The cultural benefits of literacy

Iffat Farah
2005

This paper was commissioned by the Education for All Global Monitoring Report as background information to assist in drafting the 2006 report. It has not been edited by the team. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to the EFA Global Monitoring Report or to UNESCO. The papers can be cited with the following reference: “Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006, Literacy for Life”. For further information, please contact efareport@unesco.org

* Commissioned through the University of East Anglia (UEA), Norwich
The Cultural Benefits of Literacy
By Iffat Farah

1. Introduction
This paper explores the cultural benefits of literacy using a broad definition of culture in terms of the beliefs, values and attitudes, norms and practices, and roles and relationships which characterize a people in a particular context – context being defined in terms of region, ethnicity. This broad concept does mean that many of the benefits of literacy to a culture (what people believe and how they behave) are also the benefits which are categorized as social or political (see Robinson-Pant’s overview). As Patel mentions in her paper, it is difficult to tease out specific categories of benefits. Before going on to discuss available research evidence on the cultural benefits of literacy, it is important to recognize the following issues which show that determining cultural benefits of literacy is a complex endeavor.

a. The first question is how should we understand “cultural benefits”? Should we understand it in terms of the effects of literacy in strengthening the existing cultures of the individuals/communities, say by enabling written records of history, literature, supporting cultural practices and promoting indigenous languages? Or should we understand “cultural benefits” in terms of the changes in the beliefs, practices and lifestyles which may come about as a result of literacy acquisition and participation in adult education programmes? In the second understanding, a critical issue is related to who decides that a culture needs to improve? And what aspects should improve? In this paper I have looked at benefits in terms of both of the above meanings.

b. Second, the relationship between literacy and culture is strong but works in both directions. In fact a growing body of research on literacy use in diverse regions has highlighted the strong influence of the existing ideology, norms of behavior, and roles and relationships within the family and community on what literacy will be acquired, how it will be used, by whom and for what purpose (Street 1984,
Thus the impact or benefit of participating in adult literacy programmes is not neutral but mediated by the existing cultural context of the individual and communities to whom it is introduced. One of the most significant studies to demonstrate this point was conducted in New Guinea (Kulick and Stroud 1992) and shows how instead of being transformed by literacy (as the missionaries had intended) the agency of literacy, introduced by Christian missionaries, was used by the Gapun as agency to promote their pre Christian beliefs and their strong notions of individuality and independence. Another body of research (although there is less of this) demonstrates how literacy affects and impacts culture. Fishman (1991) exploring the uses and varieties of writing in the Amish community in the United States concludes “there is more to writing than meeting personal needs of writer, there are the ways writing reflects and shapes the society that reflects and shapes the writers themselves …” (p.22). This dual relationship – culture effecting literacy and the reverse - will be apparent as we explore more recent literature on the cultural benefits of literacy.

c. Third, the difficulties of measuring literacy outcomes and impact are mentioned in several evaluation reports. These difficulties are even graver when we try to gather evidence for how literacy affects/ benefits culture. Cultural benefits are difficult to identify, count or measure. Any effect that literacy may have on the culture (i.e.what people believe and how they do things) of an individual or group will be slow (Archer and Cottingham 1996), will not be easily and immediately accessible (Maddox 2005), and will be difficult to identify as the outcome of a single intervention such as a literacy and adult education programme (Carr Hill 2001). Additionally, learning about the affects of literacy on culture will require a more holistic approach which looks at the effect on both men and women’s life styles. At present, the rather exclusive focus on the impact of literacy programmes on women, evident in studies we reviewed for this paper, offers only a partial view.
In the following sections I review a body of research on literacy to explore its benefits to various aspects of culture as defined above.

2. Attitudes

Evaluation studies of literacy programmes provide some evidence to suggest that participants and graduates of these programmes are more likely to express ‘modern’ attitudes (Carron et al. 1989, Oxenham 2000, Carr Hill et al. 2001). However, this evidence is neither very strong nor straightforward. A large scale survey in Uganda (Carr Hill et al. 2001) shows that graduates of a literacy program express somewhat more modern values than those who have not attended. However, the difference in attitude is narrower than the difference in knowledge. The researchers point out that the narrow difference is probably the result of the countering influence of the cultural conditions and that the change in attitude are not necessarily and exclusively attributable to literacy programmes but also to other development interventions in the context. They also suggest that participants adopt new attitudes and practices more readily when they are “from the outside” (such as attitudes regarding boy-girl preference for western education), and are more reluctant to change attitudes regarding more local and traditionally accepted beliefs (such as attitudes towards bride wealth and its role in keeping families together). A study of participation in REFLECT programme in Bangladesh makes a similar point (Archer and Cottingham 1996). The programme positively affected the nature of women’s interaction within the all-women committees but was unable to change men’s (and women’s) attitudes towards women’s participation in public formal and non formal organizations. Adult literacy programmes in Nepal influenced participants’ attitudes towards family planning and made them more open to speaking up for change in practice. However, the effectiveness of this change was compromised by the traditional values associated with daughters (Robinson-Pant 2001).
Attitudinal change is fragile and must be consistently supported by post literacy activities as well as by other support structures in the context\(^1\). There is some evidence that literacy (or participation in literacy programmes) leads to change in belief in traditional medicines, home remedies and traditional healing in Nepal and Bolivia (Robinson-Pant 2001, Burchfield 2002). However, both studies also show that such change in indigenous beliefs, and a consequent change in traditional practice, is sustained only when dependable health services are available.

