

Bridging the gap: research, policy and practice in women's literacy
(Quick-fire Session)

The quick-fire session, "*Bridging the gap: research, policy and practice in women's literacy*" was the first activity for the BAICE-funded Building Capacity and Networks Project organised by the UK Literacy Working Group and the Literacy and Development Group at the University of East Anglia. This event was part of the UKFIET 13th International Conference on Education and Development held at the University of Oxford on the 15th September 2015.

Academic researchers, policy makers and practitioners in education and development attended the quick-fire session which was chaired by Dr. Ian Cheffy from SIL International. Each presenter was given five minutes to share their thoughts on issues surrounding women's literacy learning and the gaps between the work carried out by academic researchers and practitioners in order to improve the construction of knowledge and the framing, dissemination and application of research findings outside academia.



Prof. Anna Robinson-Pant from the University of East Anglia gave an academic research perspective on women's literacy and development by mapping the directions in research on women's literacy learning and providing current challenges for academic researchers working in this field. She began by presenting examples of the kind of academic research that has dominated this area – exploring the link between women's literacy and development. She used a sample study (female literacy and fertility in India) to illustrate a research perspective which was largely informed by policy. She argued that too often

correlation was taken simplistically as causation – a point which had been emphasised in the morning session by one of the plenary speakers of the conference, Prof. Stefan Dercon from DfID.

Anna then moved on to outline alternative research directions, particularly ethnography. This body of research on women's literacy takes into



account contextual perspectives which incorporate diverse values, cultural practices, and identities. Lastly, she talked about three current challenges researchers need to address: 1) how to engage with policy while also confronting the issue of the over-emphasis put on an instrumental approach by governments and donors, 2) how to use ethnographic data in a policy and programme context, and 3) how to shift the policy and programme focus from women's literacy to gender and literacy.

To give a country-specific example which reflected the issues raised by Anna, Mr. Fusheng Jia, a postgraduate researcher from the University of East Anglia, shared an ethnographic perspective on how the learning of Chinese rural-urban migrant women affects their capacity to cope with urbanization. Fusheng gave an overview of the situations of the migrant women and local rural women in the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong Province, especially the older migrant women, whose experience of working in urban settings enabled them to assume multiple identities and show their cohesive role in society and family. He added that, generally, these women had lower formal educational qualifications. To solve the problem of migrant workers' learning inadequacy, the authorities in Guangdong Province initiated a number of large scale educational plans.



Fusheng's presentation was then focused on the adult learning opportunities of two *Dream Fulfillment* plans provided to migrant workers in Guangdong Province since 2008. He pointed out that these educational plans achieved widespread social influence and reputation, and also brought opportunities for migrant women to show their academic and organizational capacity. This contributed to their aspiration for life and work. In the learning process, migrant women as students, especially older women, showed cohesive roles in class activities and implementation of educational plans. This was not only related to their formal learning opportunities but also to the informal and non-formal learning they gained in their working and urban experiences.

However, Fusheng argued, there existed some issues about these educational projects. Firstly, migrant women did not receive enough support from the enterprises they worked for. Moreover, the educational plans were directed at elite migrant workers with required entrance literacy requirements, age limits and household registration records. These made older migrant women more marginalized and vulnerable.

Fusheng concluded that the future of rural women not only depends on their own conscientization, but also on social inclusion, which can be achieved through the collaborative efforts from authorities, general public, enterprises, and migrant women's family.



Taking an NGO perspective on the issue, Dr. Katy Newell-Jones, Chair of the British Association for Literacy in Development (BALID), identified the gaps in partnerships between NGOs and academic researchers in the field of women's literacy. Katy talked through the issues around NGOs' access to academic research, looking at constraints in terms of funding, time, research skills, and inaccessibility of academic language. She also highlighted the ways NGOs used research findings, suggesting that research was often used to *justify* approaches selected and less often to *inform* this selection. Research evidence is also widely used to demonstrate impact in other contexts, suggesting by extrapolation that it will be successful in a different context.

