Literacy Assessment Practices (LAP) in Selected Developing Countries: Analytic Review of Four LAP Country Case Studies

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Abstract

The present paper provides an analytic review of four country case studies that were prepared for the Literacy Assessment Practices (LAP) project, undertaken jointly by the International Literacy Institute (ILI) and UNESCO, in collaboration with UIS and UIE. This report attempts to provide a summary of key issues, as well as to identify lessons learned and areas that are in need of further investigation. Examples are drawn from the four cases in the light of the present context of the field of adult literacy, and various conclusions and new directions are drawn from this material. Overall, in the context for both the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education for All and the 2000 Dakar World Education Forum, it is concluded that substantial new work will need to be done not only to meet the target goals of the EFA initiative, but even to know with credibility how far along the path to these goals nations have traveled. Thus, the LAP study, and work that may follow from it, may well serve as stepping stones toward promoting systematic assessment of progress towards achieving the universal goal of a more literate and equitable world.

Disciplines

Curriculum and Instruction | Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Methods | International and Comparative Education | Language and Literacy Education
LITERACY ASSESSMENT PRACTICES (LAP) IN SELECTED DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Analytic Review of Four LAP Country Case Studies

A Technical Report prepared by the

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Preface

The present paper provides an analytic review of four country case studies that were prepared for the Literacy Assessment Practices (LAP) project, undertaken jointly by the International Literacy Institute and UNESCO, in collaboration with UIS and UIE. This report attempts to provide a summary of key issues, as well as to identify lessons learned and areas that are in need of further investigation. Examples are drawn from the four cases in the light of the present context of the field of adult literacy, and various conclusions and new directions are drawn from this material. Overall, in the context for both the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education for All and the 2000 Dakar World Education Forum, it is concluded that substantial new work will need to be done not only to meet the target goals of the EFA initiative, but even to know with credibility how far along the path to these goals nations have traveled. Thus, the LAP study, and work that may follow from it, may well serve as stepping stones toward promoting systematic assessment of progress towards achieving the universal goal of a more literate and equitable world.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

The World Conference on Education for All, held in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, highlighted the need to improve learning opportunities and learning achievement in all countries, and with a special focus on the least developed countries (LDCs). In Jomtien, a number of educational targets relating to youth and adults were agreed upon, including reducing by 50% the number of adult illiterates by the year 2000 and improving learning achievement to an agreed percentage of an appropriate age cohort. At the Mid-Decade Review meeting on Education For All in Amman, Jordan, in June, 1996, the international community further called for efforts at both international and national levels to adopt new techniques and strategies to collect and analyze meaningful data to monitor progress toward Jomtien goals.

At the programme level, robust and reliable literacy outcome statistics are rarely available. Even now, in 2002, the agreed-upon Jomtien approach to learning achievement has yet to become a major part of literacy work in LDCs, though some encouraging trends may now be seen. Increasingly, it is believed that the field of literacy and non-formal education (NFE) requires both a greater focus on the quality of literacy services and also better ways to measure literacy outcomes. At the 2000 Dakar World Education Forum, these approaches were reinforced by three of the six main stated goals of EFA, namely:

(iii) ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes;
(iv) achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults;

(vi) improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills.

As is well-known, government officials, international agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been hampered by a lack of information about what really works in literacy programmes and second-chance non-formal education programs. Education specialists, programme managers, and policy makers lack essential information about whether or not participants in literacy and NFE programmes are learning what is taught, and how well they are learning to apply new knowledge to solving longstanding and complex problems of daily life. Literacy needs to be seen now in terms of the assessment of the learning competencies of individuals, as well as in terms of the evaluation of the problems and difficulties of the literacy programme managers. But, as pointed out in the commentary by Prof. Bown, one must not confuse assessment issues with monitoring and evaluation, valuable as they both are for understanding the impact of educational policies. The LAP study is focused on the former, namely, assessment.

