

## Gains for Illiterate Adult Learners from Lifelong Learning

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**ABSTRACT** The research question for this study was: Why is there a need for lifelong learning for illiterate adults? A literature review was done in this regard. The findings included possible gains that illiterate adults, in especially developing countries, can get from attending literacy programmes. These adult learners may for instance gain socially, politically and economically when engaging in lifelong learning. They derive social gains in the sense that after becoming literate, they will be able to participate in the social affairs of their various communities, becoming responsible citizens within specific contexts. Adult learners can learn to contribute ideas and help make decisions for the good of the broader society in the political sphere of their lives. In the economic sphere, literate adults are able to contribute to the economic development of their country.

### INTRODUCTION

Adults have to engage in the process of lifelong learning in order to cope with the rapid changes in life that are brought about by, for instance, technological, social, political and economic developments. These contexts are dynamic and keep changing as time goes by. Some adults have adequate educational levels to cope with changes through training and education, but in especially developing countries like South Africa, there are many adults who cannot even read or write. They need basic literacy skills first and then they will be able to absorb the more technical and advanced knowledge to understand the changing environments around them. Educational and training institutions need to develop programmes that enable adult learners to meet the demands of this complex world.

In this paper a literature study is undertaken to determine what the needs of adult learners are, especially in a country like South Africa, and what these learners can gain from literacy programmes through lifelong learning.

### Objectives

The research question was: Why is there a need for lifelong learning for illiterate adults? Sub-questions formulated from the problem statement were:

(a) Why is there a need for lifelong learning for illiterate adults?

(b) What do illiterate adult learners gain from lifelong learning?

The above sub-questions were researched through a literature study.

### OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

#### Concept Clarification

#### *Literacy and Illiteracy*

Shore (2003) in Taylor (2006) regards literacy as embracing everything that comprises the past and present cultural practices of a particular cultural group. Wedin (2008) in Hanemann (2016) defines literacy in the same vein as a social activity that is situated in time and place. This means that literacy will always change as time goes by in order to satisfy the needs of people in a particular context at a particular time in their history.

Many people do not have basic literacy skills, especially in developing countries and that is a drawback for the development of these countries in various spheres. According to Woodin (2008), the social, economic, as well as the political progress of a country depends on literate citizens. Woodin (2008) associated literacy with development; illiteracy on the other hand has

been associated with underdevelopment, as evidenced by societies where illiteracy is rife. In his study Breytenbach (1998) established that in many African countries where illiteracy was rife, people were excluded from participating in the decision making structures of their countries. Literate people on the other hand demand to participate in decision making structures. Kutner (2004) defines literacy as the ability to read and write, so that one can engage in further learning. In other words, literacy should enable people to engage in further learning. Hanemann (2015: 297), however, refers to the UNESCO (2000, 2005) definition of literacy as a very “complex, context-bound and dynamic phenomenon” which provides a challenge for lifelong learning programmes to move beyond mere literacy and numeracy skills. These programmes should confer “human, social, economic, political and cultural benefits” on individuals, their families, and their work context as well as on the communities where they live.

#### **Adult Learner**

According to Zahn (1967: 67), adult learners differ from school children because they have ‘different body characteristics, different learning histories, different reaction speed, different attitudes, values, interests, motivations and personalities’. It is therefore imperative for adult educators to take these unique characteristics of adult learners into consideration, so that they can adequately cater for their educational needs. The learning material should be developed with the context of learners in mind. Adult learners are more independent than children when it comes to learning, but illiterate adults need guidance to reach their potential.

#### **Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET)**

According to Irsselis (2008) ABE is the process of developing adults with basic educational needs, before embarking on advanced needs. In the United States of America, ABE is education that is aimed at assisting ‘basic education adult learners’ to move on to post-secondary programmes so that they can follow careers in high demand fields in order to develop the economy of a country. Each step in ABE in the USA is designed to enable adults to follow their cho-

sen career from the early stages (USA Department of Education). This definition also applies to ABE in developing countries.

In South Africa adult basic education is called Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) and is described as follows:

*‘Adult basic education and training is the general conceptual foundation towards lifelong learning and development, comprising of knowledge, skills and attitudes required for social, economic and political participation and transformation applicable to a range of contexts. Abet is flexible, developmental and targeted at the specific needs of particular audiences and ideally provides access to nationally recognised certificates’* (Department of Education 1997: 12).

The context is important, especially the social, economic and political context when developing literacy programmes. Through such programmes adult learners can become active citizens not only contributing to their communities, but also to the nation as a whole. In 1994 the concept ABET was adopted after democracy was introduced to South Africa. Through this new approach to adult education the democratic government hopes to redress the racial inequalities of the previous government.

