Literacy and Development: Ethnographic Perspectives

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Abstract for Presentation by Brian Street

_Literacy as Social Practice; implications for international policy_

In international policy, adult literacy has remained low on the development agenda, even though data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) show that 757 million adults and 115 million youths still ‘lack basic reading and writing skills’ and millions of children are dropping out of school with insufficient reading skills’ (UNESCO, 2015b). And where literacy has been addressed, mostly for children and schooling, ‘literacy experts’ and planners have made prior assumptions about the needs and desires of beneficiaries that link with these statistical surveys based on ‘skills’ and ‘effectiveness’, themselves measured through statistics of skill outcomes, attendance etc., Ulrike Henimann from UIL, Hamburg, whose particular research interest is on recent developments in conceptualising literacy from a lifelong learning perspective, has recently pointed out some shift in Unesco policy: ‘Innovative approaches to literacy and adult learning are being analysed, promoted and disseminated through publications and UIL’s online Effective Literacy & Numeracy Database’ (http://www.unesco.org/UIL/litbase/). I can call upon these recent publications to update us on the debates in the field.

In this presentation for the Ramphal Institute, I mainly focus on literacy and ethnography and their implications for policy. The ethnographic approach links to recent theoretical approaches to literacy (see note below) in general that, I argue, are very relevant to the discussion about development programmes. From this perspective, literacy is defined not just as a set of uniform ‘technical skills’ to be imparted to those lacking them – what I have termed the ‘autonomous’ model (Street, 1984) - but rather that there are multiple literacies in communities and that literacy practices are socially embedded (Street, 1993, 1995; Heath, 1983, Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1999). I will also call on the work of a number of ethnographers of literacy projects (see footnote below). The ‘academic’ research emerging from this new field of interest is thus of considerable practical significance, with implications for literacy programmes in particular and development programmes more generally. This presentation is given in that spirit of engagement between theory and practice, academic and applied concerns. It aims to make a contribution across the divide, in clarifying conceptual issues and enhancing knowledge on the one hand and in aiding policy making and programme building on the other.
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Headings: Introduction; Literacy as Social Practice; Unesco etc Policy Statements; SDGs etc; UK organisations eg Uppingham Seminar 2016 ‘Adult Learning And The Sustainable Development Goals’; eg BALID; Conclusions; plus Footnotes including ‘Other conferences on this theme’ and ‘forthcoming publications’

Introduction

A number of literacy projects in recent years have taken forward a more social view of literacy and of learning than has been evident in the dominant policy perspectives, stressing that before launching into literacy programs and interventions it is necessary to understand the literacy practices that target groups and communities are already engaged in (Freebody, 1994; Prinsloo and Baynha, 2013; Yates, 1994). Researchers trained in field work methods and sensitised to ways of discovering and observing literacy practices on the ground have conducted studies into these everyday practices and their relationship to the programmes designed to alter them. Their findings are now being included from the earliest stage in projects (Yates, 1994; Prinsloo and Breier, 1996) and fed into the campaign design and development. Similarly, Alan Rogers, (who is organising an Uppingham Seminar ‘Entitled Adult Learning And The Sustainable Development Goals’ from 7-9th April this Year) – see below), has also written extensively on this issue. In a recent paper for the Unesco Journal Prospects, for instance, he writes: whilst ‘there is an individual cognitive component to learning (see Abadzi in the same Prospects volume) … there is also a social element, the learning process … always takes place in ‘situated activities. ’Without the social interaction, the cognitive would not take place; and the form that the cognitive process takes is shaped by the ‘situated activity’ of which it is a part’. This work, then, emphasises ‘the social dimension of learning to read’, a theme I will develop here in relation to the ethnographic perspective.

"In recent years there has been growing awareness of the value of qualitative, ethnographic approaches to educational research and the contributions it can make to development planning. Ethnographic research can be utilised at all stages of the project cycle, from project identification
to project appraisal and can help to complement more positivist statistical surveys by revealing the cultural and social dimensions which may positively or adversely affect how a project is taken up” (Yates, 1993)

I will also call on ethnographic approach which is concerned with attempting to understand ‘what actually happens’. The findings of the ethnographic approach may lead to different ‘measurement’ and claims for ‘outcomes’ and to different curriculum and pedagogy than in many traditional programmes.