3. Values

The most frequently reported benefit of literacy is improved self image and esteem (Egbo 2000, Farah 2002, Oxenham 2003)\(^2\). Literacy becomes a value that is admired within the culture of a particular group. Women participants in a literacy programme in Sudan report a change in their perception of self from “uneducated and stupid” to “confident and outspoken” which are the new values they admire (Mace 1999). Studies of adult learners in literacy programmes in Namibia and South Africa conclude that “feeling better about oneself may be as important as any real change in terms of income and social positioning” (Papen, 2005: 15). However, the feeling of status and esteem seems to be relative to and closely associated with the value assigned to particular languages and literacies in a given community. For adults in Namibia, South Africa and India, becoming literate in English is perceived to be beneficial by those who have been excluded from the higher social class and culture represented in the English language and in formal schooling (Papen, 2005; Millican, 2004; Dyer, 2001).

In Muslim communities, the ability to read the Quran in Arabic brings respect and status as well as meeting spiritual requirements (Farah 1992, Wagner 1993, Zubair 2001). Similarly, Fante is considered the language of worship in South Ghana (Herbert and Robinson 2001). Thus literacy in a “religious language” is desirable and culturally

---

1 See Robinson-Pant’s conclusion ‘Literacy plus?’ to her paper on social benefits for discussion of the other kinds of support needed for change to take place.
2 See Stromquist’s section on ‘self esteem’ for a discussion of this research evidence in relation to the political benefits of literacy.
beneficial. Access to religious texts in the local, secular language could also bring power and agency to individuals and particular groups. Maddox (2005) provides some evidence from Bangladesh. Women graduates of a literacy programme who acquire literacy in Bengali are able to, and some of them begin to, read the translation and interpretation of the Quran. Such use of Bengali literacy is traditionally limited to men and provides access to a powerful form of knowledge. Although Maddox gives only a few examples of such use by women, he suggests that an outcome of women’s acquisition of literacy was that their reading of the Quran and its interpretation in Bengali rather than only ritual reading in Arabic was becoming established as a legitimate cultural practice.

Use of minority languages in adult literacy projects can strengthen cultural diversity. A paper on the role of adult literacy programme in two minority languages in Botswana (Chebanne, Nyati-Ramahobo and Young 2001) shows that the outcomes of the programme include development of orthography in the minority language and the writing of cultural folktales, poems etc. as literacy material. Community responses to the programme suggests a belief that literacy in the mother tongue will contribute to the preservation of their culture as they will be able to write their poems, write about their lives and about the lives of their ancestors. This would create cultural knowledge and they will be respected as a people who have a written culture.

Case studies of literacy and basic education programmes for indigenous people in South and South-East Asian countries also provide evidence of similar benefits of adult education in indigenous languages. For example, programmes for an Orang Asli community in Malaysia (Chupil 2003) and the Maori in New Zealand (Tarawa 2003) use the indigenous language and indigenous educational activities for empowerment. In both cases, mother tongue literacy creates confidence in collective cultural identity, develops and record indigenous knowledge, and is an impetus for action and change in the existing economic and political situation. The Orang Asli, an indigenous community in Malaysia, whose reputation is that of a lazy and dependent people, are able to create a memorandum of their own history and struggles and to present it to officials to demand recognition of their rights (Chupil 2003). Similarly, an adult education programme for a Maori
indigenous community in New Zealand helped generate cultural knowledge resources and strengthen the use of the Maori language (Tarawa 2003). Adult literacy programmes for the Karen, an indigenous community in Burma, and the Limbu community in Nepal illustrate the significance of mother tongue literacy to strengthen cultural identity (Norwood 2003). In the Limbu community, literacy in the mother tongue led to the revival of an abandoned script, the development of publications in that script, and enhanced the value of the mother tongue (Subba 2003). Mother tongue literacy for the Karen refugee women in Thai camps gave them confidence and voice in their immediate community (Norwood 2003). In the above cases, mother tongue literacy primarily strengthened cultural identity, cultural resources, and developed what Rowland (1998) refers to as the strength within (Rao and Robinson-Pant, forthcoming). However, usually a different language - an international or a national language - is associated with the power to influence decisions and move ahead. Therefore, similar to the participants in South Africa and Namibia, and the Rabri in India, the Karen women also demand literacy in Burmese, the language of power beyond their immediate community.