#### **Literacy Levels World-wide**

Illiteracy is a world-wide problem, particularly in developing countries. In 2002 it was estimated that there were 877 million illiterate adults in the world, of which the highest percentage, thirty-seven percent was in sub-Saharan Africa (Nassimbeni 2006). A report compiled for The United Nations Education Science and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) by Aitchison and Alidou (2009) showed that, in the sub-Saharan region of Africa about twenty percent of the population were illiterate. Illiteracy is, however, not just a problem in developing countries. There are also many illiterate adults in more developed countries. There are illiterate people in countries on the European, American, and Asian continents. This is evidenced by an international European survey (NALA sa), which showed that twenty-five percent of Irish adults, three percent of adults in Sweden and five percent of adults in Germany have literacy deficiencies.

According to Hildebrand and Hinzen (2004), Germany has four million adults who are func-

tionally illiterate with serious problems in reading, writing and arithmetic skills. The problem, according to Hildebrand and Hinzen (2004), is created by the large number of learners who drop out of school yearly in Germany without adequate education.

In Wales a survey carried out by Miller and Lewis (2010) showed that literacy at level 1 had improved from fifty percent in 2004 to eighty-eight percent in 2010. These statistics show that the Welsh authorities are making a concerted effort to improve levels of literacy, but it also indicates a major problem with illiteracy in Wales. In Scotland a concerted effort to reduce illiteracy was initiated in 2001 after an International Adult Literacy Survey showed that illiteracy is evident and that it needed urgent attention (Goulet and St. Clair 2009). The authorities in Scotland concentrate on the concrete benefits that learners can derive from participating in literacy programmes. This approach is called the Social Practices Approach to adult literacy. It is learner centered and concentrates on addressing the specific needs of learners (Goulet and St. Clair 2009) in a specific environment in order for the adults to use the knowledge and skills in their everyday life.

Ireland is addressing the problem of illiteracy through the National Adult Literacy Agency of Ireland (NALA) which consults broadly with all of those who are involved in adult literacy including the learners themselves (NALA sa). In this regard Comings et al. (2006) argued that the adult literacy philosophy in Ireland is the product of the dominant education ideology of an economically driven society emphasizing the acquisition of knowledge and skills for the sustenance of the labour market.

There are also illiteracy problems in the United States of America (USA). In the USA Adult Basic Education (ABE) falls under the Federal Government's division of Adult Education and Literacy. The aim of ABE in the USA is to enable adults who did not complete their basic education to acquire skills that will assist them to become active participants in society (USA Department of Education sa).

In Mexico many of the provinces and municipalities are financing and organizing their own literacy programmes and campaigns. These provinces are opting for the use of rapid literacy methods. In this context seven provinces and at least five municipalities are currently using the Cu-

ban literacy method (Mexican Institute for Adult Education sa), because it seems adaptable to the Mexican context. Authorities in Cuba have been making a concerted effort to address the problem of illiteracy since the end of the Cuban Revolution. The literacy campaign which followed after the Cuban Revolution of the 1960s mobilized every political or mass organisation and managed to render a large percentage of its population literate within a short period of time ([www.eric.ed.gov/?q=Adult+Education+in+Cuba](http://www.eric.ed.gov/?q=Adult+Education+in+Cuba)). Adult education classes are held in almost any location and sessions are adapted to the industrial or agricultural areas where many of the adult learners reside. Adult education is regarded as part of lifelong education in a socio-economic context. This means that lifelong education is regarded as the means through which the socio-economic situation of citizens can be improved. The task of carrying out lifelong education in Cuba is regarded as an obligation and right affecting every citizen ([www.eric.ed.gov/?q=Adult+Education+in+Cuba](http://www.eric.ed.gov/?q=Adult+Education+in+Cuba)).

According to the Package for Developing Adult Learning Materials (PALM) which is based in East Asia, one of the best ways to develop learning materials that reflect the needs of adults, is for the community to develop their own learning materials. PALM is an organisation in East Asia that guides facilitators on how to produce material that will meet the needs of their particular learners. This type of material takes into account the context in which adult learners live (PALM sa).

The problem of illiteracy is also being addressed in many sub-Saharan countries in Africa. Botswana, for instance, is addressing illiteracy through the Botswana Literacy Programme, which was introduced in 1981 in order to teach adult learners to read, write and calculate. It was later on improved by including skills that are useful in the lives of adult learners as a whole. These skills are aimed at enabling adult learners to improve their lives by earning or generating income on their own (Green and Motiki 2011).

