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ABSTRACT

Noting that, generally, low-literate adults in Labrador and Newfoundland (Canada) are being helped only through the altruistic efforts of literate volunteers, this paper argues that adult literacy must be professionalized and become an integral part of the education system. The paper begins with a brief discussion of the definitions of literacy, and then presents implications about adult literacy programs that follow from the assumption that there are significant differences between adult and child orientations to learning. The paper describes several programs and methods of instruction, noting that there is no single approach to adult literacy instruction and no instructional approach that works for all students. The paper then presents criteria for program evaluation, including skills development, content development, materials development and selection, and instructional strategies. Using these criteria, the paper evaluates two commercially produced print programs, the "Laubach Way to Reading" and "Reading for Today." The paper concludes with 11 recommendations involving the training of adult literacy educators, the role of volunteers, program funding, accreditation of programs, government policy on adult literacy, instructional strategies, and evaluation of programs. (RS)

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A Framework for the Evaluation of Adult Literacy Programmes

Lloyd Brown

Report Number 4

Summary Reports of
Paths to Literacy and Illiteracy in
Newfoundland and Labrador

Linda M. Phillips and Stephen P. Norris (editors)

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ASSUMPTIONS AND PURPOSES

This study is based on two assumptions: (a) the learning needs of adults are different from those of children; and (b) attention to adult learning needs is a crucial factor in the design of effective adult literacy programmes.

The purposes of the study were to:

- synthesize research on the nature of literacy, adult learning, and adult literacy programmes and instruction;
- develop criteria for the evaluation of adult literacy programmes;
- use the criteria to evaluate some of the most extensively used adult literacy programmes;
- draw conclusions about and make recommendations for the provision of adult literacy programmes.

LITERACY DEFINED

In popular understanding, literacy is comprised of two sets of skills: performative and functional. Performative skills emphasize decoding and encoding of text. Functional skills allow us to cope with the demands of using written language. These skills have been the focus of most studies that attempt to determine national literacy rates.

While skills are important, literacy is more than a set of skills. We need a view of literacy that emphasizes the capacity to reason, think, and judge. At this level, literacy is active and creative, and allows us to act upon and transform our knowledge and experience. It is helpful to view literacy at three levels:

(a) *performative literacy* -- the skills of encoding and decoding that are necessary for further literacy development;

(b) *functional literacy* -- the skills to cope with those demands of daily living that involve written language;

(c) *critical literacy* -- literacy that emphasizes the capacity to think, a critical understanding of texts, participation in the literate culture, and the use of society's literate resources (Olson, 1987).

ADULT LEARNING

Fundamental to adult education is the assumption that there are significant differences between adult and child orientations to learning. Further assumptions are that adults and children differ in pace of learning, background experience, self-concept, and readiness to learn. A number of implications about adult literacy programmes follow from these assumptions.

Orientation to Learning

- Active interest and participation in learning are more likely when the adult learner helps to identify learning objectives and selects learning tasks.
- Because adults tend to be problem-centred in their orientation to learning, the appropriate organizing principle for adult learning is to focus on problem areas, not on subjects.
- Adult learning is facilitated by relating the content and skills that are being learned to the background experience of the learner.
- Adult learners should be encouraged to verbalize and clarify their problems and goals.
- Learning activities should be designed and executed in light of the learning styles of each learner.

Pace of Learning

- Adult learners should establish their own pace for learning.

Background Experience

- The adult learners' past experience should be an integral part of their learning programme.

- Emphasis should be placed on techniques that tap the background experience of adult learners, such as group discussions, field projects, seminars, and community development.

- Reference to the experience of adult learners should be made when illustrating new concepts and generalizations.

Self-Concept

- Adult learners first should engage in learning activities on a scale that ensures success.

- The learning environment should be one in which adult learners feel accepted and in which their ideas are respected.

- Adult learners should be encouraged and helped to diagnose their learning needs.

- Adult learners should participate in planning their own learning, including translating needs into objectives, planning experiences to achieve these objectives, and evaluating the extent to which these objectives have been met.

Readiness to Learn

- Instruction should be designed and sequenced so as to be in step with the adult learners' social roles.