1.2 Background

Although many countries have been actively striving to meet the basic learning needs of education for all, current national and international capacities remain inadequate for assessing and monitoring the acquisition of literacy and basic skills for youth and adults. Furthermore, increasing attention to the functional aspects of literacy during the 1990s has reinforced the necessity of assessing individual performance across a continuum of literacy abilities not tied directly to school curricula, from the basic “3 R’s” to the increasingly important area now termed “basic life skills” or “survival skills”. There remains a critical need for a practical and cost-effective methodology which can bridge the gap between methodologies for assessment at the national survey level and at the programme level which can be used effectively by developing countries with limited funds but major literacy problems.

In addition to major efforts to gain a better understanding of literacy levels across individuals, and nations worldwide, there is increasing demand for the ability to analyze the effectiveness of literacy programmes as they currently exist in the varied regions of the globe. Programme evaluation (though often without learning assessment components) now constitutes an important element of this understanding of how literacy works, and how literacy provision can be improved and expanded. Moreover, there is also a growing need for increased accountability of literacy programs, and greater attention is paid by agencies and governments to rigorous and in-depth evaluations of such programs. Though still relatively scarce (compared to formal school studies), and of varied quality, assessment and
evaluation studies have become very important to literacy and NFE programmes in many countries of the developing world.

Though a number of countries (both industrialized and LDCs) have had extensive, practical experience in collecting information and statistical data on literacy programs, most of these are the census or monitoring of indicators type. It is clear that relatively few efforts have been made as yet to collect, review, and systematically analyze national and local practices of literacy assessment. Little has been done to document existing procedures employed in current literacy evaluations to see how successful they are at producing reliable and relevant data which could meet, or even come close to, the international standards of sophisticated – and expensive – assessment studies, such as the International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD/Statistics Canada, 1998). The same specialists who actually go out to the field to collect and process the information on current literacy programmes in many countries of the world are those who are most in need of relevant data regarding the success or failure of literacy assessment practices from neighboring countries and other regions of the world. These specialists – and the policy makers they report to – are in real need of knowledge, information, and training in literacy statistics, research and information/data analysis, and the use of innovative and user-friendly assessment methodologies and tools.


The present, second phase of the LAP project, culminating in the Second Experts' Meeting (ILI/UNESCO, March 2002) has produced this analytic review of existing types of assessment and evaluation studies of literacy and non-formal basic education programmes, based on case studies from four significantly different developing countries (India, China, Nigeria, and Mexico), all members of the E-9 group. The objectives of these country case studies were: to identify conceptual and methodological frameworks which are currently in practice, including the aspect of functionality of literacy; to describe the assessment procedures, methodologies, and tools currently utilized for literacy assessment. Also part of the second phase of the LAP is the current analytical report, which draws upon the case studies, and includes one case study (India) as an illustrative example (with the other three put on the Web), to develop a baseline of ‘lessons learned’ from current assessment and evaluation practices and produce directions for future work. Finally, in a separate working document, the LAP project has produced a set of principles and options which will eventually lead to a set of guidelines for the operational and easy use of the literacy assessment methods and tools (ILI, 2002).
The overall goal of the LAP project is the identification of elements of practical, robust, and cost-effective methodologies which can be used by countries and agencies to promote easy and systematic literacy assessment procedures with appropriate cultural sensitivity and validity within given specific ethno-linguistic contexts. A second major goal of the study is to help move forward a programme of work, building on a set of methodological guidelines, that would support improved assessment, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for literacy and NFE programmes in developing countries.

2. Historical and Cultural Issues

The four LAP case studies provided perspectives on literacy assessment in their respective countries covering at least the past three decades. These indicated similar trends with regard to literacy rates: in all four cases census returns show notable improvements in reports of literacy – for example from 16% in India in 1950 to over 65% today. Statistical breakdowns in each country by age group show greatest gains among the young, but at the same time the populations of these nations have grown at such a rate that there remain many millions of illiterate youth and adults. Of these, the oldest age-groups still have the highest rates of reported illiteracy.

