

## BEING AN ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION STUDENT IN KENYA

**John Muiru**

Kenyatta University (formerly)

**Gary N. McLean**

University of Minnesota

### Abstract

*The focus of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was the experience of being an adult literacy education student in Kenya. Ten adult literacy education students in three learning centres were interviewed. A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts uncovered sixteen common themes in three broad categories: reasons for participating; effects of literacy in the daily lives of students; and challenges students encountered.*

### Résumé

*Cette étude herméneutique phénoménologique avait pour but d'analyser les programmes d'alphabétisation des adultes au Kenya. Dix apprenants adultes provenant de trois centres d'alphabétisation ont été interrogés. Une analyse thématique des contenus d'entrevue a permis de dégager seize thèmes communs regroupés en trois catégories: les raisons motivant la participation, l'impact de l'alphabétisation au quotidien et les défis rencontrés.*

Illiteracy is a worldwide problem. Even in the United States and Canada, despite decades of compulsory school attendance, the problem persists. The problem of illiteracy is even more acute in developing countries like Kenya. Some 10.5 million Kenyans—35% of the population—are illiterate (Odalo, 2000). With such a high rate of illiteracy, it is not possible to prepare all citizens to take responsibility for the massive work demanded by nation building. It also seems unlikely with this level of illiteracy that the Kenyan government will achieve its goals to alleviate poverty and achieve the status of a newly industrialized nation by 2020. To compete internationally, adapt to

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new technologies, and attain higher levels of efficiency and productivity, Kenya requires a highly literate populace (OECD, 2000).

This hermeneutic phenomenological study investigated the experience of being an adult literacy education student in Kenya in Murang'a District. It explored the question: What is it like to be an adult literacy education student in Kenya?

Becoming literate is no small task for most adults. "It requires sacrifices in terms of time and money, even a certain humbling of oneself in order to dare to try something totally new in which one is not at all certain of success" (Fagerberg-Diallo, 2002, p. 49). It is, therefore, important that the stories be told of these people who are working in such difficult circumstances to become literate. Further, the fight against illiteracy in Kenya is far from over. With each passing day, it is becoming increasingly difficult to eliminate illiteracy. The country is currently bogged down by problems of poverty, disease, ignorance, corruption, drought, and poor political leadership. This study offers insights into the lived world of adult literacy. It highlights the lived experience—struggles, pains, hopes, expectations, frustrations, joys, successes and failures—of some adult learners in their efforts to become literate.

While the results of this study cannot be generalized to all adult literacy students in Kenya, it is important for planners and providers of adult literacy education to know what experiences some learners go through. This will help them to tailor adult literacy programs to the needs and interests of students.

### **Previous Research**

According to UNESCO (1997), adult literacy is the key to the 21st century. Among the challenges to which adult literacy should contribute are alleviating poverty, consolidating democratic processes, and strengthening and protecting human rights. However, these goals will not be achieved as long as mass illiteracy persists.

Literacy has also become an increasingly important topic of discussion around the world. UNESCO declared 1990 as International Literacy Year. It estimated that by 2000 the total number of illiterates in the world would surpass one billion, or about one-third of the adult world population, and that four of ten children in developing countries would not complete primary education (Jennings, 1991). According to Mulira (1975), no country can develop without a highly literate populace—"Illiteracy is a brake on economic and social development" (p. 94).

A well-educated and trained person is an asset to effective management and utilization of resources for increased productivity (Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Finance & Planning, 2002a). Literacy is one of the basic requirements that would enable the majority of Kenyans to break out of the cycle of disease, ignorance and poverty. According to UNESCO (1997), literacy empowers people, both as individuals and as members of their communities. It opens up avenues of communication, makes possible the acquisition of new skills, promotes self-respect, and expands personal choice. It is an essential precondition for effective participation in political and social institutions and for exercising most other human and legal rights. According to Fordham (1983), "If all countries of the world are to move forward from stagnation, recession, and despair, they will need to generate a new climate of urgency for literacy" (p. 12).

