

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION TO LIVELIHOOD IMPROVEMENTS: A CASE STUDY OF TWO NAMIBIAN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS



Nicholette Mutenda holds a Master of Education in Adult Learning and Global Change from the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, and a Master of Business Administration from the University of Namibia. She has spent much of her career working at a distance education centre (Centre for Open, Distance and eLearning, University of Namibia) primarily engaging with adult learners in an administrative capacity. Currently, she serves as a Postgraduate Coordinator at the University of Namibia.



Dr Colette February is a lecturer in Adult Education at the University of the Western Cape. She has a Master's degree in Literacy Studies from the University of Cape Town, and a Master's degree in Adult Learning and Global Change from the University of the Western Cape. Since 2017 she teaches on an intercontinental, intentionally online, adult education postgraduate programme, which has become a successful 24-year international collaboration between the Universities of British Columbia, Canada, Linköping, Sweden and the Western Cape, South Africa. Her PhD dissertation allowed her to explore her interest in nontraditional students and lifelong learning in higher education. Colette is also interested in finding ways to make lifelong learning personally and socially meaningful, and believes that authenticated forms of lifelong learning may assist in democratising the public spheres and educational contexts she knows and seeks to build.

Introduction

This article shares an account of adult literacy education in two informal settlements in Namibia - Groot Aub and Mix Settlement. The article reflects on the perceptions of adult learners and adult educators (promoters) who participated in a qualitative study¹ in 2023 about the kind of influence literacy classes had on improving their lives, livelihoods, and standard of living. Their perceptions reveal that the adult learners now feel empowered and independent in certain aspects of daily life where they previously did not. The skills the learners gained are not only beneficial to them but also have a positive impact on their families and the communities in which they live. While this article explores and examines the positive influence of the literacy classes, it does not seek to make any undue claims about literacy 'solving' all social ills.

Background and context

Namibia is experiencing increasing urbanisation as people move from rural to urban areas in search of better opportunities and improved livelihoods. However, the cost of urban living is financially prohibitive for many people and, therefore, they find themselves living in informal settlements. Many residents of informal settlements face multiple challenges, including limited or no ability to read or write. There is a perception amongst some that acquiring literacy skills would better position them to sustain themselves and improve their livelihoods. In this instance illiteracy is seen as a barrier. On the other hand, there are others who do not perceive their inability to

read or write effectively as a societal disadvantage. As a result they do not regard adult literacy classes as a meaningful way to improve their current living conditions. The literature supports both arguments. For example, studies by Keja-Kaereho (2013) and Alfeus (2017) suggest that adult literacy provision can lead to an improved standard of living and poverty reduction among participants.

In September 1992, the government introduced the National Literacy Programme in Namibia (NLPN)², as part of its commitment to national development and education for all. It draws from a long tradition of literacy and adult education and serves as a way to assist people in acquiring useful skills such as reading, writing, communication, and numeracy. The idea is that once adult learners are equipped with these skills, they will be able to improve their standard of living and quality of life. While the government is regarded as the main facilitator and sponsor of the adult literacy programme through the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and its Directorate of Adult Education, the ownership of this programme resides with the communities who are expected to take ownership of the entire process of learning. For example, adult literacy promoters are tasked with finding places where classes can be conducted. In Namibia, an adult literacy promoter is generally regarded as someone who helps adult learners develop reading, writing, and numeracy skills. This term is used in Namibia because adult literacy promoters are considered to go beyond teaching adult learners literacy skills. They create awareness about the importance of adult literacy, actively encourage community members' enrolment and full participation in classes (participation is done on a volunteer basis), and engage with community members to understand their needs.

