

Chapter #22

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES A SOCIAL PRACTICE APPROACH TO ADULT LITERACIES EDUCATION MAKE TO ADULT LEARNERS' QUALITY OF LIFE IN WESTERN RWANDA?

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ABSTRACT

Provision of quality adult education has the potential to make a difference in the lives of adult learners especially those from poor and marginalised backgrounds. In this chapter, we report on the effect of implementing a social practice approach to adult literacies education in rural communities in three districts in Western Rwanda. Following the implementation of a social practice approach to adult literacies education, we interviewed a sample of 32 participants, two or three years after they completed adult classes, to understand what impact the classes may have had on improving their lives and wider capabilities. The findings indicate that a social practice approach to adult literacies education impacted participants in connection with health, hygiene and sanitation, nutrition, improved marital relationships, better support for children's education, and greater community involvement. Adult learners developed greater understanding and practical grasp of life skills, social competence, positive self-image, and personal and family wellbeing while developing their literacies. They retained and used the knowledge and skills to improve their lives, that of their immediate households and the wider community. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: adult education, adult learners, literacy as social practice, quality of life, Rwanda.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In this chapter, we report on the impact of participating in a social practice approach to adult literacies education (SPA-ALE) for adult learners. SPA-ALE was implemented between 2017 – 2023 in three districts (Karongi, Rubavu and Rusizi) in the Western Province of Rwanda. In our SPA-ALE project, we embraced UNESCO's definition of literacy to mean 'a continuum of learning and proficiency in reading, writing, and using numbers throughout life as part of a larger set of skills, which include digital skills, media literacy, education for sustainable development and global citizenship as well as job-specific skills' (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018).

Globally, literacy is key to human development (Stromquist, 2016). It is an essential human right and a prerequisite to individual empowerment and development (McCaffery, Merrifield, & Millican, 2007; UNESCO, 2009; Wagner, 2011). Literacy is liberating since literate individuals are capable of exercising agency to improve their lives by disrupting structures and symbols of inequality (Robinson-Pant, 2008; Stromquist, 2016). Literacy can extend human capabilities and enable individuals to lead a life they value (Sen, 1999). Given the importance of literacy, the United Nations has adopted literacy within the Sustainable

Development Goal (SDG) 4.6 “By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy” (United Nations, 2015, n. p.). Adult education is essential in the global efforts to achieve inclusive and sustainable development (United Nations, 2015; Zarestky & Ray, 2019).

The Government of Rwanda acknowledges that adult education is essential for poverty reduction, improved health, and increased participation in community development (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning [MINECOFIN], 2000). To this end, the Rwanda Government developed an adult education policy to combat ‘illiteracy’ by 2020 (Ministry of Education [MINEDUC], 2014). However, this has not been achieved for a number of reasons. For example, adult literacy education provision is underfunded; there is lack of training for adult literacy tutors (Abbott, Mugisha, Mtika, & Nzabairwa, 2020); and there is a prevalence of the use of ineffective teacher-centred approach which is unsuitable for adult learners (Knowles, 1980; Stromquist, 2009). Nevertheless, the government is committed to addressing the problem of illiteracy in the country.

Internationally, adult literacy education is essential, and its importance was highlighted through the Belém Framework for Action, which noted that it can enhance people’s quality of life (Milana, Holford, Hodge, Waller, & Webb 2017). However, there is a global concern regarding illiteracy, which is estimated to affect more than 773 million young men, women, and adults, aged fifteen or over in low and lower-middle-income countries (LMICs) (UNESCO, 2022). Within sub-Saharan Africa, illiteracy is fuelled by inefficiency within the education sector. It was previously estimated that 88% (202 million) of primary and lower secondary school-age children and adolescents would not be able to read proficiently by the time they completed school (UNESCO, 2017). Illiteracy is gendered and two-thirds of those who cannot read, write, or perform numeracy globally are women (World Bank, 2022). For Rwanda, adult literacy rate (% of people ages 15 and above) is estimated to be 76% (World Bank, 2022).