PROGRAMMES AND INSTRUCTION

Most commercial adult literacy programmes emphasize phonics through the use of structured and sequenced tasks. There is considerable evidence to suggest that programmes that use structured methods are effective, particularly when used by inexperienced instructors and with students who have difficulty with novel tasks (Chall, Heron, & Hilferty, 1987).

Successful programmes, particularly those that offer early-stage literacy instruction, are those that stress practice (Kitz, 1988; Chall, Heron, & Hilferty, 1987). Successful programmes also emphasize the ways in which reading and writing are needed in our everyday lives (Fagan, 1989). Norman and Malicky (1982) have developed such a programme.

Much research confirms that, to be successful, adult literacy programmes must stress the centrality of the learner. The learner-centred approach encourages group discussion, class presentations, and sharing written work. By allowing invented spelling, for example, in order to dispel the notion that one should not write before learning how to spell, adults are encouraged to take risks with their writing. Kazemek (1988) argues that the collaborative learning aspect of this approach allows individual strengths to emerge. It fosters cooperation and group empowerment, and frees teachers to work individually with those students who need more attention.

The widely used language experience approach has become a torchbearer for the learner-centred movement. It is successful because it ties instruction to the experiences of the learner, focuses on matters of immediate concern to the learner, and uses learners' own language patterns (Davidson & Wheat, 1989).

Despite its popularity, the language experience approach has some limitations. It requires teachers who are able to diagnose language skill deficits, and it is less effective with more advanced readers (Singh, Singh, & Blampied, 1985). Moreover, those who believe that literacy involves critical awareness argue that the approach reduces literacy to personal expression. One suggestion for improving the approach is to include organizational literacy, literacy concerned not only with personal experience but also with the workplace (Darville, 1989).

Some adults are ashamed of their illiteracy and may object to group work. One promising way to resolve this problem is to use computer assisted instruction. The greatest limitation is the scarcity of good software.

In summary, there is no single approach to adult literacy instruction. The dominant literacy skills approaches are criticized for promoting too narrow a view of literacy. However, the more comprehensive critical literacy view is not represented well among existing programmes. The approach taken should reflect the needs, goals, and abilities of learners. For example, those with limited social experience and self-confidence may be more successful with highly structured, one-on-one learning experiences; those who are more confident may be more successful with collaborative work such as engaging in discussions and class presentations.

However, there is no instructional approach that

works for all students. Conti (1989), for example, found that the teacher-centred approach was more effective with students who wished to pass the General Educational Development Test. However, for students who wanted to improve their literacy for personal satisfaction, the learner-centred approach was more successful.

CRITERIA FOR PROGRAMME EVALUATION

Guiding Principles

Adult literacy programmes should:

- reflect up-to-date knowledge of language teaching and learning;
- recognize that literacy is more than skills, that it is a thinking, creative, transforming process;
- reflect the principles of adult learning;
- provide for instruction at all three literacy levels, the performative, functional, and critical.

Criteria for Skills Development

In order to offset learning merely about literacy skills and not how to use the skills, adult literacy programmes should:

- develop skills in context;
- provide for practice of skills;
- use many real-life occasions for practicing literacy skills.

Because encoding and decoding skills by themselves do not lead to higher levels of literacy, adult literacy programmes should:

- engage students in analyzing, synthesizing, predicting, and evaluating texts;
- develop critical understanding of texts;
- portray reading and writing as a means of learning and not just as skills to be mastered.

Because language development is a holistic process, adult literacy programmes should:

- encourage the integration of reading and writing;
- provide for language learning that is a natural, genuine communicative process.

Criteria for Content Development

Because adult learners are motivated to learn things that meet their needs, satisfy their interests, and solve their immediate problems, adult literacy programmes should:

- provide content that is meaningful to adult learners, because it relates to their personal needs and circumstances;
- make use of the experiences, problems, knowledge, and language of adult learners.

Because students need to expand their vocabulary, ideas, and skills, adult literacy programmes should:

- introduce a variety of genres, in addition to the adults' own narratives and self-expressions.

Criteria for Materials Development and Selection

Because adult learners have a variety of needs, adult literacy programmes should provide a variety of materials to meet these needs, such as:

- everyday materials -- labels, forms, bank slips, signs;
- student materials -- own stories, poems, reports;
- commercially prepared materials, including computer-based ones;
- tutor-prepared materials.