One important feature of the available literacy statistics from these past decades is that national statistics were based largely on self-report, and employed the dichotomous model of ‘literate’ and ‘illiterate’. Such an approach is not only questionable as to its reliability, but it also leaves the data seriously lacking for modern policy makers and programme designers, who are concerned not only with the acquisition of the skills of reading and writing but the wider contexts of their use, their meanings in various socio-cultural and ethno-linguistic settings, and how literacy and numeracy can impact individuals and societies in diverse ways. Basic definitions of literacy across participants in the LAP case studies included the abilities to read and write and perform basic calculations, in everyday tasks relevant to their lives in their respective settings. In prior ILI/UNESCO work, the Basic Learning Competencies project (BLC; ILI/UNESCO, 1998, 1999) included not only the aforementioned 3 R’s, but also life skills relating to health and other kinds of knowledge critical to survival.

Country case study teams defined literacy as a set of basic skills as well as in terms of relationships to individual, social, and economic development. China, for example, emphasized its need to develop national human resources as it continues to broaden its scope of involvement with the global economy. Further, the China study reported that government policy was firmly behind a highly-skilled workforce as a major goal and that the lack of such human resources is a great impediment to progress.

The case study teams agreed that literacy programmes serving out-of-school youth and adults are essential to the improvement of human resources. In addition, adult and non-
formal literacy education is critical to addressing the problems of dropout and poor school retention, not only for programme participants themselves but also for their families and wider communities. As well as promoting community involvement and social responsibility, the country case studies affirmed that many NFE programmes also contribute significantly to improvements in individuals’ and communities’ health, especially for mothers and their children, and encourage increased school attendance and greater achievement among school-age children.

LAP teams also cited the value of literacy acquisition to individuals, who (in Nigeria, for example) reported a “sense of joy and freedom” in being able to conduct important transactions for themselves and their families, no longer exploited because of their ignorance. Such empowerment was also extended to certain groups in each nation which have been historically disadvantaged, such as women and girls, ethnic and linguistic minorities, and those outside the mainstream economy such as nomads and pastoralists. The assessment of literacy education provided to such groups reflects the widespread concern for social justice as a significant component of each country’s development.

3. Methodological Issues

3.1 Purposes of Assessment and Types of Programmes

LAP teams agreed on the value of assessment to the on-going improvement of existing programmes and to the development of new assessment approaches which may better serve current needs. Because of the large variety of goals for literacy education, it was necessary in the present study to examine a variety of programmes and the practices of literacy assessment which have been applied to these programmes and their learners. Participants therefore reported on literacy assessment practices for adults as well as children, including students in national schools, and those in programmes for out-of-school youth and adults, among which were large-scale mass literacy efforts, programmes sponsored by local governmental bodies, and those run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Currently there is heightened interest in programmes for adults which continue beyond basic literacy and emphasize life skills. Among these are post-literacy, ‘bridge’ (between home and school), and lifelong learning programs.

3.2 Data Reporting Agencies

In the LAP countries there were substantial amounts of data available based on the larger governmental programmes, but considerably less, if any, on NGO efforts. In Mexico, for instance, one governmental institution, National Institute for Adult Education (INEA), is responsible for assessment policies and practices for the entire country. NGOs operating in Mexico are subject to INEA’s guidelines, but these NGOs have not up to now provided reports on their evaluation practices. On the other hand, China maintains a national system
of literacy education and literacy assessment with a clearly-delineated structure for reporting from the village level up, with guidelines stated at the national level. In addition, a national interdepartmental committee coordinates literacy work and the responsibilities of participating units. In both China and Mexico, data are collected by government agencies only, primarily national but also lower-level ones which reported to the central authorities. In all LAP countries, large amounts of data came from the national censuses, but these data were often of limited depth and quality. In India, the primary focus was on nationwide assessments of primary education and adult literacy programs, since (like China and Mexico) NGOs have relatively little data on their programmes. Thus, only anecdotal information about innovative approaches to assessment could be covered in such cases. In Nigeria, assessments and evaluations were conducted by governmental agencies and NGOs as well as individual researchers, representing a more diversified mix of data.