Illiteracy is associated with various negative outcomes. Those considered illiterate are sidelined from the mainstream socio-economic and political activities (Abbott et al., 2020). Such individuals face stigma which generates low self-esteem (Helliwell, Huang, Wang, & Norton, 2020). Illiteracy is also associated with poor general health of mothers and poor-quality nurturing care given to their children (World Bank, 2018). At household level, parental illiteracy is linked to poor educational outcomes for their children (Zheng et al. 2018). More specifically, mothers’ education has a strong influence on children’s development of reading, numeracy, and other foundational learning skills (UNICEF, 2022). It is essential therefore that adults who look after children gain relevant literacy capabilities (Mtika & Abbott, 2023).

We designed and implemented a collaborative SPA-ALE project in Rwanda. The overall objective of the SPA-ALE project was:

“to develop, implement and embed a social practice approach to adult literacies education in Rwanda that can be managed and delivered by local institutions to support people’s livelihood through poverty reduction and inclusive socioeconomic development” (Mtika, Abbott, & Byaruhanga, 2023).

This project supported local educational institutions, namely, the University of Rwanda-College of Education and three Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs) and other stakeholders, such as Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB), to improve the provision of adult education in the country. The project was underpinned by literacy as a social practice framework, which we will discuss in the next section.

2. SOCIAL PRACTICE APPROACH TO ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION

The project involved adapting an existing Rwanda adult education curriculum. We designed and implemented a culturally responsive, learner-centred approach to adult education. This was a departure from the predominant teacher-centred adult education, which has been the practice in Rwanda (Abbott et al., 2020). This teacher-centred approach is unsuitable for adult learners (McCaffery, Merrifield, & Millican, 2007). Our baseline findings show that most adult learners in Rwanda who had undergone teacher-centred adult education do not retain literacy skills (Abbott et al., 2020).

Literacy as a social approach acknowledges “the plurality of literacies - that there are different literacy practices that carry with them different values and affordances” (Street, 2016, p. 336). Literacy is embedded within the socio-cultural set of activities, which provide the material for teaching and learning (Rogers & Street, 2012). The approach encourages adult learners to exercise their agency in the formulation of learning objectives and teaching activities with the adult tutors. It uses learner-centred and practical approaches (McCaffery, et al. 2007). This approach is empowering for the adult learners as they work closely with their tutors to identify problematic issues that matter to them as the basis for the planned learning activities. In this way, learners have a say about lesson contents and teaching approaches.

SPA-ALE considers the curriculum to be less prescriptive and adaptable in that it can be contextualised and tailored to the learners' livelihood practices and needs. Some of the topics covered during the adult classes included balanced diet, causes of stunting, family planning, community-based health insurance (CBHI), hygiene, saving clubs/association, kitchen garden, soil erosion causes and prevention, farming practices, role of women in development, income generating activities and use of mobile phone. SPA-ALE adopts teaching approaches that are participatory, such as group problem solving, role play, ethnographic walks, case studies, etc. Participatory approaches have other by-products for adult learners such as enhancement of ‘community cultural wealth’ (Trigos-Carrillo, 2019). By contextualising learning, adult learners are more likely to be motivated to practice what they have learned, to alleviate their day-to-day concerns. When learners gain relevant literacy skills and knowledge that matter to them and successfully apply them in their day-to-day activities, it may positively impact their quality of life.

SPA-ALE implementation involved re-orienting adult literacy tutors to work closely with adult learners. This enables adult learners to develop appropriate knowledge and skills for alleviating their individual and socio-cultural concerns in their lives within their communities (Street, 2016). In other studies, it was found that adult literacy education that had close community connection produced social capital outcomes for learners (Balatti, Black, & Falk, 2007). Volunteer community adult literacy tutors (CALTs) were trained by tutors from three primary teacher training colleges (TTCs) through an apprenticeship model in the social practice approach. An apprenticeship model is a form of experiential learning where less experienced practitioners gain knowledge, skills, and attitudes by observing and conducting activities with more experienced practitioners. During adult learning classes, trained TTC tutors acted as role models and mentors for CALTs.