At the individual level, research in adult literacy (Buttaro & King, 2001; Carns, 1995; King, 2000) has suggested that learners choose to attend programs to meet a variety of goals. Chief among these are to increase employability; to become eligible for promotion; to be able to read for a particular purpose, such as reading the Bible or notes from school; and to become more active in the education of one's children.

Fujisawa (2001) found that learners acquired literacy to gain more knowledge and skills that were useful in their daily lives. In another study done in Kenya by Carron, Mwiria, and Righa (1989), learners said that they joined the literacy program because of the simple desire to learn how to read, write, and do simple calculations. However, the researchers found that the main driving force behind the considerable efforts that adults made to attend literacy classes regularly was the strong desire to master basic communication skills that would allow them to become part of mainstream society. Malicky and Norma (1994) also reported that learners wanted to become more independent, meet family obligations, and meet people.

However, there are many deterrents to adult literacy. In Kenya, the following have been identified as some of the most common deterrents: lack of family or peer support, poverty, gender bias, time constraints, lack of a literacy environment, unemployment, and under-qualified teachers (Ayot, 1995; Carron et al., 1989; Kamau, 1989; Kaugi, 1993; Nzioka, 1983; Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Finance & Planning, 2002b).

### Methods

This is a hermeneutic phenomenological study of the lived experience of being an adult literacy education student in Kenya. Hermeneutic phenomenological research is interested in the human world as we find it in all its variegated aspects (van Manen, 1997). It seeks to meet human beings—men, women, children—where they are naturally engaged in their worlds. Hermeneutic phenomenology has roots in two separate philosophical movements—hermeneutics and phenomenology.

According to Palmer (1969), hermeneutics means to interpret—to make familiar, present, comprehensible—a situation or something foreign; strange; or separated in time, space, language or experience. “The task of interpretation must be to make something that is unfamiliar, distant, and obscure in meaning into something real, near, and intelligible” (p. 14). He further noted that interpretation refers to three different matters: oral recitation, reasonable explanation, and translation from another language. In all three cases, something requiring representation, explanation, or translation is somehow brought to understanding—is interpreted. In most cases, literary interpretation involves two of these processes and often a third. In this study, all three processes were used to understand the experience of being an adult literacy education student in Kenya.

Giorgi (1997) saw phenomenology in its most comprehensive sense as the totality of lived experiences that belong to a person. In other words, phenomenology is the study of the lifeworld—the world as we immediately experience it, pre-reflectively, rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it. The concept of everyday life is fundamental to phenomenology. “Phenomenology aims to come to deeper understanding of what persons go through as they conduct their day-to-day life in the language of everyday life” (Hultgren, 1989, p. 50). Phenomenology asks, “What is this or that kind of experience like?” (van Manen, 1997, p. 9). Phenomenology does not deal with physical experience but with the meaning of that experience.

### Interviews

In this study, data were collected from students who were enrolled in an adult literacy program. Ten students from three learning centers in Murang'a District were interviewed. According to Polkinghorne (1989), because the purpose of phenomenological research is to hear individual stories and experiences, and generalization is not the goal, such research has value even with only one participant. Kvale (1996) observed, “Technically, the qualitative research interview is semi-structured: It is neither an open

conversation nor a highly structured questionnaire...the interviewer leads the subject towards certain themes, but not to certain opinions about these themes" (pp. 27-34). To avoid leading the interviewees to certain answers, the senior author did not have an interview schedule. Instead, he had one broad and open-ended question on the learner's experience of being an adult literacy education student. Follow-up questions were based on the interviewees' responses. Interviewees were asked to elaborate on their answers or make clear whatever was not clear.

The interviews were conducted in the Kikuyu language. After the interviews, the texts were transcribed and then translated into English. Translation is a special form of the basic interpretive process of bringing to understanding what is foreign or strange into a medium that the reader can understand. The problem with transcribing and translating a text is that language loses some of its expressive power. "Oral words seem to have an almost magical power but in becoming visual images they lose much of this power" (Palmer, 1969, p. 16).

