Pedagogical Innovations in Literacy Programmes: Lifelong Learning as both a Method and a Goal

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With the financial support of the Education Program Development Fund (EPDF) of the EFA Fast Track Initiative (FTI)
The Education for All Global Assessment Report pointed out that only 5% of primary school students in Africa have attained the minimal level of competency which should be acquired by the end of primary school. Based on this, the need for creating and sustaining alternative education systems and approaches is painfully evident. However, funding for alternative forms of education is dismally low. In most countries, government funding for “out-of-school” education programs is usually less than 1% of their education budget. This is the niche for non-formal education and literacy programs. This paper focuses on how non-formal education programs are innovating in order to meet the needs of this population.

The need for innovation is continual in educational systems, because the needs of learners and resources of providers change constantly. Ideally, innovations should take place on several levels, more or less at the same time, including:

- crucial decisions in policy and planning,
- innovations in the classroom, focused on learner-centered curricula and methodologies,
- creating a context to make these programs successful, including a literate environment, recruiting personnel, and methods of evaluation.

Non-formal education is creating new approaches to education to meet needs in a multilingual and multicultural context. It is not constrained to teaching a pre-established curriculum but rather to finding educational responses to real-life questions and needs.

The UNESCO terms lifelong learning and lifewide learning are very appropriate expressions. It means finding educational approaches which accept and celebrate diversity, as the following examples and case studies show. This diversity includes the diversity of learners, goals, languages, learning styles, time invested in the classroom, funding, political settings, etc. In this context, the goals of the LIFE (Literacy Initiative for Empowerment) program are especially relevant.

While writing this article we identified the following trends or characteristics which are important to education today. Effective non-formal education is becoming more learner-centered, more responsive, more participatory, more flexible, and wider in the educational options being offered. Also, the use of maternal or national languages has become the norm for most programs. The shift has been from teaching to learning; from standardized, uniform curriculum to a curriculum which adapts to individual and social needs; from a focus on literacy as an independent skill to literacy embedded in a contextual need. This is the essence of innovation in non-formal education today.
## Abbreviations

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ABET</td>
<td>Adult Basic Education and Training</td>
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<td>ADEA</td>
<td>African Development for Education in Africa</td>
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<td>ARED</td>
<td>Associates in Research and Education for Development</td>
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<td>EFA</td>
<td>Education for All</td>
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<td>FABE</td>
<td>Family Basic Education</td>
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<td>Faire-Faire</td>
<td>private-public partnerships</td>
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<td>FAL</td>
<td>Functional Adult Literacy</td>
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<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information, Communication and Technology</td>
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<td>IIED</td>
<td>International Institute for Environment and Development</td>
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<td>IIZ/DVV</td>
<td>International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association</td>
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<td>IRI</td>
<td>Interactive Radio Instruction</td>
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<td>LIFE</td>
<td>Literacy Initiative for Empowerment</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>ODA</td>
<td>Overseas Development Administration</td>
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Pedagogical Innovations in Literacy Programs:
Lifelong Learning as both a Method and a Goal

1. Trends in non-formal education and literacy today

This article is centered on pedagogical innovations in non-formal lifelong learning in general, and more particularly on literacy classes in Africa. But in researching and writing it, we were confronted by two questions. Are we looking at the individual innovations carried out by projects, teachers and organizations? Or are we looking at the long-term trends in educational programs in Africa? This article is organized around the long-term trends in non-formal literacy education, and how approaches have evolved in Africa over the past 20 to 30 years. Some of these trends could be called “innovative”, while others are more “business as usual”. Both inform this article.

But interwoven into that narrative are the individual experiences which are promising and creative, and which achieve noticeable success rates. The problem with these experiences, be it a government project or an NGO, is that it is difficult to determine if they can be “scaled up” to reach the large numbers of people in need of an education today. Often smaller, experimental programs succeed because they have been able to tailor their programs to the needs and interests of particular groups of learners. Nevertheless, these innovations play an essential role in what we are looking at in this article. This tension, or synergy, between long-term trends and specific innovations is fundamental to the discussion about education in Africa today, as the reader will feel throughout this article.

1.1 The challenges to non-formal education

In 2000, the Dakar Framework for Action identified six key educational goals to address over the next decade(s). These were:

- Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children,
- Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality,
- Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programs,
- Achieving a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults,
- Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls’ full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality,
- Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills. (UNESCO, 2000, p.3)

However, in the same year the Education for All Global Assessment Report pointed out that in those countries which carried out evaluations, only 5% of primary school students had attained or surpassed the minimal level of com-
petency which should be acquired by the end of primary school. The need for creating and promoting new educational approaches is painfully evident. In spite of these statistics, funding for alternative forms of education to either pick up students who did not succeed in the formal system or those millions of adults who have never been in it, is dismally low. In most countries, government funding for non-formal or “out-of-school” education programs is usually less than 1% of their education budget.

While most major donors and governments do put some resources into the non-formal sector in the name of basic education, nevertheless “basic education” has come to largely mean “primary school education”. Formal primary school education absorbs the majority of resources of both governments and donors, even at the expense of secondary education in many places (Bregman, 2005). According to Rosa-Maria Torres:

The 1990s started with the International Literacy Year and the World Conference on Education For All proposing an ‘expanded vision of basic education’ — children, youth and adults. However, there was no real commitment toward adult education in Jomtien.... EFA was interpreted as a worldwide commitment to ‘universal access to, and completion of, primary education by the year 2000’. In practice, since Jomtien, all was reduced to children; basic education to primary education; and universal primary education to enrolment. (Torres, 2002, p.82)

This is a serious challenge to educational providers, and it is echoed in most of the references in this article. A study done by the Institute for the International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association (IIZ/DVV) echoed this viewpoint in very strong terms:

Following the Dakar World Forum on EFA... a commitment was expressed to ‘achieve a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women’. In the follow-up, however, we realize that basic education through state schools has become the dominant feature, which has led several critical colleagues to question whether EFA means ‘Except for Adults’. (Hildebrand and Hinzen, 2005, p. 35)

The challenges to an educational program which attempts to confront the mission of the Dakar Framework for Action are multiple and diverse. Every educational program has at least some of the following goals in mind:

- to help the individual learner to fully achieve their individual goals and potential in life,
- to teach basic skills such as literacy and numeracy (which are supposedly “neutral” in terms of content, but which carry a strong social and cultural charge),
- to transmit a fixed body of knowledge and information which is deemed important by leaders in the community and/or outside experts (as in the example of religious education, agricultural extension work),
- to help individuals learn the skills and information they need to play an active role in local social issues in order to promote the development of their community (such as managing a budget for a group activity, or learning to lobby for local interests),
- to work towards the preservation, adaptation and expansion of local knowledge and of the culture of the community,
- to work towards the creation of new knowledge by empowering individual learners to explore, putting known and new information together in a creative manner.

And any educational program should have at least some of the following impacts, including:

- human benefits (increased self-esteem, self-awareness, empowerment, increased participation in groups and associations),
- political benefits (increased political participation, attention to ethnic equality),
- cultural benefits (knowing one’s cultural heritage, understanding cultural change, preservation of cultural diversity, exploring and supporting indigenous knowledge),
- social benefits (including new knowledge about health, information about reproductive behavior, information about the spread of HIV/AIDS, promotion of gender equality),
- economic benefits (including a better understanding of production systems, increased efficiency in production, planning, budgeting).

Given the wide range of goals and impacts, it is little wonder that effective education programs are complicated to design and to implement.
This is made even more complicated by the fact that we need to talk about education for children, adolescents and adults; in both formal and non-formal institutions; in a multilingual context where various languages are very unevenly developed.

Alan Rogers gives a vivid description of education which shifts the focus from teaching to learning. He writes about how adults learn, and how educational systems can better meet their needs. He says:

Adult learning is continuous and chaotic. Adult learning is not preparatory to any activity; it co-exists with the activity. And it is not sequential, starting with easy tasks and moving to more difficult tasks, for life itself is not sequential. Adults learn from the immediate tasks which face them day by day, however difficult these may be. Adults learn by and from their own experience. And this means that learning is highly individualized as well as being collaborative. (Rogers, 2005, p. 238)

The internal struggle in all educational systems is the need to somehow organize, standardize, and evaluate on the one hand; and the imperative to meet individual needs, learning styles, talents, and interests on the other. This is the challenge.

1.2 The place of non-formal education in the educational arena

The word “non-formal” somehow implies that this is not a legitimate form of education, associated with non- and out-of notions. However, non-formal education includes any educational activity organized outside of the formal school system and intended for any person wishing to receive specific training in a topic or skill which interests them — in a place they can get to, at a cost they can afford, with a time investment which matches their needs. Long before there was formal education there was non-formal and informal education, which will always play a role in educating members of any society.

By its very nature, non-formal education is innovative. It is not constrained to teaching a pre-established curriculum but rather on finding educational responses to real-life questions and needs. There have always been alternative learning and teaching systems, from apprenticeships to religious education to parent-child teaching to radio broadcasts which meet information needs, etc. Education is a very large concept, and non-formal education plays an important role in it.

Formal, centralized, top-down, standards-(test)-driven, funded-by-the-government education only took root worldwide in the 20th century. In Europe, formal education:

... was created in the late nineteenth century and was designed to prepare the poorer classes in Europe for working in the mills. Its aim was to create obedient, diligent, persistent, and uncritical workers.... Classes of same-level students progressing strictly sequentially formed the core structure.... This model was exported in an early phase of globalization to colonized societies, destroying in full or in part their indigenous learning systems; and on achieving independence, many countries adopted this as the key to the apparent success of the West. (Rogers, 2005, p. 241)

In Africa, the concept and implementation of this top-down type of education took place during the colonial period. In this system exported by the colonialists, a “basic education” took 9 months per year, roughly 5 hours per day, for a total of roughly 5400 hours in the classroom. This only covered the education of 7 to 12 year olds. If a student went on, roughly the same number of hours were needed in order to achieve the level of a high school diploma. This taught what the colonialists needed in order to educate a small minority for the posts they needed to fill.