Altogether, 209 female and 289 male CALTs were trained. The CALTs delivered adult literacy courses to learners using the social practice approach. The adult literacy classes lasted nine months leading to a certificate for all adults who successfully completed the courses. Classes were conducted in several settings such as church buildings and primary schools. The classes were conducted on weekends for no more than three hours per session. During the

life of the project (2017 - 2023), CALTs taught an estimated 13,996 female and 3,139 male adult learners mostly in the Western Province.

The findings from course evaluation showed that the use of the social practice approach for teaching adult learners was well-received. The adult learners enjoyed the participatory learning approaches that involved group discussion, group work, case studies, and exploring social practices within their social contexts, which went beyond reading, writing and numeracy.

3. CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Rwanda has a problem of adult illiteracy (Ministry of Education [MINEDUC], 2014; National Institute for Statistics of Rwanda [NISR], 2018). Literacy rate (the ability to read a simple passage) for those aged 15 years or older in Rwanda was around 73% in 2018 (NISR, 2018) and is currently around 76% (World Bank, 2022). However, it is estimated to be nearer 50% if it excludes those who can only read the passage with difficulty (Abbott et al., 2020). Literacy rate of men was 77.5% whereas that for women was 69% (NISR, 2018). In most LMICs, factors associated with illiteracy include inefficiency of primary education (UNESCO, 2017), being female, being from a marginalised group, living in a rural area and growing up in poverty and larger households (Abbott et al., 2020; McCaffery et al., 2007).

The Government of Rwanda is committed to achieving adult literacy for *all* as demonstrated by the development of an adult education policy and implementation strategy (MINEDUC, 2014; MINECOFIN, 2013). Rwanda aims to have “a literate society where every citizen has access to and makes full use of reading and writing, numeracy and life skills for personal, family, community, and national development” (MINEDUC 2014, xi).

Western Rwanda is the poorest province, with 69% of the population living in poverty (Abbott et al., 2020). The province is also largely rural than the Rwanda average. The province’s main source of livelihood is agriculture with most of those aged 18 and above undertaking agrarian related activities. The region has lower educational attainment than the national average (Abbott et al., 2020).

4. THE STUDY

4.1. Research Methods

In this semi-structured-interview-based qualitative study, we consider perspectives of adult learners who had successfully completed the SPA-ALE project in terms of how they felt the project had influenced their lives after graduation. The impact we are interested in relates to both literacy capabilities and changes to other aspects of quality of life (e.g., self-esteem, confidence, social competence, agency, etc.). Our research question is:

What impact does participation in a social practice approach to literacies education has on adult learners’ lives, their households, and the wider communities in three districts in Western Rwanda where it has been undertaken?

Qualitative data collected directly from the participants has the potential to provide rich and personal evidence of the causal processes and ‘stories of change’ (Remnant & Avard, 2016). The research participants were asked to talk about the main changes in their lives over a pre-defined period of their participation in SPA-ALE, and were prompted to share what they perceived to be the main drivers of these changes, and to whom or what they attribute any change (Remnant & Avard, 2016).

4.2. Sampling and Data Collection

We drew a simple random sample of adults aged 18 years and over who had completed SPA-ALE in 2021 and 2022. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 69 years. Most of the participants were married and had children. Participants' livelihoods revolved around subsistence farming and other informal income sources. The participants had identified themselves as 'illiterate' before joining the SPA-ALE project. Table 1 shows the profile of research participants.

Table 1.
Profile of participating adult learners.

	Female	Male
Gender	26	6
Marital status		
<i>Married</i>	23	6
<i>widowed</i>	2	-
<i>Single</i>	3	-
Age-range		
<i>20 - 29</i>	2	-
<i>30 - 39</i>	13	4
<i>40 - 49</i>	8	-
<i>50 - 59</i>	1	-
<i>60 -69</i>	2	2
Main occupation		
<i>Farming</i>	17	6
<i>Basket weaving</i>	1	-
<i>Trader/vendor</i>	17	2
<i>Casual worker</i>	2	-

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 adult learners after they had completed SPA-ALE classes, to elicit their views about what they perceived to be the impact of the adult classes and how they were making use of the knowledge and skills they had developed. The participants had completed the literacy classes 2 or 3 years prior to the interview. We interviewed participants in three districts in Western Rwanda (Rusizi, Rubavu and Karongi) in 2023. The interviews were conducted in the local language, Kinyarwanda. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour.

