of literacy. While drawing on a number of disciplines including sociology, anthropology and linguistics, and emphasising a socio-critical perspective, NLS intend to act as a point of contact between literacy research (ethnographic) and literacy work.

As a dominant feature of the post-2015 education and sustainable development agenda, sector-wide and cross-sector approaches need to include the development of literacy and numeracy as foundation skills in lifelong learning systems.

Literacy as part of a broader set of skills: Increasingly, literacy is seen as a set of capabilities, skills or key competencies referring to written communication, accessing and (critically) processing information, requiring reading, writing and numeracy skills, as well as enabling capabilities such as digital competency and the ability to pursue and organise one's own learning. Overall, a shift can be observed towards teaching and learning reading, writing, language (written and spoken communication) and numeracy as part of a wider concept of key competencies, human resource development and lifelong learning. Therefore, literacy can no longer be perceived and treated as a stand-alone set of skills that is developed and "completed" within a short timeframe and is then over and done with. It should rather be seen as one component of a complex set of foundational (or basic or core) capabilities, skills or competencies which require sustained learning and updating in a continuous process.

Literacy as part of sector-wide reforms: Education systems which promote lifelong learning adopt a holistic and sector-wide approach with a longer-term planning horizon. The integration of literacy into sector-wide education strategies and plans – or even into broader lifelong learning policies and frameworks – has been promoted as an effective approach to make literacy a national priority. It is seen as an indicator for long-term political commitment and conducive to partnership development, financial stability, and continuity. A number of countries have already aligned or integrated their literacy policies, strategies and programmes with or into national education sector plans (Hanemann 2012).

Literacy as part of national development strategies: The successful combination of learning and living requires a policy approach which cuts across all development-relevant areas (health, agriculture, labour, social security, environment, culture, etc.), beyond the education sector. A holistic approach to literacy seeks the association of literacy learning with other essential development tasks. In other words, literacy has to become instrumental in the achievement of the SDGs related to poverty, food security, health and well-being, gender equality, water, environment, work and peace. In light of this broader understanding, literacy is a key condition for poverty reduction, inclusion and sustainable development.

To sum up this section, then, positioning literacy within a lifelong learning perspective means that the acquisition and development of literacy takes place before, during and after primary

school, it takes place in and out of school, in a broad range of different life spheres, through formal, non-formal or informal learning. Therefore, it covers the full spectrum of lifelong and life-wide learning and involves a continuum of proficiency levels that require institutionalised learning systems which are flexible and support integrated approaches at all stages over a person's life and around a diversity of life situations. In the following section, the analysis of some examples will build on this analytical framework.

Analysis of some examples of promising literacy policies and practices from a lifelong learning perspective

While the above framework is an attempt to break down the lifelong and life-wide learning process of literacy into a number of features reflected in policies and practices, my application of these features in this section to an analysis of current trends is structured around three sources of data. I begin with findings from a recent report (UIL 2013), then move on to a desk study of national literacy campaigns and programmes I was engaged in, and finally focus on some examples of promising policies and practices identified through desk research which seem to support the features of "lifelong literacy" outlined above.

Findings from the national progress reports for the 2nd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 2)

In the 141 national progress reports on the implementation of the commitments made with the BFA (UIL 2010) submitted by UNESCO Member States in 2012¹⁸ to the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) for GRALE 2 (UIL 2013)¹⁹, there is evidence of both restricted and broad views on literacy. Mainly in Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean it can be observed that literacy is perceived as an initial level of and subsumed under adult basic education. The notion of literacy as a gradual or continuous learning process is expressed in

¹⁸The full national progress reports are available at <http://uil.unesco.org/home/programme-areas/adult-learning-and-education/confintea-portal/news-target/national-progress-reports-for-grale-2012/af44e96bc9ca05553529f73098b1348b/> [accessed 5 May 2015].

¹⁹ The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) is mandated to monitor UNESCO Member States' progress in meeting their commitments made at the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) in Belém, Brazil, in 2009. The data obtained for the purpose of this monitoring are evaluated and published at regular intervals in a *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (GRALE). The second one of these (GRALE 2) focused on literacy; it was subtitled *Rethinking Literacy* (UIL 2013).

definitions from five countries.²⁰ Ten countries explicitly use the term “lifelong learning” or “lifelong learner” in their literacy concept²¹ (UIL 2013, p. 24). Most clearly the notion of literacy as a continuum of proficiency levels is spelled out in National Qualifications Frameworks, some of which have particularly defined entry levels of basic literacy and numeracy.²²

