Adult Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

The study Engaging with Adults is a review of international experience with adult basic education (with a focus on Africa), as part of the World Bank’s reassessment of the case for increased support to this form of education. In this study Adult Basic Education (ABE) includes literacy and numeracy, and other curriculum element to be chosen with due regard to the local context and the target group concerned. The study’s major findings are as outlined below.

Basic education serves as a foundation for improved conditions of life, not only for those who are young enough to start in the mainstream school system, but also for adolescents and adults who have been missed by that system.

Illiteracy is a major barrier to poverty alleviation. In a great number of African countries, it will take too long to reduce adult illiteracy substantially if one only relies on expansion and improvement of primary schools. Therefore, the problem of illiteracy needs to be addressed both through the provision of primary education of adequate quality to all children of primary school age and through the provision of effective ABE programs.

Investment in ABE and in primary schooling produces positive synergy, in that ABE induces parents to give more support to their children’s education. It is especially important to reach the illiterate mothers. ABE can also be part of a strategy to make schools more community based.

ABE is a means of alleviating inequity by gender. In most countries with low rates of schooling and literacy, it is the adult women who lag most behind as to level of schooling. ABE programs nearly always find it easier to attract females than males.

Since ABE enhances the participants’ sense of self-efficacy, it can enable disadvantaged groups to act more effectively in pursuit of their goals, thus making ABE a means to empower the poor and their communities. The World Bank’s recognition of the role of civil society for good governance and for poverty reduction highlights the importance of empowerment effects. The more participatory forms of pedagogy—at least a style of teaching which treats learners with respect—will be better for building such individual and group efficacy.

Literate mothers are better able to protect their children’s health. This is true for literate mothers in general, and there are studies which show such effects from mothers’ participation specifically in ABE.
Lack of literacy and of arithmetic skills are barriers to entrepreneurship and market transactions. Some evaluations report improved livelihoods as direct results of ABE.

Earlier allegations about the generally poor internal efficiency of ABE are contradicted by the bulk of evidence now available. It should also be noted that the trend in recent ABE provisions is to respond to active demand by local groups—unlike the early 'mass campaigns' that sought to 'eradicate illiteracy' by also roping in the more reluctant learners. Better efficiency should follow from this trend.

Among the kinds of adults and youth who are motivated to take part in ABE, producing 'minimum literacy' is achieved at less cost than the cost of 3-4 years of primary schooling.

Early "drop out" in a course is not a very appropriate measure of efficiency in ABE. Nonetheless, in most programs covered in recent reviews, at least half of those who enter complete the course and meet minimum performance criteria. But there is much variation, and therefore a need to monitor internal efficiency.

Such limited research as has been done indicates that the loss of reading and arithmetic skills acquired from ABE is not an internationally pervasive problem—though a literate environment helps ensure improvement rather than loss of skills.

With regard to achieving "good internal efficiency," the findings do not point to any single prototype of uniquely superior teaching and learning methods. More than one route has worked well.

Most completers of ABE courses show only quite modest mastery of literacy skills. However, what matters more is whether the mastery is sufficient to facilitate further learning: and it could be that other 'empowering' social skills and networks are even more important outcomes than literacy and numeracy acquisition as such.

Policy issues

A government that is prepared to strengthen its support for ABE needs to consider a range of policy issues. These often include the following:

- What groups should be targeted?
- What are the roles for various organs of government and for NGOs?
- What are the roles for businesses and industry?
- What language policy should be adopted?
- How firmly should ABE be institutionalized (e.g. the contrast between campaigns and permanent institutions, between volunteers or civil servants).
- Apart from literacy and numeracy, what should ABE teach?
- Should ABE give officially recognized equivalence to formal schooling?
- What role should information and communications technology play?
- How far can participatory pedagogy be implemented?
- How can local social support for ABE be built?
- How can adequate monitoring be ensured?
- How should ABE be financed?

General recommendations

- Recognize the importance of ABE for achieving Education For All.
- Give strong political leadership to ABE, find good staff for key government positions, be prepared for considerable investment in institutional development. Consider other forms of public administration of ABE than the normal government departments.
- Especially target women and out-of-school adolescents.
- Diversify programs so as to be responsive to local demand.
- Look for opportunities to initiate ABE in already established groups.
- Build partnerships with NGOs/CBOs and with enterprises.
- Use local languages for initial literacy teaching, and provide a route to the official language for those who have acquired literacy.
- Recruit teachers locally and use short-term contracts.
- Good ABE curricula and materials respond to what learners want and adapt to local context.
- Prevention of HIV and caring for AIDS victims should be part of the ABE curriculum.
- Back ABE up with radio, but do not expect much of a match between the timing of radio programs and topics taught by instructors.
- Good methods will show respect for the learners and seek to make them active participants.
- Accommodate within ABE opportunities for continuing education.
- Monitor ABE carefully but in ways that are participatory and helpful to providers.
- No one who wishes to attend ABE should be unable to do so because of inability to pay.
Given the recognition of the importance of ABE for poverty reduction, the study recommends that the World Bank actively advocate ABE programs, help countries prepare and finance such programs as well as mobilize financial support from other external agencies, and work actively to improve and share the knowledge base for good practice in ABE.

This article was written by Jon Lauglo, Senior Education Specialist, Africa Region, the World Bank. The full text (also the French version) of the study, Engaging with Adults: The Case for Increased Support for Adult Basic Education in Sub-Saharan Africa, is available on the web, along with other recent Bank publications on Adult Education, at http://www.worldbank.org/education/adultoutreach/
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