Furthermore, Katy emphasised the donor factors at play which have a strong influence on the actions of NGOs, in particular donor's priorities when setting expected outcomes and measuring impact. She stressed that most donors do not see women's literacy as a priority and so it is often not made explicit in the project outcomes and consequently not given attention time in evaluations, even when there are key outcomes among community members.

Towards the end of her presentation, Katy drew the attention of

the audience to the issue of how NGO work could better inform academic research into women's literacy. She pointed out some barriers which include limited access to academic networks, a lack of a cost/benefit relationship, low commitment to research publication, and perceived high costs to NGOs of partnerships with higher education institutions.

The remaining presentations were devoted to country-specific examples in terms of academic-practitioner collaborations. Dr. Gina Lontoc, a Visiting Fellow at the University of East Anglia, and Dr. Juliet McCaffery, Secretary of BALID, related their experiences working with women's groups in Southeast Asian countries, with Gina in the Philippines and Juliet in Cambodia. The last presenter was Dr. Clare Meade, Senior Associate at the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE), who gave a country-specific example based on the research she conducted in the United Kingdom.



Gina presented her work based on her involvement in programmes facilitated by an NGO in the Philippines. This NGO helps poor communities through savings and livelihood projects, one of which is the establishment of women cooperatives. Gina described the activities and organisational structures that perpetuate

gender inequalities. She related these inequalities to her research findings based on her analysis of learning materials used in the Alternative Learning System in the Philippines. She stressed that these learning modules and review materials suggested gender inequalities.

However, as noted by Gina, research findings were seldom used by NGOs in their work on literacy. This raised another concern which relates to the extent research findings are accessible to NGOs. Like Katy, Gina identified the cost of journal subscriptions and access to databases as barriers to NGOs integrating academic research in their work. She also believed that the language used in journal articles and their contents were too academic for NGOs making these articles irrelevant to their work. In addition to the expensive amount needed in purchasing computer software for data management and analysis, Gina also emphasized the skills and training involved for the NGOs' utilisation of the software.

To end her talk, Gina left the audience with other greater concerns related to the issue on how academic research can be translated into policy and practice. First, she suggested the involvement of NGO staff members in the actual research process. Second, she called for support from NGOs to help academic researchers gain greater access to communities and funders. Lastly, she articulated that governments and funding agencies should allot funds for the dissemination of research findings and for the practitioner-academic collaboration process.

As previously mentioned, Juliet's presentation was about her experience as a practitioner in reviewing, and then rewriting, the literacy curriculum for adults in Cambodia. She presented the challenges involved in planning and implementing literacy programmes outside one's own context. The first issue she discussed was the difficulties encountered in complex situations when one is not familiar with the language or the country. This can entail addressing very difficult historical issues. She pointed out that though literacy programmes should ideally be socially and contextually situated, the breadth of the Cambodian curriculum which included family life, farming, pregnancy, childcare, diseases as well as civics, enabled women of all ages to benefit. Some wished to receive the education they had missed during the Khmer Rouge period, others wished to know about pregnancy and childbirth.

Coming from the standpoint of a practitioner, an academic researcher and a policy maker, Juliet pointed out the challenges in writing an adult literacy curriculum with very limited access to academic journals, research reports and ethnographic information with the additional pressure of producing outputs in a short span of time.



In addition, Juliet brought up the issue of the types of information that government departments consider when planning literacy programmes. She directed this to the forms that the information takes such as research articles, project reports and commissioned research.

With regard to the final presentation, Clare delivered a talk based on her experience working as practitioner, trainer and researcher in



adult learning and family literacy and learning in Uganda and in Europe, particularly in the UK. Clare addressed how family literacy and learning can be

effectively evidenced to inform research. Drawing on the projects she had been involved in, she believed that collaboration between practitioners, academic researchers, and local authorities would bring positive results in terms of informing research on literacy practices. She also underscored the issue on giving substantial importance to the voices of women and families in family literacy and learning and its underlying values.

One of the major concerns raised by Clare was the question of how family learning practitioners can contribute most effectively to academic debate and inform policy. She then related this to more specific and compelling issues such as the conduct of family literacy and learning projects driven by specific targets

and agenda. Additionally, she mentioned the problem of the availability of data and there was the lack of infrastructure to process and to utilise these data. Similar to the views of other presenters, Clare expressed the practitioners' lack of academic links and resources to publish their work.

