



# Adult literacy, local languages and lifelong learning in rural African contexts

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This special issue of the *International Review of Education* on *adult literacy, local languages* and *lifelong learning* explores the intersection of these distinct but inseparable aspects of learning in rural African societies. It draws together articles on current empirical research, literacy programme and policy assessments, and analysis of the social assumptions related to the practice of reading and writing in local languages in Africa, with the intention of enlarging our understanding of their implications for lifelong learning.

The term *adult literacy* as used in this special issue refers not only to how people learn to read and write, but also to how reading and writing are taken up in practice in daily life. Peter Easton's (2014)<sup>1</sup> distinction between supply and demand is helpful in this regard. The supply of quality instruction is crucial, since adequacy of instruction is the first step towards creating the skills necessary for ongoing learning. However, supplying instruction begs the question, what is the nature of the demand that will see people through until the classes finish? Demand is not a one-time motivation that exists prior to instruction. For example, Sanjana Shrestha and Lisa Krolak (2015)<sup>2</sup> observe that librarians in Nepal are not just dispensers of books; they *facilitate demand* (i.e., the desire for more books by people who are

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<sup>1</sup> Easton, P. (2014). *Sustaining literacy in Africa: Developing a literate environment*. Emerging trends in youth and adult literacy series Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved 9 June 2016 from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002252/225258e.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Shrestha, S., & Krolak, L. (2015). The potential of community libraries in supporting literate environments and sustaining literacy skills. *International Review of Education*, 61(3), 399–418.

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already readers). These distinctions of supply and demand demonstrate the importance of understanding how and why people learn to read in the first place, how and why they continue to use written texts after the classes have finished, and who facilitates demand for instruction and use in African contexts.

The term *adult literacy* as used here also encompasses the significance of reading and writing for African youth and adults living in rural communities. First, although acquiring literacy skills does not determine how they will be used in daily life, the qualities of literacy programming do determine the adequacy of the literacy and numeracy skills gained – as well as whether learners perceive that those skills will be useful (or not) for lifelong learning. Also part of the significance of adult literacy is the status that it confers on the individual and the language community. Literate adults compare themselves to their peers who are formally educated; they also compare their languages to other languages for evidence of legitimacy such as dictionaries, books, newspapers, etc. (Trudell and Cheffy 2017).<sup>3</sup>

The use of the term *local language* in this context is intended to highlight the languages of local African communities. The local community is the site for literacy practices, and the shared language of the community is the medium for these practices. The pedagogical advantage of such contextualised literacy learning is that it allows people to begin with what they know best, both linguistically and socio-culturally. Learning literacy in the local language starts with the nexus of social relationships that the learners already have.

The language aspect of literacy also acknowledges that multilingualism is common among Africans in rural communities, and that for many, their first exposure to literacy in the formal classroom has been through the language of schooling rather than the language of their community. Because of this, the practice of literacy is influenced by the expectations created by schooling regarding what literate learning is good for. Local language literacy instruction in this context is a novelty and it helps to create new expectations of what literacy might be good for beyond the classroom.

The use of the term *lifelong learning* in this context situates literacy in daily life, outside and beyond formal schooling. It does not preclude formal schooling as a site for literacy instruction, but neither is schooling assumed. Lifelong learning also contextualises literacy in the discourses of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The term “lifelong learning” is explicit in SDG 4: “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN 2015).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, lifelong learning is not just confined to SDG 4; it contributes to sustainable development across the SDGs. According to UNESCO’s 2016 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, the critical role of adult education and learning is also important (though often overlooked) for

<sup>3</sup> Trudell, J., & Cheffy, I. (2017). “We also wanted to learn”: Narratives of change from adults literate in African languages. *International Review of Education*, 63(5), 745–766.

<sup>4</sup> UN (United Nations) (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015 – A/RES/70/1. New York: UN. Retrieved 13 May 2019 from <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>.

achieving the other SDG targets (UNESCO 2016).<sup>5</sup> The articles we present in this special issue provide further evidence for the contributions of local language literacy to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

By examining the intersection of adult literacy, local language and lifelong learning, this issue highlights the significance of the connections between adult literacy as a reading practice and the social, linguistic and learning situations where it is practised. The importance of these connections has been highlighted in a previous special issue of this journal, where Ulrike Hanemann and Veronica McKay emphasise the importance of “connections among literacy activities across sectors, generations and spheres of life” (Hanemann and McKay 2015, p. 267),<sup>6</sup> and Aaron Benavot argues that “literacy thrives and is sustained when a state of connectedness exists: when there is a social nexus of relations among individuals, households, communities and social institutions” (Benavot 2015, p. 284).<sup>7</sup> The articles in this current special issue further demonstrate the importance of these connections, particularly in the rural African context.

