

Adult Basic Education Research. An Introduction to the Topic

MICHAEL SCHEMMANN

Volume 42 of the *International Yearbook of Adult Education* is dedicated to Adult Basic Education Research. It is the second time that the International Yearbook focuses on this topic, since volume 20/21 in 1991/1992 addressed the topic “Literacy and Adult Basic Education in European Industrial Countries” (Knoll 1992). However, this time, the aim is to display on-going research on adult basic education. As such this volume presents current research questions, theoretical and methodological approaches as well as most recent empirical findings.

This introductory article will start off by giving an overview of the development and the discussion of the topic, focusing the political debate as well as research. Following, the outline of the concept of this year’s volume and the articles will be highlighted. The article will conclude with some remarks on our own account.

1 Brief history of the development of the programmatic debate and research on Adult Basic Education

When focusing on the institutionalization of literacy and adult basic education, the political debate and research as well as the national and international level have to be taken into account. In the following, a brief history of the institutionalization will be presented, but particularly focusing on the role of international agencies.

One of the key actors in this process is the “United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)” which started engaging in literacy work with its foundation in 1945. Literacy was considered a basis for participation in modern life. However, illiteracy was generally seen as a problem of so-called developing countries. It was at the beginning of the year 1979 in a meeting of representatives of the member states of the European Union that the Portuguese representative asked if there was a literacy problem in the EU (Schöfthaler 1992, p. 2). Most of the representatives and especially the German one denied this, not considering, that during the 1970s numerous local initiatives were founded in industrialized countries by teachers, social workers and psychologists to start literacy work (Steuten 2016, p. 18). As a consequence, loud protest was formulated and addressed to the government representatives. Both UNESCO and the German UNESCO Commission started working on the topic and helped to establish the topic of functional illiteracy in industrialized countries on the political agenda. What is more, as Schöfthaler points

out, it was made clear during this phase that the idea, that illiteracy was a problem of developing countries to which the industrialized countries had the solution, had come to an end (Schöffthaler 1992, p. 4).

1990 can be seen as the pivotal year for international efforts to strengthen programs for adult basic education. UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP and the Worldbank initiated the “World Conference on Education for All. Meeting Basic Learning Needs”. More than 1500 delegates from 155 countries adopted two documents: The “World Declaration on Education for All” as well as the “Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs” (UNESCO 1990). The Framework defines targets and goals as follows:

“Countries may wish to set their own targets for the 1990s in terms of the following proposed dimensions:

1. Expansion of early childhood care and developmental activities, including family and community interventions, especially for poor, disadvantaged and disabled children;
2. Universal access to, and completion of, primary education (or whatever higher level of education is considered as “basic”) by the year 2000;
3. Improvement in learning achievement such that an agreed percentage of an appropriate age cohort (e.g. 80 % of 14-year-olds) attains or surpasses a defined level of necessary learning achievement;
4. Reduction of the adult illiteracy rate (the appropriate age group to be determined in each country) to, say, one-half its 1990 level by the year 2000, with sufficient emphasis on female literacy to significantly reduce the current disparity between male and female illiteracy rates;
5. Expansion of provisions of basic education and training in other essential skills required by youth and adults, with program effectiveness assessed in terms of behavioural changes and impacts on health, employment and productivity;
6. Increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills and values required for better living and sound and sustainable development, made available through all education channels including the mass media, other forms of modern and traditional communication, and social action, with effectiveness assessed in terms of behavioural change” (UNESCO 1990, p. 3).

Politically, UNESCO also tried to point the way by proclaiming 1990 as International Literacy Year which re-emphasized the targets of the framework. But as a series of international comparative studies on literacy indicates, the ambitious goal of the reduction of the adult illiteracy rate was not achieved by 2000 and still has not been achieved (UNESCO 2015, p.135).

As regards research, a milestone was set in the 1990s by the “Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD)” and its study “International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)”. The study examined prose literacy, document literacy and quantitative literacy in more than 20 countries and also set a certain standard: “Level 3 is regarded by many experts as the minimum level of competence needed to cope

adequately with the complex demands of everyday life and work” (OECD/Statistics Canada 1997, S. 3). As was shown elsewhere, the effects of the partly dramatic and alarming findings for industrial countries on adult education policies were contingent (Schemmann 2007). The IALS methodologically paved the path for the PISA-studies (“Programme for International Student Assessment”), which were also carried out under the auspices of OECD and intended to measure 15-year-old students’ performance in mathematics, science, and reading. What is more, the PIAAC-study needs to be mentioned here: Published in 2013, the “Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies” assesses and analyzes adult skills. As such the domains of literacy, numeracy and problem solving are in focus. The survey is conducted in over 40 countries worldwide and is concerned with the 16 to 65-year-old adults (Rammstedt et al. 2013).