Non-formal education plays a role at two levels. It can either contribute to completing the needs left unfulfilled by the formal system, or even better, it can propose educational systems which meet real-life needs. Both forms will be discussed in this article.
1.3 The place of literacy in the educational arena

Since the 60’s, a special form of non-formal education has been developed and has spread throughout the world as part of an effort to confront the inadequacies of the formal system: literacy programs. While many forms of education assumed that the student needed to learn to read and write as the basis for continuing education, the concept of literacy programs in Africa was originally driven by the concept of quickly promoting this skill in isolation, without foreseeing the broader, long term educational needs.

According to the UNESCO EFA Global Report, literacy can be analyzed from four crucial perspectives:

- literacy can be seen as an autonomous set of skills, meaning that the only objective of an educational program is to impart the capacity to read and write, and perhaps do basic math,
- literacy can be seen as a skill which is applied and necessary in real-life situations, becoming literate can be seen as a step in the learning process — especially learning how to learn independently,
- being literate can be seen as being able to use and interpret written text to both express ideas and to learn something new. (UNESCO, 2005, p. 148)

In literacy programs today, some put the emphasis on learning a skill in isolation. This is by far the least expensive option because only the “simple” transfer of a skill needs to be considered. It is shorter, and takes less preparation and expertise. However, many so-called literacy programs today actually address real-life needs which are often driven by the need for information. Being literate is a skill which allows the learner to continue in the learning process. Issues can be addressed before becoming literate, while becoming literate, after becoming literate. If learners see the dynamic connection between becoming literate with their lives and livelihoods, it is because the program has put a lot of thought and preparation into developing the materials and training the teachers.

This difference makes it difficult to compare programs, but also puts the emphasis on the needs of the learner, which is the major trend in non-formal education today.

1.4 A crucial paradigm shift in educational strategies

Given this complexity, the UNESCO term lifelong learning and lifewide learning are very appropriate expressions. It means finding educational approaches (educational “offers”) which accept and celebrate diversity, as the following examples and case studies show. This diversity includes the diversity of learners, goals, languages, learning styles, time invested in the classroom, funding, political settings, etc. This is the context for the discussion which follows, which searches to present approaches at all levels which have an impact on non-formal education and literacy classes, from both the viewpoints of the learners and the providers. And specifically the goals of the LIFE (Literacy Initiative for Empowerment) program (launched by UNESCO in 2005 to address the needs of roughly 34 countries worldwide which are the home of 85% of the world’s illiterates) is especially relevant.

The need for innovation is a constant in educational systems, because the needs of learners and resources of providers constantly change. Ideally, innovations should take place on several levels, more or less at the same time, including:

- crucial decisions in policy and planning, innovations in the classroom, focused on learner-centered curriculum and methodologies,
- supporting the context to make these programs successful, including creating a literate environment, recruiting personnel, and methods of evaluation.

These are the main topics which will be explored in this article. Clearly the vast majority of innovations are taking place at the level of curriculum development and methodologies in the classroom. Policy and planning are less active, as well as creating a supportive context. For any government, this poses a serious question of how to incorporate these new method-
ologies into their global program for Education For All.

In our research we have identified trends or characteristics which have a great importance to education today. Effective non-formal education is becoming more learner-centered, more responsive, more participatory, more flexible, and wider in the educational options being offered. Also, the use of maternal or national languages has become the norm for most programs. The shift has been from teaching to learning; from standardized, uniform curriculum to a curriculum which adapts to individual and social needs; from a focus on literacy as an independent skill to literacy embedded in a contextual need. This is the essence of innovation today.

But the programs which embrace these ideals are faced with monumental challenges such as limited funding, training and maintaining personnel, limited access to materials including books, being able to scale-up in order to meet growing needs, a need for validation to provide a pathway between educational systems, needs for certification for the work world, etc. So even the most successful programs, whether governmental or NGO programs, all face the constant need to adapt, innovate, read the social context, search for funding, interact with learners, grow.

2. Crucial decisions in policy and planning

Generally everyone assumes that policy decisions should be the underlying support in creating and supporting educational systems, whether they be formal or non-formal. The UN General Assembly Report suggests that: “The State must play the central and crucial role in planning, coordinating, implementing and financing programmes for Literacy for All.” (UN General Assembly Report, 2002, p. 8) In the words of a Ugandan researcher: “...if universal literacy is not a national priority with accompanying measures to ensure that local governments also treat it as a priority, it will likely not be achieved by 2010 or 2015. While the NGOs, which interest themselves in literacy education, will doubtless fund their programs reliably, they cannot on their own handle the entire national need.” (Okech et al., 2001, p. 102)

Researcher Wedin suggests that there are four archetypal forms of modern education: exclusionary, assimilationist, multicultural, and pluralist (Wedin, 2004). Every country in the world needs to constantly re-evaluate which of these forms of education are, and should be, in practice in their time and space in order to adapt to constantly changing needs. Happily, there has been a long-term concern with the role of non-formal education, and governments often search for ways to better work with non-formal providers, since this collaboration is crucial in multilingual contexts.

2.1. The necessary interaction between policy and pedagogy

As Hassana Alidou has said “there is no pedagogy without policy” (oral communication, UNESCO UIL, 2006). However this part of the total picture is probably the slowest to respond to rapidly growing changes and needs. By definition, it is not on the innovative edge. However, it is so important that we need to consider its place in the role of educational innovations today. And in fact when and where it has been actively carried out, this level of decision making has had a forceful impact.

2.1.1 The fundamental choice in non-formal literacy programs: language

The most decisive choice in any educational program is the language of instruction. While the language choice in formal programs is dictated by the educational system, in non-formal education the decision is more often determined by the needs of the learners. As researchers have found: “A more grassroots driven approach to language planning and policy work could proceed from the linguistic needs of language groups, including the promotion and cultivation of alternative literacies in multilingual contexts.” (Stroud, 2002, p. 22)

A primary school education in the formal system requires from 5400 to 7200 hours of classroom time, if we assume five to six hours
per day, nine months out of the year, for six years. And ultimately this system gives very poor results, with less than 5% of students arriving at the minimal level of achievement. In sub-Saharan Africa high failure rates can be associated with the fact that education is being passed through a language (English, French, or Portuguese) which the majority of students don’t understand or speak when they enter school.

On the other hand, non-formal literacy classes, which take place in a language which participants understand, are rarely funded for more than 400 hours. Compare 5400 hours to 400 hours in the classroom. One of the major reasons that literacy classes achieve acceptable levels at all is that the language of instruction is one which students and teachers speak, and the task therefore becomes a task of teaching literacy skills rather than teaching a second language.

Multilingual Education for Children in South Africa: ‘If you paint another language on my skin, my soul cannot breathe.’

“Two of our projects have been working in early childhood and storytelling. Our experiences on these projects provide evidence for the disastrous consequences of this one language as medium choice, particularly in poorly resourced communities in which neither school nor parents have the means to provide environments which are highly saturated with English language and literacy resources. In both these projects, young children used their multiple African home languages purposefully and productively in their oral and performance work and in some instances, improvised short plays of up to thirty minutes, rich with social languages. When we asked them to write a few sentences on their stories, all this rich multilingualism vanished from these tongues, they took out their pencils, and wrote one to two words or sentences in English, a language they do not speak in their life worlds. In addition, they did not have literacy skills in their own languages as a resource to draw on in the making of their meanings. After all this abundance of language and creativity, we saw there was profound loss as they sat down to write. This sense of loss comes from their daily struggle to create meaning in the context of the language constraints which have been imposed on them by those in authority (such as parents and teachers). As one of our students said: ‘If you paint another language on my skin, my soul cannot breathe.’... Later students demanded to be allowed to write ‘in their own languages’...” (Stein and Newfield, ??, p. 160)

In the past years, more and more funding has gone into programs using national languages; but it is not enough. There needs to be a policy decision that this form of education, whether for children, out of school adolescents, or adults, meets the needs of the country. This is a major issue which deserves much more focus in the future.

The case of Tanzania: Both policy and implementation

Tanzania was the first African country to make a policy decision about the use of a national language, Kiswahili, in public office and in education. Furthermore, both child and adult education in formal and non-formal settings was developed. But a policy decision wasn’t enough and Nyerere also supported an implementation program. According to Alidou: “The two main factors that accounted for the success of the language policy are a sound education language policy and the creation of governmental structures to carry out the implementation of this policy.” In the 70’s and 80’s, illiteracy had almost been eradicated.

As the Tanzanian experience in the 70’s and 80’s showed, fundamental policy decisions are one part of the equation. The second part is the creation of implementing agencies which support the process. These included at least six institutions which supported child and adult education in a national language (Kiswahili):

- the Ministry of Culture created in 1962,
- the Institute for Kiswahili Research created in 1966,
- the Tanzania Publishing House created in 1966,
- the national Kiswahili Council created in 1967,
- the Department of Kiswahili at the University of Dar es Salaam, created in 1970,
Kiswahili was adopted as an official national language in Tanzania in 1962, and the years from 1962 through 1978 demonstrated a continuing commitment to work so that this policy decision could be implemented. However, in 1992 the donor which had made this success possible stopped funding Tanzanian education, and there has been a growing drop in literacy rates. Since the state hasn’t been able to make up for the financing of the process, they are facing a dropping literacy rate today. (UNESCO UIL, 2006)

2.1.2 Early-exist and mainstreaming — or additive language acquisition

There are two types of maternal language programs today which receive widespread recognition, and grow out of a policy debate about how to educate both children and young adolescents. Both focus on success within the formal school system since both focus on exam results as established by the formal system, even though the language of early instruction is a maternal language. One is called “early-exit” and the other “mainstreaming”.

