



International Literacy Day 2020

Literacy teaching and learning in the Covid-19 crisis and beyond

'Literacy teaching and learning in the COVID-19 crisis and beyond'

- The role of educators and changing pedagogies -

Concept Note

Context

The world has made steady progress in literacy in the past decades. Yet, globally, 773 million adults and young people lack basic literacy skills¹, and more than 617 million children and adolescents are not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics². The recent COVID-19 crisis has been a magnifier of existing literacy challenges, deeply affecting schooling and lifelong learning opportunities including for youth and adults with no or low literacy skills.

During the initial phase of the pandemic, schools were closed down in more than 190 countries, disrupting the education of 91 per cent of the world's student population of 1.6 billion at its peak.³ The COVID-19 pandemic also affected around 63 million primary and secondary teachers.⁴ Governments have been rapidly deploying distance-learning solutions on an unprecedented scale, particularly in formal education for children and young people. A range of solutions, such as virtual lessons, dissemination of materials, and learning provision through TV, radio or in open air spaces, have been adopted.

At the same time, in many places, the COVID-19 crisis has shed light on the unpreparedness of infrastructure, education systems, programmes, and people, including policy-makers, educators and professionals, families, and learners themselves, for ensuring the continuity of teaching and learning in such a situation. It has considerably affected some specific sub-sectors, including youth and adult literacy and education. In many countries, adult literacy and education were absent in initial education response plans, and numerous adult literacy programmes that did exist in the pre-COVID-19 crisis era have been suspended. This means that many youth and adults with no or low literacy skills, who tend to face multiple disadvantages, have had limited access to life-saving information and remote learning opportunities and/or are at higher risk of losing livelihoods. In terms of the digital divide, for instance, globally, nearly half of the world population (51.2%), including many non-literate adults, did not have access to Internet in 2018⁵. Mobile phone subscription per 100 people was 67.5 in low human development countries, while the corresponding figure exceeds 90 per cent in high (113.6%) and middle (91.9%) human development countries.⁶ As countries are moving out from the initial response phase, it is anticipated that the majority of non-literate youth and adults would be the hardest hit by educational, social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis, therefore, has been a stark reminder of the large gap between adult literacy policy discourse and the ground reality that already existed in the pre-COVID-19 era. Moving towards the recovery and resilience-building phase, it is important that literacy, including youth and adult literacy, be integrated into global and national COVID-19 response and recovery plans to ensure the continuity of learning, improved provision, and more inclusive national lifelong learning systems and capacities.

In this context, there is the emerging need to revisit literacy teaching and learning for youth and adults, as well as the role of educators⁷. How have literacy teaching and learning, as well as educators, been affected

¹ <http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/literacy>

² Fact Sheet No. 46 September 2017 UIS/FS/2017/ED/46.

³ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/globalcoalition>

⁴ <https://teachertaskforce.org/news/teacher-task-force-calls-support-63-million-teachers-touched-COVID-19-crisis>

⁵ <https://news.itu.int/itu-statistics-leaving-no-one-offline/>; the figure is slightly high at 54.7 per cent for developing countries.

⁶ http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/COVID-19_and_human_development.pdf

⁷ The term 'Educator' here refers to all those who teach literacy to adults and includes teachers, facilitators, animators, monitors, mobilizers and tutors.

by the COVID-19 crisis? What are some effective teaching approaches that should be maintained or expanded? How can teaching and learning for youth and adult literacy be reimagined in times of COVID-19 and beyond? These are some of the questions that need to be answered to guide our collective reflection and action. Against this backdrop, the celebrations of International Literacy Day (ILD) on 8 September 2020 will be devoted to the theme of **'Literacy teaching and learning in the COVID-19 crisis and beyond'** with a particular focus on **the role of educators and changing pedagogies**.

Main issues to be addressed

Educators are at the heart of promoting quality lifelong learning. If educators are motivated, trained adequately and consistently, guaranteed decent working conditions, satisfactorily remunerated, and provided career prospects, youth and adult literacy programmes can be more successful and lead to better learning and development outcomes. However, this scenario is rare, not only because governments and partners tend to focus more on teachers in formal education but also for a range of other reasons at the system and programme levels.

The recent COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the fragility of many youth and adult literacy educators, programmes and systems as represented by abrupt suspension of numerous programmes. Many educators who were on unstable contracts and/or in the non-formal sector, for instance, are at risk of losing livelihoods. Even if they continue their work, many of them would face multiple challenges in providing meaningful learning due to inappropriate teaching environments, inadequate materials, poor working conditions, and their lower status, to name a few. At the same time, during the initial response phase, policy-makers, practitioners, and development partners have learnt some important lessons, particularly in the context of formal education, such as the potential of distance learning offered by digital and other types of technologies, and the value of face-to-face interactions between educators and learners. Educators have an important role to play in learning lessons from the COVID-19 crisis and reimagining effective teaching and learning. The COVID-19 crisis has been also a reminder of the educators' catalytic role in generating the transformative power of literacy for people's empowerment, social transformation, and the betterment of humanity and the planet, within and beyond the SDG4 context.