Applicable ethical principles and practices were followed during the research. We obtained research ethical approval from the University of Aberdeen's Committee for Research Ethics and Governance in Arts, Social Sciences and Business (CREGASSB). In addition, participants gave informed consent after being told the purpose of the project and what their involvement entailed. The participants were assured of their rights to withdraw, anonymity and confidentiality. The research assistants who supported data collection had relevant experience and received further training before embarking on data collection on the project.

4.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the semi-structured interview data. Through this, we generated several themes relating to how adult learners perceived the impact of attending SPA-ALE classes on their quality of life. The findings show that adult learners developed greater understanding and practical grasp of life skills, social competence, positive self-image, and personal and family wellbeing while developing their literacies within certain areas of social practices. The specific themes we focus on in this chapter include (i) improved maternal health, hygiene, sanitation, and nutrition (ii) improved marital relationships (iii) support with children's education (iv) greater involvement in community development. The adult learners retained the knowledge and skills they developed during the classes and used these in their day-to-day lives for the benefit to the individual, their households, and the wider community.

5. FINDINGS

5.1. Improved Maternal Health, Hygiene and Sanitation, and Nutrition

The theme 'improved maternal health, hygiene and sanitation, and nutrition' was evident from the participants through the ways they perceived the knowledge and skills gained through SPA-ALE and how it influenced changes in behaviour and practices. In connection with maternal health, the following illustrative quotes highlight the change in behaviour regarding managing childbirth and family planning.

I could give birth without attending any hospital but now I follow all the pregnancy check-ups. I did not know about preparing birthing clothes but now I get them at earlier stage due to the teachings we got from adult literacy class (Rusizi, female, 38 years).

Family planning information was shared at the literacy class...I was able to grasp it better and see its significance (Rubavu, female, married, 35 years).

In relation to hygiene and sanitation, participants highlighted ways in which they made changes to their practices after taking part in SPA-ALE.

Today, I am aware that I must bathe my child, dress her in clean clothes, and do the same for myself (Rubavu, female, 28 years).

Hygiene has improved. Toilet has been built and roofed which was not the case before (Karongi, male, 43 years).

Participants also indicated that the knowledge from SPA-ALE was helping them to have healthy meals.

They taught us how to cook healthy meals at home. Now, I put this into practice. If I prepared potatoes and beans today, I must add vegetables tomorrow. If I had fish the other day, I must add carrots (Rubavu, female, 35 years).

I have a kitchen garden that was built from the skills I got at adult literacy classes. It has saved me from buying vegetables. We eat fresh fruits and vegetables which cost less. I offer my children a balanced diet meal (Rusizi, female, 38 years).

The findings indicate how participants changed their lives for the better because of attending SPA-ALE.

5.2. Improved Marital Relationships

In relation to familial impact, taking part in SPA-ALE was viewed to have positive impact in marital relationships which had not existed before. The main issue that they highlighted was marital conflict.

A male participant indicated that there was a power imbalance between him and his wife, which was a source of conflict but that he was now able to resolve this due to the knowledge and skills gained at SPA-ALE.

My wife and I had regular confrontations to the extent we were about to divorce. The issue was that she is literate, and she wanted to take over my power as husband at house. I felt very disrespected. We were always quarrelling with endless fights. After joining adult literacy classes, I was taught different ways of resolving relationship issues as well as forgiving our partners... We are now a happy family... (Rusizi, male, 45 years).

A female participant highlighted how attending adult classes reduced arguments with the husband as both the wife and husband were now literate.