### ***Data Analysis***

Giorgi's (1997) method of data analysis was used in this study. He said that there are three basic steps in analyzing phenomenological data: read through the data, break down the data into parts, and synthesize or summarize the data, so it can be communicated to the scholarly community.

***Read through the data.*** After the transcription and translation, the texts were read and reread carefully to give the researcher a global sense of the data to determine how the parts are constituted. Giorgi (1997) said that the phenomenological approach is holistic, and so one would have to read through all of the data before beginning any analysis. It is the purpose of the subsequent steps to highlight what is relevant. Dahlberg et al. (2001) noted that the beginning of data analysis is a familiarizing phase, which means that the researcher reads the whole text a number of times to get a sense of it as a whole. "When this reading is completed, the researcher should easily be able to briefly articulate the overall theme of a particular text" (p. 187). She further stated that the importance of this initial reading should not be underestimated because it gives the researcher a sense of the whole material before examining the parts. "The sense of the whole helps the researcher to find her/his way through the data" (p.187).

***Break down the data into parts.*** After the initial readings, the data were reread carefully several times and divided into meaning units. Since one

cannot analyze all of a text at once, and to gain a deeper understanding of the data, the text must be divided into smaller segments, preferably in relation to the meaning of the parts, that is, the meaning units (Dahlberg et al., 2001). Giorgi (1997) observed that the meaning units are formed by a slower rereading of the texts, and each time the researcher experiences a transition in meaning in the description, he or she marks the place and continues to read until the next meaning unit is discriminated, and so on.

Since phenomenology is interested in meanings, the basis of the division into parts is meaning discrimination. The end of this step is a series of meaning units. "As one reads and rereads the texts, similarities and differences in meaning are observed and in this way a pattern of understanding emerges" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 247). The next reading is focused on the meaning units, in order to understand the meaning of every unit and to come up with common themes.

*Synthesize or summarize the data.* Finally, the texts were read and reread carefully, and compared with each other to identify common themes unique to the experience of being an adult literacy education student in Kenya. Dahlberg et al. (2001) observed that analysis of data in phenomenological research has a tripartite structure and is described as a movement between whole-parts-whole. She said that it is imperative that each part be understood in terms of the whole, but also that the whole be understood in terms of the parts. "It is always a question of seeing the relationships in the text and carrying on a dialogue with it" (p. 185).

After analyzing the texts, the senior author came up with sixteen themes describing the experience of being an adult literacy student in Kenya. These themes were considered to be essential to the experience. They were grouped into three broad categories: reasons for participating in the program, effects of literacy in the daily lives of students, and challenges students encountered in their efforts to become literate.

### **Reasons for Participating in Adult Literacy Education**

Five themes were identified explaining why learners participated in adult literacy programs in Kenya: be able to read, write, and compute; have a second chance to acquire education; acquire knowledge and skills with immediate application; integrate into the community; and interact socially.

#### ***Be Able to Read, Write, and Compute***

Participants said that their main objective for joining the program was their desire to know how to read, write, and do simple calculations. As far as reading was concerned, it did not matter what they were able to read. Some



participants wanted to be able to read the local newspapers, letters from family members and friends, instructions on medicines or directions when traveling. For some participants, ability to read religious books was crucial. As one participant explained,

I joined this [literacy] program in order to learn how to read and write. I am a Catholic, and knowing how to read and write was important for me. It made it easy for me to attend catechism classes. In actual fact, I did most of the preparation for baptism on my own since I could read. I have now been baptized. My wife was also baptized soon after me. I thank God for helping me this much.

Participants also recognized the importance of being able to write. Some participants wanted to know how to write their names. They said that they were tired of thumb printing documents [done with people who cannot sign their names] whenever they went to an office or bank. One participant pointed out that, "Before I joined the group [class], I was illiterate. I didn't know how to hold a pen. But I wanted to know how to read and write. Today, I am able to sign documents, and I have opened a bank account."

Some participants wanted to gain computational skills that would help them run a business. One participant said: I need to improve on my numerical skills...be able to calculate how much I have spent on the merchandise and what my profit is.