3.3 Approaches to Assessment and Data Collection

Literacy assessment practices in India are a blend of programmatic evaluations and assessments of individuals’ literacy achievement. There are periodic literacy assessment surveys at various levels, as well as monitoring and evaluation of programme effectiveness and outcomes. The intent is to employ these tools to inform policy formulation and focused programme implementation. Assessment practices reported in China focus on measuring individual learning achievement, thereby ascertaining rates of literacy according to minimum standards set by the central government; in this way the regions which have or have not ‘basically eradicated illiteracy’ can be identified. Nigeria’s reported literacy assessment practices are for the most part either programme evaluations or measurements of learner achievement, but not both for the same programs. Mexico’s assessment practices are conducted within the framework of programmes themselves, and include not only measurement of basic skills but of multiple languages and functional application of literacy and numeracy. However, the full-scale implementation of literacy assessment on a regional or national basis has yet to take place in Mexico.

3.4 Background Variables and Outcomes

China collected background information on participants in its 10- and 8-Province Surveys, including personal, family, educational, and employment data. Also collected were self-reports regarding personal outcomes of literacy programme participation, such as attitudes toward the program, participation in cultural activities, and future plans following the program.

In Mexico, INEA maintains a register of programme participants, including such characteristics as age, previous schooling, sex, occupation, and marital status. In addition, for the initial stage of basic education (literacy), there is a certificate that helps the teacher assign students according to their abilities in reading, writing and basic arithmetic for adults. This includes each individual’s name, sex, marital status, occupation, date of birth, place of
birth, previous schooling, if the person uses or needs corrective lenses, whether he or she has hearing or speech difficulties.

Background data in Nigeria were collected with regard to primary school students’ families as part of its Situation and Policy Analysis national survey, through the means of parent questionnaires. These included background information such as family type, marital status of parents, educational background of mother and father, parents’ occupation, number of children, learning facilities available, as well as personal variables such as parents’ feelings about the conditions existing in the child’s school. Other personal variables were included in student questionnaires, such as whether or not and students liked school, reasons for absenteeism, and their attitudes toward teachers. Personal outcomes were a primary focus of evaluations of such programmes as the Baptist Prison Ministry, which reported significant improvement in learners’ outlook on life and work following the program. Learners in the UNIVA programme also reported positive personal outcomes of participation, with regard to income-generating prospects and also toward the conduct of the programme itself and its incorporation of learner input in materials generation and instruction.

India incorporates background as well as personal outcome variables in its literacy assessments, including such items as mother tongue, gender, caste, occupation, level of schooling, religion, and education of parents. Programme evaluation reports also consider issues relevant to literacy such as amelioration of poverty, improvement in health, recognition of women’s equality, giving up superstitions, better financial management, and improved self-confidence. Cost of assessments per learner was also considered in several studies.

In the case of Nigeria and Mexico, it was reported that positive consequences derived from the data collected on eye-sight. In Nigeria, especially, it was reported that a major new programme on health was stimulated by literacy programme assessment of eyesight of learners in adult education programs.

3.5 Measures of Learning Achievement

In each LAP country, measures of learning achievement constituted a central concern of literacy assessment: Can learners read, write, and calculate, and are these programmes succeeding in facilitating the acquisition of these skills for participants? While each country formally ascribed to current international definitions of literacy, particularly with regard to the importance of functional literacy and acquisition of life skills, each country measured learning and basic skills achievement in varying ways; further, in certain cases, learning achievement data were either not collected or were flawed for technical reasons.
As noted, the four LAP countries (and many other countries as well) rely primarily on census data for national literacy statistics, but these often derive from self-report of literacy skill. In the LAP country cases, additional data on literacy were also sometimes collected. For example, India’s NSSO is a periodic sample survey using their census definition of literacy, but adding more recently a literacy test to a sample of those who claim to be literate. India employs a standardized framework nationwide, with a delineation of ‘competencies’ and guidelines for adapting tests in different locales. In addition, background information is collected on the learners and their communities (see Annex on India).

