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Universal Adult Literacy: Policy Myths and Realities

By STEPHEN P. HEYNEMAN

ABSTRACT: There is not the slightest doubt that literacy is good and its effects significant, but the virtues of literacy have occasionally been promoted in isolation from competing social objectives. This article notes three past mistakes in advocating literacy programs and suggests that future arguments would be more effective if past mistakes were taken into account.

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NOTE: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and should in no way be attributed to the World Bank.

REFERRING to the percentage of a population that is literate to denote social progress is traditional, in both economics and sociology. Those who can read constitute a given good, that is, the greater that percentage, the greater the progress. Though this relationship is not assumed to be linear, there is such wide consensus on the virtues of literacy that debate about when and under what circumstances to advocate its promotion is not a primary concern. Errors can be made, however, when advocacy of literacy ignores political realities and programmatic trade-offs. Blind advocacy can manifest itself in three ways:

- a rush to judgment in cases where policymakers are assumed to undervalue the goals of literacy;
- a naïveté about the real forces that motivate policymakers; and
- a misunderstanding about the nature of research and its appropriate role in determining social policy.

Let us look at each in turn.

RUSH TO JUDGMENT

Policymakers may be adjudged to undervalue adult literacy programs because of the low priority afforded to the programs within the budgets of ministries of education. Similarly, development assistance agencies—the regional development banks, the World Bank, and bilateral agencies—that follow suit are believed to be working against the interests of the poor and the downtrodden. The discussion often takes on a derogatory

tone, as though these big agencies and ministries were instruments of the status quo, as though they were beholden to vested interests, unresponsive to the true voices of the people.

It is true, of course, that adult literacy programs within ministry budgets are commonly allocated less than 2 percent of total recurrent expenditures. It is false that their low priority is irrational, is a function of conservatism, or denotes a lack of innovation in the education sector. The education sector is large and therefore cumbersome in terms of policy shift. Its public nature implies that it is subject to widespread scrutiny and public pressure. For example, approximately one of four Americans is involved in education as a teacher, a student, or an administrator. In a developing country, the proportion of the population can reach one in three. But neither its cumbersome nature nor its size determines the priority given to adult literacy. The priority is based upon a correct perception of the costs and failures of past programs and the correct estimate of the public interest.

REAL FORCES BEHIND POLICYMAKERS

Whether policymakers are elected or are members of the military, and whether the economy has as its origin the free market or central planning, all policymakers are subject to common pressures. One pressure is their obligation to help people responsible for their welfare during times of difficulty and political uncertainty; such people may include, for exam-

ple, neighbors from the same province or village, family members, tribal connections, and kinship relations. Lines of authority to party or bureaucracy rule through manifest mechanisms. This is especially true of executive authority in developing countries, where sycophancy is common. Other influences include personal gain, ideology and professional views, and orientations associated with particular graduate schools. Public opinion, program results, and literacy campaigns are three domains that cut across such influences and are crucial to support for adult literacy programs.

Public opinion

Public opinion can be legitimately expressed even within dictatorships. Whereas opinions about a president's competence are usually considered threatening and even traitorous, public claims for local bridge repair, a new school, or a health clinic are considered normal and acceptable. Public claims, therefore, influence and help to establish educational policy and choose between educational priorities.

For example, public opinion often holds that senior policymakers, being disproportionately rich and/or urban, skew the direction of health care toward hospital care and away from primary health care and, in education, toward universities and against elementary education. But there is little evidence to suggest that the low priority given to adult education results from lack of political power among its supporters. It is not that people believe adult literacy pro-

grams lack value. Instead, wealthy people favor university or preschool programs for their children, and poor people, especially in rural areas, tend to favor primary education when given a choice. Since votes are rarely taken, this impression may not be substantiated empirically. Nonetheless, it is widely known that if a school is not built, the policymaker feels tangible public pressure. If there is no adult education program, the claim is more likely less frequent and weaker. In essence, the low budgetary priority given to adult literacy programs most probably is a rational reflection of weak demand.