Open forum

After the presentations, Ian facilitated the open forum where members of the audience comprising both practitioners and academics contributed to the debate.



The presenters were confronted with challenging questions predominantly about aligning academic research into Sustainable Development Goals and the principles of lifelong learning. There were also questions about the different perspectives people hold in terms of defining literacy.

Furthermore, participants raised compelling issues which were context-specific such as the role of education in widening the gap between male and female school children in India, literacy in China and its preconditions in terms of ways of thinking and systems of learning, and the advocacy work of NGOs in promoting women's literacy in Southeast Asia and the lack of support they get from governments.

Finally, points about new directions for collaborations between

practitioners and academic researchers were brought up. Participants asked the presenters to respond on how to direct their research efforts in the light of the SDGs and to determine new prospects in literacy and development.

Issues that emerged from questions and comments on Post-it notes

Since the group ran out of time to entertain more questions, after the session, Ian invited the participants to post their questions and comments on the posters.

Several issues have emerged from the notes of the participants. These can be divided into themes such as research access to research data, barriers to collaboration, beliefs and expectations, capacity building, collaboration

framework, factors that influence collaboration, goals, power differentials, research agenda, roles/identities and uses of research data.



The following table contains the unedited questions and comments of participants written on Post-it notes which are grouped according to themes:

Themes	Questions and Comments
access to research data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree with Anna - comment about ethnographic researchers can make their work available • How do NGO workers in rural Nigeria, Sudan & Cambodia possibly have access to academic journals? • Most academic chairs have the links • Research publication - copyright • Who has access to research in country? How can UK & other academics overcome this?
barriers to collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not having the research skills • academic literature - language • Some "grey" literature is lost because of staff changes (very frequent!) • Some NGOs are reluctant to share their "research" (i.e. evaluations) with academics because of fear of being judged as not being "academic" (in language, methodologies, background literature etc.)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • academic language beyond comprehension of NGOs (practitioners)
Beliefs and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is literacy? • Learning is complex- measuring reduces complexity
capacity-building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to access academic literacy • How to engage practitioners in research? • How can NGOs build up <u>or</u> access a body of academic literature? - a resource centre?
collaboration framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is family literacy the more appropriate channel for ensuring a policy shift from women's literacy to gender & literacy? • Should we/how do we get adult education out of the education sector and into a more cross-sectoral policy-setting environment?
factors that influence collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence, social status • Motivation of adult women towards learning literacy skills • Practitioners are wary of policy advocacy and doubt the benefits from such work • Limited opportunity but precious - Local governments are more open to NGO recommendations for women's literacy than national government
goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence of research on policies or revision of policies
power differentials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We seem to be saying that research priorities and funding determined more by research funders' priorities than by the researchers' own academic interests? - On whom do we focus - governments? donors? our own academic bosses? • Why are funders unresearched in funding literacy? • Women literacy - whose agenda? - ministry, NGOs, donor, policymaker • Advocacy by demonstrating good practice - governments praise NGOs but do not scale up practices • Governments are suspicious of NGO-collected data
research agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literacy as a gendered issue • How do we frame the case for women's literacy in the context of sustainable development and where do we make the case? Governments, donors or others?
roles/identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All the presenters today are PhDs and PhD potential! What does this say about the gap between NGOs & academics? • Who should conduct research for/within NGOs?

uses of research data

- How seriously is ethnographic research taken within a policy-making context?
- Gap between research findings and its use in developing program
- How to make data speak? (re family learning)
- How do we make sure policy is driven from practice & research?
- How do we make the links between practice / research into policy?
- Use of research findings in developing programs

The quick-fire session ignited a high degree of interest among the participants who were very engaging during the session. Also, some of them expressed that they wanted to be involved in *Bridging the Gap's* next activity which is a networking meeting on 23 October.

Overall, this quick-fire session was a huge success.

Report written by: Gina Lontoc, with contributions from the presenters and chair.

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