

**TITLE OF ARTICLE: KEY COMPONENTS OF A
NATIONAL LANGUAGE AND LITERACY POLICY:
RECOMMENDATIONS TO GUYANA'S MINISTRY OF
EDUCATION**

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Abstract

Numerous writers have established that a national language and literacy policy is expected to lead to improved literacy skills of citizens. There is evidence that Guyana has a high rate of adult illiteracy and does not have a national language and literacy policy. This paper sought to highlight a number of key components that the relevant authorities in Guyana can include in a national language and literacy policy. A national language and literacy policy can include information that will address the needs of marginalised citizens, such as poor and unemployed individuals. It should also contain information relating to curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation. Moreover, the policy ought to emphasise staffing and funding issues. Furthermore, the language needs of immigrants should be articulated in a national language and literacy policy. Finally, in this technological age, the use of ICTs in advancing language and literacy needs of citizens should be articulated.

Key words: language and literacy policy, marginalised people, curriculum, ICTs

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Introduction

It has been established that a national adult language and literacy policy is very important for the advancement of language and literacy skills (Education for all Global, 2006). Adults who are literate are prone to take steps to prevent HIV/AIDS infection, attend prenatal clinic and take care of themselves. Thus reducing maternal deaths, and ensuring that their children attend school, consequently improvement in their academic performance (Soriano, 2007). Williams (2000) argued that individuals who are highly literate will be able to access higher paying jobs than those with lower literacy. These individuals are likely to use their literacy skills to engage in the production of goods and services that are of high quality, consequently, contributing to a nation's economy. The Global Monitoring Report acknowledged that there are approximately 771 million adults who are illiterate (as cited in Soriano, 2007). These figures reveal that there is need for national adult language and literacy policies that will inform decisions for the hosting of programmes geared to reduce illiteracy. Although many governments are aware that adult literacy is very important in the development of their citizens, a very small portion of their total budget goes to basic adult literacy. According to Guyana National Development Strategy (n.d.) in Guyana there are a number of illiterate adults or persons who are not functionally literate; nevertheless much emphasis is not placed on adult literacy programmes to empower these persons to participate successfully in society. In 2000, the National Development Strategy noted that in Guyana the functional literacy rate was 50 %. Functional literacy can be defined as the ability to read and write in order to cope with the demands of daily life (Guyana Chronicle, 2010). Additionally, despite the fact that there is evidence that adult language and literacy policy results in increase literacy rates in adults (Education for all Global, 2006) there isn't a separate language and literacy policy in Guyana. Thus, there is a need for a Guyana to develop a national language and literacy policy. This article seeks to provide information that the relevant authorities in Guyana can use to make informed decisions relating to suitable components for a national adult language and literacy policy.

For the purpose of this article, adult language and literacy is defined as being able to read and write in order to work for the provision of one's physical needs as well as being able to make meaningful decisions relating to one's life and that of family members. Adult language and literacy also relates to being able to contribute to the development of one's community in order

to improve one's life as well as other members of the community (Soriano, 2007). Language and literacy policy is defined as a set of main beliefs that have been decided on by stakeholders so as to inform decision making about adult language and literacy issues (Ministry of Education, Youth & Culture, 2001).

Components of a National Language and Literacy Policy

Addressing the Needs Marginalised People

There are several components that should be included in a national adult literacy and language policy. One important area of focus is that the policy should address the needs of marginalised adults, such as those who experience severe financial challenges and speak in a mother tongue but are unable to adequately communicate in the standard language. In addition, the policy ought to concentrate on the needs of those who live in remote areas and have challenges accessing educational opportunities (Soriano, 2007). The needs of these three target groups of marginalised people are very essential in a national adult language and literacy policy. Poor adults may be unable to access quality education because of financial constraints. Thus, a national adult language and literacy policy ought to provide information on strategies that will be used to ensure that adults who have severe financial constraints are able to access language and literacy education. According to Muiru & Mukuri (2005) in Kenya poverty has prevented many adults from engaging in literacy programmes.