Program results

Lessons learned from past efforts also influence the priority given to adult literacy programs. Most policymakers are aware of the problems; problems are discovered not by complex research effort but by common sense. For instance, the opportunity cost—especially for the poor—of literacy constrains a learner's continuation in a program; when families are hungry, literacy classes have to come second. Literacy as a skill—as opposed to oral rehydration or cattle dipping—is complex and difficult to transfer. Literacy teachers are often volunteers or low-paid service personnel. Quality control is low; personnel turnover is high. The language of literacy programs is politically sensitive. Choices can sometimes alienate ethnic out-groups; linguistic tolerance can increase costs. Program resources are idiosyncratic; they ebb and flow. Private voluntary organizations may play a large role

in program delivery, but these organizations can create tension with the state if they have a supplementary message that is inconsistent with governmental goals. Other programs—numeracy, entrepreneurship training, child care, agricultural extension, and marketing—rival literacy programs for resources. While these programs are conceived as companions to good literacy training, they can act as an opportunity cost for an individual's attention. A learner may take a literacy class but may be more interested in shopkeeping skills.

Perhaps most important is the willingness to pay for literacy classes. Unless the classes are attached to the equivalent of an elementary school certificate, the economic demand is generally low.

Literacy campaigns

Literacy campaigns are highly political, highly visible short-term action programs designed to jump-start an end to illiteracy. The shortcomings in these programs are widely known and are, quite understandably, widely ignored when policymakers are contemplating new campaigns. With respect to literacy campaigns, one must recognize that the process is as much an attempt to solidify political legitimacy as an attempt to teach literacy efficiently.

Literacy campaigns often follow on the heels of political revolution; they occur in the midst of high hope and strong levels of consensus. They accompany programs for distributing eye glasses, vaccinations, nutritional supplements, and elementary school

equivalency certificates for those previously excluded from the system, for example. They are often nested among many other campaign goals that have equal weight.

Other characteristics of mass campaigns are also widely known but less widely acknowledged. Somalia shut down every postprimary educational institution for one year so that students could be used in the campaign. The students had, of course, no choice in the matter. Cuba's well-known and successful campaign occurred when the country was emerging from its revolution not only with considerable fervor but with a level of literacy—80 percent—considered the highest at the time in Latin America. Such circumstances are not easy to duplicate elsewhere.

COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS BETWEEN RESEARCHER AND POLICYMAKER

Sometimes it is thought that results of research on literacy should determine policy decisions in adult literacy programs. Usually this opinion coincides with those who pose research questions and publish research results. The problem is that research questions, by their nature, can focus only on a small subset of the problem. For instance, while one might conclude from research that one program is more efficient than another, it would be a mistake to generalize as to whether either program was justified. Sometimes researchers conclude that policymakers who ignore findings are irrational and must, therefore, make decisions on the basis of "political" (read "irra-

tional") grounds. This accounts for many types of misunderstandings.

Key to understanding the sources of misunderstanding here is knowing who is the client and who is the producer. Policymakers are clients; researchers are producers. As in marketing a consumer good, the client does not need to improve on his or her adaptability or interest; rather, the producer needs to understand exactly how, whether, and under what circumstances the research might make an impact. The responsibility for making research effective lies with the producer. If the research is not read, if it is ignored, this does not necessarily mean that the policymaker is deficient. All sides must recognize that the policymaker has to decide priorities on the basis of instinct, as well as on scientific underpinning.

SUMMARY

It is entirely reasonable and fitting to value adult literacy, to promote it, and to assess its effects. Adult literacy should not, however, be promoted at the expense of common sense, at the expense of other impor-

tant services, or at the expense of other demands on people's time. We should remind ourselves, when advocating literacy, what has been learned recently about the effects of schooling. We have learned that some of the most powerful influences of schooling have to do with the attitudes and behavior associated with the schooling process rather than with the skills acquired as a result of the curriculum. We have learned that not all curricular goals are equally effective in influencing behavior, that higher-order understanding is stronger than the mechanics of factual recall.

This implies that the direct behavioral results of the short-term teaching of adults to read may be disappointing compared to the 6- to 10-year process of educating children in primary and secondary schools. No country, so far as I am aware, has achieved universal literacy without also achieving universal schooling. I do not doubt that adult literacy classes are worth selective investment, but the ultimate guarantee of a literate population remains an educated population.