Many ongoing change processes in national education and lifelong learning systems are related to the development of recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) mechanisms and National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs). For hundreds of millions of young people and adults without (sufficient) basic skills and school certificates this has opened up new opportunities. One of the findings of GRALE 2 is that a growing number of mechanisms for the recognition, validation and accreditation of all forms of learning have contributed to positioning literacy within lifelong learning. Furthermore, national and regional qualifications frameworks with different skills and qualification levels which allow for equivalencies between formally and non-formally acquired skills have helped pave the way for the recognition of literacy as a learning continuum and a foundation of lifelong learning (UIL 2013, p. 34). Eighty-seven (70%) of 129 countries reported that they have a policy framework for recognising, validating and accrediting non-formal and informal learning. Standardised tests leading to certification are implemented in 54 countries to measure and recognise the learning outcomes of adult literacy programmes. In a number of countries, literacy learners can receive a certificate equivalent to successful completion of primary or secondary education (*ibid.*, pp. 137–140). The acquisition of recognised qualifications and certificates is a strong motivation for many young people and adults to (re)engage in learning.

None of the official literacy definitions indicated in the national progress reports submitted for GRALE 2 mentions the importance of literate environments (UIL 2013). If the aim is not only to develop literate individuals but also literate families, communities and societies, then the quality of the literate environment and its characteristics are at least as crucial for motivating, developing and meaningfully sustaining literacy skills as the literacy training as such. The challenge is to include the features of literate environments both in

²⁰ One of these, Bangladesh, quoted UNESCO’s operational definition from 2003, the other four were Slovenia, El Salvador, Guyana and Uruguay.

²¹ Botswana, Cape Verde, South Africa, Bangladesh, Croatia, Portugal, Scotland [submitted a separate report], the Dominican Republic, Mexico and Uruguay. However, a number of countries such as Croatia, Paraguay, Portugal, Slovenia and South Africa are known to use, in practice, the term “lifelong learning” in other definitions.

²² Examples can be found in Botswana, Ethiopia, the Gambia, South Africa and the UK.

practical literacy-promoting interventions and in assessments.²³ At the same time, 37 countries' definitions, mainly in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, stressed literacy as a (situated) practice, be it as "functional" literacy (8 countries) or as practices situated in specific contexts (ibid., pp. 23–24). There are also attempts to develop more integrated approaches such as family literacy or literacy embedded in vocational or practical skills training, which is a definite indication of a paradigm shift in positioning literacy within a lifelong learning perspective.

The gap between official definitions and emerging lifelong literacy practices is widening

Based on the responses received from UNESCO Member States, the following current and emerging trends of conceptualising literacy can be roughly outlined: the gap between operational (official) definitions and broad concepts (in practice) of literacy seems to be widening. Most of the official definitions do not seem to have changed essentially since 2009.²⁴ They rather narrowly relate to functional reading, writing and numeracy skills necessary for everyday life. However, in the political discourse, and often in practice, literacy is conceptualised as one component of a broader set of skills. In some cases, such basic skills are packaged into "literacy, language and numeracy", "skills for life" (literacy, numeracy and ICT skills) or "essential skills". The instrumental purpose of literacy training for employability, for self-employment, or for independence in many cases seems to give biased priority to literacy for economic development and growth.

Summary: there is still no common understanding of how to approach literacy as a continuum and a lifelong learning process

Findings resulting from in-depth analysis of the 141 national progress reports can be summarised thus: there seems to be increasing conceptual acceptance of literacy as involving a continuum of learning (as adopted in the BFA) and of the achievement of sustainable reading, writing and numeracy skills requiring levels of basic education beyond elementary literacy. However, this still needs to be translated into key operational aspects of literacy

²³ Some innovative approaches have already been developed to measure, for example, the "density of the literate environment" in the context of implementing UNESCO's Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP), or measuring "valued practices" regarding literacy by using ethnographic and practice-based approaches (see case studies from Nepal and Mozambique by Maddox and Esposito 2012; Esposito et al. 2011).

²⁴ This was the year when the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) was held in Brazil, where the *Belém Framework for Action* (UIL 2010) was adopted.

provision, including the domain of measurement. The latter continues to pose major challenges such as the requirement of comparability; the complex nature of literacy itself; the need to address a variety of social, cultural, linguistic and other contexts; the need to find valid cost-effective approaches, etc. The findings of GRALE 2 indicate that there is still no common understanding of how to approach literacy as a continuum and a lifelong learning process, and that most countries continue to use traditional methods²⁵ to estimate literacy rates (instead of proficiency levels), which are still based on the dichotomous approach of classifying a person as either “illiterate” or “literate” (UIL 2013).