Another common thread running through all of the articles in this issue is the implication, drawn from the SDGs, that disparities in education should be diminished and learning should be made more equitable. In the first article in this issue, Ulrike Hanemann and Veronica McKay use the term “parity of learning” in reference to redressing historic language inequities in South Africa. Also drawing on research in South Africa, Nathan Castillo and Daniel Wagner speak to “improving learning quality among poor and marginalised students” by combining information and communication technology (ICT) support with local South African languages. Joel Trudell and Ian Cheffy argue that for the concept of lifelong learning to be equitable, it has to take into account how it is practised in local languages in African settings; otherwise, it could be construed as an agenda promoted from the Global North. In interrogating the term “reading culture”, Barbara Trudell notes that the language promoted in a school reading culture is often a foreign-language medium of instruction, and that more reading materials should be available that actually address the population. Clinton Robinson and Vũ Tú Anh Thị use the term “equitable communication” with regard to language as a means to development. Finally, Peter Easton and Laouali Malam Moussa propose a research agenda that will serve policymakers for improving literacy in “impoverished African settings”.

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<sup>5</sup> UNESCO (2016). *Education for people and planet: Creating sustainable futures for all*. Global Education Monitoring Report. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved 13 May 2019 from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245752>.

<sup>6</sup> Hanemann, U., & McKay, V. (2015). Lifelong literacy: Towards a new agenda. *International Review of Education*, 61(3), 265–272.

<sup>7</sup> Benavot, A. (2015). Literacy in the 21st century: Towards a dynamic nexus of social relations. *International Review of Education*, 61(3), 273–294.

## **(1) Learning in the mother tongue: Examining the learning outcomes of the South African *Kha Ri Gude* literacy campaign**

In the first article we present, *Ulrike Hanemann* and *Veronica McKay* examine the learning outcomes of the *Kha Ri Gude* adult literacy campaign in South Africa. This campaign was launched in 2008, and was carried out in 10 indigenous South African languages as well as in English. Hanemann and McKay analyse the literacy and numeracy scores for the 2011 cohort, and compare the learning outcomes among these eleven languages. In spite of the national policy intention to serve speakers of each language equally, the authors discover considerable disparities in the scores among learners from the various languages.

In analysing these disparities in scores, the authors asked ten language experts involved in the literacy campaign to classify the languages with regard to any linguistic features that might make them harder to learn to read, and to interpret the language-related score differences of learners. Taking the language experts' responses into account, Hanemann and McKay found that, in fact, the demographic size of language communities and the political status and resources that have historically accompanied numerically larger language communities contribute significantly to better performance among those larger communities, even if their languages are linguistically more complicated to learn to read.

This leads to a valuable conclusion for lifelong learning: though language choice can be an important resource for learning, the playing field is not level. Certainly, every learner learns best in the language that they understand best, and every language should have equal rights for use in education; however, some African languages have more educational capital than others due to their status, and due to the history of resources devoted to their development. The authors thus recommend that parity of learning could be gained by addressing the historic inequalities of language development: governments implementing literacy and numeracy programmes need (1) a better understanding of why learners in certain language communities are learning well, and (2) a certain "positive discrimination" of investing more in languages that have not historically been used in education.

## **(2) Early-grade reading support in rural South Africa: A language-centred technology approach**

*Nathan Castillo* and *Daniel Wagner* also examine the outcomes of a reading programme in South Africa, carried out in three home languages and in English. However, in contrast to the *Kha Ri Gude* adult literacy campaign, the South African version of the Bridges to the Future Initiative (*BFI South Africa*) utilises multimedia instructional software to support formal schooling for rural South African children in grades 1–3. The authors argue that such digitally enhanced learning, accompanied by guidance by a teacher trained for providing this, results

in significant gains in reading fluency and comprehension over traditional instruction or unguided use of software.

There are several reasons for including a study on early grade reading in this special issue on adult literacy. First, the programme emphasises instruction in the home language, in a rural environment – a situation that involves similar linguistic and resourcing challenges no matter what the age of the learners. Castillo and Wagner contend that ICT-enhanced instruction can make a difference in addressing the inequalities that accompany low-resource language contexts. Second, this study shows how guided ICT instruction can provide local language support to help struggling readers succeed in school – a lesson that can be applied at any age. Third, SDG 4 frames qualified teachers as an important part of preparing people of any age to become lifelong learners. In keeping with this aim, the authors' emphasis on teachers' capacity to utilise educational resources is as important as the resources themselves.

The authors argue that ICT-enhanced educational materials are relevant to the low resource environments that are common in rural Africa. While the terms "ICT-enhanced" and "low-resource environments" are not often paired, the evidence presented by Castillo and Wagner demonstrates that the contextualised nature of the programme with respect to local language and reading instruction is effective for helping to support struggling readers.