Early-exit programs are designed around the idea that a student should first be taught in his or her first language (or at least in a language he or she speaks), but within three years these students should be transitioned into a primary school program which is dominated by the official language (usually French or English). This applies to children between the ages of six and eight. Mainstreaming is a program which picks up children at a later age, usually between nine and fifteen years old, who have either never started or who have dropped out of formal school. The concept is to get them quickly ready to pass essential exams in order to “mainstream” them into the formal official-language school system by using mother-tongue education at the start but quickly switching to the official language.

While the concept behind these programs is interesting, their success rates are yet to be statistically demonstrated. It obviously makes sense that students learn basic skills better in a language which they speak, but it is not clear what percentage of students are able to pass exams in the official language. The weight of success or failure is clearly on the students, who must perform for national test standards.

A more interesting and more complex alternative is that of additive language acquisition. That is, students study in length and in depth in a language which they speak, but also learn an additional second (usually international) language throughout their schooling, so that by the end of school, they are competent in at least two languages. This model is one frequently used in Europe, where truly bilingual citizens are important to the nation and the economy.

Multilingual Programs for Primary School in the Zambia

In the 1966 Education Act, Zambia made a policy decision to use English as the medium of instruction in their schools. However, in a ministry study in 1995, it was pointed out that only 25% of 6th grade students could read at a “minimal level”, as defined by the Ministry of Education. And worse, only 3% could read at the “desired level”. Furthermore, they remarked that school was unrelated to life, and rote learning was the major pedagogical tool used in this context. They therefore began a process of developing a new Primary Reading Program which is a carefully designed seven year program which starts with teaching in one of the seven major Zambian languages, and then integrates the teaching of English as a second language. With support from DFID, a progressive program for teaching reading was developed, with very promising results. For example, in an evaluation in 1999, only 4.8% of second grade students could read at grade level in English. In contrast in 2002, 24% of second grade students had achieved the desired level.

According to recent evaluations, the effectiveness of the Primary Reading Program is due to five basic elements:
• a policy decision to develop a bilingual language approach,
• thoughtful development of an overall curriculum,
• good teacher training,
• involvement of all the major stake-holders, creating a literate environment which promotes reading.

(Linehan, 2004 and Alidou, 2006)

Debating the choice of the language of instruction is automatically part of any non-formal literacy programs. But this is also a crucial debate which should be taking place within formal schools which operate in a multilingual setting. At the very least, formal programs need to be more prepared to teach official languages as a second language, and not depend on official languages as the language of instruction.

2.1.3 Funding for non-formal and literacy programs

Funding for adult literacy and non-formal education has rarely been a priority for governments, which normally spend less than 1% of their national education budget on this sector. The costs are often passed on to NGOs and to community volunteer organizations. This trend is harmful to “out-of-school” education in most countries. As UNESCO pointed out in 2005:

As budget, loan and grant allocations to primary education grew rapidly, adult programmes had their public funding reduced, and responsibility was often transferred from the public sector to NGOs... Although the focus on primary education was justified... it was also limited, for it neglected those who had either not attended school, or who had done so without becoming literate. (UNESCO, 2005, p.28)

If policy decisions are to mean anything, they must include concerns about funding local providers. Sometimes the funding can come directly from governments. At other times, it is a question of putting donors and local educational providers in contact, such as in the faire-faire programs (private-public partnerships) of West Africa in which government plays a facilitating role rather than being the agency of execution.

Another example is that of AlphaSol in Brazil. This non-profit organization created in 1997 has touched over 5 million people in their literacy programs. But most amazing is the creative funding which they have found for their work. 40% of their funding comes from the federal government, while 60% comes from various private and public sources. From 20 financial partners in 1997, in 2005 they were receiving funding from over 178 sources, a large part being from the private sector. South Africa also seems to have found a creative way of combining resources. Although adult education is still clearly under-funded, a recent study showed that: “NGOs provide a much larger part of ABET provision (18.5%) than they were previously credited for; the State much less (28.5%) and the Corporate Sector also much more than they were given credit for (41.7%).” (Williams, 1996)

The conclusion is that government and local providers can and should work together to provide a very precious resource to a population which cannot, and should not, pay for this resource themselves.

2.1.4 Going to scale: scaling up or reaching wide

One vision of teaching literacy is that literacy is an independent skill which can be taught outside of a life context. In that case, it was assumed that governments could organize a unified national program: “The traditional approach has usually been operationalised through the bureaucratic structures of government in a centralised and hierarchical manner. The top-down organisational structure aims to ensure a standardised provision of literacy tutoring throughout the country.” (Mpofu and Youngman, 2001, p. 581)

In contrast to this top-down highly centralized approach, today one of the challenges to any program which shows signs of success is the concept of how to “scale up”. That is, how to expand a successful program to reach ever larger numbers of people. Individual government projects and NGOs which have developed
relevant programs are not necessarily equipped to take on that responsibility. In each case, one needs to determine if a successful program in one region, language, or with a specific occupational group, etc. would be applicable with others. Chances are the answer is no. However, lessons learned plus materials and approaches can be exchanged and adapted more easily because they have been successfully tested.

Since non-formal education programs do not have a top-down approach, the concept of “scaling up” is more a question of opening up spaces for negotiation and exchange rather than of simply adding more and more classrooms and participants. Scaling up is usually narrowly seen as simply enrolling more students. But in a context where the educational offer needs to be expanded to fit diverse needs, the first step is to create an exchange between educational systems and the participants.

One compelling example of how a program can expand is that of REFLECT, the ActionAid approach which has made a profound impact worldwide. The original experience started in just three countries (Uganda, El Salvador, and Bangladesh) in 1995, but today is an approach used by more than 260 agencies in over 60 countries. This is not an example of scaling up but of reaching wide. The breadth of the impact of REFLECT programs may not satisfy the needs of a single government, but it is an approach which has affected a large number of local providers.

Finally, when one is considering sharing a promising program (curriculum, teacher training, materials, etc.) on a national level, it is indispensable to involve the district and local level authorities and representatives of the education ministry (oral communication by Salum Ramadhan Mnjagila of the Ministry of Education in Tanzania, UNESCO UIL, 2006). Tanzania was successful in promoting their educational programs in the 70’s and 80’s through close cooperation with local authorities. And today it is using the same approach to promote the REFLECT program for adult education throughout the country.

2.1.5 Cost effectiveness

There is no question that non-formal education is cost effective. First of all, educational results are acceptable — for example, the equivalent of 3rd grade reading levels after only 300 hours of class — and the cost is very low:

In relation to what the program designers believe can be accomplished under the conditions prevailing in Uganda and within about 300 hours of instruction, the average attainments of the genuinely illiterate learner fall short…. That said, the fact remains that the genuinely illiterate strongly outperformed primary school pupils, who had had three to four years of schooling. The signal is that, even if nonliterate adults do not master the skills of literacy as rapidly as the designers of literacy programs think they might, they do seem to learn those skills at a faster rate than primary school pupils in the same conditions. (Okech et al., 2001, p. 75)

Secondly, while costs vary depending on the resources of the program, they are nevertheless within reason. In Senegal, the faire-faire literacy program allows for up to $60 per student. A national program in Senegal known as PAIS estimates the costs at $12 per student. In an evaluation of costs for literacy programs in Uganda, the costs for the government program was only $4 per participant, because teachers were unpaid volunteers. In a local REFLECT program the costs went up to $9 per participant because teachers were paid a stipend (Okech et al., 2001, p. XVIII). In comparison, the average cost of four years of primary schooling was calculated at $60 per student. (Torres, 2002, p. 7)

However, the cost of non-formal education is low because everything in the non-formal system is underfunded. There are rarely any classrooms built or maintained; teachers are often volunteers; the training of teachers is usually completed within two to four weeks; books aren’t available, etc. It is clear that literacy classes are a viable and extremely important type of educational system in most countries — and also clear that most of the necessary inputs are not being covered financially, but rather through the commitment (“militantism”) of the learners, teachers and the community.
2.1.6 Equitable funding in decentralized environments

In most African countries today there is a major move towards decentralization. This shift has many advantages, in that it brings citizens and their government into closer contact, and can give citizens increased control over their immediate environment. But a major disadvantage is that some districts have less income than others, and adult literacy is often left to the side in those areas:

The government has among its many goals and policies the aims of democratic decentralization and universal literacy. Our observations suggest that the two are not necessarily compatible, since the variations between the districts in budgeting for and actually funding literacy education programs are strikingly wide. It is clear that some local authorities do not attach the same priority as the central government to universal literacy. The second conclusion is that the government will need to negotiate a balance between promoting decentralization and ensuring the maintenance of its priorities. (Okech et al., 2001, p. 98)

While the movement towards decentralized government is both clear and desirable in long-term objectives, local literacy programs are often caught in a major crisis to figure out how to fund their activities given the wide discrepancy between the availability of funds between various districts.

2.2. Planning and management of education programs

One of the major trends in the planning and management of non-formal and literacy programs is that responsibility and control is more and more in the hands of the beneficiaries. This is a fundamental step in making educational programs more responsive to real needs.

2.2.1 Community involvement in design, planning and management

A major trend in the development of non-formal programs today is the implicit understanding that participants, and the community, are going to be involved from the design stage through to the management stage. This is often a slow process, with many potential setbacks, but it is the best guarantee of long-term success.

Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association (IIZ/DVV)

The great challenge facing a self-help approach is the need for a functional strategy of disengagement on the part of external agencies, both NGOs and donors. We have identified the following principles for successful literacy practice:

- participatory needs appraisal prior to the planning of the activity-literacy needs must be expressed by the target group, preferably by learners organized in self-help groups,
- identification of the role of literacy in the given development context and validation by the community,
- participatory decision-making with regard to language, time, duration, individual responsibilities, and material and financial inputs, a self-management strategy,
- a strategy of financial participation and self-financing,
- creation of ownership and responsibility at all levels enshrined in contracts between all those involved,
- opportunities to up-grade the competencies of NGO facilitators and staff,
- constant lobbying and advocacy for literacy, starting at the local level application of suitable instruments for monitoring, counseling and evaluation at all levels (from self-evaluation to external evaluation).