Findings from a desk study of national literacy campaigns and programmes

In a recent background paper I prepared for the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2015* (Hanemann 2014a), the status and characteristics of adult literacy campaigns and programmes since 2000 were analysed in more than 30 countries worldwide. Four case studies on major literacy campaigns in Brazil, India, Indonesia and South Africa were used to expand in depth on global trends. Aiming to determine to which degree national literacy campaigns and programmes reflect a lifelong learning perspective, the following analysis focuses on only three (out of a total of ten) key aspects of my suggested framework for successful literacy campaigns and programmes.²⁶ They are aligned with the three main components of the analytical framework for “lifelong literacy” proposed above (Table 1): (1) Literacy as a lifelong learning process (in terms of duration of literacy courses, and the continuity of learning opportunities); (2) literacy as a life-wide learning process (in terms of pedagogies which emphasise flexible and integrated approaches to learning); and (3) literacy as part of lifelong learning systems (in terms of situating literacy provision within broader national learning systems, institutionalising literacy and non-formal education, and offering the possibility to acquire recognised certificates).

Literacy as a lifelong learning process

²⁵ E.g. population censuses and/or household surveys asking about educational attainment (see UIL 2013, pp. 25–27)

²⁶ The ten key aspects of my suggested framework for successful literacy campaigns and programmes are (1) duration, intensity and number of non-literate adults targeted; (2) main funding sources, overall cost and cost per learner; (3) supporting policies and/or legislative measures; (4) social mobilisation and community ownership; (5) partnerships, collaboration schemes, governance and management structures; (6) inclusiveness of the campaign; (7) recruitment, payment and training of educators; (8) pedagogical aspects; (9) monitoring and evaluation systems; and (10) the continuity of learning opportunities (see Hanemann 2014a, pp. 14–15).

While information on the number of teaching–learning hours²⁷ was not available for most of the campaigns and programmes analysed, the duration of literacy course cycles could be ascertained as varying from three months to up to three years. In the case of mass literacy campaigns, which usually apply strategies aiming for broad coverage over a short period (e.g. the literacy campaigns in Bolivia, Nicaragua and Venezuela, the Nepalese National Literacy Campaign Programme [NLCP] and the National Literacy Programme in Pakistan), the duration tends to be limited, while other literacy programmes can take several years if they are part of more comprehensive programme packages which are considered equivalent to formal primary and secondary education (e.g. the Mexican Education Model for Life and Work [MEVyT] or the AKRAB! Programme in Indonesia, both featured in LitBase [see footnote 16]). The South African *Kha Ri Gude* mass literacy campaign (also featured in LitBase), which is designed for a duration of six months (240 teaching-learning contact hours²⁸), has created special provisions for vulnerable groups such as older learners and deaf and blind learners, to continue their classes for nine (instead of six) months, and learners who are unable to complete the course within six months are also given the option to re-attend the programme in the following year. The Brazilian *Brasil Alfabetizado* Programme (see LitBase) has a flexible duration of between six and eight months.

Other programmes which have already been running for a long time and are well established, such as the National Literacy Programme in Namibia (see LitBase) are implemented in phases. The “literacy phase” of the Namibian adult basic education programme comprises three formative one-year training stages, each averaging about 240 learning/lesson hours. The curriculum of the Mexican MEVyT programme allows for each learner to progress at his or her own pace. On average, learners need between seven and ten months to complete the basic level. Another factor which has an impact on programme duration is the implementation of programmes in bilingual intercultural contexts. For example, countries which offer bilingual literacy programmes for indigenous populations, such as Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay and Peru, have reported that these programmes need to last longer than those offered only in Spanish (UIS 2013), because the

²⁷ Research suggests that between 550 and 600 hours of instruction are needed to become fully literate and numerate (see: http://www.qualifax.ie/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=238:adult-literacy-faq&catid=70&Itemid=63 and <http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/mosergroup/rep04.htm>) [both accessed 5 May 2015].

²⁸ It is necessary to distinguish between contact and notional hours: While contact hours refer to the minimum number of hours learners are expected to attend a class, notional hours include the additional hours a learner spends doing homework, reading his or her books, and engaging with other learning tasks.

target groups – whose language entry levels range from monolingualism in an indigenous language to different degrees of bilingualism – usually need to learn Spanish as a second language.

The smooth transition of graduates from basic literacy courses into follow-up learning opportunities remains a challenge in several cases. Often learners have no access to related information, counselling or guidance, particularly in the context of short courses. The evaluation report of the Nepalese National Literacy Campaign Programme established that only 4.5 per cent of the interviewed literacy graduates knew about the established opportunity to build upon their newly acquired skills in the community learning centre (CLC), and only 56 per cent of these actually visited CLCs (Government of Nepal 2013, pp. 10–11). In other cases, such as the *Brazil Alfabetizado* Programme in Brazil, not enough places are available for learners to further their studies, because they are “competing” with people who left school before completing grade 4, and such opportunities are very rare in rural areas.

