

BALID INFORMAL LITERACY DISCUSSION No 20

ADULT LITERACY: POLICIES AND STRUCTURES

**Tuesday, May 12, 2015, at Redcliffe College, Gloucester.
Led by Lalage Bown**

Banner words for 2015: “Literacy not only changes lives; it saves them”, Irina Bokova, UNESCO Secretary-General, 2014

PRELIMINARY – A NEW UK CONTEXT

My theme, which links to a previous discussion led by David Archer, is the need to acquire political literacy ourselves. This has been made dramatically urgent by the new UK political scene.

Within the UK, there has already been a trend towards cuts to funding for adult education programmes in Further Education; the budget line for this in 2010 was £4.5 billion; for 2015/16 it is £2.7bn – a drop of 40%.

Now, at about the same time as the election, Julian Gravatt writes: “we face the possibility of the total elimination of adult learning funding [by the state] by 2020, so that other budgets can be protected. The fact that other sectors are more powerful in our political system doesn’t mean that they are more deserving of available funds” (Adults Learning 26.2). Meanwhile staff from Welsh further education colleges are demonstrating against an overall budget decline of over 20%.

Outside the UK, the last British government ring-fenced the development aid budget. In the new climate, desperation for cuts and an ever-inward-looking Conservative party clearly put that at risk.

THE CHALLENGE

All of us, researchers, practitioners, NGO workers, education managers, share a commitment to adult learning in general and adult literacies in particular. Over the years literacy has been seen as a human right and an instrument for transformation. But in almost all societies at the present day, literacy programmes are marginalised and the number of non-literate people in the world remains fairly static.

Global Monitoring Report figures show 780 million adults (60% women) and 126 million youths lacking basic literacy skills,

while on average, 1 in 4 children entering school in developing countries will drop out. The Millennium Development Goal of UPE has not been achieved in a number of highly-populated countries and this means that substantial numbers of young people will grow up lacking access to the official/prevaling literacies.

The challenges we face are: why are we relatively unsuccessful in conveying to governments our conviction of the significance of adult literacy and adult learning more broadly? Why are we relatively unsuccessful in persuading politicians and civil servants to translate policies into action? And do we have practical prescriptions for structures to ensure action? These apply to any country's internal situation and to the work of aid-giving nations.

As Jan Eldred said in 2009: "How can we make arguments that have influence?"

POLICIES AND INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY

David Archer reminded us of the importance of international advocacy. Even when international conferences and resolutions seem remote, they can at least provide the strength of international consensus and if governments have signed up to various declarations that gives a lever in arguments to persuade governments to act.

The concept of rights remains fashionable and there are several UN declarations on the right to basic education. For example: the original Declaration of 1948, Article 26: "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages."

Prescriptions based on the concept of rights include the UNESCO Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education of 1976, para 6: "Consideration should be given to the need for an adult education component, including literacy, in the framing and execution of any development programme" and para 16: "With regard to such persons or groups as have remained illiterateadult education activities should be designed not only to enable them to acquire basic knowledge (reading, writing arithmetic, basic understanding of natural and social phenomena), but also to make it easier for them to engage in productive work, to promote their self-awareness and their grasp of the problems of hygiene, health, household management and the upbringing of children, and to enhance their autonomy and increase their participation in community life."

Moving to the present day, there is a gleam of hope in the activities around the post MDG plans for a programme to 2030.

The UN Secretary-General appointed in 2012 a High Level Panel to set out the 2030 agenda. One of three co-chairs was David Cameron. The panel reported in 2013 and barely made mention of education at all, but building on their work, the UNESCO meeting On Global Education for All in Muscat in May 2014 adopted a framework which includes as key words: inclusivity, equity, quality and lifelong learning. This last phrase gives a basis for the advocacy of adult literacy.

POLICIES: CHANGING PUBLIC THINKING

The accumulated international consensus is not sufficient to change politicians' minds. Both Michael Gove and Ed Miliband seem to have the same rather narrow view of literacy within adult learning – and most of the UK public share it. They see it either instrumentally, as a means to employment in a capitalist society, or formally, as part of the formal educational structure and thus either the business of schools for the young or a component of an “academic” and not necessarily helpful curriculum administered to adults.

We have to find more ways in which participants in literacy programmes can witness to their experienced and express their views. Academics and practitioners often publish case-studies, but they are read by the converted. Our predicament is how to get access to the media, particularly new media. The story of Malala gave a powerful witness to the problems of school-girls in Pakistan; can we find an adult woman's story and disseminate it? And how else can we get the message out?

STRUCTURES

Convincing those in power, whether in central or local government, in some NGOs or in important companies, is just one step. There have to be structures to enable those learners to gain access to useful literacy tools. In the 20th century, there were mobilisation societies, where the whole population was involved, in the USSR, Cuba, Guinea Bissau (the President Amilcar Cabral phrased it: “All those who know should teach those who don't know”) and Tanzania. But in the 21st century, globalisation has (paradoxically) fragmented societies.

Various recipes have been tried. Usually, in poor countries, literacy work has usually been the responsibility of Ministries of Education or of Community Development; but then it often becomes the poor relation. Alternatives include placing the responsibility in a central government agency; Kenya located it in

the President's office, assuming that it would be sheltered there, but in that case too, it was too insignificant a function compared to other activities.

Outside central government, adult literacy learning can have more prominence, but the crucial issue is funding. In centralising governments like the UK, local authorities or local institutions, such as FE Colleges, can, as we have seen, be left without resources for the task. NGOs also may be hampered by a dependence on state grants and be left unable to continue programmes.

International bodies are advocating a fixed budget allocation for literacy work, as with the budget for development aid. The Global Campaign for Education is recommending three percent of the national budget. This could be helpful, but there are modes of interpretation which water down this provision. For instance, India allocated 10% of Federal funds, but the main resources and expenditure are located in the States.

IN CONCLUSION

Diagnosis is easier than solution, but I have tried to suggest some ways of tackling the challenges we face. If we don't have the courage to confront them, we will have small successes in diverse places, but we won't make a real breakthrough. As I have said, we have to educate ourselves in political literacy!