Literacy and Numeracy from a Lifelong Learning Perspective

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Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 calls on countries to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (WEF, 2015). Literacy and numeracy are indispensable not only to the achievement of this goal and the 10 related targets set out in the Education 2030 Framework for Action, but also to meeting the other 16 SDGs. However, literacy and numeracy can only unfold their full potential to 'transform our world' if they are approached from a lifelong learning perspective (Hanemann, 2015) and brought closer to people's lives through integrated, multi-sectoral approaches that draw the focus from supply to demand. Achieving this means working towards 'literate families', 'literate communities' and 'literate societies' made up of independent, confident and effective lifelong learners.

The Education 2030 target

SDG Target 4.6 requires that by 2030 Member States 'ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy' (WEF, 2016, p. 46). The principles, strategies and actions for this target are 'underpinned by a contemporary understanding of literacy not as a simple dichotomy of "literate" versus "illiterate", but as a continuum of proficiency levels' which 'depend on specific contexts'. The aim is that 'by 2030, all young people and adults across the world should have achieved relevant and recognized proficiency levels in functional literacy and numeracy skills that are equivalent to levels achieved at successful completion of basic education' (ibid., p. 47).

SDG 4.6 is one of three global quantitative targets that express a commitment to universalize basic education for all by 2030; the others are Target 4.1

(a full cycle of 9–12 years of free, public primary and secondary education) and Target 4.2 (at least one year of pre-primary education). Given the different country contexts and baselines, benchmarks will have to be set at national level. Progress will be assessed against the following global indicator: 'Percentage of population in a given age group achieving at least a fixed level of proficiency in functional (a) literacy and (b) numeracy skills, by sex' (UIS, 2016). Many countries have yet to develop or adopt the necessary frameworks, tools and methodologies to make monitoring of this indicator possible.

Literacy from a lifelong learning perspective

In today's fast-changing society everyone needs to have a wide set of knowledge, skills and competences, including literacy, numeracy and digital competency at a proficiency level, in order to learn,

What we mean by 'literacy', 'basic education' and 'lifelong learning'

Literacy usually refers to a set of skills and practices comprising reading, writing and using numbers as mediated by written materials. However, literacy has evolved into a multidimensional and complex concept. While acknowledging the 'plurality' of literacy and literacy practices, there is a need to use terminology which is clear and intelligible to everybody. This involves avoiding the metaphorical use of the term (e.g. computer literacy, financial literacy, health literacy) to designate competency or skills in senses other than those directly concerned with written text. Literacy is best understood as a competency: 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 demands.

Basic education – sometimes referred to as fundamental, elementary or primary/secondary education – consists of at least nine years and progressively extends to up to 12. It is free and compulsory, and prepares the learner for further education and an active life and citizenship, while meeting basic learning needs including learning to learn, and the acquisition of literacy, numeracy and scientific and technological knowledge as applied to daily life. Equivalent basic education is offered to youth and adults who did not have the opportunity to receive and complete basic education at the appropriate age (UNESCO, 2009).

Based on emancipatory, humanistic and democratic values, **lifelong learning** is founded in the integration of learning and living, covering learning activities for people of all ages, in all life contexts (home, school, workplace, community, etc.) and through formal, non-formal and informal modalities (UNESCO, 2014). 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).

adapt and participate in social, economic, cultural and civic life. The Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) indicates that adults with low levels of proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology-rich environments face a higher risk of unemployment, a higher incidence of poverty and social exclusion, higher health risks and lower life expectancy, while their children face higher risks of educational underachievement (OECD, 2016).

Literacy can no longer be treated as a stand-alone set of skills developed and 'completed' within a short timeframe. It should rather be seen as one component of a complex set of core competencies which require sustained learning and updating on a continuous basis. The development of these core competences is at the heart of basic education and contributes significantly to the achievement of the SDGs. While the required proficiency levels and how people apply reading and writing skills depend on specific contexts and purposes, the minimum literacy threshold to be reached by all citizens of a country must be established at policy level, if possible based on a broad consensus, and should be allowed to evolve over time. There is increasing acknowledgement, reflected in the Education 2030 Framework for Action, that completing basic education tends to be the minimum requirement for full participation in society, employability and access to further learning.

Expanding the vision

Hanemann (2015) offers an analytical framework for 'lifelong literacy' in order to examine current trends in literacy within a lifelong learning perspective. It comprises three dimensions that are closely interrelated: (1) literacy as a lifelong learning process, (2) literacy as a life-wide process, and (3) literacy as part of a set of holistic, sector-wide and cross-sectoral reforms towards lifelong learning systems.

(1) Literacy as a lifelong learning process

Literacy learning is a continuous activity leading to different proficiency levels. Competency levels acquired at a given moment in time can be insufficient, outdated or lost in another. It is meaningless to talk of someone being either 'literate' or 'illiterate'. Literacy is a learning continuum of proficiency levels. The goal of policy should be to 'improve levels of literacy' rather than to 'eradicate illiteracy'. The acquisition and development of literacy takes place before, during and after primary education, in and out of school, and through formal, non-formal and informal learning, throughout a person's life. It is never too early or too late to start literacy and numeracy learning.