Persons who speak in a mother tongue but are unable to communicate effectively in Standard English may include persons who speak in the vernacular. For example, in Jamaica many citizens speak the Jamaican Creole and this has been accepted by the Jamaican government as one of Jamaica's languages. The other language is the Standard Jamaican English (Ministry of Education, Youth & Culture, 2001). It has been established that many countries in their adult language and literacy policies have advocated for learning to be conducted in the local language of the people, such as in Africa and Asia (Robertson, 2015). This has become necessary because the local language is known by most of the people. Craig (n.d.) noted that many citizens of Commonwealth Caribbean countries use creolese in their every day speech, consequently they experience challenges in the use of Standard English. Mora (2014) warned that any language

policy that neglects to consider the cultural and linguistic diversity of the people, one that favours one language over another is unfair and discriminatory.

In the interior locations of Guyana there are educational opportunities available, but many persons are unable to access due the distance places where these programmes are held from their homes (Guyana: Education for All, 2004). Accordingly, a national adult language and literacy policy ought to consider the use of the local communities in providing adult learning (Patel, n.d.).

Campbell (2010) suggested two other groups of marginalised people that should also be included in a national adult language and literacy policy: the unemployed and those with low skilled jobs. According to National Adult Literacy Agency [NALA] (2011) adult literacy is very essential in helping countries to accomplish their educational and economic goals. Adults with poor literacy skills are more likely to suffer individually as well as the country. Accordingly, the policy needs to focus on advancing the skills of the unemployed and those with low skill jobs. Raudenbush and Kasim (1998) argued that individuals who have low literacy levels are likely to have lower paying jobs than those whose literacy skills are higher. Consequently, literacy has a direct relationship with someone's job and earnings and vice versa. In Australia the language and literacy policy focused on employability. Unemployed persons attended mandatory classes to improve their literacy skills (NALA, 2011). A national language and literacy policy for adults ought to focus on the needs of the aforementioned marginalised groups.

Curriculum Development, Implementation, and Evaluation

Other than the inclusion of the needs of marginalised groups in a national adult language and literacy policy, there is a need for the inclusion of information pertaining to curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation (Campbell, 2010; Soriano, 2007). Mora (2007) found that in The Republic of Ireland adult literacy and language programmes occur as informal learning groups with a disjointed curriculum. Mora saw this as a need for a policy in order to correct this limitation. Some of the areas of focus of an adult language and literacy curriculum should be the content of language and literacy instruction, preparation of lesson plans, and assessment measures (Campbell, 2010; Soriano, 2007). Dewalt, Berkman, Sheridan, Lohr, and

Pignone (2004) posited that in determining the content of language and literacy instruction, a needs assessment should be conducted. In 2005, Kutner, Greenberg, and Baer noted that a needs assessment was done in the USA to determine the literacy needs of the people. This study found that 50% of the American people had low literacy skills, such as health literacy. Dewal et al., (2004) suggested that adults who have limited health literacy skills are likely to suffer from poorer health than those with higher literacy skills. Some ways cited by the authors in which poor health literacy can be manifested are individuals being unable to be their health advocates and being unable to adequately communicate with health care workers about their health challenges. Therefore, a needs assessment held to determine the literacy needs of the population can be very valuable in determining curricular content. Another aspect of curriculum development that ought to be considered in an adult language and literacy policy is assessment measures. Soriano (2007) noted that there is a need for countries to espouse measures that will provide reliable data on participants' literacy deficiencies. These measures should be a movement away from paper and pencil tests to evaluation portfolios. A national language and literacy policy that offers suggestions on assessment measures can provide alternative ways of assessments rather than the usual paper and pencil test. As long as there will be a programme of instruction, curriculum matters are imperative to ensure a more structured and organised programme to meet the needs of individual learners.