**Literacy as Social Practice**

I will briefly outline some of the recent theoretical issues that, I argue, are significant for our engagement with the current Policy proposals, as in the SDGs. In particular, I would like to suggest some theoretical and research perspectives from the field of Literacy as Social Practice (LSP). In an introduction to a forthcoming UNESCO Journal, ‘Prospects’, that addresses these issues (Street, 2016), I examine the challenge that authors put forward to the dominant perspective evident in the approach of many Agencies, which we might characterise as a ‘skills’ approach. The policy assumption on ‘skills’ is that the ‘low levels of literacy’ found in many countries are the result of children not being sufficiently brought into schooling; and the educational perspective is that these children should be exposed to fairly standard teaching and learning regarding reading (and writing). This perspective tends to ignore the role of adults, focusing on schooling and children at the expense of the wider social context, and of ‘family literacy’.

The alternative perspective shifts the focus from schools and from children and instead sees the importance of linking adults and children in a number of different institutional contexts. This does not simply focus on ‘adult literacy’ or on ‘schooled literacy’, as many studies do. Instead this approach works across the boundaries, the age groups and the institutions from a ‘social’ perspective that sees reading and writing as always embedded in social contexts whose meanings may vary rather than being uniform, as they do in the ‘skills’ approach.

Such an approach draws upon the concept of ‘Literacy as Social Practice – LSP’ (cf Street, 1995) which refers to the nature of literacy as social practice, and upon the plurality of literacies that leads to quite new ways of understanding and defining what counts as literacy and has profound implications for how we learn and teach reading and writing. I would like to discuss, in this context, as colleagues from different parts of the world and from different fields meet in this seminar, the ‘implications of the ‘social’ perspective for how we conceptualise
literacy and, in educational contexts how we learn and teach reading and writing. If literacy is a social practice, then it varies with social context and is not the same, uniform thing in each case and this has implications also for Policy, of the kind we see in current national approaches and also such international perspectives as those expressed in the SDGs. Whereas the UK National Literacy Strategy, for instance, sees ‘the basics’ as the key focus for literacy education, involving surface features of language and literacy, such as rules of grammar in the traditional sense and rules for phoneme/grapheme relations, the LSP approach, on the other hand, shifts from such narrow views to the larger social and ideological context. By addressing these conceptual issues, I hope to engage practitioners, researchers and policy makers in reflexive debate about these issues and I look forward to continuing the conversation in this seminar.

That literacy is a social practice is an insight both banal and profound. It is banal, in the sense that once we think about it, it is obvious that literacy is always practised in social contexts; even the school, however ‘artificial’ it may be accused of being in its reading and writing teaching methods, is also a social construction. The site of learning (whether at school or within adult literacy programmes) has, like other contexts, its own social beliefs and behaviours into which its particular literacy practices are inserted. The notion that literacy is ‘social’, is also profound in that it leads to new ways of understanding and defining what counts as literacy, and has important implications for how we learn and teach reading and writing. If literacy is a social practice and it varies with social context then what is being learned is not the same, uniform concept in each case.

The view that literacy in itself has consequences irrespective of (‘autonomous of’) context has tended to dominate educational thinking, a view I have described as an ‘autonomous’ model of literacy (Street, 1984). In contrast with this view, I have posed an ‘ideological’ model of literacy, which argues that literacy not only varies with social context and with cultural norms and discourses (regarding, for instance, identity, gender and belief), - what might be termed a ‘social’ model - but that its uses and meanings are always embedded in relations of power – which is why I use the term ‘ideological’. It is in this sense, I suggest, that literacy can be seen as ‘ideological’ – it always involves contests over meanings, definitions and boundaries, and struggles for control of the literacy agenda. For these reasons, it becomes harder to justify teaching only one particular form of literacy, whether in schools or in adult programmes, when the learners will already have been exposed to a variety of everyday literacy practices (Street, 2016). If literacy is seen simply as a universal technical skill, the same everywhere, then the particular form being taught in educational contexts where often schooled literacy comes to be treated as the only kind, becomes the universal standard that naturalises its socially specific features and disguises their real history and ideological justifications and practices. If literacy
is seen as a social practice, then that history and those features and justifications need to be spelled out, and students need to be able to discuss the basis for the choices being made in the kind of literacy they are learning.