Literacy as a life-wide learning process

Endeavouring to cater for diversity and allow for flexible approaches in the delivery of literacy courses, the curriculum of the Mexican MEVyT programme is modular, i.e. it comprises a series of self-contained yet complementary modules leading to accreditation (certification) at different levels. Modules have been tailor-made to reflect and respond to the linguistic, cultural and social circumstances and needs of various ethno-regional groups of learners. Another example of integrated approaches to literacy teaching and learning is the Indonesian AKRAB! programme, which includes entrepreneurship, life skills, gender equity and local culture in literacy training. The curriculum for basic literacy is part of a broader curricular strategy for non-formal basic education, with learning modules offered in Package A (equivalent to primary education), Package B (equivalent to lower secondary education) and Package C (equivalent to upper secondary education) programmes, leading to recognised certificates.

Literacy as part of lifelong learning systems

Earlier large-scale programmes can often be observed to have led to new initiatives and revised strategies towards some form of institutionalisation of adult basic education, such as in India, South Africa and Brazil. Many national literacy campaigns and programmes now

seem to be making amendments to their strategy to service the demand of newly literate populations. This has been mainly the case in short-term campaigns in Latin America (i.e. Bolivia, Nicaragua and Venezuela), which led to follow-up courses. However, many literacy programmes, even those running for a long time, do not seem to be directed towards the establishment of a non-formal education system. They offer just one step beyond basic literacy, often still called “post-literacy” (e.g. the National Functional Literacy Programme in Ghana; the Post-Literacy Programme in Pakistan), which is not consistent with the notion of literacy as a continuum of learning. In some cases (e.g. Timor-Leste), policy and planning documents suggest an intention to build a non-formal education system for adults. However, realities on the ground frequently tell a different story.²⁹

While in some countries non-formal education sub-systems have been well-established for some time (going back into the 1990s), even furnished with equivalency programmes and competency-based programmes within National Qualifications Frameworks or systems, in other countries such institutionalised approaches have only emerged recently, or still need to be developed. In a few countries, there are indications of a broadened understanding of literacy as a continuum, however, this still needs to be translated into the domain of measurement. One exception is the series of “Skills for Life” surveys in the UK (BIS 2012), where literacy and numeracy skills were assessed in a graded and differentiated way by competency levels. This is the only case where it was possible to compare baseline data on the distribution of skills levels from the first survey in 2003 with those from a follow-up survey in 2011 to determine the degree of progress achieved.

Even in a country with a sophisticated National Qualifications Framework like South Africa, with possibilities of easier association with the non-formal Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) Programme equivalent to nine years of General Education, the transition from the *Kha Ri Gude* campaign to the ABET system presents challenges. In order to boost its effectiveness (and this is also the case for other literacy campaigns), *Kha Ri Gude* was designed as an independent system not organically integrated into the non-formal education system. The transfer of learners from *Kha Ri Gude* to ABET would require a more systemic and institutionalised approach in order to make the gains of the campaign sustainable (Hanemann 2011).

²⁹ During a mission to Timor-Leste in August 2014, I found that the national six-month *Alfanamor* basic literacy programme, launched in 2007, was discontinued after the finalisation of the *Sim Eu Posso* literacy campaign (with technical support from Cuba) by the end of 2012, and hence left a major gap in the emerging non-formal education system.

Summary: literacy campaigns raise major concerns with regard to continuity and sustainability

The findings from this analysis of adult literacy campaigns and programmes suggest a mixed picture: there are indications of progress as well as setbacks in addressing literacy from a lifelong learning perspective. Progress is more clearly visible in the discourse of policy and planning documents. Yet, implementation still poses challenges. If this stage is reached, there are major concerns, in particular with regard to the continuity of learning processes for “newly literates” and the integration of short-term campaigns with the national learning systems. While campaigns have created fresh momentum to mobilise people and resources for literacy, most of the large-scale campaigns have set too ambitious targets and underestimated the complexity of the tasks. Furthermore, the promotional language of campaigns often claims to permanently “eradicate” illiteracy and to declare a city, region or country as “illiteracy-free”. This does not only reflect the obsolete dichotomous approach of categorising a person as either literate or illiterate, but is also potentially harmful to long-term learning efforts, because most people need more time than the length of a campaign to develop their literacy skills to a proficiency level which can make a real difference in their life.³⁰ The provision of literacy as a continuum through programmes which are structured into levels of graded progression while offering different pathways which meet a diversity of (evolving) learning needs remains a major challenge to most large-scale literacy campaigns and programmes. Short-term campaign approaches need to be more firmly and lastingly embedded into national learning systems while regarding literacy as a continuum and part of lifelong learning.