### **(3) Local knowledge, global knowledge: The role of local language literacy for lifelong learning in rural African contexts**

Lifelong learning is a term that implies global relevance. As used in SDG 4, it specifies "lifelong learning opportunities for all". However, notwithstanding its globalised meaning, lifelong learning takes place in specific local circumstances. *Joel Trudell* and *Ian Cheffy* explore the ways in which our understanding of the global concept is enriched by a study of adults in rural African contexts who recount their experiences as lifelong learners following participation in literacy programmes. The data for this study are taken from interviews conducted in Ethiopia, Kenya, Cameroon, Ghana and Burkina Faso, with 95 adults who had completed local-language literacy instruction within the previous 20 years. The interviewees were asked to identify the changes in their lives that had come about after learning to read, write, and calculate in their own language.

Trudell and Cheffy observed that changes revealing learning in the community were broadly associated with either writing skills or reading skills. Adult literates in the study reported using writing for record-keeping and for keeping track of things of significance to them. They record features of their agricultural economy, such as when they plant and harvest each year, and when their animals give birth. They also use writing to measure and calculate costs, such as estimates for carpentry or metalwork. In the marketplace, they track their sales to know whether they have made a profit. These writing practices document the local knowledge of these adults; when they share what they have written with others, it enriches the knowledge of the community.

In contrast, the use of reading skills in the community has mainly to do with reading materials published in the local language, and produced by organisations rather than individuals. The themes of the publications are predominantly knowledge from outside of the community, and the organisations that produce them draw on content that is readily available worldwide. Each organisation makes its own decisions regarding what to publish, but learners most often referred to content relevant to rural life such health, hygiene and agriculture, as well as Christian scripture publications, which contain valuable knowledge for adherents of Christianity.

These observations about the distinct uses of writing and reading in rural Africa are relevant to our understanding of lifelong learning. Writing practices in the local language emphasise local agency in learning, since they allow people to track what they want to monitor for their own purposes. In contrast, publications in local languages, insofar as they are read, respond to local demand for outside knowledge. Thus, one of the most salient lessons of the study may be that local literacy organisations have a key role in making literate learning accessible in local communities, both by teaching the skills necessary to read and write in local languages and by producing reading material in the local language that is most relevant to learners.

#### **(4) Reading in the classroom and society: An examination of “reading culture” in African contexts**

*Barbara Trudell* examines the assumption that “reading culture” is a high-value social feature unique to societies that have well-established uses of written text, and that it is lacking in societies that do not give much attention to written text. While there is no complete agreement on what constitutes reading culture, Trudell notes that it has become a term that has gained international popularity. Since reading and writing practices are relatively infrequent in many societies of rural Africa, especially outside of the precincts of the school, the assumption is that a reading culture must be established in these contexts if proper learning and development are to occur. This approach takes no account of local cultural patterns of knowledge sharing, and makes no attempt to assess actual uses of written text in a given community considered to lack a “reading culture”.

This narrow perspective on reading and culture has implications for lifelong learning. For example, in many African contexts, people still prefer oral communication over written communication. These cultural preferences should not be regarded as a cultural deficit for learners. Furthermore, it is not useful to label people as predominantly “oral learners” or “written learners”, since a preference for oral communication does not mean that use of texts is absent from these societies.

The language question is also relevant here. While the balance of oral and written means of communication and learning may vary in a society, one might assume that the school is the site where a culture of reading could be unreservedly promoted, because reading is so important to success in school. However, in African contexts, school-based learning is closely associated with international languages; a serious learning inequity emerges when students are expected to learn from texts that are written in a language they do not understand. The danger then is that promoting a

culture of reading in school is not really about cultural preferences, as if it were a “learning style”; rather, it is about promoting the language of school at the expense of learning in the language one knows best.

## **(5) Literacy, languages and development in Africa: A policy perspective**

*Clinton Robinson* and *Vũ Tú Anh Thị* draw attention to the links between literacy, languages and development processes as a policy concern. Literacy policy is often influenced by the SDGs, and is thus based on an instrumental view of literacy because it “gets the development job done”. Attention to the best language choices for literacy is often absent from this discourse. However, an emphasis on literacy as a means to obtain information misses one of the essential connections between literacy and development, namely that literacy use is a means of communication. Asking questions about the languages used in literacy practices shifts the focus to the local level: what are people’s actual patterns of communication, and in what languages? Examining the use of local languages as a principle of equitable communication cuts through the well-worn and too easily assumed arguments against inclusive language policy, e.g., that “there are too many languages”, “it can’t be done in all languages”, etc.