4. Practices

Very few good studies documenting the relationship between adult literacy and lifestyle are available. One reason for this may be that change in practice comes about very slowly and is determined by many factors other than literacy. Evaluation studies generally report that literacy positively affects life style by making people more independent (being able to carry out literacy tasks such as reading electric bills, road signs etc by themselves). A study based on interviews and discussions with Nigerian women shows the difference between the daily routine of literate and illiterate woman with the literate woman spending more time on leisure and rest. However, it is apparent that it is not literacy per se but the possibility it offers to engage in non farming jobs and access to credit that explains the difference (Egbo 2000). The same study reports that literate women are less inclined to continue cultural practices which are harsh on women, such as the long and painful practice of mourning a husbands’ death.
Leisure activities for both literate men and women include reading and writing. While men generally read material which serves more functional purpose (such as newspaper) women read romance, stories in magazines and write diaries for self expression.

Stromquist’s (1997) ethnographic research in Brazil revealed that newly literate women began to read ‘women’s magazines’ which were seen to promote rather than challenge traditional values and roles for women. In Nepal, Ahearn (2001) researched how young people were using their newly acquired literacy skills in writing love letters. Her study relates their love letter correspondence to social and cultural changes taking place in rural Nepal, including a new sense of ‘agency’ which the love letters both reflect and influence. Zubair (2001, 2004) researched the use of literacy by different age groups of women in two rural communities in Pakistan. Her ethnographic study shows that women’s access to reading and writing in Urdu (the national language) and English changes the quality of their leisure time and creates a new norm of privacy –something not part of the Pakistani culture. Younger women create private time where they can read news, romantic fiction and women’s magazines and write diaries. Reading and writing do not remain mere leisure activities but become means of creating private space, freeing imagination and engaging in reflection and emotional expression. Through leisure reading and writing they begin to question, challenge, resist, and renegotiate values and their role within patriarchy – initiating a possible change in the cultural belief and norms of women’s status and behavior.

5. Roles and Relationships

In general, literacy and educational levels of mothers are believed to affect mothers’ attitudes toward their children’s education. However, there is very little research into understanding of how literacy may affect the nature of a mother’s/parent’s involvement with their children. A study comparing women participants and non-participants in an integrated literacy and basic education programme in Bolivia (Burchfield 2002) concludes that “In both the experimental and the control group more educated women

---

3 See Robinson-Pant’s section on ‘adult literacy and children’s education’ for further discussion of this area.
had greater involvement with their children’s educational activities than less educated women. They were more likely to help their children with homework, to visit their child’s school and to read to them, although reading to children is not a common educational practice” (p.63). Similarly Egbo (2000) reports Nigerian women’s account of their daily routine which brings out the contrast in the routines of children of literate and illiterate women in Nigeria.

A few studies show that literacy acquisition through REFLECT programmes can lead to change in gender roles and practice. A study of a programme in Lesotho shows that some participants are able to change gendered roles and practice with men taking more responsibility at home (Attwood, Castle, and Smythe 2004). In Bangladesh, Maddox (2005) found that in some households, literacy enabled women to establish their right of financial management for the household normally controlled by men. A study in India (Khandekar 2004) describes a case to demonstrate how literacy empowers Dalit (low caste) women to challenge a culture which expects them to suffer poverty, violence and to adopt a subservient behaviour. Khandekar shows that acquisition of literacy and participation in the literacy programme provided women the confidence and opportunity for collective action and leadership against alcoholism amongst community men. These cases demonstrate that literacy programmes can have cultural benefit by initiating positive changes in the norms of behavior, role and relationship within family and community. However, they also underline the need for ongoing support to spread and sustain such nascent changes which challenge and are in turn challenged by the existing culture.

6. Conclusion

The limited evidence available on the cultural benefits of literacy suggests that the acquisition of literacy and participation in adult literacy programmes can bring about change in people’s values, beliefs, roles and practices. However, this change takes time as it interacts with and challenges the existing cultural norms. Most studies present data from women participants and it is hard to find studies reporting benefits for men. The
experience of writing this paper has demonstrated that while there are several very good and in-depth studies showing how culture influences how literacy is used in particular communities and contexts, we know very little about the effects (benefits or disadvantages) of adult literacy and basic education programmes on culture. The available studies on impact of programmes do not sufficiently focus on this aspect. We need to think carefully about what questions we should ask about the relationship between literacy and culture and what methods we should use to study these questions. If a purpose of adult literacy is to bring about and document sustained change in people’s lives, more effort will have to be put in designing research to study cultural change/benefits of adult literacy.

References


Fishman, A.R. (1991) ‘Because this is who we are: Writing in the Amish Community’. In D. Barton and R. Ivanic (Eds.) *Writing in the Community*. Newbury Parch: Sage.


Tarawa, N. (2003) Reading our Land: a case study of Te Waka Pu Whenua, Maori adult education center in New Zealand, ASPBAE indigenous adult education case study series, Mumbai, ASPBAE