Another participant said that he needed to know how to measure using the metric system. In school he had learned to use the old measuring system of pounds, yards, and gallons. Once the metric system was introduced, he was at a loss what to do.

### ***Have a Second Chance to Acquire Education***

For many participants, the main driving force for participating in an adult literacy program was the need to acquire more education. They attended school in their youth, but, for various reasons, they did not complete primary school or acquire as much education as they wished. Therefore, they joined the adult literacy program to get the education they missed in their youth. As one participant noted, "This is not the first time that I am going to school. I went to school a long time ago, but I didn't receive as much education as I wanted. To me, adult literacy education was a good opportunity to further my education."

Another participant said he joined the adult literacy program because he dropped out of regular school prematurely because of poverty:

I went to school up to grade 4; then my father died in 1966. By then I was still young. My mother did not have resources to enable me to continue with schooling. So I had to drop out. But today, I am happy we have a teacher, and I feel obliged to utilize the available opportunity to continue with my education. I know that if I continue attending classes I will get a good education, and I will be like those who went to school in their youth. Given an opportunity, I will study hard, day and night, until I get well educated.

Some participants expressed the desire to study and become professionals. As one participant said: My wish is to continue with learning. I want to learn more and more and advance to higher stages. I have heard of a woman who studied in this program up through university, and she eventually went abroad for further studies. I want to be like her. [laughter] I will never give up. Even after learning how to read and write, I will still continue for I know education has no end.

#### *Acquire Knowledge and Skills with Immediate Application*

Participants wanted to acquire knowledge and skills with immediate application. They wanted the adult literacy program to help them solve their problems, earn a living, and improve their family well-being. Hence, most participants emphasized income generating projects run by their classes. They wanted more emphasis placed on development-related projects; that is, projects that will generate money for their group (class), like beekeeping, poultry keeping, and goat keeping. "If you have no money and you are hungry, you can't be attentive in class."

For some participants learning to read and write was important, but it was not enough. They also expected the literacy program to provide them with practical skills. Participants noted that it was the practical things they did and learned in class that kept their group going. One participant said,

Sincerely speaking, it is the practical things we learn and do that have kept our group going and makes people come to class. A good example is our agricultural demonstration plot; what we learn there, we practice at home in our shambas [small plots of land under cultivation]. So, we start with theory and then try to put what we have learned into practice.

Participants also wanted to learn skills to help them run their businesses. One participant wanted skills that would help him handle his business customers, especially the younger generation:

As a businessman, I needed skills on how to handle different customers. When I was doing casual jobs, I used to follow my employer's



instructions and guidance. But now, I am on my own, and I needed to know how to handle my customers and cope with the young generation. That is why I joined the adult education literacy class.

### *Integrate into the Community*

Another objective for participants joining the adult literacy program was to integrate into their communities. Participants said that they could not integrate into their communities as long as they were deficient in literacy skills. One participant said that he joined the program so he could read religious books like other Christians in his congregation. He wanted to end his isolation resulting from his inability to read.

Another participant noted that being literate had made her less fearful: "Now I can go to any office on my own since I can read the numbers on the doors. I am no longer afraid of going to offices. The fear has been lifted from my heart. Before, I couldn't do that."

Learning the local language was important for participants' integration into the community. One participant joined the adult literacy program to learn Kikuyu so that she could communicate effectively with members of the community.

### *Interact Socially*

Finally, participants joined the adult literacy education program because they wanted to interact with other people. Participants wanted to keep in touch with others so they would not lag behind in terms of ideas and knowledge. One participant said, "The program helps me to keep informed of what other people are doing. I don't want to be left behind."

Participants also helped each other in times of need. One participant said that she was happy fellow learners were able to help materially and emotionally when she lost her daughter and when their class chairlady died.

Attending literacy classes also helped participants relieve stress and relax. Most participants came to class after doing most of their domestic chores. They were, therefore, tired and stressed. They said that they felt relieved taking a break from backbreaking chores to interact with other like-minded people: "In my class, we exchange ideas and give each other moral support. By the time I go home, I am a relaxed person. Even if I had difficulties at home, they don't burden me any more."