The ideological model of literacy, then, offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being. It is also always embedded in social practices, such as those of a particular job market or a particular educational context and the effects of learning that particular literacy will be dependent on those particular contexts. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always “ideological”, in that they are always rooted in a particular world-view and in a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others (Gee, 1991; Besnier & Street, 1994). The argument about social literacies (Street, 1995) recognizes that the ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially the new learners and their position in relations of power. It is not valid to suggest that “literacy” can be “given” neutrally and then its “social” effects only experienced afterwards. I argue that many of the policy statements about literacy that we see in the public domain fail to take account of the social practices embedded in different contexts for learning and using literacy.

How, then, can we know about such ‘social practices’. I would argue that an ethnographic perspective can be helpful in addressing the local uses and meanings of literacy - what people are actually doing with reading and or writing in specific social contexts. Rather than appealing to large statistical data sources where the methodological validity rests on what Mitchell (1984) terms ‘enumerative induction’ based in representative sampling, an ethnographic perspective is founded on ‘analytic induction’. Instead of looking for a “representative” sample, the ethnographer instead looks to another kind of inference involved when analytical statements are made. What the anthropologist using a case study to support an argument does is to ask how general principles deriving from some theoretical orientation manifest themselves in some given set of particular circumstances. A good case study, therefore, enables the analyst to establish theoretically valid connections between events and phenomena which previously were ineluctable. From this point of view, the search for a “typical” case for analytical exposition is 'likely to be less fruitful than a telling' case’ (Mitchell, 1984, p. 240). Green and Bloome (1997) and others have pointed out that such a perspective need not be restricted to anthropologists – in fact an ethnographic perspective is already evident in the work of many educationalists, linguists and social commentators. Such Ethnographic accounts of literacy, then, can in Mitchell’s terms, provide
'telling cases' of what literacy means to different populations of users, focusing on the cultural and institutional locations of such meaning using analytic induction and avoiding the ethnocentrism involved in narrow, dominant approaches.

Research in the field of Literacy as Social Practice (LSP) (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Pahl and Rowsell, 2006; Street, 1994; 2005) – a term that has to some extent replaced what was earlier referred to as ‘New Literacy Studies’ (Gee, 1990) - has, indeed, addressed issues of how literacy is learned in many different contexts, of which school is only one. By engaging in reading and/or writing in contexts such as in communities and in workplaces, learners come to terms with a variety of issues that they are not necessarily conscious of learning explicitly. Alan Rogers (forthcoming), as we cite below, writes ‘The current interest in 'lifelong learning' has directed attention to 'informal learning' - the learning that takes place throughout life outside of formal and non-formal educational and training programmes.’ These are terms that we may have to learn and develop in order to elaborate on the social practice perspective and its implications for 'learning'.

I will now signal some of the Policy statements on education and literacy and then cite some of the critiques, from a social perspective, that colleagues have made, before following through further the implications of these debates for learning literacy.

**Unesco etc Policy Statements; MDGs/ SDGs etc**

*The Education for All (EFA) Goals: 2000-2015*

In September 2000 the largest ever gathering of heads of state ushered in the new millennium by adopting the UN Millennium Declaration. The declaration, endorsed by 189 countries, was then translated into a roadmap setting out goals to be reached by 2015: ‘The eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) form a blueprint agreed to by all the world’s countries and all the world’s leading development institutions. The MDGs were designed to combat the world’s leading concerns in development by eliminating poverty, hunger, disease and more through eight defined goals by the year 2015. The first goal, perhaps the quintessential goal of the MDGs, is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger’.