Because materials should be meaningful to the learner and should grow out of personal experiences and needs, adult literacy programmes should:

- be written in natural language, rather than the stilted, often controlled language found in children's primers;
- provide materials that portray situations reflecting the reality of the learners' lives.

Criteria for Instruction

Because adults usually want to be treated as independent learners, tutors should encourage them:

- to help determine their own goals and to plan their own learning:
- to help diagnose their own needs for learning;
- to help determine their learning progress.

Because adult learners often lack self-confidence, tutors should:

- provide a learning environment in which learners feel accepted, and in which their ideas are taken seriously;
- engage adult learners, initially, in literacy activities that assure success.

Because different adults have different learning styles, tutors should try to acknowledge each learner's style by:

- allowing for structured or collaborative work, depending on the needs of the learners;
- providing for (where collaborative work is appropriate) group discussions, class presentations, sharing of written work, etc.;
- providing, where desired, for confidentiality and privacy through one-to-one teaching or the use of technology.

Because adults bring to their learning a rich background of experiences, tutors should:

- use techniques, such as group discussions, field projects, and seminars, that tap these experiences;
- encourage learners to reflect on their experiences and to integrate them with their new learning;
- use learners' experiences to illustrate new concepts and generalizations.

ANALYSIS OF PROGRAMMES

Using the above criteria, the following main conclusions are drawn from an analysis of two commercially produced print programmes, the *Laubach Way to Reading* (Laubach, F.C., Kirk, E.M., & Laubach, R.S., 1984) and *Reading for Today* (Beers, J., Beech, L.W., McCarthy, T., Dauzat, J., & Dauzat, S.V., 1987).

- The programmes overemphasize decoding skills, and give too little attention to meaning; in this respect they do not reflect modern theories of, or research on, reading and writing.
- The activities provided resemble the workbook activities that have proven unsuccessful with many younger students, most likely the same individuals who are now taking the adult literacy programmes.
- The programmes make too little use of the students' background knowledge and experiences.
- The choice of themes reflects an attempt to make the programmes relevant. However, given the diversity of individual interests, abilities, and goals, it is not possible to pre-package materials that will appeal to and meet the needs of all students.
- The goal of these programmes seems to be the development of functional literacy. However, too little attention is given to the many occasions for reading and writing in the students' everyday lives to make the learning functional.
- The reading selections, with their controlled vocabulary, are sometimes uninteresting and contrived.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Generally, low-literate adults are being helped only through the altruistic efforts of literate volunteers. The assumption seems to be that adult illiteracy should be handled as a "literacy" welfare system. Newfoundland's and Labrador's approach of short-term funding for volunteer-based adult literacy programmes supports this conclusion.

The point is not to diminish the contributions of the volunteer. But there are serious limitations to the volunteer-based tutor system: it gives the impression that providing adult literacy is charity work; and, volunteers often are insufficiently prepared for teaching adult illiterates.

We expect school teachers to be highly trained, to be familiar with recent theories and research in language, to have completed student teaching experiences, and to be familiar with child development. When they are teaching we provide them with support services such as language arts consultants, workshops, seminars, conferences, university institutes, and publications.

Adult literacy tutors have little support. There are no adult literacy specialists to help them, no institutes at the university, and few conferences or seminars. Yet, they are expected to develop their own programmes to meet the special needs of individual students. They often teach in isolation, unaware of the practices of others and of the different types of programmes in use.

If there are to be advances in adult literacy, it must be made an integral part of the education system, a part of the mainstream, and provided with resources for its growth and development. In other words, it must be professionalized.

Recommendation 1.

It is therefore recommended that:

- the university be asked to provide a programme to train educators in adult literacy, and that such a programme should help students to:
- understand the needs of adult learners and the nature of adult learning;
- explore the nature of adult literacy;
- examine a variety of adult literacy programmes;
- develop ways of evaluating student progress;
- develop criteria for the evaluation of adult literacy programmes;
- provide practice in developing literacy programmes to meet students' individual needs;
- examine different approaches to adult literacy instruction;
- become familiar with the economic, vocational, and social services available to adult students who need them.