Another participant added, "When I come to class, I socialize with other women, and even if I was in a bad mood, it goes away. By the time I go

home, I am relaxed and even if I had differed with my husband, I am able to forget all that."

Being in the adult literacy program also provided participants an opportunity to travel, meet old friends, and make new ones. Participants said that, during national holidays and adult literacy day celebrations, they traveled to the district headquarters to entertain guests and in the process had a chance to meet old friends and make new ones.

### **Effects of Literacy in the Daily Lives of Students**

Three themes were identified related to the effects of literacy on the students' daily lives: ability to read, write, and compute; acquisition of useful skills; and recognition in their communities.

#### ***Ability to Write, Read, and Compute***

Participants reported that joining the adult literacy education program had changed their lives dramatically for the better. Many of them were happy that they did not have to rely on others to write, read, and compute. One participant said,

I like adult literacy education. Before I joined this program, I didn't know how to write my name. I didn't know how to write [participant's name]. But now I do. I don't need to thumb print documents anymore, since I now know how to sign my name.

The program was also helping participants to brush up on their writing skills:

Women sometimes go for a long time without practicing their literacy skills, and it is easy to lose them. Through this program I have been able to brush up on my writing skills. I had almost forgotten how to write a letter. But now I am back in class and practicing again.

Being able to read helped participants keep informed about what was going on around them and in the world. They could read and get information on their own instead of relying on other people: "I like reading newspapers. I read even old newspapers, despite news being stale. It helps me to keep informed of what is going on in the country and the world."

Another participant said, "I can read Taifa Leo [a local Kiswahili newspaper] on my own. Isn't that good news?"

One participant said that she was happy she was fluent in reading and speaking Kikuyu:

I am happy with my progress. This has enabled me to be an active church member. On several occasions I have been selected to do the Sunday

mass Bible reading. When I am asked to do that, I tease people that I am a foreigner, and I don't know how to read Kikuyu [laughter]. But they tell me they have heard me read, and I read better than the locals.

Ability to do simple computations helped participants become better farmers. One participant said he was now able to know how much money he had made from his coffee crop. Another participant said that her computation skills were helping her in her hawking business: "I use my computation skills in doing my business. For example, if I buy vegetables for Kshs 100, after sales, I am able to calculate my profit."

Participants also reported that their literacy skills were enabling them to help people around them: "I am able to help my son, who is in standard 6, with homework."

Another participant added, "I have children who are going to school. My first born is in standard 5, and the second born is in standard 4. They come back from school with homework every day, and I have to assist them to do it."

One participant reported that her literacy skills had helped her protect the family property after her husband died: "My husband passed away in 1998. He had a carpentry workshop, and he had employed my brother-in-law. The latter wanted to swindle me and inherit all the money and the workshop. But due to my education, I was able to prevent that from happening."

### *Acquisition of Other Useful Skills*

Participants were happy that they had acquired other useful skills through the adult literacy program. Participants reported having gained skills in farming, leadership, cookery, management, business, and so on. Many participants said they had learned modern farming methods through the literacy program: "I always practice what we learn in class. I have learned modern methods of farming. Some time back, I was awarded a panga [large chopping knife used by workers], a hoe, and a 10 kilogram bag of fertilizer for practicing modern farming methods."

Participants were particularly excited about organic farming. They were happy they could grow food without using expensive fertilizers.

Participants also reported that they were able to prepare better meals for their families, and they had also learned the importance of eating a balanced diet: "Sometimes we grow food in our shambas, and we don't know its importance. Since I enrolled in the literacy program, I have learned about the various food uses."

Another participant said that she was able to cook better now because she could plan ahead for her cooking.

Participants reported that, because they had a better understanding of their environment, they were better able to conserve: "When we come to class, we are taught how to conserve our environment. We have to dispose of waste in the right way."

### ***Recognition in Their Communities***

The study participants said that, since they had learned how to read and write, their status within their communities had been elevated. People in their communities looked to them for leadership; they were elected to several leadership positions in the church, politics, and women's groups. They were also role models in their communities: "When I learn something new in class and implement it at home, people are happy about it, and they also try to learn from me. They praise my effort."