Examples of literacy as a lifelong and life-wide learning process: promising policies and practices

The following section examines several experiences with the potential of representing “good practice” and serving as building blocks of a framework towards lifelong literacy. While the selection of examples neither claims to cover all features of the analytical framework suggested above nor to be exhaustive with regard to ongoing experiences at the global level,

³⁰ According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC/CEPAL), getting a better-paid job and breaking the “cycle of poverty” (Torres 2009, p. 5) requires an education equivalent to at least twelve years of schooling in the region.

it intends to showcase promising policies and practices along the lines of the three main features: literacy as a lifelong learning process, literacy as a life-wide learning process and literacy as part of lifelong learning systems. At the same time, this analysis also addresses some challenges and concerns arising in the context of these experiences.

Literacy as a lifelong learning process: learning across all ages and generations

In 2011, the European Commission established a high-level expert group to analyse the literacy challenge in Europe. One of the recommendations included in the final report, which was launched in the context of International Literacy Day (8 September) in 2012, is to develop visions and strategies for literacy development with wide ownership across all ages by adopting literacy strategies with a lifelong timespan, stretching from early childhood to adulthood (European Commission 2012). In particular, the expert group made a case for “family literacy”, which is an integrated approach based upon the most ancient of educational traditions: intergenerational learning. While intergenerational lifelong learning practices are rooted in all cultures, and educational programmes with literacy components involving families are found in all world regions, they are not always called “family literacy”. Indeed, definitions can go beyond literacy and also refer to community learning: “Family literacy is an approach to learning that focuses on intergenerational interactions within the family and community which promote the development of literacy and related life skills.”³¹ Very often the desire to help their children with school is a motivation for parents to (re)engage in learning themselves. Family literacy brings together two (or even three) components of the education system: early childhood (and primary school)³² education and adult and community education.³³ By encouraging and valuing all forms of learning – formal, non-formal and informal learning – a family literacy approach can support the development of literacy and other skills for all age groups by overcoming artificial barriers between home, school and community, and between different generations. Research on the results of family-centred literacy programmes shows that there are immediate benefits as well as a longer-term impact

³¹ This is the definition formulated by the participants of a European Learning Partnership project on family literacy (QualiFLY); see <http://www.unesco.org/education/uie/QualiFLY/> [accessed 11 May 2015].

³² In some cases it even covers secondary school level (e.g. family literacy programmes in Ireland, Malta and Mexico, see <http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/>).

³³ In a recent review of his four pillars of education, Jacques Delors lays “particular emphasis on families” when indicating the challenges to bring a child fully into the “educational society” during the first years of his or her life (Delors 2013, p. 321).

for both children and adults (e.g. Hayes 2006; Tuckett 2004; Brooks et al. 2008; Carpentieri et al. 2011).

The Mother and Child Education Programme (MCEP) in Nigeria, implemented by the Ecumenical Foundation for Africa, is an integrated and intergenerational (family-based) educational and literacy programme (see LitBase). It combines early childhood education with literacy courses for women with the aim of promoting women's empowerment, appropriate child rearing and rural development. One of the lessons learnt is that the integration of literacy, life skills and early childhood education (ECE) learning opportunities is critical for the success of rural-based educational programmes. The Family Basic Education (FABE) programme (see LitBase) implemented by the Ugandan NGO Literacy and Adult Basic Education (LABE) targets rural families (out-of-school children/youth and adults), as well as school-going children, school teachers and adult literacy facilitators, with the aim of improving the educational performance of children through effective family literacy and educational support; equipping parents with basic knowledge and communication skills when interacting with their children and teachers; creating a broad awareness of family learning; enriching the abilities of teachers and adult educators in child–adult teaching and learning methods; and strengthening community participation in primary school education and general community development.

The family literacy project (FLY) in Hamburg, Germany (see LitBase), has been implemented for more than a decade in pre-schools and schools to help children and parents from migrant backgrounds to develop reading, writing and language skills, to sensitise them for the uses of literacy and to enhance their joy in reading and writing. It involves children, parents and educators in three types of activities: engagement of parents in classes, sessions of educators with parents, and joint activities of parents, their children and the educators. The pedagogical approach is to respect parents as the first educators of their children and to use existing resources in the family and community for learning. The idea of opening up schools to families and building closer relationships between school teachers and parents has been well received and successfully developed into a mainstream part of Hamburg school policy (Rabkin and Roche 2014).