Coming back to the political agenda, it was again UNESCO launching the “United Nations Literacy Decade” in 2003 (United Nations 2003). What is more, the World Education Forum in Dakar integrated the efforts around literacy and adult basic education into the “Education for All”-initiative (UNESCO 2000). One of the central goals was again to reduce the illiteracy rate by half and to establish basic adult education for all as a right (Lenhart 2018, p. 14). This initiative also had some resonance on the German national level. The German education policy established a funding scheme for literacy and adult basic education projects in 2006. All in all, more than 100 projects in research and development were to be funded, amongst them an empirical study called “leo. – Level-One Study”, analyzing literacy rates among the German-speaking population in Germany. As opposed to PIAAC or IALS, LEO focuses on the lowest competence level, the so-called level one (Grotlüschen & Riekmann 2012). From 2012 to 2016 Germany ran a National Strategy for Literacy and adult basic education and in 2016 the so-called “AlphaDekade 2016–2026” (BMBF & KMK 2016) was launched with the overall goal of reducing functional literacy in Germany and enhancing the levels of adult basic education.

All in all, it can be stated that there has been an interplay between policy and research on adult basic education, which made sure that it remained both on international as well as national political agendas.

2 On the concept and the individual contributions

When putting the articles for volume 42 of the International Yearbook of Adult Education together, the main intention was to analyze the topic of “Adult Basic Education” based on the understanding of adult education as a multilevel system. Thus, this volume displays articles on the macro, meso and micro level. At the same time, multiple facets of the topic were included in order to develop a complex picture of the research carried out on adult basic education. As such the aspects of policy, diagnosis, teaching and learning as well as teaching competencies were considered.

The article *Practices and Competencies – Evidence from an Adult Literacy Survey in Germany* by Anke Grotlüschen, Klaus Buddeberg, Gregor Dutz, Lisanne Heilmann and Christopher Stammer is based on data of the LEO-study 2018. Thus, the article reports data on the proportion of low literate adults among the population between 18 and 64. What is more, the article widens the perspective towards an understanding of literacy represented by practices. As such, the relationship between levels of literacy and the usage of certain specific practices is focused on as well. As a theoretical point of reference, the article draws on work from the New Literacy Studies.

Uwe Gartenschläger and Ounpheng Khammang focus on the political dimension of adult basic education. They put the process of developing and adopting a policy of Lifelong Learning in Lao PDR to the centre of their analysis. *The Process of Adopting a Lifelong Learning Decree in Laos* starts by outlining the general social and economic situation as a framework for educational policy. What is more, the special role of the “Deutscher Volkshochschulverband (DVV International)” as a development aid organization and its activities in Lao is discussed. At the heart of the analysis, it focuses on the motivation and potential benefits as well as the process of drafting a Lifelong Learning Decree. Thus, the article contributes to a further understanding of the policy development for Lifelong Learning and adult basic education on a national level.

The article *Effects of Work-Oriented Adult Basic Education Trainings: Addressing Employee’s Competencies across Sectors* by Dennis Klinkhammer and Michael Schemmann focuses on effects of work-oriented adult basic education trainings in different industrial sectors. It is based on the research project “ABAG²” funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The study draws on a longitudinal self-assessment of the participants and differentiates various dimensions of competence. Furthermore, the study referred to individual preferences, satisfaction with the work situation and with work-related trainings.

The article *Professionalization of Teachers in Work-Oriented Literacy and Adult Basic Education. Process Orientation as a Special Competence Requirement of Teachers* by Julia Koller and Carolin Radtke takes its starting point in the assumption that the field of work-oriented adult basic education constitutes a specific framework, which also has an impact on the competencies required by the teaching staff in this field. Thus, the article aims at identifying these special competence requirements by carrying out an exploratory study which was also part of the research project “ABAG²”. The study employs a multi-perspective analytical concept including the perspective of the teaching staff, stakeholders in companies as well as participants. The article highlights that process orientation and the focus on addressees are distinct competencies for the field of adult basic education but as well for adult education in general.

Finally, Irit Bar-Kochva, Réka Vágvolgyi and Alexander Bulajic focus on low literacy skills in adulthood, which have been associated mainly with a difficulty in reading comprehension. In the article *The Abilities and Deficits in Reading and Writing of Low Literate Adults* they pose the question whether the difficulty of low literate adults is restricted to reading comprehension or whether deficits can be traced back to the more basic reading and writing skills. The article analyzes previously published em-

pirical studies and highlights deficits not only in reading comprehension, but also in the very basic components of reading and writing such as decoding, orthographic knowledge, word recognition and spelling, in addition to deficits in reading fluency. What is more, the article also indicates to a large variance within adults participating in basic education and literacy classes, as a considerable proportion of those adults do not exhibit extreme deficits across the different reading and writing components.