One participant said that people in his community were looking to him for leadership as he could now read and write. Another participant said, "I am a women's group leader. I lead about thirty members, and I am able to do that because I have gained the necessary skills from this program."

### **Challenges Students Encountered in Their Effort to Become Literate**

Eight themes related to the challenges the students encountered in their efforts to become literate were identified: poverty, lack of support, feeling of being too old, time factor, gender bias, knowledge not applicable, lack of motivation, and under-qualified teachers.

#### ***Poverty***

Many participants said that they did not have regular incomes, and they earned their living by working in their shambas [small plots of land under cultivation]. Occasionally, they got part-time jobs. However, they were not making enough money to make ends meet. They felt that they were really poor, and this affected their progress. For instance, they could not afford to buy learning materials like books, pens, and so on. One participant said, "Sometimes I want to buy books, but they are so expensive these days. To make progress, you have to buy textbooks. In a subject like Kiswahili, you have to practice reading on your own, and these books are expensive."

Another participant acknowledged that poverty was a big problem for him, and his class attendance was irregular because he had to spend a lot of time trying to earn a living from doing casual jobs and running a small business. Many participants said that they were forced to choose between

buying learning resources for themselves and their children. And because the money was not enough, they ended up buying learning materials for their children.

### ***Lack of Support***

Participants reported lack of support as one of the challenges they faced in their efforts to become literate. There was lack of support from family, community, and the government. Family support is important. One participant reported that her husband was not happy when she left people working in their shamba to attend classes:

It is hard for me to come to class and do all the work at home. I have to pick coffee and attend classes. Sometimes I have casual workers picking coffee in our shamba, and it is hard to leave them unsupervised. My husband is not happy when there is so much to be done at home, and I have to be away attending classes. He worries about work being left undone. Sometimes I have to sneak away from home to attend classes. I know the benefits of literacy, and I have to do everything possible to attend classes.

Community support was also important. However, in some cases, it was not forthcoming. Participants said that many people did not understand what they did in the adult literacy program, and they considered it a waste of time.

Participants also lamented the lack of government—especially local government—support. One participant reported that their class income-generating project collapsed because of lack of local government support. Participants also felt that they were not getting support from the Department of Adult Education. They felt that the department had abandoned them because their teachers were not being paid their honorarium. To make matters worse, the pay was so little that they could not understand why the government could not pay.

### ***Feeling of Being Too Old***

Participants' ages ranged from the mid-20s to 60s. Most of them reported feeling too old to juggle work, family and studies. As one participant said, "Right now, I am 53. I have to work to support my family and myself. Juggling work, family and studies is not easy."

Participants also felt that they were too old to benefit from adult literacy education. They felt that, at their advanced age, it was difficult to find secure

jobs. Consequently, they considered learning academic subjects less important. As one participant lamented,

My age does not allow me to continue with academic education. I wonder why I should continue with academic education! Even if I did, after 3 years, I will be 50 years old; who can hire me for a job at that age? So, my main interest now is with any educational activities related to development. That is something applicable in my day-to-day life...like how to make the best use of my small piece of land for maximum return, how to prepare a balanced diet for my children, and so on.

### *Time Factor*

Learning is time consuming. And it cannot be rushed: "Unlike digging in a garden, you can't learn everything in a day or two. Learning takes time."

This realization was evident in the interviews with most participants. However, time was scarce and was one of the greatest barriers to their efforts to become literate. As peasant farmers and small business people, participants were too busy trying to earn a living and take care of their dependents. As a result, they did not have adequate time to devote to their classes. One participant said,

I don't like missing classes. If it were not for having too many commitments, I wouldn't miss any classes. Right now, my daughter is sick. I took her to the district hospital three days ago, and she was admitted. I have to provide care for her. This is also the harvesting season, and I have to harvest my maize before the next rainy season starts. If I don't harvest my maize now, it will be ruined by rain. However, I always attend classes whenever I can because I like what we learn, and I have gained a lot from this program. This explains why I came back after being away for about ten years.