This experience reflects a view of effective learning families: Each child is a member of a family, and within a learning family every member is a lifelong learner. Particularly among disadvantaged families and communities, such an approach is more likely to break the intergenerational cycle of low education and literacy skills and foster a culture of learning than fragmented and isolated measures to address low levels of learning achievement and the

lack of reading, writing and language skills (Elfert and Hanemann 2014). However, to make such an approach successful, it is necessary to provide sustained teacher training, develop a culture of collaboration among institutions, teachers and parents, and secure sustainable funding through longer-term policy support.

Literacy as a lifelong learning process: a continuum of proficiency levels

Other examples of integrated approaches to literacy as a continuous learning process can be observed in a number of recent curriculum frameworks, in formal and non-formal education. For example, the Pennsylvania Literacy Framework outlines literacy learning as a continuum for every person, a process that develops over a lifetime (“lifelong literacy”). Moreover, in this framework literacy learning from a lifelong perspective is taken across all disciplines, subjects and contexts. This means that all teachers need to be involved in incorporating literacy and language learning strategies as a way for learners to process essential ideas in depth and convey their learning (PDE 2000, 1.1–1.30).

Since there are significant differences in the way different learning areas structure text and in the features and vocabulary required to know and use language, it is important that learners acquire a diverse, flexible, dynamic and versatile repertoire of literacy knowledge and skills, which can only be developed throughout their schooling. This is why the Australian authorities have decided to treat literacy as a learning continuum across the whole general education curriculum. The Australian Curriculum (F–10 – Foundation to Year 10) follows an integral approach to literacy: categorised as one of seven general capabilities, literacy is addressed explicitly in the curricular content of the different learning areas as a cross-cutting task. Moreover, the “literacy learning continuum” incorporates two overarching processes (namely comprehending texts through listening, reading and viewing; and composing texts through speaking, writing and creating), with four areas of knowledge applying to both processes (i.e. text knowledge, grammar knowledge, word knowledge and visual knowledge) which are carried through all ten levels (ACARA 2014).

In another example, related to the New Zealand curriculum, literacy and numeracy are seen as critical to successful engagement with the increasingly complex texts and tasks students face as they progress through school. In order to reinforce students’ emerging (year 1–3) and developing (year 4–8) literacy and numeracy understandings, school leaders and teachers participating in a pilot project were provided with examples of how such skills and understandings can be developed through the five key competencies established in the

national curriculum.³⁴ These examples include aspects of using language, symbols and texts, critical thinking, managing the self, relating to others and participating and contributing (MINEDU 2010). The pilot project implementing the integration of key competencies and reading programmes in New Zealand resulted in lively conversations about literacy ideas (about the world and about the construction of texts), powerful ways of changing the nature of student opportunities to learn, and in (“often dramatically”) increased engagement with reading (Twist and McDowall 2010, p. 58).

Literacy as a life-wide learning process: embedded or combined with the development of other skills

Attempts to integrate literacy with other skills training have been made for a long time. The second integrated approach combines the development of literacy, language and numeracy with vocational and other skills. It builds on the recognition that learners usually want and need to improve their skills in a specific context and for a specific purpose, such as coping and progressing at work. Such embedded approaches to teaching and learning have been applied, for example, in the context of the “Skills for Life” strategy in the UK. Research has shown that embedded literacy, language and numeracy is most effective where vocational and other subject practitioners work in a team with language, literacy and numeracy practitioners in joint programmes which present an integrated whole to learners, have several learning aims within a single programme, and integrate literacy, language and numeracy in a variety of ways. This resulted in higher overall retention and success rates and much higher achievements in language, literacy and numeracy. While the specific model of embeddedness and how it is managed varies and is determined by each provider, meaningful, collaborative working was clearly identified as one key element of effective embedded delivery (Casey et al. 2007).

Improving adults’ literacy and numeracy skills is a key action within the New Zealand Skills Strategy introduced in 2008. As research confirms that improving workforce literacy, language and numeracy skills works best if learning happens in a context which is relevant to the learner, embedding literacy and numeracy in provision of, for example, vocational training is considered to be “the most effective and efficient way to provide direct, purposeful

³⁴ The key competencies are defined in the curriculum as “capabilities for living and lifelong learning” (MINEDU 2007, p. 12). Recent research has suggested that teachers need ample examples of what such an integration of key competencies with other aspects of the curriculum might look like in practice (ibid.).

in instruction in contexts (settings) that allow both the initial opportunity to acquire new literacy and numeracy knowledge and skills, and plenty of scope for practising them” (TEC 2009, p. 4).