(Hildebrand and Hinzen, 2005, pp. 41-42)

Clearly, there are numerous decisions to be made throughout the process of providing an educational program, and many are made at the beginning. But with feedback, a good program should also be ready to make changes and adjustments rather than blindly carrying out a pre-set program. This is a welcome new possibility as communities become involved in making decisions.

However, it is also prudent to point out that education in every country in the world is
partially or largely funded through taxes. The idea that “outside donors and NGOs” cannot remain forever does not shift the responsibility of paying for education to individual families. It must be part of a larger collaboration between national government, local government, and projects in which innovative approaches (funded by, for example, NGOs) find new funding through permanent government sources.

2.2.2 Non-profit organizations, community based organizations, and governments

The collaboration between government and local organizations has taken some interesting twists in the past 10 years. A new trend is to put governmental resources (which might actually come from donors) at the service of groups who are active and successful in the field. As John Oxenham pointed out in a recent study:

Indeed, the potentially equal effectiveness of both government and nongovernment programs points the way to the positive partnership attempted by the government of India in 1978: it offered to help finance the programs of proven private bodies. That principle operates in the faire-faire contractual partnership of the government and NGOs of Senegal.... For policy, the strong signal is that frameworks to encourage complementarity and active partnership between governments and other agencies would best serve the people who want adult basic education. (Oxenham in Okech et al., 2001, p. 110)

Faire-faire or Public-Private Partnerships

Programs designed around the concept of faire-faire are some of the most interesting and influential in francophone West Africa today. It is a partnership between donors, government, and local organizations. The core factor is developing a partnership with local organizers of literacy classes who can receive funding through a governmental program, which is supported by international donors.

As stated in the ADEA study carried out by Gueye and Diagne (2006), there are six principles behind the conception of a faire-faire program:

- It is an appropriate tool to encourage the diversification of the types of opportunities for offering relevant education,
- The process is decentralized, which favors the diversification of education offerings,
- This diversification of non-formal programs is essential for the management of education in multilingual and multicultural environments,
- This diversification allows local knowledge and needs to be valorized in an appropriate educational program,
- Diversification of educational offerings support innovations in the system,
- To support this whole enterprise, the publication of books, plus ICTs, are essential elements.

(Gueye and Diagne, 2006)

Senegal is the first West African country to implement a faire-faire program but the concept has spread across francophone West Africa today. In Senegal two faire-faire programs have been in operation for ten years. Each developed a complex procedural manual through which local organizations could apply for funding for local literacy classes. A similar partnership was also created in Burkina Faso in 1999; and since has also touched Mali, Niger and Benin.

The concept behind this partnership is very interesting because it creates a space for negotiation between civil society and government. However there is a down side. The responsibility is “given” to local players, who must then follow rules which are clearly stated by the government supervisory structures, including the number of students per class, percentage of women participants, maximum numbers of books to be used and purchased at a standardized price (which is quite low), etc. This sharing of responsibility is often quite ambiguous and not always easy to manage. Nevertheless, these initiatives are very interesting to follow. The best success rates seem to come from those organizations which have worked in the field for a long time, have developed their own methodologies through trial and error, and have a clear sense of a larger mission than just teaching literacy, such as the non-profit organization Tin Tua in Burkina Faso.
2.2.3 Cohesive community groups

Experience has also shown that community organizations which have the power to make operational choices about hiring teachers, timing for classroom participation, who can participate in the program, managing money, etc. are amongst the most successful. These are obviously not individual choices, but choices made by a group which is participating in the process.

As a study carried out by the African Development Bank concluded: “Another factor which should be taken into consideration is the characteristic of the groups, i.e. the group should preferably have a single cohesive characteristic such as a religious group, a women’s group, a farmers cooperative, etc. According to several authors, the foundation should be built on structures already in existence within the community.” (ADB, p. 45) Researcher John Oxenham concurs with this: “Chances of success are even greater in a program that works with established groups of people who share a common purpose, rather than with individual applicants.” (Oxenham et al., 2002, p. 3) These two studies point out two related aspects. In one, the focus is on working with established groups rather than creating a new group. And in the second, the focus is on working with a group rather than individuals.

Formal education in Africa has usually been a top-down activity, organized far away from the participants. Literacy and non-formal programs offer the opportunity to make a shift in power, being based on local groups who share an objective and have the habit of working together. This decentralization of management and responsibility is a major contributing factor to successful programs.

3. Innovations in the classroom, focusing on learner-centered curriculum and methodologies

The previous section described the macro level in which literacy programs operate. Although there are promising examples of innovations in specific countries, there are few examples of creative change because work at this level requires lots of interaction with formal schooling, with difficult language issues, etc. However, in the following section on curriculum and methodology, there are more and more examples of how programs are adapting to a new imperative — that is, how to focus on learning rather than teaching. This can be felt at two levels. One, curricula are becoming more flexible, more focused on the expressed needs of participants. Secondly, the methodologies in the classroom are becoming more participatory.

3.1 Curriculum Development

Curriculum development is a key area in which non-formal education has no choice but to respond to local needs. In formal education, having a pre-established curriculum is a fundamental requirement. In non-formal programs, curriculum (including both content and progression) is often not clearly defined. However, this is usually because learner needs rather than teaching objectives are at the core of the process. It is flexible and open to input and change. Perhaps after several years of experimentation an NGO or experimental government project will suggest a curriculum which has worked for them — but always in the spirit of being open to change and adaptation based on new experiences and different contexts and new groups of learners.

Core Concepts in Curriculum Development in Non-formal Programs

Curriculum development is a multidimensional task that often involves the input of many different people. Qualifications for curriculum developers should include:

- sound technical skills and knowledge on the curriculum content subject,
- knowledge of the community’s needs, as well as social, cultural and economic characteristics,
- knowledge of the principles of curriculum development.

Principles to take into account:

- Target group
- Awareness by the learner of his/her situation, leading to empowerment
• Linkages between basic literacy and post-literacy
• Functionality (do the materials serve a purpose)
• Empowerment
• Flexibility
• Diversified
• Building on the experience of the learners
• Action-oriented

*United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2000*

This responsive approach to curriculum development is fundamental to non-formal education. It shifts the focus from “what to teach” to “who are the learners”, and the content and timing of the programs must change in turn.

### 3.1.1 Construction of knowledge

A key question to ask is whether the curriculum of a program is constructed around the idea of “imparting skills and information” or whether it is about “constructing knowledge”. If a program has true respect for the learner, especially adults, it has to take prior knowledge into account. An exciting factor in non-formal education is the development of approaches which help people to become conscious of what they already know, and to be able to express their ideas on the topic. These programs have the objective of giving learners confidence about their own knowledge, their role in their communities, their capacity to have an impact on decisions being made for and about them.

**Core elements of REFLECT:**
- power and voice
- political process
- democratic space
- intensive and extensive process grounded in existing knowledge
- linking reflection and action using participatory tools
- power awareness
- coherence and self-organization

*ActionAid, 2003*

An obvious step is to integrate prior knowledge with new information, which can give participants the power to make choices and conduct daily business.

### The International Institute for Environment and Development program for pastoralists

One of the more innovative examples of this mix of known and new is the IIED program for the education of pastoralists in the Sahel. This program brings together both literate and non-literate adults to analyze their production system. Because herders have been told since colonial times that they are the problem because they are not “modern” enough, these participatory trainings begin with a validation of what people already know. But this construction of knowledge also integrates new knowledge, such as an explanation of how to calculate “carrying capacity” which is used by all technicians, and presentations of the legislation which governs this production system.

*ARED annual report, 2006*

Integrating the known and the new is a fundamental component of non-formal education today. It is this cross-fertilization which can make education relevant in today’s world. It doesn’t always start with literacy skills, but it can help create a new information environment where literacy skills have a real and important role.

### 3.1.2 Mixing literacy and livelihood skills

A question which faces numerous non-formal programs is whether to first teach literacy skills and then something practical, known as “livelihood skills”; or whether livelihood skills should be the base. In the 2002 World Bank study, livelihood was defined as “the knowledge, skills and methods used to produce or obtain the food, water, clothing and shelter necessary for survival and well-being” (Oxenham, 2002, p. 7). For others the concept behind livelihood is income-generation and/or credit schemes. All join together on the concept of linking a real world use of literacy with the learning of literacy skills themselves.

There are five possible relationships between the teaching of literacy and livelihood activities in adult literacy programs:
- literacy in preparation for livelihood activities,
- literacy followed by separate livelihood activities,
3.1.2 Mixing literacy and livelihood skills

• livelihood activities leading to literacy,
• livelihood activities and literacy integrated, literacy and livelihood activities in parallel but separate.

The strong point of programs which combine these two elements is that the needs of learners must be identified with the participation of potential learners before the program can be put in place. But these programs are more costly because they require more teachers; not only a literacy teacher but one or more people who can teach the livelihood skills in question.

The World Bank study, “Skills and Literacy Training for Better Livelihoods”

This World Bank study focused on four African countries (Senegal, Guinea, Uganda and Kenya) and evaluated numerous programs within these countries. In the end the report gives seventeen findings and ten recommendations. Amongst the overall remarks in the study, the most compelling are the following:

Conditions of effectiveness
The first observation is ... almost banal: ... whether a program starts from literacy/numeracy and includes some livelihood training, or starts with livelihood objectives and includes literacy/numeracy, it is likely to be successful in both...if it is well adapted to the interests and conditions of its participants and well run.

Motivation
The second observation, again almost banal, is that education and training programs for very poor adults would be wise to offer very clear, concrete, and immediate reasons to justify enrollment and ensure perseverance....

Leading from livelihoods
This observation...is that programs that start from livelihood skills seem to stand a stronger chance of success. They can demonstrate an immediate reason for learning.