According to Thomson (2001), advisor to the Kenya Post Literacy Project, the aim of adult education in Kenya is to structure social processes in order to address social issues and concerns that have come about as a result of changes in the lives of people. Continuous changes in for instance the economic, social, and political spheres bring about challenges and opportuni-

ties for adult educators who have become change agents in their communities. Adult educators are change agents because they assist adult learners to become literate so that they can cope with the personal and global changes due to inter alia technological advancement. The Kenya Post Literacy Project was being implemented at a time when there was a need to introduce economic, educational and political reforms and it was believed that this project would facilitate changes by 2015.

South Africa is also making a concerted effort to address the problem of illiteracy since the introduction of democracy in 1994. A significant reason for illiteracy in South Africa was the disparity in the education systems caused by the system of racial discrimination which started in 1910 and ended in 1990 (Fleisch and Christie 2004). That situation led to the high rate of adult illiteracy among especially the black population in South Africa. Walters and Funeka (2000) reported that the 1994 democratic dispensation in South Africa decided to place emphasis on lifelong learning. The newly established government realised that it was necessary to embrace lifelong learning in order to uplift previously disadvantaged racial groups. The government and private sector embarked on a concerted effort to render illiterate adults literate.

In this paper the researchers research the need for lifelong learning world-wide and the gains illiterate adults can get from literacy programmes through lifelong learning.

### **The Need for Lifelong Learning**

Head et al. (2015: 1), Laal and Salamati (2012), Hanemann (2015) and Park et al. (2016) explained lifelong learning with reference to other authors as the “purposeful and continuous acquisition of skills and knowledge throughout an individual’s lifespan.” It is also voluntary and self-directed. Lifelong learning has become indispensable because of the increase in knowledge, information and communication technologies. Adults need to learn skills and competences for career, personal, social and community reasons. Lifelong learning is especially important for adults to lead a productive civic life, for a sustainable lifestyle and for personal wellbeing.

According to Quane (2009), Laal and Salati (2012) and Hanemann (2016), lifelong learning integrates learning and living horizontally and

vertically throughout peoples’ lives. Lifelong learning integrates learning vertically in that a person learns from birth to death. The study concentrates on adult learning where learning is integrated horizontally in the sense that it involves all aspects of a person’s life such as family, community, study, work and leisure activities. Lifelong learning encompasses all learning that a person is exposed to, namely, learning that occurs at home, in school, in the community, at the workplace and through the mass media. Adult literacy can therefore be regarded as part of a lifelong learning process. Lifelong learning takes place within all learning systems, namely, formal, non-formal and informal sectors. It thus includes “skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that people acquire in their day-to-day experiences ... It not only enhances social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development, but also competitiveness and employability” (Laal and Salamati 2012: 399; Charungkaitikul and Henscke 2014). Walters (1999) and Head et al. (2015) posited that lifelong learning does not just happen in formal education, but takes place in any situation where people gain knowledge and skills that can be beneficial to their lives. Lifelong learning therefore means that human beings have to continuously engage in learning in order to cope with the challenges that they encounter throughout their lifetime.

Quane (2009) further contended that lifelong learning assists people to lead fulfilling lives as it enables them to understand themselves, their surroundings as well as their actions. Through lifelong learning people learn to become responsible for themselves and others as well as to perform their roles in different settings. People who are in a position to perform their roles in different settings, live satisfying lives as family members, friends, workers, employees, entrepreneurs, members of a society, citizens of a society as well as citizens of the world. In this sense lifelong learning improves all aspects of life so that people can lead fulfilled lives. According to Jarvis (2010), lifelong learning is education that aims to improve the lives of adult learners and provide them with skills that will be useful in their lives. Useful skills are for instance skills that will enable adult learners to improve their standard of living by generating income through small businesses or by securing employment.

In the global context, lifelong learning has become essential as people have become more mobile (Omolewa 2009). People are able to travel from one country to another for business or for leisure or to study, as well as meeting people from many different countries in their own contexts. Omolewa (2009) maintained that the role of lifelong learning, in a global sense, is to ensure that there is parity between systems, to enhance trend compatibility and to enable system users and workers to relate appropriately to new trends and patterns. Lifelong learning is thus needed at an individual, community, societal, national and global level. Lifelong learning is crucial in adulthood, because adults need to continuously gain knowledge and skills so as to improve their living conditions.