My inability to read frequently led to arguments within our family. For instance, my husband might give me money to go shopping and then he would get upset with me because I was taken advantage of by traders. However, because I can now read, write, and count... our relationship has improved (Rubavu, female, 38 years).

Another male participant described how SPA-ALE brought about a change in his stereotypical attitudes towards his wife in relation to household chores.

Family relationships were not that perfect because I used to argue with her about house chores. I did not help with house chores because I thought these were for women only, but at the adult literacy classes, we learnt to help our spouses and I am now doing it (Karongi, male, 43 years).

The participant further added,

"I used to not value her opinions and thinking that she cannot contribute anything to the family development but now we sit together and make every decision together" (Karongi, male, 43 years).

These findings highlight the marital challenges which were alleviated by attending adult classes. Apart from developing literacy skills so that one was not taken advantage of when shopping, they also developed different ways of thinking about issues from the tutors and the materials used for teaching. This led to positive changes to social practices such as gender relations and distribution of family labour.

5.3. Support with Children's Education

Another dimension of familial impact resulting from participating in SPA-ALE relates to support with children's education. The findings from the study highlight ways in which participants felt that they had been impacted to support their school-going children. This was through change in attitudes towards education, helping children with their primary education and buying necessary school materials for their children.

A parent reflected on how adult classes had influenced her to support her children's education. She noted,

After taking the literacies class, I now place higher priority on my children's education. I am now aware that my children need books, pencils, and other necessities to attend school because I need them myself. To prevent them from not learning, I also ensure that the children do not arrive at school hungry (Rusizi, female, 42 years).

Another participant highlighted how she used her own local Kinyarwanda language skills gained at adult literacies classes to support her child's education.

Even though I do not speak English, I can teach her Kinyarwanda consonants, vowels, reading, and writing. To prevent her from becoming like me, I advise her to pursue education while she is still young (Rubavu, female, 28 years).

The change of attitudes towards education was further reflected in the following remarks,

There was nothing I could do to support my kids academically, such as with their homework prior to taking the literacy classes. I was illiterate and uninformed...I was not even interested in whether they attended school. I now ask my children when they get home from school what they learned... (Karongi, male, 36 years).

I did not care about their education and believed they would still be able to survive without it. I started paying more attention to my children's education after taking the literacy classes. When they missed school, I would discipline them for not attending to school. Now, I believe that my children's education is important... (Rubavu, female 42 years).

The findings show how adult learners who were also parents started to pay keen interest to their children's education. They changed their attitudes and saw the value in educating their children by ensuring that the children were properly fed before going to school. They also monitored children's school attendance.

5.4. Greater Involvement in Community Development

The findings highlight the impact that graduates of SPA-ALE had on community development. This was mainly through learners developing self-confidence, social competence and playing active roles within their communities. They did this by taking on leadership roles and acting as role models. Through the citizenship roles these adult learners took on, adult literacy classes benefited the wider communities. A participant noted,

I was promoted to be acting village leader. People gave me that trust due completing adult classes. I felt the adult literacy gave me courage that I can do whatever I want (Rusizi, male, 45 years).

Another participant who was actively involved in the community noted that she was trusted by the community. Her status within the community was elevated and her ability to use the literacy skills acquired enabled her to fulfill a community role of record keeping.

Today, due to the trust leaders and the people in the village have for me, I regularly help the Isibo leader (smallest decentralised community unit) to collect funds from the residents and recording those who have paid and those who have not (Rubavu, female, 38 years).

Those who had completed adult classes were also acting as role models within their communities. This shows how individual's self-image and status within the community changed. Individuals also enhanced their religious literacy practice and took on active religious roles such as leading their congregations.

Most of the people who know that I am now literate are contacting me to know when adult literacy classes will be resuming and how they can join. Whoever sees me read the Bible and preach to a big congregation testified that adult classes are very important (Karongi, female, 32 years).