Phase 3 of the Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan (ELA) programme³⁵ envisages a “two-track approach” with parallel programmes: a “basic general literacy” (BGL) programme and a “skills-based literacy” (SBL) programme with a curriculum that integrates occupational skills learning with embedded literacy practices. This means that literacy and numeracy practices are being incorporated into the training of specific trades and crafts and become “a bee keeper’s literacy, an electrician’s literacy, a weaver’s literacy” (Rogers 2014, p. 31). However, this kind of uncompromising approach requires well-qualified researchers, curriculum and material developers, practitioners and trainers who are able to prepare and implement such a programme at the local level. In a context like Afghanistan, these requirements come up against a number of unsurmountable challenges.

Literacy as part of lifelong learning systems: a holistic approach to literacy

At the policy level, there are also examples of holistic approaches to literacy. The *Lifelong Learning Strategy for the City of Vancouver* (Talbot & Associates Inc. 2006), which addresses the learning needs of all citizens from infancy to later life, includes an organising framework of lifelong learning. This “Lifelong Learning Framework” (Table 2), which is supplemented by two models illustrating the different environments in which learning occurs and the dimensions of learning, outlines an inclusive, progressive approach to learning through the different life phases with an explicit focus on literacy in each of these life phases. While this framework acknowledges “the complexities involved in creating a culture of lifelong learning”, it emphasises the need to prioritise the development and enhancement of literacy and numeracy as a learning activity throughout a person’s life (“lifelong literacy”) (Talbot & Associates Inc. 2006, p. 9).

Table 2 Lifelong learning framework

Early childhood	Childhood & Early adolescence	Later adolescence & Early adulthood	Adulthood	Later life

³⁵ ELA is a joint initiative implemented by the Afghan Ministry of Education and UNESCO, funded by the Swedish, Japanese and Finnish governments.

Focus on early literacy creativity, inquiry and physical activity	Focus on literacy and numeracy	Emphasis on individual responsibility for learning	Enhancement of adult literacy and numeracy	Enhancement of senior literacy and numeracy
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Table created for the purposes of this article *Source* Talbot & Associates Inc. 2006

Literacy and basic skills are also integrated into national lifelong learning policies, strategies and frameworks.³⁶ Examples are the Lifelong Education Act (RoK 2009) and the 3rd National Lifelong Learning Promotion Plan (2013–17) of the Republic of Korea (NILE 2013), the National Policy on Skills Development in India (MLE 2009), the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (2008–13) of Bulgaria (MLSP 2008), the Strategy of Lifelong Learning (2007) of the Czech Republic (MSMT 2007) and Denmark’s strategy for lifelong learning (UVM 2007), among others.

Literacy as part of RVA mechanisms and NQFs

In recent years, mechanisms of recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of non-formal and informal learning have become important components of national lifelong learning policies and even strong drivers of education reforms to better integrate alternative learning pathways into one diversified system (particularly in Africa, see Yang 2015). However, a strong emphasis on work-related skills to enhance employability (i.e. sub-frameworks to TVET) and on the acquisition of qualifications which pave the way to higher education (i.e. not reaching the most vulnerable target groups) are also evident. A recent review (ibid.) of feedback from 42 UNESCO Member States and other sources of information show that while many stakeholders see the need to create such mechanisms, they also find themselves facing a number of challenges in doing so, including a lack of updated policies, systems and resources, as well as limited technical capacity to develop outcome-based qualifications frameworks, among other things. Evidence of the contribution of RVA mechanisms to inclusion and empowerment is still scant. Moreover, the evidence already available in the case of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), though being far from conclusive, suggests negligible impact and negative consequences. However, it is also true that much of the potential of RVA and NQFs has yet to be realised (see Raffe 2013),

³⁶ See UIL’s online collection of Lifelong Learning Policies and Strategies (UIL 2014b).

particularly with regard to becoming bridges to further education opportunities for people engaging in literacy as a foundation for lifelong learning.

While NQFs are not indispensable means of achieving national policy objectives,³⁷ RVA mechanisms seem to be relevant for people with low levels of basic skills. The establishment of alternative pathways for the acquisition of foundational skills that imply equivalencies between formal and non-formal learning programmes requires an outcome- or competency-based curriculum and standardised approaches and tools to assess learning outcomes. Transforming the expanded vision of literacy into a learning continuum with different proficiency levels would meet such a requirement. However, one challenge lies in organising operational procedures which can be tailored to a diversity of learning needs, life situations and contexts, including interventions for young people and adults who are not participating in structured literacy programmes. Another challenge lies in the need to develop measurement tools which are able to generate reliable, credible and comparable data which can be used with the flexibility that non-formal education requires.

There are many adult literacy and basic education programmes (in some cases called “equivalency programmes”) which are accredited to issue certificates after successful completion of a final test or other means of assessment³⁸ (Hanemann 2014a). However, no evidence is available on RVA practices for entry levels of literacy and basic education outside of such organised programmes. While there are provisions for RVA at the policy level in a number of countries, mainly in the context of NQFs (e.g. in Ireland, South Africa, New Zealand, the UK), these still need to be realised in practice.³⁹ This will depend on the development of operational systems and supportive mechanisms which enable disadvantaged populations to obtain recognised certificates for basic skills and education at the lowest levels.