A closer look inside the literacy classes

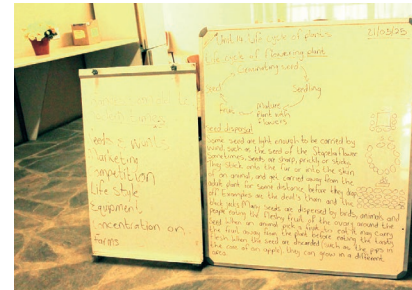
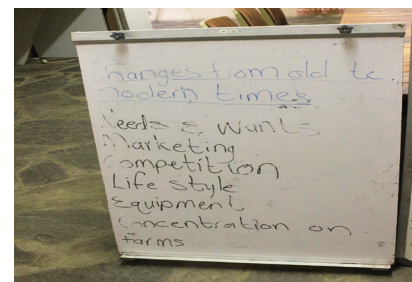
Groot Aub is 57 kilometres south of Windhoek and Mix Settlement 20 kilometres north of Windhoek.



The adult literacy promoter was given permission by the local church to conduct literacy classes there free of charge.



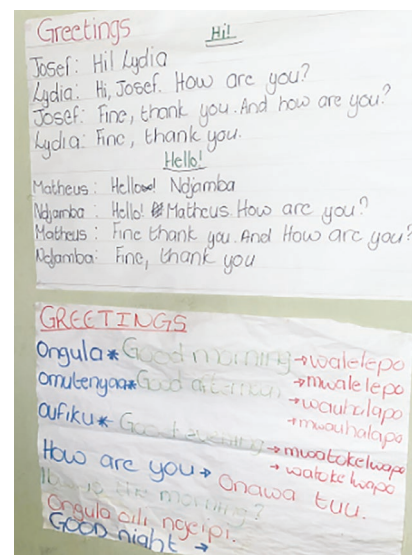
Adult learners were told to read what is on the board while waiting for the adult literacy promoter. There was low attendance on this day.



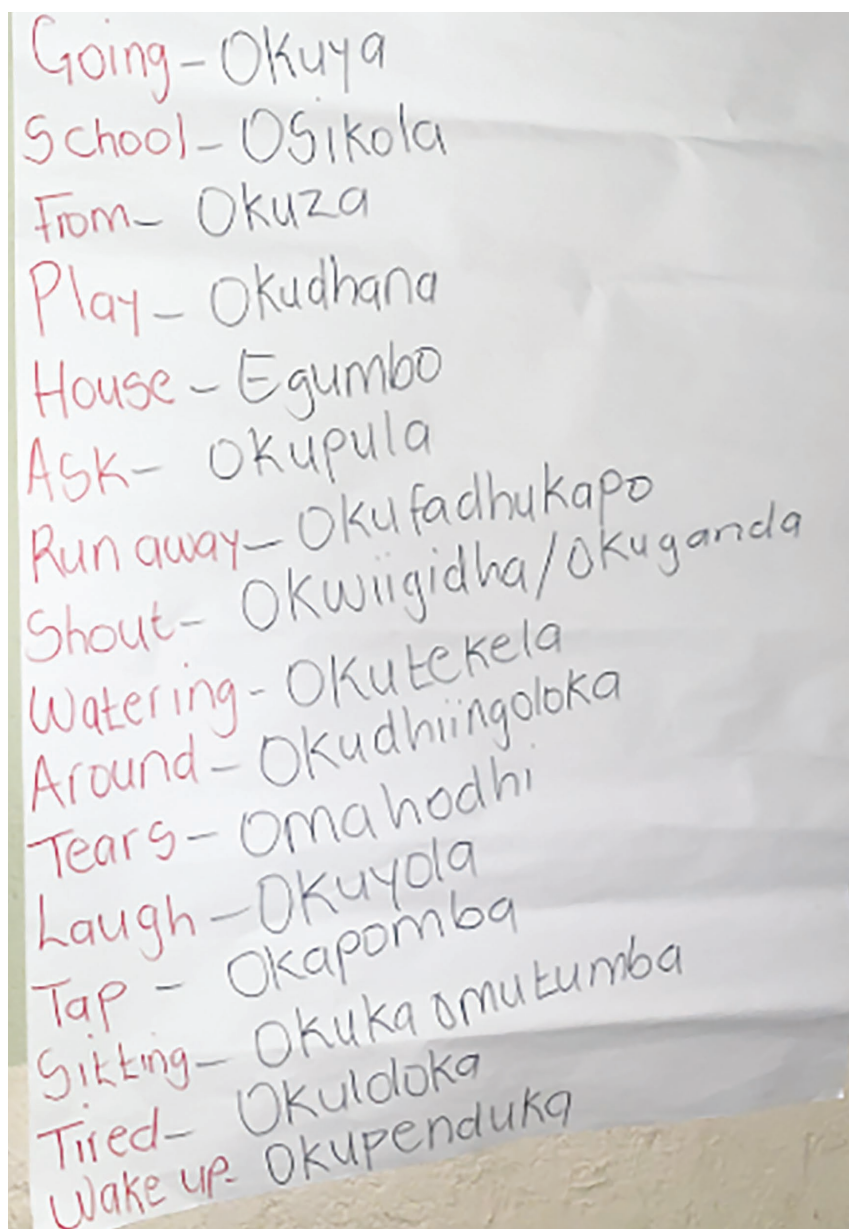
Lesson of the day.