Livelihood leading
Organizations that are more concerned with livelihoods and other aspects of development seem to be better at designing and delivering effective combinations of livelihoods and literacy than organizations that are more focused on education.

Flexibility
In all the countries studied, the diversity of possibilities for improving established livelihoods and developing new ones appears so wide as to demand extreme flexibility, imagination, and resourcefulness. NGOs seem to have more flexibility than government agencies to respond to local and changing needs.

Savings and credit
Livelihood-plus-literacy/numeracy programs can substantially reinforce their chances of success if they can start from or at least incorporate training in savings, credit, and business management.

Group approaches and negotiation
Chances of success are heightened by working with established groups of people who share a common purpose, rather than with individual applicants.

(Oxenham et al., 2002)

Worldwide there is more and more interest in figuring out locally adapted responses to combining literacy and livelihood, each well-adapted to the learner and hopefully to both aspects of the program. But with these steps forward, we must also stop and reflect on the cost of producing small print-runs books for very specialized types of knowledge for a large population which nevertheless has basic literacy needs, as well as the cost of having more than one teacher in each classroom.

3.1.3 Cultural identity and indigenous knowledge

Learning is first and foremost about anchoring oneself in a social and cultural context. Learning never happens in a vacuum, but always in a social context which makes learning both important and possible.

Cultural input is often ignored in many education programs. Most programs see education as the teaching and learning of something new. However, learning to read and write needs to be integrated into a process of recognizing the value of one’s own culture. Too often programs are designed around the idea of “teaching” or “imparting” knowledge and skills. However, there are more and more examples of programs...
which focus on interior cultural knowledge as the basis of learning, recognizing prior knowledge, admitting that these must be valued in the world of education today.

In the experience of Associates in Research and Education for Development, an NGO publisher which publishes in Senegalese languages, individual book buyers come in looking for novels, poetry, local history, etc. They are looking for examples of reading as a mirror of themselves and for the pleasure of reading, not just as a way of learning new information. And when reading is a pleasure it is easier to develop fluent reading skills, which are crucial for reading for learning something new. As one researcher was told during her interviews with participants in literacy classes: “We must try to revitalize our culture, and literacy in our language is one instrument for reaching that goal.”  (Fagerberg-Diallo, 2001, p. 154)

### 3.1.4 Literacy as an embedded social practice

Thinking about how and why people become literate has shifted today to an awareness of the social reasons for adding this skill. Adults invest time and money to become literate, and their motivations are fundamental to the design and implementation of any literacy program. The following quotation eloquently expresses a break in the mold of how becoming literate has changed: “There are two paradigms of adult literacy. The traditional conception of adult literacy is derived from the linguistic perspective that views literacy as a technical process of acquiring reading and writing skills…. On the other hand, the socio-linguistic perspective sees adult literacy as embedded in a social context.”  (Mpfou and Youngman, 2001, p. 575)

This idea of being embedded in a social context has been a major force for change in literacy programs and practices in the past years. In general it is called “situated literacy” or “integrated literacy”, as presented below:

A social practice approach emphasizes the uses, meanings and values of reading, writing and numeracy in everyday activities, and the social relationships and institutions within which literacy is embedded. The social practice approach is drawn upon by the New Literacy Studies which has developed over the last 20 years.... This approach sees literacy, numeracy and language as part of social practices which are observable in ‘events’ or ‘moments’ and are patterned by social institutions and power relationships. This view encourages us to look beyond texts themselves to what people do with literacy and numeracy, with whom, where, and how. It demands that we make connections with the community in which learners lead their lives outside of the classroom; with notions of situated learning; between learning and institutional power; between spoken language, print and other media; between the literacies and numeracies of teachers and researchers. The focus shifts from deficit or lack, to the many different ways that people engage with literacy and maths, recognizing difference and diversity and challenging how these differences are valued within our society.  (Hamilton et al., 2006, pp. 17-18)

According to Brian Street, a researcher who insists on seeing literacy skills in a social context:

1. Literacy is more complex than current curriculum and assessment allows,
2. Curriculum and assessment that reduce literacy to a few simple and mechanistic skills fail to do justice to the richness and complexity of actual literacy practices in people’s lives,
3. If we want learners to develop and enhance the richness and complexity of literacy practices evident in society at large, then we need curriculum and assessment that are themselves rich and complex and based upon research into actual literacy practices,
4. In order to develop rich and complex curricula and assessment for literacy, we need models of literacy and of pedagogy that capture the richness and complexity of actual literacy practices,
5. In order to build upon the richness and complexity of learners’ prior knowledge, we need to treat ‘home background’ not as a deficit but as affecting deep levels of identity and epistemology, and thereby the stance that learners take with respect to the ‘new’ literacy
practices of the educational setting. (Street, 2005, p. 4)

New developments about curriculum development focus on learner needs and not a pre-established body of knowledge. This movement towards exploring the ways that education can be relevant is a fundamental part of how non-formal education develops programs in which literacy is embedded in a social and cultural context.

3.1.5 Learner centered programs

What does “learner centered” mean in real programs? Basically it is: “respect for the learner, dialogue, participatory approaches, active learning, cooperation and solidarity in the teaching-learning relationship.” (Torres, 2002 p. 63)

Alan Rogers urges that literacy programs be modeled after agricultural extension programs “which provides on-going direct and specific assistance to individuals and groups of farmers with their immediate tasks and needs.” (Rogers, 2005, pp. 256-7) It is crucial to point out that the learner is both an individual and a group, so the needs of both need to be reconciled. He suggests the model of having a “drop-in center” in support of, or in replacement of, formalized literacy classes.

The problem is how one can create a learning program which is individualized while at the same time providing scaffolding and developing opportunities for collaborative learning; which uses the immediate purposes (motivations) of each different adult learner; which builds on the individual experience of each literacy learner; which takes place at their own pace; and which also takes place in their own spaces rather than in a central location at a given time and in a group. (Rogers, 2005, p. 242)

The NGO Associates in Research and Education for Development has found the concept of a drop-in center to be a good model, where learners learn at their own pace, in small groups, and come in to meet with the teacher as they feel the need. This is especially effective when trying to reach “difficult to reach” learners. In the case of ARED, it often focuses on mobile herder groups who cannot come to class on a pre-established timetable. This approach requires true motivation on the part of the learners, since they have more responsibility for their own learning. But if they are motivated, the process of learning can be built around their needs.

The Family Basic Education project in Uganda also has a very creative and flexible approach to making their program responsive to learners. They speak in terms of competencies which are identified by the learners, the facilitators, and the program planners. In the words of Patrick Kiiry: “Competencies are a set of specific, predetermined...performance indicators that give evidence that what was stipulated to be learned has actually been learnt to at least that minimum level. So competencies illustrate what the learners can do.” Amongst the competencies in that program are: “communicate confidently, effectively and meaningfully in spoken or written language in a wide range of situations”, “use language skills to think, reason, access, and process information”, etc. (UNESCO UIL, 2006) These types of competencies interweave literacy skills with communication skills.

3.1.6 Family literacy programs

In 1983, Denny Taylor introduced the phrase “family literacy” to describe a set of social literacy practices (embedded practices) observed within the family context. In particular, Taylors’ research highlighted ways in which young children engage in reading and writing as they explore and imitate everyday social activities.

Since then, family literacy has been used as an umbrella term to describe a wide variety of literacy intervention programmes that include an inter-generational focus in their design and delivery....

In particular, the term family literacy has been used to describe a specific type of programme initiative, which attempts to break the inter-generational cycle of school failure and under-education by focusing on parents and children simultaneously, providing both adult basic skills training and early childhood education. These family literacy programmes emphasis that parents are their children’s first and most important teachers, and that they should be encouraged and supported in this role....
A family literacy programme based on this model typically aims to:

- Improve the skills and attitudes of educationally disadvantaged parents;
- Enhance the quality of parent-child relationships;
- Improve the developmental skills of young children;
- Foster better relations between home and school;
- Unite parents and children in a positive education experience.

(Clare, 2000, p. 10)

Encouraging several members and generations of a family to become active in literacy and learning is obviously a practice which can profoundly change education and literacy in Africa today. It means getting parents more active in their children’s learning, and also providing relevant materials to both groups for continued learning. It creates an innovative link between formal and non-formal education, as well as including social involvement by parents who become more responsible for their children’s education.

**Family Basic Education (FABE) in Uganda**

Another form of partnership that LABE (Literacy and Adult Basic Education) promoted was that between formal and non-formal education through its experimental Family Basic Education (FABE). FABE, being piloted in one district in Eastern Uganda, targets improved educational performance among both primary school children and their parents by promoting shared learning among the two groups. This is done through: sensitization of parents on their parental responsibilities in their children’s learning; training school teachers and adult instructors in children and adult teaching methods; producing learning materials for use in adult and children classes and organizing parent-share learning sessions.

The results have been: increased literacy skills among parents; increased visits to school by parents to discuss their children’s school progress; improved home and school learning environment and improved performance by the children. Through FABE, LABE has also built strong links with the government education authorities in the district.

(Okech, 2005, p. 9)

The results of this approach have the advantage of creating strong links between schools, non-formal education, and the community. However, one of the obvious problems to address is that of language. If children are learning in the official language, and parents aren’t fluent in that language, approaches need to be developed which support interaction with a formal education system while also providing language materials which can be shared by both generations.

**3.1.7 Difficult to reach groups**

With a top-down standardized educational system, there will always be groups who are difficult to reach, including:

- nomadic groups who can’t follow the (temporal) constrictions of a pre-designed program,
- people who live in remote areas, and therefore don’t have the possibility to participate in highly centralized programs,
- members of minority groups, who are often marginalized in community programs,
- adult men are often identified as a difficult to reach group, since they are often not willing to expose their lack of information or skills,
- those who have been infected with the HIV virus are often stigmatized, and have a hard time gaining access to educational systems,
- participants with physical handicaps, people who have been displaced by either natural or man-made disasters and thereby lose their access to an education,
- areas living with open conflicts are obviously not conducive to the creation and continuation of education, often locally recognized officials exclude themselves because of personal inhibitions, while they are a group who needs access to education most urgently today.