Staffing Issues

An additional key component of a national adult language and literacy policy is staffing issues (Campbell, 2010; Soriano, 2007). There is a need for information regarding the qualifications of language and literacy facilitators. According to Global Education Monitoring Report (2009) facilitators of literacy courses should be trained in the principles of adult learning. There are certain characteristics that have been advanced for adult learners, for instance adult learners use their experience as a prerequisite in their learning (Clardy, 2005). Adult educators, who are trained and qualified in the principles of adult learning, ought to be effective engaging adult learners (Li, 2011). Trained and qualified facilitators to teach adult language and literacy programme is very crucial in ensuring effective learning. However, research shows that some of the staff members of adult language and literacy programmes are volunteers who may have very little training in adult learning (Li, 2011). Therefore the policy ought to address staff

development sessions for both the trained and untrained adult educator (Leach, Zepke, Haworth, & Isaacs (2010). Trained adult educators are likely to ensure that the content of instruction has the appropriate level of difficulty. In teaching a class of learners with low reading skills, the selection of learning materials and activities should be sensitive to their present reading skills and ensure that the work is not too easy or too hard (Lesgold et al., 2012). If the learning materials and activities border too much on what they already know, the learners would not experience new literacy skills and may find the literacy programme meaningless. On the other hand, if the learning materials and activities are too difficult, the learners may become frustrated, consequently, dropping out of the programme. The selection of suitable learning materials and activities are important considerations for the teaching of the language and literacy programme. Staffing issues are likely to ensure a more organised and efficient way in staff selection and retention, therefore a national adult language and literacy policy should concentrate on this concern.

Funding for Adult Language and Literacy

A further component of a national language and literacy policy is funding (Campbell, 2010; Soriano, 2007). Many countries budget a miserly 1% to literacy programmes. If there is limited funding for adult literacy programmes, it is likely that there will not be sufficient and properly run programmes. Funding is needed for most areas in adult language and literacy programmes, such as, training of adult educators and for the holding of language and literacy programmes (Campbell, 2010). National Centre for Vocational Education (2011) noted that the Australian government saw the importance of funding for literacy programmes for adults, as a result in 2010, it budgeted \$15 million for a four year period towards programmes geared to meet the needs of workers whose language, literacy, and numeracy skills were low. Harvey (2007) noted that in the USA although a 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy showed that about 30 million persons over 16 years in that country could not read up to Grade Eight level, there was a drastic reduction of federal funding for adult literacy by \$US 9.8 million. Harvey postulated that the reduction in funding will in no measure improve the literacy skills of those deficient. For that reason a national adult language and literacy policy must articulate clearly how funding will be garnered for the implementation of adult language and literacy policy.

Considering the Language and Literacy Needs of Immigrant Adults

Guyana's national language and literacy policy ought also to address the language needs of its immigrant population. In 2015, Choi and Ziggler claimed that international migration is a common trend in contemporary society. The authors noted that migrants may face language challenges in their host countries where a different language is spoken than the immigrants' language. These challenges may prevent them from acquiring jobs, getting schooled, or even understanding others whose language is different from theirs. In Guyana there have been recent trends of in-migration where a number of Chinese and Brazilians have been migrating to this country (Vezzoli, 2014). According to the Organisation for Economic Development literacy education plays a significant role in the economic development of countries (as cited in Choi & Ziggler, 2015). Accordingly, if the recent Chinese and Brazilians migrants are to make significant contributions to Guyana's economy, their language and literacy deficiencies must be addressed. Other than these two groups of recent immigrants to Guyana, a number of health workers from Cuba are working in Guyana's health facilities through an agreement between the Guyana and Cuba governments. Guyana, Cuba Signs (2012) stated that more than 1200 Cuban health workers have worked in Guyana under Cuban/Guyana Health Agreements. One very important point to note is that most of these health professions cannot effectively communicate in English, which is the official language of Guyana. Nageer (2014) emphasised the importance of the language deficiencies of the Cuban health workers in serving Guyana, when she shared an experience visiting a health facility that was staffed by mainly Cuban health workers. She acknowledged that she was unable to effectively articulate her health issue due to the language barrier that existed. Nageer recommended that Cuban health workers to be taught English so that they can adequately serve the patients. Accordingly, an adult language and literacy policy must take into account the literacy needs of the immigrant population. With a policy that addresses this issue, it is possible that programmes will be arranged to meet their needs, as a consequence lessening their communication deficiencies.