In considering national language policy as it applies to multilingual environments in Africa, Robinson and Vũ frame the discussion in terms of the importance of personal interaction in development. In this context, literacy and the languages of written communication are dimensions of the way government policies prioritise (or fail to prioritise) local participation in development. Drawing on policy data from Cameroon, Morocco and Senegal, the authors consider the ways in which language policy choices reflect particular models and practices of development. Focusing on local languages and their use for written communication, the authors examine the extent to which national policies are clear concerning the purposes of literacy, and how far these intended purposes are actually implemented. In spite of marked differences in their national policies, all three of these cases seem to lack the intention to link learning through the local language with the aims and processes of development. This reveals an incongruity: while literacy levels are monitored as evidence of development, the actual uses of written communication are not considered relevant processes of development.

## **(6) Literacy usage in impoverished African settings: Post-Education for All (EFA) research needs**

Wrapping up the special issue, *Peter Easton* and *Laouali Malam Moussa* draw our attention to the dearth of information about what people do with the skills that they have acquired following literacy instruction in African settings. While it has been established that these settings have some of the lowest literacy rates in the world, very little is known about the dynamics of literacy use among those who complete

literacy programmes. Educators have a notion of how people become literate, but the use of literacy skills beyond organised instruction is less well understood. However, having a firm grasp of this post-instruction use of literacy is critical for policymakers if they are to support the successful use of literacy skills in various sectors of development. Aiming to extract existing research that would inform policymakers who want to improve conditions for literate learning in low-income countries, the authors review the literature on the post-instruction use of literacy.

In their report, Easton and Malam Moussa distinguish five types of literacy research: “tracer” and longitudinal studies; investigations into “literacy practices”; evaluations of programmes designed to link literacy and livelihoods; evidence from local “empowerment” initiatives; and documentation of local capacity building for political and economic decentralisation. These research types are examined with a view to determining what kinds of inquiry might shed light on the conditions that characterise the successful application of new literacy skills. The studies they review encompass wide-ranging domains, from hidden and digital literacies embedded in societies to decentralisation movements in water management, forestry and financial services. The authors conclude that the actual evidence of literacy use found by each type of research is sparse; however, taken together, the five types of literacy research do suggest a concerted research strategy for understanding literacy use in low-resource environments. The authors then propose a literacy research design for the post-2015 education agenda.

One thread that runs through this article is that creating conditions supportive of local literacy practices requires factoring in the larger social and educational contexts beyond the local literacy environment. This means that the research agenda must necessarily include investigation of broader political, social and economic conditions, and how they impinge on literacy use, as well as the linkages of literacy learning with other sectors to achieve the SDG targets. Easton and Malam Moussa envision that the stakeholders in such research would also be extensive, ranging from educators, development workers and decision-makers to the communities themselves because, in the end, this research agenda is meant to address the complex policy conditions and constraints surrounding literacy learning in Africa.

To sum up, this special issue highlights the fact that the Sustainable Development Agenda gives renewed emphasis to the importance of lifelong learning. The six articles we present here elaborate on the meaning of this term, drawing on research in eight different African countries and on many references to the educational realities found elsewhere in Africa. These articles contribute to our appreciation of how we can understand lifelong learning not just as a global ideal, but also as a practical concept for educators concerned with language and learning contexts such as those found in Africa.

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**Joel Trudell** began his involvement in adult literacy in Peru in 1982, by training Quechua authors to use



typewriters and silk screen presses to produce local literature. His research interest has focused on literacy in daily life, leading to ethnographic studies of indigenous literacy in Peru for his MA (U. Texas at Arlington) and in Cameroon for his PhD (Edinburgh). His recent research has been to adapt the Most Significant Change method of monitoring and evaluation to collect narratives of change from the perspectives of those who have benefited from literacy programmes in African languages. His current interest is in accounts of how soft skills relevant to rural Africa were acquired during and after literacy programmes, in addition to literacy and numeracy skills.

**Ian Cheffy** is an SIL International literacy and education consultant who has worked in the field of literacy in development for over 30 years. During 10 years living in Cameroon, he supported training programmes and literacy materials production in a number of local languages. He subsequently developed an accredited MA in literacy programme development for the SIL training programme in the UK. His current activities centre on research and publication. He is particularly interested in the transformative effect of literacy in African contexts and how literacy can empower adults at the fundamentally important level of personal identity.

**Barbara Trudell** currently works as the Director of Research and Advocacy for SIL Africa. A citizen of the USA, Barbara has resided in the Global South for most of her adult life. Her background includes local-language literacy programme facilitation, leadership of country-level literacy programme initiatives, building alliances with concerned institutions around issues of language and education, and consulting for agencies such as UNESCO, USAID, UNICEF and the British Council. Her recent publications have focused on the formation and implementation of language policy in education; reading and culture; community processes of language development; and the use of African languages in formal education.