Learners attending a class in a local library at Mix Settlement. There is no electricity in the library. The adult literacy promoter brings a torch and, at times, the learners use their phones for lighting.



Examples of charts. Learners are in Stage Two - Oshiwambo (the mother tongue) and some English (e.g. greetings) are used in the classes.



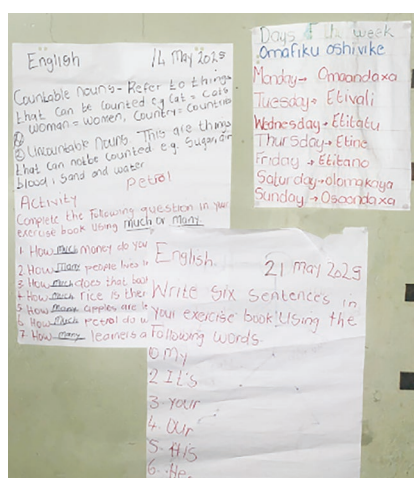
- Good English communication skills, reading and writing skills. I can read important information which is pasted somewhere.
- I can go to the clinic alone and be able to speak to the nurses in English without a translator. I can go to the bank, fill in a deposit slip, and be able to deposit money in my account.
- When I go to the government offices, I can now communicate in English. Unlike in the past when I did not know how to speak in English. When going to town I can speak in English to the driver to say where I am going, and at the clinic I can speak in English to the doctors and nurses.

Responses from learners at Mix Settlement

- Yes, adult literacy classes have helped in the way I speak, learnt how to read, and write. I can write on my own.
- I am now be able to help my children with their homework. I can also give directions to tourists if asked for directions in English.
- I acquired English speaking skills - I can talk to others in English, I can go to the bank and fill in a bank deposit slip on my own.
- When looking for a job it is now easier as I can speak English. I can communicate in English with my boss or supervisor.

Adult literacy promoters have seen the following improvements:

- Learners can now read and write. They can now count on their own as well as adding and subtracting money which is useful in their daily lives.
- They can now talk and communicate in English - read and write. They can now spell certain words correctly.
- They now know how to write their names, count money, and they can now speak English in certain situations.
- Learners can now speak English - they can even notice if you make a mistake and correct you as a teacher.
- They are now able to communicate freely in English, and they feel freer to make their voices heard. Some say they can start a small business because of the numerical skills they acquired.
- They can now read on their own. When they started their skills were low, but now they are able to answer questions in class, and they are able to write their names. They can now even communicate in English.



How adult literacy is helping adult learners in their daily lives

Adult learners were asked in what way/s the literacy classes are helping them. Following are some key positive findings. The adult literacy promoters also share their observations further below.

Responses from learners at Groot Aub

- The ability to read and write, mathematics skills - I can add money and divide money among the children.

From the above it is clear that the functional literacy³ classes are benefitting the adult learners in several ways. Learners reported an improved ability to communicate effectively in English in various settings which require English, such as when expressing their needs in healthcare settings and when seeking employment. They experienced increased independence when doing things such as filling in a bank deposit slip on their own. Promoters stated that there has been a rise in learners' confidence, including identifying and correcting promoters' errors during lessons.