In India’s Total Literacy Campaign (TLC), the evaluation of learning achievement and of the effectiveness of the programme was based on the norms of functional literacy as defined by the National Literacy Mission. The literacy test was expanded to include life skills items such as reading road-signs or writing applications. The test was intended to provide a framework adaptable to different regions of the country, and was administered by local agents. More importantly, learner performance was not described in terms of pass/fail but according to a range of scores, weighted by importance according to an assessment committee. Tests administered to continuing education students were essentially the same except for the higher level of difficulty. While Indian census enumeration still classifies persons as ‘literate’ and ‘non-literate,’ efforts in the last fifteen years have led to further consideration of literacy as a continuum with a scale of proficiency. In some instances a range of scores has been indicated, and other assessments have categorized the learners ‘good’ to ‘poor’ to ‘quite ignorant’ - or levels I, II, III. Literacy assessment practices in Indian formal primary schools are similar except that not only is the framework for the test determined at the national level, as in the case of TLC, but the test itself is standardized; content is determined at the district level, and then translated into different languages according to region.

China utilizes a standardized definition of literacy and assigns individuals to the categories of ‘literate’ or ‘illiterate’ based on whether or not they meet certain minimum standards (or a ‘threshold,’ see discussion in section 7, below). With regard to basic literacy, 1500 Chinese characters is the threshold set for rural residents, and 2000 for urban residents and/or those employed in a company or institution. In addition, China reports that neo-literates are expected to be able to apply these basic skills to everyday tasks such as reading easier popular publications, maintaining simple accounts, and completing written applications. China considers an area to have ‘basically eradicated illiteracy’ if nearly all the population (95% in rural areas and 98% in urban ones), aged 15 and over, born since 1949, meets these minimum requirements. Test instruments administered in the 10- and 8-province surveys were designed by national education authorities and were uniform across the provinces.

In Mexico, those recognized as ‘literate’ are expected to be able to perform not only basic decoding and numerical recognition but apply these to necessary everyday functions.
In addition, literacy levels are recognized to fall along a segmented 3-level continuum. For appropriate placement of individuals entering literacy programs, INEA has established 3 levels of literacy achievement, considering level 3 ‘literate’, while those at levels 1 and 2 would be expected to continue or repeat basic literacy education. Speakers of indigenous (non-Spanish) languages have literacy programmes oriented at developing skills in their own languages as well as enabling them to ‘interact’ with Spanish speakers. For indigenous language speakers to be classified literate, they must demonstrate reading, writing, and oral-communications skills appropriate for everyday interactions in their regions, including a threshold level of spoken and written Spanish competency as would be considered necessary to function in their home areas. The materials obtained to date do not make entirely clear what level of ‘bi-literacy’ is required by Mexican authorities, nor what ‘threshold’ may be applied to indigenous communities.

In Nigeria, assessment techniques adopted for the study of NGO programmes included the use of questionnaire, interview, and qualitative focus group assessments; assessment of learning achievement was not used. In terms of learning achievement, the only test-based survey was accomplished on school children (primary IV) through the MLA study. Tests covered reading, writing, numeracy (including measurement, geometry, everyday statistics), and life skills (health, social studies, survival skills, science). Data from this study are among the first available on literacy achievement, but they do not cover out-of-school youth and adults.

3.6 Participatory Assessments

In India, participatory assessments were conducted by NGOs serving primary school students, whose goals were to make assessment stress-free and task-oriented. Children participated in a “fair” where they could display program-related skills in enjoyable activities, then undergo a formal test which would determine their placement in the upcoming term. In another setting, students were monitored on an ongoing basis and allowed a range of several years to complete a segment of the curriculum, depending on individual inclination.

In Mexico, participatory assessments were utilized for the indigenous population, to evaluate the operational and pedagogical qualities of the literacy programme for that group. These were intended to be implemented periodically, include various workers and groups, and serve to determine changes necessary to meet programme objectives. The findings of the assessments have not been reported.