According to O'Brien and Fathaigh (2007), the need for lifelong learning comes about as a result of continuous and rapid change that is taking place in the world. In emphasising the value of lifelong learning in adulthood, Rogers et al. (2007) argued that livelihood programmes or lifelong learning opportunities do not just involve training people in new skills expecting them to be in a position to improve their lives - it also entails continuous learning in order to keep pace with the ever changing world. Consequently lifelong learning is an ongoing process.

Lifelong learning has become imperative mainly because of technological advancement (Wain 2009). Wain (2009) pointed out that rapid change brings about instability in the economic, political, and social aspects of people's lives. It is, therefore, necessary for human beings to engage in lifelong learning so that they can cope with the changes in their daily lives such as technological changes and global integration.

Wain (2009) further argued that education provided through formal schooling alone does not enable a person to handle the challenges brought about by the rapid changes of contemporary life. Education provided through formal schooling usually serves to prepare adult learners to embark on lifelong learning, because it renders them literate enough for further training. According to a literature study done by Evans et al. (2013) basic skills like literacy and numeracy are important for lifelong learning to assist in vocational training and advancement of careers, but also for helping with self-confi-

dence, to help children with their homework and to pursue interests outside of work. The ultimate aim of becoming literate as described below is reflected in the next section on the gains from literacy programmes for adult learners:

*'Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and numeracy. It also encompasses aspects of personal development – social, economic, emotional – and is concerned with improving self-esteem and building confidence. It goes far beyond technical skills for communication. The underlying aim of good practice is to enable people to understand and reflect critically on their life circumstances with a view to exploring new possibilities and initiating constructive change'* (Comings et al. 2006: 212).

To inspire adult learners to engage in lifelong learning they need to be made aware of the gains and benefits from participating in lifelong learning opportunities.

### **Gains from Lifelong Learning and Literacy Programmes**

In a literature review done by Head et al. (2015), they found that the focus of adequate literacy programmes in developing countries was on human rights, literacy for the illiterate, as well as social and political inclusion in the national and global worlds. Laal and Salamati (2012) concurred by indicating that lifelong learning should not only help to create opportunities for individual learners, but should also benefit the community. Lifelong learning provides knowledge, skills, understanding and values to individuals in their personal lives as well in their lives as active citizens and adequate workers. A country with literate people become more creative and productive as well as economically stronger. According to Woodin (2008), the social, political, as well as the economic progress of a country depends on its literate citizens. The reason for this being that literate citizens will be included in decision making processes, while illiterate people are often excluded from participating in the decision-making structures of their countries. There is thus a clear need for literacy programmes for illiterate people to enable them to participate in all life spheres. Specific gains in particular life spheres are subsequently discussed.



### *Social Sphere*

Hanemann (2015: 297) found in her literature review on trends and issues of lifelong learning that illiterate people are more “vulnerable to poverty, social exclusion, unemployment, exploitation, the social effects of demographic changes and aging, displacement and disasters.” Lifelong learning should assist with improved quality of life during the more productive years but also in retirement (Park et al. 2016). Park et al. (2016) further emphasised the importance of lifelong learning programmes where people meet new people and form positive relationships which enhance mental well-being.

The social gains derived from literacy programmes are among others, the empowerment of adult learners to participate in the affairs of their various communities. The empowering nature of adult literacy is emphasised by Pretorius (2004) who maintained that literacy is an agent of social change. When there is widespread participation by members of the community there is bound to be positive social change because every decision taken will represent the views of the majority of the community.

According to Rossiter (2007), adult education is about personal growth in the sense that adult learners attend adult learning programmes in order to acquire the art of reading and writing so that they can participate with confidence in the affairs of their communities. It also includes a sense of self-worth, because when adults become literate and are in a position to express themselves with confidence, they will experience a sense of being important in their communities.

In his study of literacy in Rwanda and Tanzania, Wedin (2008) found that being literate transformed the lives of adult learners. Learners who had attained literacy skills gained personal satisfaction and social status. For example, they could read religious scriptures as well as their personal letters. Furthermore these adult learners, who had acquired basic literacy, were now in a better position to look after their children, because they could, for instance, read medical prescriptions and understand how medication should be administered to their children when they became ill.

In an ethnographic study carried out by Prins (2008) in El Salvador, participants indicated to her that becoming literate increased their confidence in reading, speaking and interacting with

people in social situations such as classes, church and meetings. Furthermore, literate learners reported making new friends in literacy classes. They also reported improvement in their relations with partners, parents, children and other family members.

