

BALID Seminar on New Directions in Literacy and Development

Saturday 29 October 2005

The purpose of this seminar/workshop was to offer members information on some aspects of current literacy activity in the UK and by UK agencies in low-income countries, and to provide an opportunity for their discussion. The seminar was chaired by Brian Street, BALID's president.

Clinton Robinson, BALID's chair, introduced the day with a brief contextual note. BALID aimed to support literacy work in three areas:

- (1) understanding literacy,
- (2) assessing literacy,
- (3) promoting the acquisition of literacy.

Research at UK universities served area (1) – at eg the University of East Anglia (UEA), Kings College London, the University of Lancaster and the Institute of Education. The year's EFA Global Monitoring Report from Unesco (dated 2006) concentrated on literacy and would contribute to this area.

In area (2) the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) based in the Unesco Institute of Statistics (UIS) was developing fresh measures sensitised to qualitative issues and reflecting a view of literacy as a continuum of knowledge and skills.

Later speakers would provide examples of projects in area (3) assisted by British NGOs and universities. Additionally, Unesco had this year launched the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) in more than 30 low-income countries where large parts of the population cannot read and write as they would like.

Alan Rogers spoke next, describing the dates and themes of the Uppingham Seminars and the conferences and research projects of the UEA's Literacy and Development Group (<www.uea.ac.uk/dev/research/lit&dev>). Uppingham Seminars had been held in the 1990s grouped round the theme of International Literacy Year 1990 – Literacy in Development: People, Language, Power – held in London (1990), Reading (92) and Harare (95). In the present decade 7 seminars had been held: on Managing Diversity in Education (2000), on Social Exclusion (01), on Literacy and Livelihoods (02), on Urban Literacies (Delhi, 02), two on Measuring Literacy (03 and 04) which discussed the LAMP initiative by UIS, and one on Numeracy in Development (05). Overseas activities included an Urban Literacies project in India; work for Unesco on the Global Monitoring Report on Training of Trainers; work in Afghanistan on Productive Skills Training and Literacy, and in Pakistan on Women, Literacy and Citizens.

The UEA Group contained researchers from both the School of Development Studies and the School of Education. The Group had held three conferences recently (in 2003 on Making Literacy Count, in 04 on Gender in Adult Education and this year on Schooling of Literacies) and was planning an event in April 06 on Literacy, Identity and Social Change. Among its recent research

projects was one on Education for Rural People in sub-Saharan Africa and another (on the Benefits of Literacy) in support of the 2006 Global Monitoring Report.

Professor Rogers believed that the Seminars and the Group's work showed a shared interest in locating literacy within both (adult) education and lifeworlds, in focussing on "developing societies", and in challenging dominant paradigms by means of insights derived from ethnographic methods. He sensed some shifts in priorities and perceptions among donor agencies and governments: a new concentration on small businesses in place of livelihoods more generally, and literacy perceived as belonging administratively in Adult Basic Education and Training and conceptually as part of lifelong learning and so contributing to fuller citizenship. He commended Judy Kalman's statement (in *Urban Literacies*, 2005, p 296) that "literacy plays a large part in the construction and reconstruction of identities," but questioned whether an inadvertent effect of the Seminars and the Group's work, like that of others, might be to strengthen the iconic status of "literacy" and weaken social solidarity.

The next speaker was David Mallows of NRDC (the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy - <www.nrdc.org.uk>). NRDC is a research and development consortium of 10 English partners, including academic and government institutions, which was set up in 2002 by the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit at the DfES (Department for Education and Skills for England). In the fields of literacy, numeracy and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) NRDC aims to improve practice, inform policy and identify new areas for research, operating at the highest international standards but directing its work at English learners, institutions and practitioners. It has achieved effective links with its Scottish and Welsh equivalents as well as with the (British) Home Office, and is in close touch with counterparts elsewhere in the EU as well as in the USA and Australasia.

Apart from its annual reports it has issued one covering its first three years: *Three years on – what the research is saying*. Drawing particularly on John Bynner's studies of cohorts born in 1958 and in 1970, this points out that adults with entry levels of 1 and 2 (level 3 being roughly five GCSE passes or in the US one General Education level) are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion – to receive low pay in poor conditions of work, not to be members of any voluntary or community organisation and to lack political interest – and so less likely to seek to improve their skills and more likely to have children whose poor experience of school repeats their parents'. Government funding has however concentrated on those at level 3 and above, so that England has only limited experience of what may be more effective responses to the needs of people at levels 1 and 2. Here, the report suggests (on p 10), "the UK has much to learn from developing countries, (from programmes of) family and community literacy, conflict resolution, and embedded literacy which support economic activity and social well-being."

Sally Pritchard, the last speaker and International Programmes Manager for Education Action International (EAI - <www.education-action.org>), described some EAI programmes of this kind. EAI works in areas of recent conflict, mainly Uganda and Sudan at present but likely to include Sierra Leone and Palestine in future. These support family literacy, incorporate vocational training at later stages of community literacy programmes, and introduce into learning contexts the themes of peace and reconciliation.

The Family Learning projects in Uganda concentrate on making the link between primary school learning and parents' literacy skills and attitudes to schooling. Where education is not valued by

parents, children may not be encouraged to attend school or perform well and so may grow up into formally uneducated adults whose children repeat this cycle. EAI and its partners help parents and children to learn together but separately, using the same study topics. The results are encouraging: high enrolments in parents' classes, increased literacy and numeracy abilities among parents, "learning corners" within the home, improved school attendance particularly among girls whose fathers have participated in parent-child joint learning activities, and more visits to school by parents.

The programmes of EAI and its partners extend literacy training beyond reading and writing. They cover: health, to promote understanding of the prevention and treatment of common diseases; finance, for learning how to manage money, make use of banks and run a business; citizenship, for understanding rights and how to participate more fully in society; some vocational skills, such as tailoring and knitting.

The Queen of Peace Centre, set up in 1999 among the Acholi people at Gulu in Northern Uganda and now with two classroom blocks, has moved from initial work centred on agriculture, health and home economics to explicit integration of peace and reconciliation themes into the learning environment and local activism on behalf of adult learning.

EAI supports literacy also among refugee communities, specifically Sudanese refugees in Egypt, Kenya and Uganda. Here it helps partner organisations access grants and training for various activities, focussing on training for relevant literacy skills.

After the three speakers, discussion ranged over issues of macro context as well as micro purposes.