The findings highlight the impact of completing SPA-ALE and how this benefited the individuals and the wider community.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest that participating in SPA-ALE led to several learning outcomes for the adult learners. These learning outcomes had impact on the individuals, members of their households, and the wider community. Adult learners enhanced their literacy

capabilities and developed greater understanding and practical grasp of life skills, social competence, positive self-image, and personal and family wellbeing while developing their literacy skills. They retained and used the knowledge and skills to improve their lives, that of their immediate households and the wider community. These findings highlight the potential for literacy to extending human capabilities in various ways (Sen, 1999).

The findings indicate that adult learners, especially women, saw improvement in maternal health, hygiene and sanitation, and nutrition because of taking part in SPA-ALE. The classes enhanced practical knowledge and skills and influenced changes in attitudes, behaviour, and practices. While low literacy is associated with poor health outcomes including poor health status (Zheng et al. 2018), our findings reveal some of the ways that literacy as a social practice addressed certain health challenges, thereby enhancing the quality of life. For women, this was in connection with maternal wellbeing through better preparation for childbirth and family planning strategies. The findings further suggest improvement to the social practices around hygiene and sanitation, and dietary practices. These findings are important for Rwanda, where evidence show prevalence of stunting among children whose parents have little or no education (World Bank, 2018). The findings resonate with the ambition of the Government of Rwanda which developed adult literacy education policy to improve health and wellbeing of its adult population (MINEDUC, 2014). The findings are also significant for other low-income contexts grappling with high level of illiteracy globally.

Our findings highlight marital challenges that participants were facing before enrolling in SPA-ALE and how taking part in adult classes in which topics such as gender relations were covered, had positive impact on husbands. The findings show that male participants enhanced knowledge about gender relations, leading to improvement in their marital relationships. Adult classes influenced gender equality and the disruption of 'a culture of patriarchy' (Abbott, Malunda, & Byaruhanga, 2023) whereby husbands no longer saw themselves as sole custodians of power at household level. Adult classes challenged the distribution of household labour, which was previously predominantly undertaken by women. The improvement in gender relations and redistribution of household labour is essential for the improvement of quality of life (Abbott et al., 2023). These findings highlight the view that literacy education is emancipatory in that it helps raise awareness of patriarchal structures that suppress women (Robinson-Pant 2008; Stromquist, 2016).

The findings show that participation in SPA-ALE improved relationships between parents and their school-age children. As previously suggested, parental illiteracy has been associated with poor educational outcomes for children (Zheng et al. 2018). The findings show that the parents who participated in adult classes changed their attitudes towards education and were more committed to supporting their children. This echoes findings from other research which showed that adult education enhances adult learners' understanding of the importance of educating their children (Stromquist, 2016). This change of attitude and support has the potential to improving children's engagement with school, leading to better educational prospects. Research evidence shows that parental education has an impact on children's development of reading and numeracy (UNICEF, 2022). This can help address intergenerational reproduction of illiteracy.

Lastly, the findings indicate that participants in SPA-ALE enhanced their interpersonal wellbeing in terms of self-esteem and self-confidence. They became more altruistic and took on grassroots citizenship roles which benefited their communities. Similar findings were reported in another study (Stromquist, 2016). These findings echo the aspiration of the Government of Rwanda's adult literacy education policy to increase participation in community development (MINECOFIN, 2000; 2013).

7. CONCLUSION

Given the findings in this study, the Government of Rwanda, local and international development partners should consider exploring strategies for funding and scaling up literacy as a social practice-oriented adult education so that it can benefit more adult learners and communities across the country. Other providers of adult literacy education in Rwanda, such as local NGOs, should consider adopting literacy as social practice in their programmes. This has the potential to make adult literacy an attainable human right (UNESCO, 2009) and a truly public good (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018) for all deserving adults in Rwanda. Finally, given the global problem of adult illiteracy, this study is a significant contribution to efforts aimed at reducing illiteracy through a culturally responsive approach which considers literacy as a social practice.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND DISCLAIMER

This work was supported by the Scottish Government International Development Programme RW3. The Scottish Government was not involved in the conduct of the research, in writing of the article or in the decision to submit the article for publication. The authors alone are responsible for the views expressed in this chapter.

There are no competing interests or conflicts of interests to declare.

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