The Use of ICTs

Furthermore, an adult literacy and language policy ought to focus on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Jimoyiannis and Gravani (2011) stated that ICTs play a central role in our lives today. Information Communication Technologies are used in every phase

of social life, such as in the work environment, education, health services, and also entertainment. Joseph (2010) acknowledged that many measures have been put in place by countries to reduce illiteracy; however, although the level of illiteracy is reducing many countries will be unable to reduce that rate by 50% in 2016 set by UNESCO unless urgently addressed. Joseph also highlighted that globally there are 775 million adults who are illiterate. The blame was laid squarely on the traditional approaches that were used to teach literacy. One solution advanced was the use of “user friendly technology interventions”. p. 110. Flecher, Nicholas, and Davis (2011) reported that E-learning can be used as a means through which adults can develop literacy skills, especially if the programmes are geared to meet their needs. According to Fletcher et al., (2011) ICT skills are very essential in the modern workforce environment. E-learning programmes can be used to meet the needs of a wide cross section of adults who may be unable to access face to face programmes due to either geographic or time challenges. Addressing the use of ICTs in adult language and literacy in a policy document may lead to systems being implemented for its use in reducing language barriers and illiteracy. ICTs can even be used in the teaching of English to both the local as well as immigrant population. Persons who are unable to access learning due to their location and time schedule may be able participate in such programmes in the comfort of their homes or internet cafes. The policy in articulating ideas on ICTs use needs to be cognizant of the digital divide (Askov, Johnson, Petty, & Young, 2003). The digital divide is three dimensional. It includes the global divide, social divide, and democratic divide. The global divide is referred to as the difference in accessing the internet by people in industrialised and developing countries. The social divide is the disparity in accessing information by the rich and poor of a country. The democratic divide deals with the dissimilarity between persons who use and do not use the wide array of digital technology in their daily activities (Norris, 2001). According to Economy Watch (n.d.) Guyana’s Internet Penetration Rate in 2014 was 33.00%. This is quite low when compared to other countries, as a result, a national adult language and literacy policy that articulates the use of ICTs to improve adult literacy skills needs to focus on whether students will have access to the technology at home, library, or a community centre (Askov et al., 2003). When developing a national adult language policy, it would be vital for the relevant agency to include the use of ICTs in language and literacy programmes.

Conclusion

As have been noted, it would be wise for the relevant authorities to seriously establish a national adult language and literacy policy. The research show that a highly literate population can be allied to a stable economy and a general improved quality of life of the population. A national adult literacy and language policy is prone to set the stage for a population with high literacy skills. A policy that addresses the literacy and language needs of marginalised groups of adults can aid in increasing their literacy skills. Furthermore, one that speaks to curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation can ensure that curriculum matters are articulated so that learning programmes are geared to meet the literacy and language needs of adults. The issue of staffing must be addressed making it possible for Language and literacy facilitators whether they are volunteers or not ought to be trained so that they can adequately meet the needs of adult learners. In addition, funding is necessary for any programme to succeed. Therefore, a national adult language and literacy policy ought to deal with this important factor. The policy ought to spell out the possible avenues for funding of adult language and literacy programmes. An adult language and literacy policy should also focus on the language and literacy needs of the immigrants in Guyana, especially the large amounts of Chinese, Cubans and Brazilians that now reside in this country. It will be imprudent for an adult language and literacy policy not to emphasise the literacy and language needs of immigrants, especially since being able to effectively communicate with each other is a perquisite to common understanding. Finally, in this technological age, a policy that does not address the use of ICTs will be a mistake. Information Communication Technologies are used in nearly every aspect of life. They can be used in adult language and literacy programmes to provide literacy skills to persons who cannot physically attend face to face classes and offer the ICT skills that adults need to effectively function in the world of work and even socially. In sum, I recommend to the relevant authorities in Guyana to seriously ponder on the aforementioned components and include them in its national adult language and literacy policy.

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