Moving forward through the COVID-19 era and beyond, it is necessary to understand the state and a range of issues that prevented literacy teaching and learning, as well as educators, from being most effective. At the system level, a prominent challenge is the shortage and uneven distribution of educators, especially in non-formal settings and disadvantaged areas. Another serious challenge concerns the limited capacities of some educators. For instance, in many areas, a secondary level of education or an even lower level is considered to be a sufficient qualification for adult literacy educators. There are also programmes that rely on volunteers with insufficient teaching skills. In addition to the above challenges, there is a need to ensure a 'professional development continuum' that supports literacy educators through pre-service training, in-service training and continuous support, while ensuring coherence between these. Such a continuum can support educators in developing their identities as professionals and pursuing continued learning throughout their careers. This can empower them to adapt more easily to unforeseen demands and challenges as the world changes. The capacities and resilience to manage distance teaching during the COVID-19 crisis is a case in point. Furthermore, many educators are insufficiently remunerated and work in difficult conditions with limited career prospects, which in part explains the relatively high turnover of literacy educators. The Fourth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE IV)⁸ shows how national investment in adult learning and education (ALE) curricula, learning materials, educators and teaching methodologies can enhance the quality of learning and education, be it investment in pre-service training, in-service training or employment conditions. In South Sudan, for instance, continuous educator training is offered, while in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the academic level of educators has increased, and Senegal has improved its training system for educators by means of 12 modules.

⁸ UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). (2019) Fourth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education. Hamburg: UIL.

At the programme level, according to the GRALE IV, some 75 per cent of 107 countries who responded to the survey reported major improvements in the quality of adult learning and education (ALE) which include adult literacy since 2015. Despite the progress, however, the capacities of educators, their working conditions and teaching methodologies, still require reinforcement in a number of literacy programmes around the world. Further improvements in these areas would necessitate more information, awareness-raising, capacity development, resources and conducive policy environments. Regarding teaching methodologies and pedagogies, which is at the heart of successful programmes, there are diverse pedagogical models for youth and adult literacy, from which lessons can be learnt. For instance, the effectiveness of learner-centred pedagogical approaches that recognize the distinctive learning needs of adults, as exemplified by Malcolm Knowles' humanistic theory of andragogy, are widely recognized by policy-makers, practitioners and researchers. Future literacy programmes can also benefit from technological and scientific development, including digital technology-supported teaching and learning and adoption of the latest knowledge and insights generated in different fields such as cognitive science. However, due to persisting information and capacity gaps, educators are often not adequately equipped with appropriate teaching methodologies and have limited awareness of the specific characteristics and needs of adult learners. Even if educators are well trained and qualified, achieving intended results through effective teaching may entail other challenges, such as lack of appropriate materials and access to learning spaces as well as insufficient human or financial resources.

International Literacy Day (ILD) 2020 is opportune to revisit different approaches to literacy teaching and learning, and the vital role that educators play in promoting quality literacy programmes with a particular focus on youth and adult literacy. Learning lessons from initial responses to the COVID-19 crisis and the wealth of knowledge accumulated across the world, ILD2020 will also explore the futures of literacy teaching and learning, as well as the educators' role in achieving the reimagined teaching and learning the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

Key questions

- What has been the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on youth and adult literacy educators and teaching and learning? What are the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 crisis? How can we reimagine adult literacy teaching and learning? How can we position youth and adult literacy in the global and national responses and strategies in the recovery and resilience-building phase?
- What are the major innovative and effective pedagogies and teaching methodologies used in youth and adult literacy programmes? How can we take full advantage of technology and scientific research, including cognitive science? What is the role that educators can play in improving pedagogical models and approaches? What constitutes good practice, including that which is technology-based, and what can we learn from such programmes? How can those effective programmes be scaled up and be integrated into national strategies for sustainability?
- How can national education policies, systems, governance, and measures (e.g. national qualification framework, recognition, validation, accreditation, and certification of knowledge, skills and competencies) be improved to provide enhanced support for educators for youth and adult literacy? What are the policy measures required to strengthen pre- and in-service training and support for educators in a 'professional development continuum'? What mechanisms have been implemented to ensure quality and professionalization? How is technology being harnessed in professional development?