According to Unesco media statements ‘The MDGs have galvanized unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world’s poorest. Over halfway to a 2015 deadline, there has been clear progress towards implementing the
Millennium Development Goals. But their overall success is still far from assured and will depend to a large extent on whether developed countries make good on their aid commitments’. A more concessionary statement recently said: ‘Over the last 15 years, much progress has been made towards achieving the Education for All Goals but despite this, they were not reached by the 2015 deadline’. And so the countries met again to set up the SDGs …

**Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2015-30**

In September 2015, at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in New York, Member States formally adopted the SDGs. The agenda contains 17 goals including a new global education goal (SDG 4). ‘SDG 4 is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ and has seven targets and three means of implementation. This goal came about through an intensive consultative process led by Member-States, but with broad participation from civil society, teachers, unions, bilateral agencies, regional organisations, the private sector and research institutes and foundations’. I will mainly focus here on SDG4 as it signals the educational and literacy issues that we are concerned with

**What are the targets for SDG 4?**

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

- **4.1** By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes
- **4.2** By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education
- **4.3** By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university
- **4.4** By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship
- **4.5** By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations
- **4.6** By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy
- **4.7** By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through
education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development

• **4.a** Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all

• **4.b** By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries

• **4.c** By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States

Accompanying the Sustainable Development Framework is the Incheon declaration, ‘Equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030: Transforming lives through education’ adopted by around 1600 participants the World Education Forum 2015 held in Incheon, Republic of Korea in May 2015. ‘The Declaration represents the firm commitment of countries and the global education community to a single, renewed education agenda…. On this historic occasion, we reaffirm the vision of the worldwide movement for Education for All initiated in Jomtien in 1990 and reiterated in Dakar in 2000 — the most important commitment to education in recent decades and which has helped drive significant progress in education. We also reaffirm the vision and political will reflected in numerous international and regional human rights treaties that stipulate the right to education and its interrelation with other human rights. We acknowledge the efforts made; however, we recognize with great concern that we are far from having reached education for all’.

The declaration outlines how to translate global commitments into practice at a country, regional and global level. ‘Building on the legacy of Jomtien and Dakar, this Incheon Declaration is an historic commitment by all of us to transform lives through a new vision for education, with bold and innovative actions, to reach our ambitious goal by 2030’.
UK Organisations on Literacy

There have been numerous conferences and meetings in the UK following up these Unesco statements, and here I will signal some of these, focussing in particular on the addition of literacy and education policy to the Development Goals, in SDG4. I will signal UK based organisations working in the literacy field: Uppsem. BALID, LETTER, UKLA, BAICE, UKFIET, RCS and I will provide some detail on the discussions held in Uppsem and BALID.

Uppingham Seminar April 2016: ‘Adult Learning And The Sustainable Development Goals’

The question posed by the Uppingham seminar seminar was ‘Why have adults been marginalised in the past and what needs to be done to bring adults more clearly into the mainstream?’, an issue that runs through this presentation and is crucial, I believe, to the Ramphal debate. Alan Rogers, a well-known literacy in development researcher and practitioner, notes a) the relative absence of adult learning from the implementation of the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), b) the almost complete absence of adults from the discussions leading up to the formulation of SDG 4; and c) the current prioritising of children in the discussions on the implementation of SDG 4. He does note some change, such as ‘the inclusion of some adult learning targets explicitly or implicitly’ and he also notes that ‘since 1990 the concept of lifelong learning/education (LLL/E) has become more common in educational policy contexts in developing countries, for instance “The new Sustainable Development Goals confirm the importance of ensuring life-long learning opportunities for all” (IIEP News 14 January 2016)’. This leads him to ask whether the conceptualisation of lifelong learning/education (LLL/E) as embracing both SDG 4 and the other learning targets would help to ensure a greater provision for adults?’ The questions this leads to, which I think we might also address in this conference, were ‘How can we avoid this discourse being rhetorical? Can such a LLL/E agenda which covers both SDG 4 and the other learning targets be operationalised and its learning outcomes measured?’