Next to the thematic articles this year's volume of the *International Yearbook of Adult Education* also comprises one article in the section Miscellaneous. In 2019 many of the German "Volkshochschulen (VHS)" celebrate the 100th anniversary of their foundation in 1919 since it was in article 148 of the constitution of Weimar that adult education was acknowledged as a public responsibility. *Annabel Jenner* takes this anniversary in her article with the title *Potenziale und methodische Herausforderungen längsschnittlicher Programmanalysen. Ein Diskussionsbeitrag anlässlich des 100-jährigen Jubiläums der Volkshochschulen (Potentials and Methodological Challenges within Longitudinal Program Analysis. A Discussion in the Light of the Centenary of "Volkshochschulen")* as a starting point and introduces a combined teaching and research project which was conducted by a group of university students, carrying out an empirical analysis of programs of a "Volkshochschule" from 1919 until 2017. The article discusses the specific methodological potentials and challenges the method of program analysis brings along when applying it in a historical longitudinal study over a period of a century. Furthermore, genuine potentials for research drawing on the method of program analysis are highlighted.

3 On our own Account

Finally, a heartfelt thanks goes to all actors who contributed to this year's volume of the *International Yearbook of Adult Education*. As such, a thank you goes to all authors of contributions, who prepared their manuscripts within the deadlines. It guaranteed that the Yearbook could be published in time. What is more, a thank you is to be said to the reviewers of the articles and to the authors of the review section.

Once again, my personal thanks go to *Lisa Breyer* who runs the editorial department of the *International Yearbook of Adult Education*. Her engagement and her constant effort to improve the quality of processes guarantee the standard of the *International Yearbook of Adult Education*. Unfortunately, *Lisa Breyer* will leave the editorial department in 2019. I would like to express my gratitude for her engagement in the last six years and wish her all the best for her professional and personal future.

Volume 43 of the *International Yearbook of Adult Education* will focus on the topic "Researching and Analyzing Adult Education Policies". We welcome contributions to this volume as well as contributions to the sections Miscellaneous and Reviews.

References

- BMBF & KMK (2016). *Grundsatzpapier zur Nationalen Dekade für Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung 2016–2026. Den funktionalen Analphabetismus in Deutschland verringern und das Grundbildungsniveau erhöhen*. Available at: https://www.alphadekade.de/files/01_Grundsatzpapier%20zur%20Nationalen%20Dekade%20Alphabetisierung%20und%20Grundbildung_final.pdf (Access on: July 30th 2019).
- Grotlüschen, A. & Riekmann, W. (2012). *Funktionaler Analphabetismus in Deutschland. Ergebnisse der ersten leo. – Level-One Studie*. Münster: Waxmann.
- Knoll, J. H. (Ed.) (1992). *International Yearbook of Adult Education 19/20. Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung Erwachsener in europäischen Industriestaaten*. Köln: Böhlau.
- OECD/Statistics Canada (1997). *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society. Further Results from the International Adult Literacy Survey*. Paris: OECD.
- Rammstedt, B., Ackermann, D., Helmschrott, S., Klaukien, A., Maehler, D., Martin, S., Massing, N. & Zabal, A. (2013). *Grundlegende Kompetenzen Erwachsener im internationalen Vergleich. Ergebnisse von PIAAC 2012*. Münster: Waxmann. Available at: https://www.bmbf.de/files/PIAAC_Ebook.pdf (Access on: July 30th 2019).
- Schöffthaler, T. (1992). Das Internationale Alphabetisierungsjahr 1990 – eine Bilanz aus Sicht der Deutschen UNESCO-Kommission. In: Knoll, J. H. (Ed.). *International Yearbook of Adult Education 19/20. Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung Erwachsener in europäischen Industriestaaten*, pp. 1–10. Köln: Böhlau.
- Steuten, U. (2016). Erwachsenenalphabetisierung in Deutschland. In: Löffler, C. & Korfkamp, J. (Eds.). *Handbuch zur Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung Erwachsener*, pp. 13–32. Münster: Waxmann.
- UNESCO (1990). *World Declaration on Education for All and Framework for Action to meet Basic Learning Needs. Adopted by the World Conference on Education for All Meeting Basic Learning Needs. Jomtien, Thailand, 5–9 March 1990*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at: http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/JOMTIE_E.PDF (Access on: July 30th 2019).
- UNESCO (2000). *The Dakar Framework for Action. Education for All: Meeting our collective commitments*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000121147> (Access on: July 30th 2019).
- UNESCO (2015). *EFA Global Monitoring Report. Education for All 2000–2015: Achievements and Challenges*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000232205> (Access on: July 30th 2019).
- United Nations (2003). *United Nations Literacy Decade (2003–2012) launched at New York Headquarters*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2003/obv322.doc.htm> (Access on: July 30th 2019).

Author

Prof. Dr. Michael Schemmann is Professor of Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Cologne. His research interests concern structural developments in continuing education, research on organizations of adult education and internationally comparative adult education research.

Contact

Universität zu Köln, Humanwissenschaftliche Fakultät, Department Erziehungs- und Sozialwissenschaften, Professur für Erwachsenenbildung/Weiterbildung, Innere Kanalstraße 15, 50823 Köln, Germany
michael.schemmann@uni-koeln.de