With so many individualized populations to reach, non-formal education is increasingly important; especially in those programs designed by NGOs which live close to both the problem and the population. Before the adoption of the
concept of Education For All, it would have been easier to exclude several of these groups simply because they are more difficult and more expensive to reach. But once we have ascribed to the EFA principle, we need to find a multitude of alternative systems, and non-formal education programs offer some of the most inexpensive and productive results.

3.1.8 Adult literacy classes as a “second-chance” program

An aspect of literacy programs that is not discussed enough is the fact that a large number of school drop-outs, who therefore have some level of literacy skills, decide to reinvest their time in adult literacy classes. In the study of Ugandan literacy participants in the Functional Adult Literacy governmental program, the evaluators discovered:

...a high percentage (73%) of people who had actually been to primary school. Half of these had attended five or more years and should have attained at least a usable command of reading, writing, and calculation. Their heavy presence among the programs’ graduates raises not only a question about the efficacy of primary schooling, but also the possibility that adult literacy programs may be missing their true target, the completely illiterate population.... The first conclusion then is that FAL (functional adult literacy) is serving more as a second-chance program for primary school leavers than as a literacy education program for people who never went to school. (Okech, 2001, p. 98)

Many programs deplore this, because it leads to mixed levels in the classroom. They are in search of the “...true target, the completely illiterate population”. In fact, this mixing of levels is the reality of the majority of literacy classes today, and as such it is an aspect to be explored and developed. If a formal education did not give results in the first trial, why not a “second-chance program” through non-formal literacy programs?

It is evident that a standardized top-down classroom has difficulty in incorporating many different levels in the classroom. But when non-formal programs use peer teaching techniques between learners, letting learners teach each other (even at home) rather than waiting for the teacher, this variety in levels can be an asset to any class. When program development takes this reality into consideration, it influences the way curricula are developed to meet potential in all of our classrooms.

3.1.9 Teaching of an official language

Many people who become literate in their first language, or at least in a language they speak, want to go on to learn the official language of their country, whether it be English, French, Arabic, Portuguese, Swahili, etc. The problem is that there are almost no programs which are designed to teach these languages as a second language. Most programs simply use the primer which was used with school children, as if the learner is just seeing the alphabet for the first time; and as if the content for children, adolescents and adults can remain the same.

An interesting example is teaching in Swahili, which in eastern Africa is assumed to be a language which everybody speaks, even if not as their first language. But according to Wedin: “Official curricula presumes pupil’s knowledge of Swahili as a first language and although nearly all pupils in the schools have Swahili as a second language, and teachers have no guidance in how to teach Swahili as a second language.” (Wedin, 2004, p. 160)

One interesting example of a planned teaching of French as a second language is that of the NGO Tin Tua in Burkina Faso. Literacy skills in a national language are the base, but in the second year French is added as an oral language. It is only with a firm basis of spoken French that the written script is added (oral communication, Benoit Ouba, UNESCO UIL, 2006).

The teaching of an official language as a second (or third or fourth) language has a long way to go. This is a major problem everywhere. Unfortunately, there are not many examples of innovations in this area. But it is important to point out this deficit in an article about pedagogical needs and developments. And this clearly falls into the realm of curriculum development.
3.2. Methodologies in the classroom

In a discussion of pedagogical innovations, it is necessary to see the entire picture, from policy to implementation. But clearly the most innovative experiences focus on methodologies in the classroom. There can be no clear line between curriculum and methodologies, because each depends on the other. But there are a few topics specific to methodologies which are worth reflecting on in more detail.

3.2.1 Participatory practices

The major innovation in most non-formal programs is valorization of participatory teaching and learning. This is a growing practice worldwide, especially in adult education programs. We have already spoken about learner-centered curricula, as well as the construction of knowledge between participants, and between participants and books. Participatory methodologies in the classroom are part of this process. However, what constitutes participation is a key question. Formal classrooms often claim to be participatory because teachers ask questions of the students. However, upon analysis the questions are usually “closed questions” guided by the teacher, with one right answer. Students reply to a “yes-or-no”, “green-or-red” question, with no possibility for further exploration or personal opinion. This is far from the concept of participatory learning which encourages open debate between participants, which encourages disagreement, and which encourages learners to define what they want to study.

One of the most recognized methods for participatory learning is a set of tools and questions known as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). It was initially developed so that outside researchers could quickly learn about community issues in a participatory style. Today it is being used by local communities so those members who have never been to school can participate in the debate around local issues.

Participatory Rural Appraisal tools

Used by a local community, these tools involve at least three steps. The first activity is formulating a generative question (what are the most important health issues in the community? where are the land tenure boundaries? etc.). This discussion evolves around a visualization which is done on the ground, which impacts the exchange in two ways. First, participants feel free to keep moving the objects around, since it is easy to change positions in the sand. And secondly, it is a moment of intense debate, as participants move towards consensus on the question. Secondly, once consensus is arrived at, the drawing on the ground is transferred to paper, which allows for the transfer of information over time and space. It is still a drawing, so it can be read by both literate and non-literate community members, but shared with a larger number of people. And finally, text can be created around the drawing. As such, it can be a literacy tool. But text also allows for written explanations of where people disagreed with the final representation. It can expand the memory of the event by giving reasons behind a decision, the nuances in interpretation. (Sonja Fagerberg-Diallo for ARED).

An exciting and significant addition to adult literacy provision is the REFLECT approach, introduced by ActionAid, a British-based international NGO. The architects of REFLECT explain that the approach seeks to build on the theoretical framework developed by the Brazilian Paulo Freire, but provides a practical methodology by drawing on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques. An important characteristic is that in REFLECT there is no textbook, no literacy primer, no pre-printed materials other than a guide for facilitators that is produced locally, preferably with the input of the facilitators themselves. The REFLECT Mother Manual states: “If most literacy programmes have failed then perhaps abolishing the primer may be one of the keys to success.” (Archer and Cottingham, 1996)

In 1995 the pilot phase of REFLECT was evaluated in the three countries where it was being tested: Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador. The findings were published in the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA) Education Paper, Number 17, 1996. The Paper concluded that REFLECT was more effective than the literacy approaches using primers. Some NGOs in Uganda plus the government program in some districts have adopted REFLECT.
The 1999 evaluation of literacy programs in Uganda did not find any significant difference in effectiveness between the REFLECT and the government approach in literacy levels (Carr-Hill, 2001). For this, we don’t know how this evaluation was carried out, and whether the REFLECT programs had input into the criteria being tested. Nevertheless, the great strength of REFLECT is that it offers a powerful tool for community participatory learning and action. It promotes participation and action together with learning, bringing individuals together to analyze and act as a group. As a method it is based on community participation, and gives practical information on how to use participatory practices in the field. It is once again an example of embedded literacy, where the “simple” skills of reading and writing are finding a reason for being in a larger social context.

3.2.2 Methods for teaching literacy skills

The major debate about how to teach reading and writing today is the argument between teaching phonics first or using whole language. Brian Street, who has studied literacy in South Africa, writes:

A critical factor regarding literacy acquisition in South Africa is the state of early literacy pedagogy, which, broadly speaking, has worked within a tradition which emphasizes repetition, recitation, and decoding at the expense of meaning-making. Educators have only recently begun to note the differences between the long-standing international debate between phonic-centred and whole-language literacy pedagogies. (Street, 2005, p. 27)

The use of phonics-based approaches — teaching the letters of the alphabet, one by one, building syllables in isolation — is still the predominant method in use in Africa today. But there are also more and more innovative programs which look into how literacy skills can be taught using the whole-language approach, which is a very encouraging development.

Phonics versus Whole Language

Those in the phonics advocacy camp emphasize that decodable text should predominate in initial reading materials with only limited access to ‘non-decodable’ text. It is seen as problematic for children to encounter words in reading materials for which the letter-sound correspondences have not been previously taught in an explicit and systematic way. (whereas the whole language approach) encourage students to use the totality of their concepts about print (including knowledge of phonics, contextual clues, and knowledge of the world) to engage with books and other texts that they are motivated to read. In short, the research suggests that decoding skills can be developed in two ways: 1) through direct instruction of these skills, and 2) through immersion in a literate environment that supports curiosity about and exploration of printed language. Instructionally, a combination of these two orientations, according to the needs of the individual students, appears to work better than a predominant focus on one end of the spectrum or the other. (Cummins, 2002, p. 115)

3.2.3 Text Based Pedagogical Approaches

One of the methods for promoting a balance between phonics, whole-word, and participatory practices is known as text based pedagogical approaches. This approach which is currently being used with success in experimental classes in Niger (UNESCO UIL, 2006) makes a clear distinction between the micro and macro levels of language. That is, literacy classes cannot only teach the smallest units (letters) of written language, but must also take the larger context (communication) into consideration. They encourage participants to see the use of both oral and written language as a way of accomplishing communication goals. To do this, participants are taught about the many ways that language can be used — to explain, to narrate, to debate, to inform, to make an argument, etc. It is only when language is studied and taught in such contexts that it is meaningful.

The text based pedagogical approach is a methodology which revolves around texts which are elaborated between both the facilitators and participants, especially around issues which
are important to the participants. As much as possible, learning takes place in an interdisciplinary context in order to develop the capacity to analyze and communicate clearly. In order to do this, four disciplines are taught: language skills, math skills, social sciences, and life sciences. Each class starts with a critical and participatory discussion which results in a text produced by the class.

Obviously this approach creates an active collaboration between the learner, the classroom, and the curriculum, which is a key to the innovations in non-formal education today.