There were a number of comments on this background paper which I will summarise briefly here as they capture some of the important points for discussion. Dr Ian Cheffy: (29.02.16) comments that he agrees with Alan Rogers that ‘the learning needs of adults have received relatively little attention in the last 15 years’ and he offers an explanation from a psychological perspective: ‘Somehow I think that human survival instincts enter into this! Adults, especially parents, prioritise children since they are the “hope for the future”. Parents want their children to have better opportunities than they had – and this spills over into public policy. Unfortunately it’s hard to change human survival instincts! ‘
He does, however, also offer a more ‘social’ explanation, namely ‘the desire of the international community to focus on a limited range of specific development goals concerning many aspects of development and not education alone, as seen in the MDGs’. However, he does take some encouragement from the new SDGs in that they do not reduce the focus on education to simply one of primary schooling but are concerned now with education at all levels – lifelong learning – a point that as we will see below Anna Robinson-Pant also recognises. So, he states, ‘the thinking about education for all ages which was a feature of the 2000 Dakar Education for All agenda has now been integrated (with updating) into the SDGs themselves’. He concludes on a relatively positive note, that others as we will see, also adopt, namely: ‘This at least opens up opportunities for international development efforts to pay attention to the needs of adults without in any way stepping outside what are now set up as the priorities’. For instance, he assumes that ‘the Education 2030 Framework for Action document which was formally adopted at UNESCO in November will not be overlooked’. This Unesco statement amplifies the ten targets within SDG4 and gives a good deal of recognition to the needs of adults and, as Rogers and others also note, ‘an emphasis on lifelong learning – for children youth and adults. It indicates that within the lifelong learning framework, “special measures are needed to address the needs of adult learners” particularly as concerns relevant skills for employment (TVET) and basic education’.

There is, then, an important balance to be established here, between focussing on the role of adults in relation to the schooling of children on the one hand but also ‘the need to recognise the contribution which adult literacy makes to children’s schooling even if it concentrates simply on parents learning to read and write’. So, he concludes in a way that perhaps helps the Conference agenda: ‘It seems that we simply have to find a way to rise to the challenge of showing the human capital benefits of adult education, if only because this is demanded by the environment in which we are having to operate at the moment’. And ‘we should certainly explore how the concept of Lifelong Learning/ education (LLL/E) connects with adult education. Adopting that concept might free adult education from some of the connotations which have led to its marginalisation … and show how much adult education is taking place already (including workplace learning) and put that under the overarching concept of LLL/E.

Dr Ehsanur Rahman, Dhaka Ahsania Mission (07 03 2016) picks up ‘The point indicating the ‘relationship of SDG 4 and these other learning targets’ and suggests that it ‘would probably need to be more thrashed out … around the questions - Whether ‘extension’ is ‘education’? What are the roles difference between ’educationists’ and ’extension agents’?” he also points out that ‘the paper does not touch upon the factors and accountability of the adult educators in ‘failing’ to demonstrate enough flexibility in adult learning programmes,
packaging adult learning encompassing diverse learning needs of adults and
developing operational partnership with other sector development actors’. So,
she argues strongly, ‘This is high time to be go for a kind of self-critic exercise
around this issue.’

Another contributor to the Uppsem discussion, Mari Yasunaga follows
through the ways in which ‘Planning for the implementation of SDGs ...
dresses a critical issue of interpretation of SDG4 and its translation into
action’. Again we can note the sheer range and complexity of the documents
already being produced on this theme, to which the current seminar can also
contribute. Like Alan Rogers and others cited here, she asks, ‘Why is adult
education neglected?’ And she offers further explanations: ‘some funding is in
fact made available beyond formal adult education contexts for instance to
communities, NGOs, the private sector and donors involved in grass-root level
activities, workplace education etc, about which a state and/or non-state actors
may not have a complete picture’. So an important issue here might be to follow
through the funding streams and recognise that some support is being given at
‘adult’ level even if it is not named as that. Another theme worth highlighting is,
she claims, the importance of ‘Making learning outcomes and benefits of adult
education/literacy more visible:’. Some of the recent international reports do, in
fact, show that ‘an evidence base regarding the multiple benefits of ‘education’ is
expanding (e.g. “Sustainable development post-2015 begins with education”
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002305/230508e.pdf). But as many
authors cited here also note, ‘the equivalent of that for adult literacy, for
instance, is still relatively limited.’ This, she suggests, ‘may be due in part to
complex variables which may need to be counted in connecting adult literacy and
its impacts on people’s income, livelihoods, health, environment protection, as
well as the principles of family literacy, that avoid separating adults and children
as Rogers explains ‘. And for this we may need to take into account other factors
for advancing adult education. So, whilst the dominant policy perspective, as in
the SDGs, may be a general notion of “universality” in fact we may need to give
more attention to recurrent education, or adult learning and education (ALE).