Social uses of literacy⁴ have also been recorded, such as learners using their new skills to support their children's education and health, thereby contributing to improved family well-being and overall living standards. A parent who is able to assist their child with homework provides learning support which can contribute to enhancing the child's academic performance. As stated above, adult learners can communicate more confidently with medical staff and can also find reliable healthcare information for their family's well-being, such as healthier ways of eating. Learners have also acquired knowledge about their democratic rights and responsibilities as citizens of Namibia. Literacy provides a foundation for adults to better understand these rights and responsibilities, for instance by enabling them to read and engage with the country's constitution.

An adult learner who demonstrates willingness and motivation to continue learning can inspire their family and others to also embrace lifelong learning.

Some limitations

While the study found that the government-run literacy programme in informal settlements has helped improve certain aspects of adult learners' lives, other areas remain unchanged. Learners expressed that the programme could further address the diverse needs of adults living

in informal settlements, be more relevant and useful, and better support livelihood improvements, as evidenced through this request by a learner from Groot Aub: 'Bring computer courses into the adult literacy programme so that we learn how to operate a computer and have computer literacy skills'.

The study recommended that continuous refresher training be provided to the adult literacy promoters. Adult literacy promoters from Groot Aub informal settlement stated: 'Refresher trainings are needed so that we (adult literacy promoters) can acquire in-depth information on how to teach the content of the subjects - the content is more theoretical and there is a need to bring in practical content'.

Scholars such as Awgichew and Seyoum (2017) have found that inadequate orientation and training of facilitators has resulted in unsuccessful implementation of adult learning and education programmes.

Conclusion

This article has explained how adult literacy in two informal settlements has helped adult learners in certain important aspects of their lives, particularly with regard to improved communication skills, reading, writing, and numeracy. The study upon which the article draws, makes several recommendations that could further enhance the success of the literacy programme and continue to improve the living standards of the adult learners involved, their families, and the communities in which they live.

References

- Alfeus, E. (2017). *Assessing the application of literacy skills towards poverty alleviation by graduates of the national literacy programme in Oshikoto region, Namibia* (Master's thesis, University of Namibia). <https://repository.unam.edu.na/handle/11070/2040>
- Awgichew, S., & Seyoum, Y. (2017). Integrated functional adult literacy: Existing practices and challenges in Eastern Ethiopia. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 5(4), 87-97. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v5n.4p.86>

Keja-Kaereho, C. (2013). *Investigating the perceptions of the graduates and beneficiaries of the adult education programmes towards livelihood improvement: The case of informal settlements, Windhoek* (Master's thesis, University of Namibia). <https://repository.unam.edu.na/handle/11070/892>

Papen, U. (2001). Literacy - your key to a better future? Literacy, reconciliation and development in the National Literacy Programme in Namibia. In B.V. Street (Ed.), *Literacy and development* (pp. 50-70). Routledge.

Prinsloo, M., & Breier, M. (Eds.). (1996). *The social uses of literacy theory and practice in contemporary South Africa*. John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/swll.4>

Endnotes

- 1 Mutenda, N. (2024). *The contribution of literacy education in raising the standard of living: A case study of two Namibian informal settlements* (Master's thesis, University of the Western Cape). <https://uwcscholar.uwc.ac.za/items/219779a5-6726-4fd7-8726-adbcee41eba5>
Twenty adult learners and six adult literacy promoters took part.
- 2 The NLPN programme consists of two broad components/stages -
Adult Basic Literacy Education Programme:
Stage 1: Basic Mother-Tongue Literacy
Stage 2: Intermediate Literacy Learning
Stage 3: English for Communication/
Communicative English
Post-Basic Literacy Education Programme:
Adult Upper Primary Education (AUPE)
Adult Skills Development for Self-Employment (ASDSE)
<https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/litbase/national-literacy-programme-namibia>
- 3 Refers to the capacity of a person to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective function of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community's development. <https://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/functional-literacy>
- 4 This approach (mostly associated with Prinsloo, Breier & Street) views literacy not merely as a collection of technical skills acquired through formal education, but as a set of social practices rooted in particular contexts, discourses, and social positions.