3.2.4 Use of ICTS

In the words of Bill Gates: "Technology can help, but it always has to be technology that understands the difficult conditions. Are computers in developing countries going to change the educational system? In a lot of countries it's more: Are there classrooms, are there teachers, is there electricity. Taking new technologies and trying to impose them on developing countries — that's crazy."

(Time Magazine, February 12, 2007, p. 4)

The use of ICTs in African education is hotly debated today. Unfortunately, the discussion is often limited to computers and access to the internet. But in fact there are many technologies which can greatly help programs, teachers, and participants, including: tapes, radio, television, CDs, DVDs, even mobile phones.

Interactive Radio Instruction (IRI)

The UNESCO/UNICEF Gobi Desert Project in Mongolia used radio to deliver education to 15,000 nomadic women in literacy skills, livestock rearing techniques, family care, income generation and basic business skills. The radio program included visiting teachers and small information centers that serve as meeting places for learning groups. Telesecundaria, a secondary-level education television series in Mexico, served over 800,000 students during the 1997-98 school year. By 1990, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Republic of Sri Lanka, Thailand and Turkey had all used broadcast media to set up national open universities.

For example, interactive radio instruction (IRI) uses a methodology that requires learners to stop and react to questions and exercises through verbal response to radio characters and engages them in group work…. Short pauses are provided throughout the lessons, after questions and during exercises, to ensure that students have the time to think and respond adequately. Typically used in formal classroom settings, the program also encourages interaction between the teacher and learners as they work together on problems, activities, or experiments. Materials and activities in the classroom compensate for the limited ability that radio has to provide information in various forms and to give students feedback on their responses.

...English in Action, an IRI program for primary students in South Africa, served nearly 25,000 students in 1995. In the Republic of Guinea, IRI was used along with printed materials to help move the country’s educational system from one that focused on a lock-step curriculum, teacher-centered instruction, and rote memorization to one in which students interacted more with each other and with teachers, as a result of IRI activities. The IRI program would prompt teachers to pair students for certain activities, thus facilitating cooperative learning; they prompted teachers to call on girls as well as boys; and they posed questions directly to students that required higher-order thinking skills such as problem solving and analysis. (Wagner and Kozma, 2003, p. 35-36)

In an educational program which only allows from $12 to $60 per participant and usually doesn’t have a permanent infrastructure, many ICTs can initially be too expensive to think about. Also, one must weigh the benefits of investing in ICT equipment, training of ICT managers, and maintenance with the cost of investing in teacher training and books. However, these technologies can customize learning, make learning part of an interactive experience, make teaching available in parts of the world where teachers aren’t sufficient, and support distance learning.

They are also a vital part of the global world in which participants come into contact, so they need to be familiar with them. According
to many, learning to use these technologies is almost as important as learning to read and write: “Digital literacy is already acknowledged as a basic learning need for all.” (Torres, 2002, p. 94) The challenge is finding a viable, affordable, sustainable way of integrating them into the learning process.

4. The essential context to make these programs successful, including a literate environment, trained personnel, and appropriate evaluation

So far we have talked about the fundamental decisions and steps in creating a literacy program, and then some of the most promising changes taking place in the classroom. However, there are still three essential elements to look at if these programs are to be supported adequately, including the creation of a literate environment in general, the training and support to teachers and other personnel, and carrying out appropriate evaluations.

4.1. Creating a literate environment

Even though setting up literacy classes is crucial, it is equally important to make the effort to create a literate environment in which new literates find things to read. In the words of UNESCO: “A ‘literate society’ is more than a society with high literacy rates; rather, it is one in which important aspects of social life such as economics, law, science, and government are... what we may call ‘textual institutions’.” (UNESCO, 2005, pp.31-32)

Creating a literate environment requires printed materials for people to read (posters, books, brochures, newspapers, etc.), but it also requires a system of distribution for these materials (local libraries, book sellers who are close to their market, prices that people can afford, regular supply of books to literacy classes, etc.) In Uganda, the government program entitled FAL (functional adult literacy) found the following when they evaluated their programs:

Those who had passed the tests but were no longer reading, writing or calculating were asked why.... The major reason for not reading is simply that the participants do not have anything to read (in their own language), either because it is not available or because they cannot afford it. The major reasons for not calculating or writing are that the graduates simply do not feel they have acquired the skills to a level where they can use them with enough proficiency to make it worthwhile. (Okech et al., 2001, p. 85)

In the faire-faire programs of West Africa, there has always been a sizable budget line item for publishing books in African languages, and several hundred new titles have been printed with this financial support. This process also encouraged more people to write. The NGO Soore in Burkina Faso has found that publishing a monthly newspaper is one of the best ways to keep people reading. They have an interesting blend of stories, some being based on both national and international news; some being based on technical information including the latest information on health issues; and many being stories contributed by new literates about their communities. And programs such as text pedagogies and REFLECT create a literate environment by getting people to write themselves.

In a 300 hour literacy class, it is clear that participants can't become fluent readers. That is why it is crucial to develop a literate environment where the supply of materials is very diversified in type and topic.

4.1.1 Post-literacy materials

Most literacy projects soon feel the need to either go beyond teaching basic literacy skills, or to combine teaching content (“livelihood”) with literacy skills. In general these materials have been called post-literacy materials, and often are of a didactic nature. And it is crucial that the provision of post-literacy materials be planned for from the beginning. In fact, they may require more time to develop than the basic literacy materials since they often require specialized knowledge. Not planning for so-called “post-literacy” is a serious limit in numerous programs today.

However, in the experience of NGOs such as Soore and TinTua in Burkina Faso, as well as ARED in Senegal, they have found that new
readers appreciate fiction, reflections of their own environment, books that make the reader laugh and cry. Students in a classroom might read a didactic text as part of their program; but individual readers need to be able to solidify their reading skills with books which are a diversion. So the search for post-literacy materials should not only be for didactic texts, but also how to find and encourage new authors of fiction who know how to write for their audience.

4.1.2 Role of editors

To encourage such a literate environment, it is crucial to develop a publishing industry which is vibrant and responsive. However, publishing in African languages has many more problems than publishing in an official language. Just a few of the challenges include:

- creating character sets in national languages,
- typing in a language one doesn’t speak,
- standardizing orthographies,
- working with untrained authors,
- finding illustrators who know the cultural references,
- using non-professional translators,
- figuring out how to reach a market which is usually rural and poor, etc.

The InWent (Internationale Weiterbildung und Entwicklung) program to train editors in national languages

Fortunately there was a program to train editors in national languages in operation for six years in West Africa, including editors from Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Senegal, funded through the German Cooperation. It provides a very good starting point for any future work, especially since seven training guides were produced over the six years. While there are numerous organizations which provide trainings for editors, this program had a unique focus on the particular constraints and possibilities when working in African languages.

One interesting feature of this program was to bring together both commercial editors and NGO editors. That provided for a rich exchange. Commercial editors obviously had a much better understanding of the “editorial chain”, and how to program for the production of books. However, their investment in national language books was very limited because they didn’t master the two ends of the editorial chain — finding good authors and knowing the market. On the other hand, NGOs often produce low quality books because of a lack of experience and training. However, they can produce exclusively in national languages, they cultivate new local authors, and they have a distribution network through their projects or classes.

(Sonja Fagerberg-Diallo for InWent)

Today there is a growing group of editors who are confronting these issues — everyone from Alpha Editions in Niger to Heinemanns in Namibia. There is a pan-African organization known as APNET (African Publishers Network) which has attempted to improve the skills of local editors. The university of Cameroon offers courses to students in publishing, as does CAFED out of Tunisia. But these efforts need to be reinforced by government commitment to put local editors into a favorable environment for work, especially when they are working in African languages.

4.2. Recruiting and training literacy personnel

Often literacy teachers are volunteers, or very poorly paid. And of course they are under-trained, while in fact literacy training in a national language requires considerable knowledge of the language, preparation for teaching adults, trainings to be not only literacy teachers but also managers of literacy centers, training to teach topics of social importance (such as talking about birth control, nutrition, sanitation, HIV/AIDS, etc).

Local literacy personnel often prove to be very effective teachers, even given minimal skills. At the LitCam event of the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2006, a literacy teacher who was invited to tell her story had effectively taught literacy classes for seven years before she received her first book! As Pandian and Raman have written: “Studies too, have also shown that effective teachers of literacy did not appear to have particularly high levels of knowledge of language structure and terminology.”

(Pandian and Raman, 2001, p. 132)
The paradox is to continue to push for better resources, more training, recognition for work well done; while at the same time validating a core of teachers who do remarkable jobs with very little back-up.

4.2.1 Educational levels of literacy teachers

This is the fascinating paradox about literacy teachers in the field today. No one disputes their need for more training, including themselves — but they can also be very effective with very little. This is a ray of hope in the world of literacy.

The Projet d’Autopromotion des Pasteurs dans le Ferlo (PAPF)

In the mid-90’s, a GTZ (German Cooperation) project which included local language literacy was started in a remote rural area of northern Senegal. To make matters more difficult, the work was with mobile herders who were constantly on the move. The concept was to train literacy teachers who came from the local community. Initially 79 people, most only literate in the local language, were trained in two trainings of two weeks each. The first training was to improve their own capacity to read, write, and do calculations. The second was to train them in how to teach. Of that group, 47 went on to become local literacy teachers for a group of 1341 participants (of which 53% were women). In an evaluation after 300 hours of class, the success rate as defined by the project was between 50% and 60%. Obviously everyone still had work to do to develop and maintain the skill. But it was clear to everyone that these local literacy teachers could do a “good enough” job. (Rapport d’évaluation du programme PAPF, 2000)

4.2.2 Training facilitators rather than teachers

Both children and adults learn by trying, doing, making mistakes, and then moving on to draw conclusions and reinvest their new knowledge in the real world. But it is fundamental that this type of supportive educational system be provided to adults in non-formal education programs. Otherwise, they will simply leave.