Conclusion: Some trends and issues for further discussion

³⁷ NQFs may provide ways of referencing national qualifications to transnational meta-frameworks, such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), but “most specifically national objectives of NQFs could be achieved by other means” (Raffe 2013, p. 158).

³⁸ The Learner Assessment Portfolios used in the South African *Kha Ri Gude* Literacy Campaign are an example of this (see McKay 2015 in this special issue).

³⁹ The Portuguese government’s “New Opportunities Initiative” was an example of practical realisation: it was successfully implemented (without an NQF) from 2000 to 2010 (see Carneiro 2011), but was then discontinued by the newly elected government.

In the 21st century, both the challenges of the need to continuously adapt to ongoing developments and changes in a world which is increasingly mediated by the written word, and the need to reach vulnerable young people and adults who struggle with reading, writing and numeracy with relevant and good quality literacy learning opportunities have become more complex and demanding with regard to the tasks involved in terms of policies and provision. Grasping the evolving notions of literacy to develop building blocks for a theoretical framework in contribution to the ongoing debate on the post-2015 education and development goals is a delicate undertaking. How literacy is conceptualised and operationalised has implications for how it is addressed in policies, for how it is taught and learned within programmes, and how it is measured and reported at national and international levels.

Reviewing the findings and examples analysed above, it emerges that there is as yet no common understanding of how to conceptualise or operationalise literacy from a lifelong learning perspective. This is due, of course, to the complex nature of literacy itself. Even though we can observe many changes, these are uneven, moving at different paces, and at times persistently slow. There are numerous statements, discussions and initiatives promoting and advancing the concept of literacy as a continuum, and efforts are also increasing at local, national and international levels to improve the quality of literacy data. However, changes at policy and operational levels which are commensurate with the conceptual and theoretical developments in this domain are extremely slow and do not always reflect an enlarged vision of literacy (and basic education) from a lifelong learning perspective. In some cases, the gap between discourse and practice even seems to be widening.

The vision of lifelong learning supports the idea of building bridges between different components, actors, institutions, processes, learning spaces (life spheres) and moments (life phases) to develop holistically designed learning systems. Integrated approaches such as family literacy and literacy embedded in technical and vocational education and training take this idea on board. GRALE 2 showed that while there are a growing number of practices which address literacy as a lifelong learning process, there is, on the other hand, still no common understanding of how to approach literacy as a continuum and as a lifelong learning process (UIL 2013). Analysis of the impact of national literacy campaigns and programmes reveals that many of these campaigns are launched by politicians or decision-makers with unrealistic and short-term aims, using promotional language (to “eradicate illiteracy”) which reflects the obsolete dichotomous approach of categorising a person as either “literate” or “illiterate”, and fails to provide for a continuity of learning opportunities beyond the initial

level, not to mention the development of non-formal and lifelong learning systems (Hanemann 2014a).

The examples analysed in this article demonstrate that there is plenty of opportunity for bringing literacy closer to the different purposes for which people need or want to read, write and communicate and for making related learning experiences deeper, richer and more sustainable. The demand side of a literate environment deserves much more attention to promote the productive use of literacy and to increase participation of young people and adults in literacy courses. By integrating literacy with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values pertaining to other areas, learning can become more meaningful, motivational and “natural” for disadvantaged learner groups. Be it advancing the culture of learning together as a family, be it the development of literacy and numeracy competencies across different or all disciplines, be it the integration of literacy with key competencies across all stages of a curriculum, or be it in the context of a transformative pedagogy to combine living and learning more effectively, there are a rising number of examples where the continuum of literacy learning is addressed from a lifelong learning perspective. These approaches are indeed promising building blocks paving the way towards “lifelong literacy” policies, strategies, programmes and practices. However, more research on effective practices will be necessary to support further debate and evolution of a theoretical lifelong literacy framework.

If we hope to achieve the proposed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) mentioned at the beginning of this article, in particular the overarching education goal of equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030, in conjunction with sustainable development priorities, we need to ensure that there is a common understanding of how literacy is conceptualised, operationalised and even measured as a continuum and foundation for lifelong learning. This means that literacy policies and practices need to embody the components analysed in this article, which is intended as a contribution to the post-2015 education debate. It seems that there is still a long way to go to achieve a general consensus on how to address literacy within a truly lifelong learning vision – in theory, policy and practice. However, there is no way around the need to fulfil the right of all young people and adults to achieve literacy and numeracy by 2030.

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