Another response in the UppSem discussion is that by Professor Anna
Robinson-Pant, Unesco Professor of Education at UEA, whose work in these
positions leads her to explore the policy documents more closely and again she
advises us go question an explore more deeply some of the language used to
describe what is going on in these contexts. She does, also, note some of the
changes in such policy documents. For instance, ‘there are repeated statements
in the 2030 Framework for Action where there is a strong emphasis on gender
equality and empowerment of women and girls as cross-cutting the three
dimensions of sustainable development – for instance one heading states ‘A
world in which every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality and all legal,
social and economic barriers to their empowerment have been removed’ (see also a forthcoming seminar on this theme Gender and the Sustainable Development Goals: Are the SDGs Good News for Women? UNRISD Seminar on 6 April). The commitment (at least rhetorically...) to gender equality and women’s empowerment in the 2030 agenda presents, she suggests, an important opportunity to look at what assumptions about learning and education could contribute to these aims. And here she draws on Alan Roger’s distinction between informal learning and education to explore what kind of adult learning/lifelong education might support the targets in Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls). Adult learning (particularly ‘awareness raising’) seems to underlie most of the Goal 5 targets (eg ‘enhance the use of enabling technology’) but is not stated explicitly.

Again the definitions and terminology need more refined attention – a view not surprising for an academic working in the field but nevertheless important for the policy statements’. However, the academics I am quoting here do not necessarily all agree and in this case she wants to question some of Alan Roger’s critical reading of the SDGs. As she puts it ‘my reading of the SDGs (particularly as compared to the MDGs/EFA agenda) is much more positive than Alan’s – in that I saw only two of the Goal 4 targets (4.1. and 4.2.) as focused exclusively on children and schooling. As I consider there is a reasonable emphasis on adult learning in the other targets, the issue for me is less around ‘the absence of adult education from SDG 4’ and more around ‘what kind of education or adult learning is envisaged within each target?’ . Indeed, she notes that SDG 4.7. seems to mark a significant shift away from the 3Rs and formal skills/education with the potential to support informal and non formal learning around ‘global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity’, ‘gender equality’ etc. of the kind that Rogers proposes. And if e are looking for explanations of why the dominant policy perspective has tended to focus on children rather than adults, then we might look beyond narrow practical constraints and instead examine more closely some of the ‘political commitment (spending money on children’s education as a ‘vote winner’, p 10), both children’s and adult education are often supported for reasons other than learning and it seems important to look at what that other agenda (the sub-plot) might be. For instance, changes in UK schooling like the extended day could be seen to relate more to providing childcare (helping working parents) than to learning. Looking at where adult learning (particularly literacy) has been strongly supported by governments in the South, this has often been part of a political movement (eg Cuba) or to provide employment for educated unemployed youth in rural areas (Nepal). For many NGOs, adult learning has provided an entry point for other development activities – valued as a way of mobilising communities and forming groups, rather than necessarily the skills taught/learned. And relating to her own ethnographic field research in Nepal,
she suggests that we might need to develop ‘a clearer understanding of lifelong learning within policy debates … In Nepal earlier this year, I met with policymakers in the Ministry of Education who explained their current commitment to moving from an ‘EFA’ (mainly schooling) agenda to ‘lifelong education’. Their current School Sector Development Plan (2016-22), being developed in response to the SDGs, proposes that ‘lifelong learning and continuing education’ is one of their four goals and discusses the desire for lifelong education increasing amongst adults. Lifelong learning is emphasised as starting from the cradle, and colleagues are exploring the connections between children’s and adult education through this definition. Now that Lifelong learning and lifelong education are more centrally on the policy agenda in many countries, there seems to be a need for clearer conceptualisation of the terms (including how they are being used in specific contexts).’ Issues here that we might need to pursue more closely in the UK too as the government attempts to develop policy that, at least rhetorically, responds to the Unesco and SDG statements.

The British Association for Literacy in Development (BALID) is another UK organisation working in this field and also responding to policy statements and the Committee have just sent a paper to Unesco Prospects, entitled “Promoting literacy from the UK – the contribution of BALID” (Ian Cheffy, Juliet McCaffery, and Brian Street to be published in June 2016).