The problem of lack of time was made worse by time wastage. The teachers and students were never punctual and ended up wasting a lot of time.

### *Gender Bias*

Many participants raised issues related to gender. They felt disadvantaged in their effort to become literate because they were female. They were overburdened with domestic chores and other responsibilities. For instance, they had to walk long distances to fetch water, look for food, cook for their families, care for children, and so on. One participant noted, "Education is important, but for us women, we have too many responsibilities."



All of these responsibilities inhibited women participants' chances of making progress in adult literacy. This state of affairs was made worse by the fact that women were disadvantaged from a young age. For some participants, their parents never sent them to school because they were women. Some women went to school but could not complete primary education due to teenage pregnancy. One participant said, "I became pregnant in grade 7. I had to drop out of school."

### *Knowledge Gained Not Applicable*

Participants reported that they were not able to put the knowledge gained in the adult literacy program into practice. For instance, one participant noted how they were taught to conserve the environment, but it was difficult to put into practice what they were taught. Another participant said that they were taught how to cook and bake different foods, but she could not apply the knowledge due to lack of electricity at home and the necessary equipment: "I am not able to utilize all the skills I learn in class. Such things as baking are a problem. At home I have no electricity and no oven. So, I can't bake bread at home."

Poverty prevented participants from using knowledge gained in class. Participants noted that, since they joined the adult literacy program, they had learned a lot about nutrition, especially the importance of eating a balanced diet. But they could not afford to feed their children a balanced diet.

### *Lack of Motivation*

There was low morale among participants. For instance, they reported that they were not motivated to continue with adult literacy classes due to lack of structure in the program. They were all grouped together in one class and taught the same things. Some participants had been taught the same things for over ten years. There was nothing challenging in the program, and it was a matter of doing the same things over and over again. As a result, they were not learning anything new or adding to their knowledge. They felt that they were wasting their time by learning the same things over and over again.

One participant blamed the Department of Adult Education for not creating enough program structure and enabling students to advance to higher grades. This participant indicated that she had been sitting for the same proficiency exams for the last 14 years.

Some participants were further demoralized by the fact that they did not see any prospects of getting a job after graduating with a literacy proficiency

certificate. It was a kind of dead end. The Ministry of Labour and Human Resource Development was not willing to help them get jobs after graduation.

### ***Under-qualified Teachers***

Participants were concerned about the competence of the instructors in the program. To many participants, the teachers were not doing a good job. Their progress was being hindered by the teacher's incompetence. They complained that the teachers were barely literate, not innovative, unable to teach most subjects or guide them in their income generating projects, and unwilling to make arrangements for them to be offered advanced classes. One participant said that he had reminded the teacher about the issue several times until he gave up. He saw the teacher as a hindrance to his progress: "The problem is with the teacher. He has not bothered to go to the district office to make arrangements for us to proceed to higher levels."

The adult literacy classes were also involved in development projects. The teachers were supposed to guide their students in initiating viable projects. But most participants complained that the teachers lacked leadership skills.

### **Recommendations for Planners and Providers of Adult Literacy**

Despite the efforts made by the government, international bodies, communities, and individuals, illiteracy continues to be a problem in Kenya. There are many deterrents to participation in adult literacy programs, such as poverty; under-qualified teachers; time constraints; knowledge gained not being applicable; low motivation; lack of resources, family or peer support; and so on. In order to reduce the levels of illiteracy, a multi-faceted approach to the problem is required.

But, according to van Manen (1997), phenomenology does not allow empirical generalization. "The tendency to generalize may prevent us from developing understandings that remain focused on the uniqueness of human experience" (p. 22). However, planners and providers of adult literacy education in Kenya (and, perhaps, other parts of the world) might find the following recommendations helpful.