So within non-formal programs we have the opportunity to both develop new approaches, such as that of REFLECT, and to train teachers who know how to work with this type of approach. In the PAPF evaluation, almost every participant interviewed commented that their teacher had never humiliated them. That this comment came from so many people is significant, in that it shows how little these adult learners expected from teachers; and more importantly that even a short (four week) training process which consciously taught principles of adult participatory teaching, and demonstrated it, had an impact on teaching styles.

Every program we looked into made specific reference to either andragogy, teaching adults, training facilitators rather than teachers, etc. which is a very positive step in the development of more responsive educational systems. This focus on the difference between facilitating and teaching is essential to the current movement to worldwide to create and sustain relevant non-formal programs.

4.3. Monitoring and evaluation

Every program in place today has to confront the concept of validating the work done by the participants. Measuring aptitudes can be used for:

- measuring increments in each learner’s reading and writing ability,
- enabling learners to measure their own accomplishments,
- deciding when to transfer the learner from one level to the next.

However, validation can be a process of using a predetermined, standardized test; or it can show the progress and capacities of each learner. It can be determined by an outside source, or the learner can be active in his or her own evaluation process.

In light of what has been said about embedded literacy and participatory teaching, many non-formal programs do not use a standardized test which is imposed at the end of a program. Rather, they try to find more creative ways to get learners involved in a process of self-evaluation. And the focus is on getting feedback
from evaluations in order to improve the overall program, not as a sanction for or against individual participants. The objective is not only to monitor, but also to mentor both programs and participants.

The Skills for Life program in Great Britain

Today the word ‘curriculum’ invariably has prescriptive connotations, meeting awarding body standards or national requirements. The national curriculum in Skills for Life has been praised for providing a framework, or criticized for being too narrow, linked to school standards of achievement….

In 1989, ALBSU, together with the BBC, began the Basic Skills Accreditation Initiative, and included consultations before defining the format of the qualification that was to become Wordpower and Numberpower…. Interestingly, the rationale for Wordpower and Numberpower can be contrasted directly with the current framework. ‘We wanted something that was continuous accreditation and not a test. We wanted something at a number of levels so that people could take it and we wanted it to be broadly user friendly.’ (Hamilton et al., 2006, p. 120-31)

One of the points to be very aware of in talking about evaluation is whether one is evaluating:
- a skill level,
- the acquisition of new knowledge,
- changes in behavior.

Many donors want to see changes in behavior, not just newly acquired skills and knowledge, and this is a challenge for all non-formal programs. We all know the importance of anti-smoking campaigns, but this doesn’t necessarily change individual behavior. New information alone isn’t enough to change behaviors around complex social issues such as sexuality, eating habits, investing limited resources in improved hygiene, etc. But it is a crucial component to be put into a participatory, creative process of integrating the known and the new.

4.3.1 Iterative, participatory evaluations

The concept of “continuous accreditation” is key to the way many programs operate. For example, many programs keep track of progress through a portfolio, rather than depending on a final exam for assessment. In a professional training project including literacy initiated by the NGO Paul Guerin Lajoie in northern Senegal, a list of skills to acquire are given to these adolescent students who learn by working in local establishments. The students contact their teachers when they think they have learned the required skill, and at that point teachers access their work. This way, each student can move at his or her own pace, faster or slower, rather than being subjected to a standardized text at the end of an arbitrary period of time. And more importantly, each student becomes responsible for his or her own learning.

Furthermore, programs often find a way to conduct evaluations frequently so that they are not threatening to learners. These evaluations become a diagnostic tool rather than a means for sanctioning.

4.3.2 National Qualification Frameworks

In spite of a general move towards more flexible types of evaluations, there is still a need in some programs, and for some participants, to arrive at a level of standardization which can be measured by national tests. This is particularly evident in Southern and Eastern Africa, where adult education can potentially lead to an equivalency diploma at any age, and can be presented to potential employers.

The NLPN (National Literacy Programme in Namibia), which was initiated in 1993, offers a programme of all together seven years of learning. The majority of learners, however, enroll in Stages 1-4…. Stages 1 and 2 are devoted to mother tongue literacy offering instruction in 11 different languages. In Stages 3 and 6, English is introduced as the language of instruction. Following these, Stages 4-6 comprise the Adult Upper Primary Education (AUPE) programme. Those graduating from AUPE will have reached a level of qualification equivalent to a primary school-leaving certificate. (Papen, 2007, p. 37)

As the above quotation demonstrates, these programs use the mother tongue only in the first year(s), then switch to the official lan-
guage. This has obvious advantages for those who are able to invest the amount of time necessary in an alternative-to-school program which is modeled on the program of primary school. It provides a recognized diploma; and there is hope that these diplomas or certificates can eventually be recognized across borders for employment purposes.

The National Qualifications Framework in South Africa “…seeks to enable quality control, but within a process which:

- involves all stakeholders,
- facilitates Open and Life-long Learning,
- effectively recognizes prior learning,
- ensures horizontal portability and vertical articulation by:
  - being structures in a modular fashion,
  - within a single national matrix on which all qualifications must be placed, which are
- outcomes based and criterion referenced.” (Williams, 1996)

This process in South, and southern, Africa is one of the most elaborate on the continent searching for ways to open up the educational offer to previously excluded adults.

The Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) Program in South Africa

Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) is available to adults who want to finish their basic education. An outcomes-based programme, ABET aims to provide basic learning tools, knowledge and skills, and provides participants with nationally recognised qualifications. The four levels of ABET training are equivalent to Grades R to 9.

ABET includes training in:

- Language, literacy and communication,
- Mathematical literacy, mathematics and mathematical sciences,
- Natural science,
- Arts and culture,
- Life orientation
- Technology
- Human and social science,
- Economic and management science.

Learners can also choose to take courses in:

- Small, medium and micro enterprises,
- Tourism
- Agricultural science
- Ancillary health care.
(www.capecateway.gov.za)

Nevertheless, there is still a heated debate over the value of such a highly standardized and formalized system, some saying that this system is slowing the development of adult education because it compares it too closely to the formal school system. These initiatives side-step the question of whether the content of this educational system is best adapted to participant needs, rather than simply being adapted to the demands of a standardized educational system which only values a limited kind of knowledge. In her research in Namibia, Papen researched so-called literacy classes which were based on learning English. But in her opinion, the ultimate objective was to teach minimal skills, not to become fluent in reading and writing and communicating in the language. She writes: “This is exactly the kind of ‘literacy practice’ that I fight against. Trying to learn enough English to do menial … tasks by filling out work orders. Is this ‘literacy’ or just ‘label recognition’? It focuses entirely on the power relationships which English creates, not on capacity building for people.” (Papen, 2007, p. 27)

The active debate over qualifying standards is one which is very heated in the non-formal community today. Some reject it because it takes away from the learner-centered approach of many non-formal programs. Others find it to be an interesting bridge between formal and non-formation education; between education and certification for the work world. As such, it is a debate which will continue.

5. Facing the future, given current trends

In the past years, the thinking about literacy has transcended the desire to simply eradicate illiteracy. Rather, programs seek to create a literate environment based on the principle of life-long learning and the creation of learning
societies. More and more programs integrate livelihood skills with the learning of literacy skills. Indian educator S. Mohanty makes a crucial comment about the concept of lifelong learning. He writes:

...lifelong learning is not the same as recurrent education within the framework of the formal educational system; lifelong learning is interdisciplinary, it overlaps the borders of different policy sectors. From a state perspective the battery of tools available is expanded; there are a number of alternative ways of investing in and creating conditions for education and learning. Educational policy, labour market policy, industrial policy, regional policy, and social policy, all have a common responsibility. (Mohanty, 2007, p.144)

This is a crucial summary about innovations in non-formal education today. Being learner-centered, it involves all members of the society (from learners to surrounding infrastructures) to look for creative and pertinent ways to meet both individual and societal goals. The skill of literacy is embedded into this much larger concept of learning.

However, for these goals to be met, at least six aspects of lifelong learning must be promoted.

First, funding is crucial for these programs, and should come from government sources as well as from NGOs, donors, and even perhaps participants. A much, much bigger effort needs to be directed towards the vast majority of the population who need the flexibility and responsiveness of decentralized non-formal education programs (which are a crucial aspect to promoting the habits and skills needed for lifelong learning).

Second, African languages need to play a crucial role in education on the continent. But for African languages to be used effectively, these languages need to be developed to play new and constantly evolving roles in education. This goes from university linguistic studies, to encouraging new authors, to helping editors more fully play their role, to developing new vocabulary, to getting African language character sets on the Internet, etc.

Third, teachers need to be adequately trained. This means considering both the content and the length of their training; and it needs to go on during in-service and recurrent trainings. These teachers need especially to learn participatory methods, and to philosophically shift the focus from “teaching” to “learning”.

Four, books and other support materials need to be available, well-written, attractive, affordable. This especially applies to African languages which very often suffer from a lack of print materials, and which need special support in order to develop a written form of each language. The problem of distributing these materials is also a crucial challenge.

Five, education should grow out of the culture and values of the community. This means creating spaces where people can share what they already know, as well as learning what is new to them. This is a “construction of knowledge” which joins the known and the new in a dynamic way which is rarely used in the transfer of skills and information which dominates formal education.

And six, a system of certification needs to become operational, not so that students can pass into the formal school system, but so that adult learners can demonstrate the value of what they have learned in their search for a decent living.

The recommendations of this article are not about “what to do”, since there are no single or easy answers. This would be in contradiction to the entire article which focuses on diversity and learners, not on what to teach. Rather, we recommend the creation of “spaces” for sharing: between the methodologies of specific programs, between programs and policy, between learners and providers, between editors and readers, between funders and participants, etc. The list can go on. The flexibility of decentralized non-formal programs is uniquely adapted to the needs of learners who cannot spend hours each day over several years in a classroom, and governments which cannot afford a population which is both immobilized and subsidized in formal institutions which do not give good results. The innovations in non-formal education and literacy learning are a pillar in the development of an educated society in Africa.
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