BALID was founded in 1987 at a time when the international community was growing increasingly aware of the need to promote literacy as a major contributor to development. Before the UNESCO International Literacy Year in 1990, BALID came into being at the initiative of a member of staff of the British Council, the agency which for many years has been highly regarded for its commitment to international education. The vision was to provide an independent forum, not linked to any particular institution, in which literacy professionals in the UK could come together to share their knowledge and experience of adult literacy work and so contribute to work in developing countries through exchanging ideas and training literacy personnel. Such a forum has proved invaluable, since it is the common experience of professionals specialising in literacy in development that they lack easy access to a body of like-minded colleagues. Members of BALID work in a variety of contexts, in universities, in NGOs, or indeed work as independent literacy consultants. Some are students, others simply have a personal commitment to development through education based on their own experiences in developing countries. Their conviction of the value of literacy for human well-being and development is the common factor, which brings them together within BALID. In the UK, BALID developed a major training course on literacy work for adults which started in 1987 and ran until 2004. Held for two weeks on a university campus during the Easter vacation, so that it was commonly known simply as the Easter
Vacation Course (EVC), it attracted up to 40 or 50 participants each year, mostly drawing in overseas students studying in the UK, but also including some highly placed literacy professionals who travelled to the UK specifically for the course.

In the past four years, BALID’s activities have centred on holding Informal Literacy Discussions (ILDs), providing an opportunity for members to meet together and, as the name suggests, to discuss in an informal way a topic of current interest in literacy led by an invited speaker. The first one was held in 2011, on the topic *Literacy – Unfashionable and Unfundable?* Since that time, 22 ILDs have taken place. Their focus has been wide ranging and international with discussion considering literacy programmes and issues in countries in Asia, Africa and South America as well as the UK and Australia. International literacy policy has come under scrutiny, as has family literacy, book publishing, multilingual education and other topics. Usually the discussions are held in a central location in London but they have also taken place at the SIL training centre near High Wycombe and at Redcliffe College in Gloucester. Reports on each of the Informal Literacy Discussions can be found on the BALID website: [www.balid.org.uk](http://www.balid.org.uk). The mix of theoretical and practical presentations has been particularly insightful and it is now planned to update and publish some of the presentations in a book, to be edited by Juliet McCaffery and Brian Street, current members of the BALID Executive Committee.

I signal in a footnote below some of the other UK organisations also working in this field but unfortunately there is not time to describe their work in detail: LETTER, UKLA, BAICE, UKFIET, RCS.

### Further Publications

A forthcoming paper in *International Perspectives in Adult Education* also updates us on the SDGs (Benavot and Lockhart, ‘Monitoring the Education of Youth and Adults: From EFA to SDG 4’ 2016, DVV International). The authors go over the policy papers we have been considering above and make a ‘call for international surveys on adult education and learning that are robust, representative and comparable’. Like many of the responses we have been considering, they note that ‘Major efforts to strengthen national capacities for data collection on lifelong learning for all youth and adults are needed’ and they suggest some ‘Lessons for improved monitoring’. With response to the previous EFA project, they point out, as indeed does Unesco, that ‘neither the six EFA goals nor the two education MDGs on primary completion and gender parity were met’. For instance, ‘While EFA Goal 3 on learning and life skills was to be achieved through formal and non-formal education in the vein of lifelong learning’, there were fundamental challenges in the writing of the goal: a lack of

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1 UNESCO’s *Learning to Be: The World of Tomorrow* report (Faure et al, 1972) argued that education should be universal and lifelong, and proposed that Member States adopt this as a meta-concept in their education policies (UNESCO, 2015).
specific measurability and different ways to interpret “life skills” – and, we might add in the light of comments by Rogers and others cited above, that the conception of ‘lifelong learning’ needed some clarification. And like other contributors here, the authors offer an explanation for the failure to cut illiteracy rates in terms of the over focus on children at the expense of adults. And there is a definitional issue with regard to literacy: whilst the Belém Framework for Action defined literacy ‘as a continuum of skills that enables individuals to achieve their goals in work and life and participate fully in society, a point confirmed by the GMR, 2015’ however, the authors comment that ‘Nevertheless, there are still definitional issues and an inability to compare literacy data over time’. One such issue involved ‘Where exactly does the education of youth and adults figure in?’, a theme we have addressed to some extent above. They note that the policy perspective tends to focus on measures of a formal kind regarding, for instance, participation in formal systems, whereas in practice ‘Non-formal education frameworks are the most common sources of adult education throughout the world. Youth and adults participate in diverse, context-specific non-formal education programmes’. And reasons for the current failure of literacy programmes are that