In the USA, ABE is used to enable adults who did not get basic education, or those who did not complete their basic education, to acquire skills that will assist them to fit into the American society. These skills include among others, being able to get employment, being able to support one’s family and being an active citizen (USA Department of Education sa). The social gains that adults derive from literacy are *inter alia*, becoming responsible and active citizens, who will contribute to the development of the country. Adult learners will become knowledgeable about health issues, about environmental problems and the empowerment of women (PALM sa).

### *Political Sphere*

The political gain derived from literacy is that literate citizens will most probably insist on participating in the affairs of their communities and ultimately the affairs of their state. This widespread participation by citizens will hopefully lead to the establishment of a democratic dispensation. In a democratic dispensation citizens are afforded equal rights by the state, irrespective of their race, class or religion. In such a state human rights are upheld and as a result there is freedom of speech, the right to education and the right to lead their lives peacefully (UNESCO 1966).

Gains that are derived from literacy in the political sphere are further emphasised by Meredith et al. (2001) who argued that literacy practices that promote collaborative engagement and community building can contribute to democracy. The link between literacy and democracy is formed when literacy schools inculcate a democratic attitude in adult learners. When these learners start participating in community affairs, they will be ready to carry democracy forward. Quigley (1997) argued that the perpetuation of democracy is dependent on literate people therefore it is important that the authorities make a concerted effort to render their citizens literate.

Mogwe (1994) argued that illiterate people are unable to challenge unfair social, political

and economic practices, while literate people are able to do so. Unfair practices include, among others, occasions when people who have power deny illiterate people their rights to economic progress, such as the right to be trained in skills that will enable them to get better paying jobs or to start their own income-generating small businesses.

### *Economic Sphere*

Morgan-Klein and Osborn (2007) argued that economic gains derived from engagement in lifelong learning are not only limited to individuals. The society or country also benefits from the engagement of its citizens in lifelong learning. These benefits manifest themselves in the form of the progress of private companies and national economies. Skilled workers are essential to the economic development of private companies and the economic growth of a nation. Furthermore, a country that has skilled labour resources is able to compete successfully in the global arena. Charungkaittikul and Henscke (2014) explained lifelong learning as essential for personal fulfilment, but also for the community as a whole. It is important for creating a career, for employment and to create better retirement options. It promotes democracy, human rights, inclusion into a society as well as the global world.

Przeworski et al. (1996) in Breytenbach (1998) concluded that the success of democracy depends on economic development, because democracy often does not survive in poor countries. Many poor countries, especially in Africa reverted back to authoritarian rule after gaining independence from their former colonial rulers (Breytenbach 1998). The significance of literacy for the perpetuation of democracy is further emphasised by Wile (2000) who maintained that the development and maintenance of democracy is dependent on the literacy level of the citizens of a particular state.

According to Rossiter (2007) adult education is also about creating financial self-sufficiency, because adult learners hope to solve the problem of poverty by being in a position to generate income on their own or to earn an income at work through adult education. Career advancement is another goal of adult education. By attending adult learning programmes adults hope to be in a position to receive further train-

ing and acquire better career opportunities or to improve their current careers.

According to Rogers et al. (2007), literacy can satisfy the needs of adult learners if it provides them with functional skills that will help relieve them from poverty. Examples of skills that can enable adult learners to improve their lives are for instance learning how to run small businesses and improving their proficiency at work so that they can get better paying jobs. The economic gain for adult learners in this instance is that they will be empowered to earn a living.

### **CONCLUSION**

The literature review has shown that illiteracy is not limited to developing countries such as South Africa only, but that it is a global problem. The problem is, however, more pronounced in developing countries, because they often have a much greater disadvantage as little had been done to uplift the illiterate people in those countries. Many countries world-wide experience an illiteracy problem and have embarked on a concerted effort to combat it. There is a need to develop programmes that will address the needs of adult learners in their various contexts through lifelong learning and to incorporate these adults into a global community.

Globalisation, the fast-growing and changing knowledge economy and technological advancement urge adults to get skills to cope in their work and in their private lives. Adults need to become good citizens of their country – they need to add value to their social environment, to the political and economic environment in which they live.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Illiterate adult learners require extra attention through adequate literacy programmes to assist them in keeping up with technological, economic, social and political changes. It is imperative for human beings to engage in lifelong learning so that they can cope with the changes of life. Consequently literacy programmes that will empower people to improve their lives in their various contexts need to be developed. Such programmes should focus on addressing the specific needs of people in their various contexts. The effort to render adults literate should not however be confined to development in their

various contexts, but also to become part of the global village. People should be exposed to the global context, so that they can assist their countries to compete effectively in the global arena. Lifelong learning through literacy programmes should help with the development of adult learners in all aspects of their lives to live satisfying full lives.

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