It was noted in this study that poverty continues to be one of the main causes of illiteracy. Most of the research participants were peasant farmers eking out a living from working in their shambas. They reported that they were not making enough money to meet their basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter. Consequently, the study participants spent most of their time trying to earn a living and had little time to spare for their studies. As

observed by Fagerberg-Diallo (2002), it is hard to study when you do not know where the next meal will come from. Thus, if in-roads are to be made in the reduction of illiteracy, concerted efforts have to be made in reducing poverty. Many study participants hoped that the income-generating projects their classes planned would help them improve their material well-being. It is, therefore, important to help learners identify viable projects that will generate income. And adult literacy instructors need to be skilled in providing leadership to income-generating projects.

The study found a close relationship between poverty and gender. Prins (2001) noted that the intersection of gender and poverty accounts for women's subordination, which is achieved through gender division of labour. Many participants in this study complained that they were unable to make progress in their literacy classes because they were over-burdened with domestic chores. To reduce illiteracy among women, it is therefore important to make society gender sensitive. Women should be able to share the domestic chores with other members of the family. However, the problem of gender bias in Kenya is deeply rooted because of cultural traditions that do not favour a fair division of labour. Women and children tend to be over-burdened with domestic chores. This problem has no easy solutions. Therefore, it is an area that might need to be researched in order to find ways of easing the burden of domestic chores on women. One possible partial solution might be to invite husbands to join their wives in the adult literacy classes and the income-generating projects. In addition, there might be discussion in the classes—with trained instructors—about the importance of shared responsibilities in the family.

Participants in this study complained of lack of motivation. To many learners the courses and the teachers were simply not challenging, and what they learned was often repetitive and boring. Adult literacy programs should be designed to meet learners' expectations. Making an adult literacy student sit for the same proficiency examination for ten years in a row is indefensible.

Adult literacy education planners might make programs more attractive to learners by creating a structure that allows them to move from one level to the next. After mastering knowledge and skills in one level, learners should be able to move on to the next level. That way, learners would not be bored from being taught the same things for years.

Most literacy programs are run by part-time and volunteer teachers. Unfortunately, most of these teachers are under-qualified. Participants in this

study complained that the teachers were barely literate. To improve the quality of instruction in literacy programs, the government needs to improve the quality of teachers. Planners of adult literacy education might want to consider setting minimum academic qualifications for all teachers—whether they are full-time or not. Further, all teachers should be given some form of training. This will also, of course, require that trained and qualified teachers' salaries be increased.

It also seems apparent that adult literacy programs should be handled by two types of instructors—those skilled at teaching literacy and those skilled at providing leadership to income-generating projects. The current arrangement, where the same teachers teach literacy and help learners manage their income-generating projects, is not viable. Planners of adult literacy education might want to establish more collaboration in the provision of adult literacy. Depending on the income-generating projects the learners might be interested in, planners could seek the assistance of other government ministries and non-governmental organizations in managing those projects.

Further, it was noted in this study that adult literacy learners are busy people with little time to devote to their studies. "It is hard to go to school, take care of children, and work" (Buttaro & King, 2001, p. 49). Due to time constraints, providers and planners of adult literacy should develop programs that are flexible and allow learners to attend classes whenever they can. This would allow them to take care of their busy schedules and attend classes. One way to do this might be to consider the development of a number of independent study approaches to literacy, such as the use of the radio.

Currently, most adult literacy classes are offered once a day for two hours, three times a week. This means that most full-time teachers are under-utilized. Planners of adult literacy programs should consider offering at least two class sessions per day for five days a week. With more class sessions and more approaches, learners will have more choice, and those who cannot attend classes at a particular time and day would have alternatives.

Finally, some participants in this study complained that they were unable to apply the knowledge gained in adult literacy programs to their daily lives. In most cases, poverty prevented learners from utilizing knowledge gained in class. As observed before in this study, it is not enough to provide learners with knowledge and skills. They need funds—possibly through micro credit arrangements—and other resources in order to make good use of the knowledge and skills gained in class.

This problem might be alleviated to some extent by helping learners identify more viable income-generating projects. However, a long-lasting solution to the problem of poverty needs to be found, and this may be the most complex challenge if Kenya is to make significant advances in literacy and benefit economically and socially from its positive impacts.

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