



The Social Practices Approach to Adult Literacies: How to Stop Failing Adult Learners

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DESCRIPTION

Rwanda has set itself the ambitious target of enabling every adult to be able to read and write a simple passage and do basic arithmetic, but little progress is being made towards achieving it. EICV 5, carried out in 2016/17, found that nearly a third of adults say that they cannot perform these crucial tasks, and the proportion increases to just over 50% if we add those that say they can only do them with difficulty. Little progress is being made in reducing the proportion of adults that struggle with literacies. In the last 15 years there has been only a five percentage-point drop, from 37% in EICV 2 to 32% in EICV 5. Our research in the Western Province shows that only 9% of adults have attended a literacy course, even though 33% do not have the essential literacies capabilities [1]. Only 14% of those that have attended a course have gained the skills that they hoped they would gain. Sixty-six per cent still cannot read Kinyarwanda and 76% cannot write in Kinyarwanda, 93% cannot do simple calculations and 99% cannot send and receive a text messages on a mobile phone. Women are more likely than men not to have literacies capabilities - 36% compared to 27% of men. Difficulties with literacies undermine people's quality of life. Those who struggle with literacies are also much more likely to be poor than those who are confident with literacies - 43% are poor, compared to 28% of adults that have completed at least grade one of primary school. Those without literacies capabilities have difficulty in getting employment and experience problems in their everyday lives because they cannot read and write. They are excluded from leadership positions, unable to read the instructions on medicines, have to ask other people to read letters for them and often lack confidence in them.

The problem: Why are people not gaining capabilities in literacies?

The Government of Rwanda has developed a curriculum for adult education, and local government oversees the delivery of adult education and of examinations. However, there is only a very small budget, and the government relies on NGOs and faith-based organizations to deliver adult literacies classes. These organizations often lack the necessary resources to provide a good quality of education. There is no national teaching qualification for adult literacies teachers, and adult literacy classes are taught mainly by volunteer tutors, many of whom have completed only primary school, and at best had one week's training in teaching adults [2]. The literacy centers are generally poorly equipped, classes are often held in churches or in the open air, and there is a shortage of learning materials. Some centers do not even have blackboards. In practice there are many issues with Literacy classes which suffer from poor attendance and high dropout rates. Classes are seldom arranged at times convenient to most learners and tutors do not always turn up. Women find it difficult to attend because they have to look after their children and do domestic work as well as generate an income. Men are reluctant to admit that they are not able to read and write. Coping with poverty takes time and energy, and attending literacy classes is not a priority, even though people know they will benefit from doing so. Many older learners have age-related poor sight and cannot see well enough to participate in the classes [3]. Although the Rwandan adult education curriculum is designed to engage with learners and help them develop knowledge that will be useful for their daily lives, the teaching methods tend to be teacher dominated and didactic and therefore inappropriate. Learning is about more than content; it is about developing cognitive, problem-solving and personal capabilities that enable learners to deal more effectively with the challenges they confront in their daily lives.

The social practices approach for teaching adult literacies

Research has shown that the approaches used to teach adults are key to effective learning. The impact of social literacies programmers can be high if novel approaches are used. These approaches can increase empowerment and civic participation among those that take part in the programmers. Adults who attend classes taught using the social practices approach are taught using learner-centered approaches that allow them to determine the content relevant to their daily lives. When, they learn reading, writing and calculation practices that are useful to them in their daily lives are more likely to continue to utilize these practices. Graduates from such programmers are more likely to take on leadership roles in their communities. There are also socioeconomic outcomes such as improving household health and income by enhancing learners' health knowledge and income-generating activities. To gain these benefits, adult learners need to be taught using student-centred methods. They need to be active learners developing research and thinking skills and taking responsibility for their own learning. The teaching methods need to be designed to enable learners to develop literacies practices that will be useful in their everyday lives. One such method is the Social Practices Approach, which we have adapted for use in Rwanda. We have built the capabilities of a team of five

academics at the University of Rwanda's School of Education so that the University can be a centre of excellence for training in the Social Practices Approach in Rwanda. A Continuing Professional Development Diploma in the Social Practices Approach has been validated at the University of Rwanda to train graduates in training the trainers of literacies tutors [4]. The first cohort of students will graduate from the course in November 2019 and the second cohort will graduate in 2020.

We have also trained community (volunteer) literacies tutors to deliver classes using a social practices approach and have to date graduated a cohort of students. We have modified the approach so that national curriculum is embedded. We have found that tutors are enthusiastic about the approach and learners have welcomed being active in their learning, involved in deciding what they will learn and gaining practical knowledge that helps them in their daily lives [5]. The adult learners work together on projects and research for example, on how to prevent their children becoming stunted by improving hygiene in the home and giving their babies and infants an appropriate diet. Some learning groups have set up and run their own savings and loans clubs. Esther, who has just graduated from one of our classes told us.

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