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_Literacy for Life_

**The benefits of literacy (human, cultural, social, political, economic)**

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The benefits of literacy (human, cultural, social, political, human, economic)

An introduction to the papers

By Anna Robinson-Pant

The purpose of this overview is to indicate the shared standpoint of the writers on the concept of the ‘benefits of literacy’, to outline the limitations of the research available on this topic, and to discuss the ways in which interactions between the different benefits have been addressed in these papers.

1. What is ‘literacy’?

In order to avoid a narrow focus on ‘reading and writing’ (along with the implied emphasis and belief in the cognitive benefits of literacy – see for instance, Ong 1982), and to minimise the duplication of material in the previous GMRs which focused on schooling, we have centred our discussion in these papers on adult literacy programmes and their benefits. Recognising that in this context, ‘literacy’ has come to mean much more to individuals and communities than just reading and writing, we have included consideration of the broader impact and the ‘non-literacy’ elements of adult basic education programmes. Given the limited research available on the impact of adult literacy programmes as compared to schooling (see opening section in the ‘social benefits’ paper), several writers have also reviewed relevant literature analysing the impact of education (i.e. including schooling) on economic, social and political outcomes. As Stromquist points out in her introduction, certain benefits (in her paper, political benefits) are dependent on literacy acquired over a longer period of time – rather than initial or basic literacy – so it is appropriate to take into account the impact of formal literacy learning in schools, as well as non-formal educational processes. Cameron and Cameron discuss how the literature on the micro-economic returns to education could be related to adult literacy, indicating the problems associated with conflating ‘literacy’ with ‘schooling’ (see p. 23 - 26).

2. Limitations of the research available
As stated in the original TOR, these papers are intended to review and analyse the existing research. As research in this area is sparse, especially when compared to research on the benefits of formal schooling, the writers faced certain constraints on how they approached the question of the benefits of literacy:

- The majority of research studies and evaluation reports focus on women’s literacy and often exclude consideration of men. This is because in many countries, adult literacy programmes are attended largely by women (see Oxenham 2003) and because the research agenda has been influenced by the dominant instrumental discourse linking women’s literacy to greater efficiency in their roles as mothers and wives (see Robinson-Pant 2004). Whilst we recognise that benefits such as ‘gender equality’ need to be addressed in terms of men’s literacy as well as women’s, we are limited in our analysis of secondary sources here by the lack of research in this area.

- Most of the research reviewed in these papers has been written in the English language (an exception being Spanish and Portuguese reports included by Stromquist). Again, this is due to the nature of research commissioned and funded by international aid agencies (including these GMR background papers!), which are inevitably aimed at an English-speaking audience. We have not come across any research on literacy programmes in indigenous languages because of this bias in the way research is funded and reported. However our team of writers includes Iffat Farah, Ila Patel and Nelly Stromquist, who have worked extensively in the field of literacy research in non-English speaking contexts, and are familiar with indigenous literacy practices and approaches.

- The papers focus more on the individual or community-level impact of literacy programmes, due again to the nature of the research evidence available. Many research studies have evaluated the experiences of individuals taking part in adult literacy classes and are linked to specific programmes, rather than aiming to research the impact of adult literacy at a national level. As discussed above, studies correlating adult literacy rates with social indicators such as decreased fertility at a national level do not disaggregate
schooling from adult literacy programmes (see Bown 1990), so were of limited value in these papers.

- The few research reports which have attempted to generalise at the national or international level have been quoted in all the papers: notably, Burchfield et al’s studies on women’s literacy in Bolivia and Nepal, and Oxenham’s (2003) review of World Bank sponsored programmes. This has occasionally meant some duplication of material between the papers, though we have used the same evidence in different ways.

- We have attempted to draw on recent ethnographic research, where appropriate, though we recognise the difficulties associated with this. An example is Oxenham’s (2001) ‘Reaching the 900 million plus’ paper, which used ethnographic or in-depth qualitative studies to generalise statistically about the benefits of literacy. As well as the methodological issues around generalising from studies based on samples that were not selected to be statistically representative, there are problems in decontextualising such findings from their cultural context (see below). Additionally, since many of these ethnographic studies emerged from a research problem which critiqued the notion of ‘literacy benefits’ and the ‘impact of literacy’ (as compared to the impact of individuals or communities on literacy – see Street’s (2001) collection), there is a certain irony in using this research evidence in the current papers. As Stromquist notes in her paper, the strength of such studies lies elsewhere: ‘the foci of qualitative studies… have been less on narrow impacts of literacy and much more on the uses and practices of literacy, literacy interaction in families…’

3. Why overlaps between the papers?

It is conceptually problematic to separate out social, cultural, human, political and economic benefits, as the original TOR illustrate (‘attitudes’, ‘lifestyles’ and ‘behaviour’ are listed under ‘cultural benefits’, yet are also the key elements to consider in relation to improved health and fertility control (listed under ‘social benefits’)). Rather than attempting to delineate each benefit rigidly to avoid such
overlap, we have chosen to discuss the same issue (where appropriate) under two or more benefits. For instance, cultural attitudes towards traditional health practices is considered with regard to both ‘cultural benefits’ and ‘social benefits’. Other strong overlaps include ‘empowerment’ and self-esteem - discussed in the papers on political, social and human benefits. By taking a wider perspective on ‘economic benefits’ to encompass capabilities, Cameron and Cameron’s paper also includes consideration of benefits reviewed in the other four papers, including political (‘advocacy capability’) and social (‘capabilities in social co-operation’).

The decision to retain and emphasise these overlaps reflects our ideological stance – that we take a ‘situated’ approach, in order to retain a holistic perspective on literacy processes, rather than attempting an audit in terms of listing discrete political versus economic benefits. We thus recognise that reported ‘benefits’ need to be analysed in relation to the specific context of the research, rather than implying that literacy has universal benefits. As Farah’s paper points out, even the notion of ‘benefits’ needs to be considered in relation to ‘our’ cultural values – for instance, whether we consider ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’ beliefs about gender roles to be preferable. Similar reservations could be made about the notion of ‘benefits’ with regard to political or social benefits and how these relate to the values we hold. In other words, though we have retained the term ‘benefits’, we have broadened our analysis to consider the interaction of literacy education and economic, social, political and cultural processes. This has enabled us to include ethnographic researchers (e.g. Betts and Kell) who have critiqued the autonomous notion of literacy - including that of ‘benefits’- whilst remaining faithful to the ideological model of literacy that informs their work.

A major contribution of these papers is thus to problematise the concept of benefits, through developing alternative frameworks of analysis (see, for instance, Camerons’ and Stromquist’s papers) which move away from the more usual development input-output model. As Farah points out, the growing body of ethnographic research illustrates the importance of considering the two way process – how culture impacts on literacy, as well as how literacy impacts on culture. We hope that this set of papers will broaden the question of benefits, to consider instead the dynamic process of

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1 As mentioned earlier, this is very different from attempts by Oxenham to ‘extract’ ethnographic findings from the values and cultural context that informed them.
interaction between literacy (and education) and cultural, social, political, human and economic dimensions.

References


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Commissioned papers on the Benefits of Literacy:

Cameron, John (School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia) and Cameron, Stuart (Institute of Development Studies, Sussex): The economic benefits of literacy

Farah, Iffat (Aga Khan University, Pakistan): The cultural benefits of literacy

Patel, Ila (Institute of Rural Management, India): The human benefits of literacy

Robinson-Pant, Anna (Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia): The social benefits of literacy

Stromquist, Nelly (University of Southern California): The political benefits of literacy

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