

Bridging the Gap: research, policy and practice in women's literacy

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(Stimulus Paper for E-Forum)

How can academic research help and support agencies (NGO/INGO and government) in the field of adult learning/women's literacy in international development? This paper draws on presentations and group discussions which explored this question during the *Bridging the Gap* event at the University of East Anglia last 23rd October 2015. The aim of this paper is to provide some initial ideas and questions about the relationship between research, policy and practice in women's literacy, as the starting point for the E-Forum which will run from 7th- 14th November 2015.

Academic, practitioner and donor perspectives on women's literacy in international development

Bridging the gap between academic researchers and practitioners working in women's literacy and development is a great challenge. Those implementing programmes on the ground set out to respond to the needs of local communities with regard to literacy – and in the case of national Governments, such initiatives may be informed by economic or political goals too. By contrast, critical analysis of policy, theory building and interrogating political objectives have often been the remit of those working in the academic world. The relationships between research and practice are often mediated by donor agencies, who provide the funding support for these activities.

The kind of policy that has dominated women's literacy learning has been largely informed by quantitative research evidence, often focused on statistical relationships between women's literacy rates and development indicators to justify investment in girls' schooling. Such research may reveal little about the educational processes involved in literacy programmes that can influence and facilitate social change (including transforming gender roles and relations). Research questions guiding academic studies have tended to respond to donor agendas around providing more quantifiable evidence of impact. Academic researchers are urged to show the impact of their work on policy and practice while navigating around the issue of the strong emphasis placed on an instrumental approach by funding agencies and governments. An even greater concern is how to shift the policy and programme focus on women's literacy to a consideration of gender and literacy.

Practitioners, though aware of the existence of academic research, may be sceptical about using it. There is an issue of credibility where some NGOs tend to see and prefer research in a 'technical' form which will help them to provide solutions to constraints and issues encountered in adult literacy programmes. However, other organisations are more open to ethnographic and other qualitative approaches to research which end up raising questions rather than providing answers. Another challenge that practitioners have to deal with is access to research findings. There are gaps in terms of perceptions about the usefulness of research, time devoted to research and more practical issues such as funding, research skills and language (specialised research terminology).

Donor requirements have a major impact on the nature of collaborations in the academic and practitioner spheres. The interplay of factors such as power differentials, conflicting aims, priorities and expectations can trigger tensions between them. Adult literacy has been a low

priority among donors and within the Education For All agenda. From the perspective of donors, academic researchers and practitioners have to identify their entry points and rather than directly addressing women's literacy, this goal may need to be reached through other priorities such as Early Childhood Education, and functional literacy skills for out-of-school youth. Also, it is hugely important to take into consideration understandings of literacy in specific institutions and cultural contexts in the field. Lastly, academics and practitioners have to be clear about donor funding modalities they require such as funding for research and country programmes.

Challenges and future directions for academic and practitioner collaborations

Challenges emerging from academic-practitioner collaborations can be grouped according to themes including: access to academic research, purpose and use of the research, institutional restrictions, and roles of funding agencies.

The issue of access to academic research goes beyond the cost of journal subscriptions; there are more compelling concerns such as the lack of an intellectual and publication space where academics and practitioners can share their work. Aside from this, the nature of language used in academic articles can set up barriers for practitioners wanting to access their contents making them appear abstract and irrelevant to work in local contexts. This leads to other issues such as the purpose of the research, which raises questions about for whom the research is intended and written.

With the changing higher educational landscape, institutional restrictions can pose threats to collaboration. Academics and practitioners work in different time frames where the former takes a longer time in producing a piece of research, which usually does not work well with the latter whose initiatives are pressured by donors to generate positive results in a short span of time. They also function within different ethical frameworks which can put into question the validity and credibility of the research. Another institutional restriction is the greater emphasis placed on quantitative over qualitative methods leading to the observation that participatory and action research can be less valued within research assessment procedures in Higher Education.

It is widely accepted that funding can be considered as one of the key factors that steers academic-practitioner collaboration. It hugely influences not only new directions to collaboration and research questions explored in academic studies, but particularly shapes the purpose of the initiative as, in certain cases, donors have the power to set the agenda. The various perceptions of stakeholders have revealed their often differing concepts of literacy, ideas of research and notions of collaboration.

With donor factors constantly at play, the playing field for academics and practitioners is becoming increasingly more complex. However, this does not necessarily mean that donor factors need always be seen as sources of tensions. Recognising and responding constructively to the challenges identified by academics and practitioners, donor agencies can help to encourage innovative, relevant and sustainable academic-practitioner collaboration.

To address these challenges and bridge the gaps that exist between these collaborations, we need to explore possible solutions around training, dissemination of research, finding ways to mobilise resources and new forms of collaboration.