(2) Literacy as a life-wide process

People use and develop their reading and writing skills in different ways across 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, and in cultural centres, libraries, museums, etc. – which complement and enhance literacy classes. Strengthening emphasis on the demand side of a 'literate environment' is about linking literacy to economic, social and cultural activities which people want or need to develop in their daily lives, thereby creating requirements and opportunities for the use, improvement and retention of literacy skills to make them sustainable. Related programmes try to integrate knowledge and skills (i.e. technical and vocational education and training, and other practical and 'life skills') – in life spheres and domains such as livelihoods, health, human rights, citizenship, gender equality and parenting – with the development of literacy, numeracy and digital competency (for examples see UNESCO's Effective Literacy and Numeracy Practices Database: http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/).

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

Education reforms that promote the development of lifelong learning systems adopt a holistic and sector-wide approach with a longer-term planning horizon. 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. Lifelong literacy covers the full spectrum of lifelong and life-wide learning and involves a continuum of proficiency levels that require institutionalized learning systems which are flexible and support integrated approaches at all stages of a person's life and in a diversity of life situations. Furthermore, a holistic approach to literacy seeks to associate literacy learning with other essential development tasks by making literacy part of national development strategies. The successful combination of learning and living requires a cross-sectoral approach cutting across all development-relevant areas (health, agriculture, labour, social security, environment, culture, etc.), beyond the education sector.

Policy recommendations

The following policy recommendations are based on an analysis of examples of literacy policies and programmes for young people and adults that have adopted holistic, multi-sectoral approaches within a lifelong learning perspective:

1. Pay close attention to the demand-side of literate environments and the development of a culture of learning

A lifelong learning strategy for youth and adult literacy should pay attention to how literacy fits into learners' lives, what it means to them and where potential sources of interest or difficulty might lie. It should not only respond to the needs of government and other institutions with the power to decide which kinds of literacy practice are valued, supported and legitimized, but also recognize literacy practices and sources of knowledge that already exist in civic life and at a local level. Such a strategy should open up and strengthen different access points for literacy (e.g. libraries, internet cafés, health centres, employment offices, etc.) and create structured learning opportunities along with other (informal) activities designed to develop and sustain literacy. The creation of an effective demand for literacy and a culture of learning supported by fertile and dynamic literate environments – also in local languages – should be a focus of literacy policies and strategies.

2. Address the national literacy challenge with integrated, multi-sectoral approaches

There is plenty of opportunity to bring literacy and numeracy closer to people's lives. Through integrated and multi-sectoral approaches – such as family literacy and learning, literacy embedded in vocational training or linked to income generation, and literacy as part of livelihood, agricultural extension or health programmes – literacy learning can become more meaningful, motivational and 'natural', in particular for disadvantaged population groups. Making literacy 'a business of all' means that different government ministries and entities need to share responsibility for addressing the national literacy challenge collaboratively. This further involves linking literacy programmes to social change and sustainable development, embedding literacy in national development strategies, promoting strategic partnerships and synergies across sectors, and longer-term (financial) commitment.

3. Enable the continuity of literacy and numeracy development towards a basic education qualification

Policies should be oriented towards continuously sustaining and improving the development of literacy and numeracy competences while also encouraging people to learn new ones (e.g. digital competence), instead of striving for the 'eradication of illiteracy' as a policy goal. In many countries, youth and adult

literacy programmes still need to be made available beyond the first levels and include arrangements for recognized certificates. Governments should therefore provide young people and adults with learning opportunities that allow for continuity of literacy and numeracy development to at least basic education proficiency level. Furthermore, given the aim to universalize basic education, governments should also encourage and support citizens to achieve basic education as a minimum qualification level.

4. Integrate literacy and numeracy into holistically designed learning systems and sector-wide strategies

Integrating literacy into holistically designed learning systems demands programmes that are structured into levels of graded progression of competency development and into different pathways that meet a diversity of learning needs. Such systems need to include literacy within common frameworks that span formal and non-formal education and reach from basic to advanced proficiency levels (e.g. national qualifications frameworks). They must also incorporate standardized tools to assess learners'/citizens' proficiency levels to diagnose, monitor and validate learning progress and outcomes. Mechanisms for the recognition, validation and accreditation of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning should be part of these systems and be accompanied by effective guidance and counselling services. The integration of literacy into sector-wide education strategies and plans – or even into broader lifelong learning policies, frameworks and systems – should be promoted as an effective

approach to make literacy a national priority. It should be seen as an indicator of long-term political commitment and as conducive to partnership development, financial stability and continuity.

5. Make literacy and numeracy instrumental in the achievement of the SDGs

In light of this broader understanding, literacy is a key condition for poverty reduction, inclusion and sustainable development. Empowerment of marginalized communities and community-based approaches to literacy for sustainable development should be a focus of national development strategies. Youth and adult literacy programmes yield benefits that go beyond those made explicit in the SDGs, such as increased self-esteem, empowerment, openness to change and resumption of learning. Literacy and education play a vital role in promoting tolerance to diversity and conflict prevention. Literacy and numeracy should therefore be promoted from a lifelong learning perspective, so that they can unfold their transformative potential.

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