‘Given the monitoring critiques of EFA Goals 3 and 4, concerted interagency and inter-sectoral initiatives are needed to evaluate the parameters and outcomes of ALE in the SDG Framework. Thus far, and despite the integrated nature of the agenda, certain SDG targets are being prioritized, often to the exclusion of those related to ALE. In the absence of sustained efforts to promote indicator development, data compilation and capacity building, it will continue to be difficult if not impossible to compare and interpret adult education patterns over time and place. There are clear gaps between the level of ambition articulated in SDG4 and levels of national and international commitment to develop feasible, robust and representative ALE monitoring tools’.

Better monitoring and data collection with sharper definitions are, then, necessary and an interesting proposal suggested by the authors is that this might include tracking individuals over time, as they move from childhood into adult life – a perspective that fits with the broader definitions suggested above that move beyond separations of schooling or of adult education and beyond narrow formal accounts of ‘skills’ at each level. This forthcoming piece, then, contributes positively to the debates raised here and indicates, as the authors conclude, that policy needs to move ‘beyond rhetoric’ and ‘towards reality’.

Conclusions; linking theory, method and policy

This brief review of the papers and seminars addressing literacy issues at this time has highlighted a number of issues raised by different authors:

- Alan Roger’s distinction between informal learning and education; and how the concept of Lifelong Learning/ education (LLL/E) connects with adult education;
- My own emphasis on growing awareness of the value of qualitative, ethnographic approaches to educational research and the concepts involved in Literacy as Social Practice;
- Explanations for minimal reference to adult literacy in Policy statements – and implications of apparent (‘rhetorical’?) shift towards more attention to this issue in recent statements
- Are the SDGs Good News for Women?
- The definitions and terminology need more refined attention, including what is meant by ‘literacy’
- The importance of ‘small NGOs to set up local initiatives to promote literacy and education among particular populations and target groups.’

**Footnotes**

**Other conferences on this theme:**

- *Gender and the Sustainable Development Goals: Are the SDGs Good News for Women?* UNRISD Seminar on 6 April

‘Agenda 2030 is ambitious in its vision, “transforming our world”, broad in its 17 goals and 169 targets, and universal in its application to all countries. Women’s rights are explicit in the preamble, and in Goal 5 "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls", and are mainstreamed in several other goals. In this journal launch event, which is a part of the UNRISD Seminar Series, experts from the UN and academia will reflect on the SDGs’ potential, strengths and weaknesses from a gender perspective, and the challenges of their implementation. This is the Geneva launch of the open access Oxfam journal *Gender & Development* devoted to the Sustainable Development Goals, co-edited by Valeria Esquivel and Caroline Sweetman.

- The United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA). Although its focus has tended to be in the UK, as the title suggests, rather than in international literacy projects of the kind outlined above in practice, some of the findings from these projects are being fed in to UKLA work, a theme highlighted in the presentations at the Association’s celebration of fifty years in July 2016.

- BAICE, British Association for International and Comparative Education each year convenes a conference of topical importance. This year’s conference, in keeping with the focus on SDGs, is entitled: “Achieving equity and quality in learning: Comparative perspectives” (September 12th-14th 2016,
In alternate years, the conference is integrated into the UKFIET biennial international conference on education and development.

**Other UK Organisations**
LETTER, UKLA, UKFIET, RCS

**Some forthcoming Publications**
*Special issue of UNESCO Prospects, on learning how to read.* The Editors at UIL aim 'to present cutting-edge research on this important topic and to publish it in June 2016'.

Benavot, Aaron and Lockhart, Ashley Stepanek (forthcoming) 'Monitoring the Education of Youth and Adults: From EFA to SDG 4' in *International Perspectives in Adult Education* (2016), DVV International

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