It is further recommended that conferences and seminars be held regularly to:

- provide up-to-date knowledge on adult literacy;
- allow tutors to share successful teaching strategies, problems, and concerns;
- acquaint tutors with the range of programmes in use, and provide information on their nature, goals, strengths, and weaknesses;
- provide information about on-going pilot projects.

Recommendation 2

Since volunteers should continue to play an important part in the provision of adult literacy, it is recommended that:

- the role of volunteers be similar to that of teacher aides in the school system, and that they work only under the guidance of professional adult literacy instructors;
- regional consultants be provided to work with all instructors of government-funded programmes.

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Recommendation 3.

Because improvement in the quality of programmes requires adult educators to analyze carefully and to describe specifically the nature of success and failure of programmes, it is recommended that:

- programme funding be contingent on an instructor-implemented programme evaluation plan and that the results of these evaluations form the basis for programme updating;
- pilot studies of any new commercial programmes be conducted before they are officially accepted;
- funding be provided for literacy specialists to conduct research on the evaluation of adult literacy programmes.

Recommendation 4.

Because of public pressures to "do something" about illiteracy, there is the temptation for governments to adopt quick fix solutions, to fund untested programmes, and to pay little attention to standards. It is therefore recommended that:

- accreditation of adult literacy centres be a prerequisite to government funding, and that accreditation be based on the following criteria:
- programmes should meet government standards;
- programmes should have an adequate supply of materials;
- instructors should have the qualifications specified by the Department of Education;
- staff should participate regularly in professional development programmes.

Recommendation 5.

In order to be successful in developing adult literacy, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador must develop an adult literacy policy as an integral part of its total education policy, and provide long-term funding for defined adult literacy goals. It is therefore recommended that:

- the Provincial Government strike a committee to examine the adult literacy needs in the province;
- the Provincial Government establish long-term funding to meet these needs.

Recommendation 6.

Because there is variety in student needs, interests, and problems, it is recommended that:

- support be provided for a variety of approaches to the delivery of adult literacy programmes by building on the existing infrastructure of community colleges, community-based groups, and school boards;
- the community college literacy programme be strengthened.

Recommendation 7.

Since schools should be learning centres for everyone, not only youth, and in line with the Ontario Ministry of Education policy to designate school boards as the prime delivery agents of Adult Basic Education, it is recommended that:

- government hold discussions with school boards with a view to establishing them as delivery agents of Adult Basic Education, including literacy programmes.

Recommendation 8.

Since the emphasis on pluralism in delivery approaches and programmes has led to some fragmentation, lack of accountability, and lack of coordination, it is recommended that:

- the Provincial Government appoint an adult literacy specialist who would assume the following responsibilities:
- co-ordinate adult literacy services;

- establish liaison with the university for purposes of research and development;
- conduct pilot projects with new programmes;
- monitor and evaluate existing programmes;
- promote approved programmes;
- establish training standards for instructors;
- encourage the development of new programmes where needed;
- provide a clearing house of learning materials, and information on literacy programmes.

Recommendation 9.

Because the research on adult literacy suggests that the most successful programmes are those that reflect the characteristics of the adult learner, it is recommended that:

- there be a commitment to learner-centred programmes that are tailored to meet learners' needs and that help solve real-life problems;
- instruction reflect the principles of adult learning;
- instructional strategies be varied to suit the variety of needs and interests of students;
- literacy centres be provided with a variety of materials: commercially produced and tutor-produced materials, materials from the community (magazines, etc.), and materials related to occupations (manuals, forms, etc.).

Recommendation 10.

Functional literacy, while important, should not take priority over higher-level literacy. Programmes should provide opportunities for students to read and write a variety of discourse forms. They should also promote the ability to analyze, synthesize, interpret, and evaluate text. It is therefore recommended that:

- adult literacy programmes focus on the development of students' ability to read and communicate in a variety of forms for a variety of purposes, and that higher-order thinking skills be emphasized in order to develop critical literacy.

Recommendation 11.

In light of the fact that some programmes do not reflect recent psycholinguistic, process, interaction, and mental model theories of literacy, it is recommended that:

- there be continuous evaluation of adult literacy programmes in the light of new theories and research.

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