In Nigeria, a number of different types of participatory assessments were conducted involving various configurations of program participants and contributors. For example, in its study of the FGN-Middle Belt Project, the Research and Service Work Group (RSWG) stressed the interdependence of all the sectors in the delivery of services and brought all the sectors concerned together, making it possible for differences of
opinion to be solicited from a wide range of professional and vested-interest groups. The RSWG worked through district development committees because it was thought that utilizing the existing infrastructure would improve the effectiveness of the exercise. The sector and community surveys generated substantial amounts of pertinent data for quantitative as well as qualitative evaluation of the Middle Belt programme, and these were supplemented by information from official statistical publications and from sectoral development plans which were readily available to the evaluators. However, the number of people involved sometimes made it difficult to reach agreement.

No participatory types of assessment were reported in China.

4. Data Partition Analysis

As described earlier, national literacy data (based on census information, surveys, or other assessments conducted in programs) typically reported rates by age group, gender, residential patterns, and various other dimensions.

In Nigeria school performance was analyzed according to achievement in literacy, numeracy, and life skills; these were in turn broken down according to school types, gender, and the urban/rural. Literacy data on adults were broken down by gender and/or state residency, and some data on schools were analyzed according to instructor qualifications and school characteristics such as ownership, year established, and available facilities. Data regarding attitudinal (personal) outcomes were gleansed from structured and unstructured interviews as well as focus group discussions, particularly in the NGO programs, and was detailed in published studies.

China reported rates of literacy by age, gender, educational attainment, employment status, and region. While personal outcomes were listed as part of assessments, it is not known how the data were analyzed.

In Mexico, the available data were analyzed according to gender, the rural/urban distinction, age, native language, and region. The main methodological modules, “Generating Word”, NEEBA, and “Global method of structural analysis”, were used to separate out significant distinctions. A three-tiered set of ability specifications was also devised based on data gathered in previous studies, which could in turn be applied to subsequent assessments.

In India, variables such as gender, age, urban/rural residency, and region were likewise important in India’s literacy statistics. In addition, of some special note was the study of language and dialect background, which led to significant findings regarding unsuitability of test instruments or administrator training. Other important issues
investigated were incidence of literacy relapse, library use, and comparisons with available contemporary census data.

In general, outside of India, limited information was provided in the case studies of typical statistical procedures for assessing the reliability and validity of literacy measures used to gather data. This is an area which should receive further attention in subsequent work in literacy assessment.

5. Sampling and Cost Issues

Sampling procedures were reported primarily in terms of census and in-depth partial census studies. In China, the sample was drawn by a two-stage cluster sampling procedure. In India, the Arun Ghosh Committee recommended that the sample size should be 5-10% of the whole, to make it more representative, especially for the disadvantaged. In Mexico, no sub-national sampling was reported. In Nigeria, the MLA survey was undertaken on a national stratified sample of about 22,500 cases, with data collected on students (Primary IV), teachers and schools themselves. The MLA questionnaire instrument was uniform but specific procedures varied from sector to sector, especially with regard to sample selection. A two-stage non-stratified random procedure was used to select the primary family unit. The first stage consisted of random selection of villages, and then a lottery was used to select families from within these villages. The Nigerian NGO studies at the village level seem to be ad hoc, and based on who participated in the specific literacy programme.

Interestingly, the countries surveyed reported very limited data on assessment cost or cost effectiveness of literacy assessment practices. One likely reason for this lacuna is that census data typically comes from government budgets for the national census; thus the literacy assessment aspect is a minor part of the total census cost. Furthermore, when partial sample studies were done, or NGO evaluations, it was again the case that cost data went unreported. In the future, it would be helpful to have such information so that one could compare the effectiveness of less expensive household, workplace or programme-oriented assessments with the kind of international comparative studies that appear to be quite expensive at the national level.

6. Summary of Lessons Learned

6.1 General lessons learned

One major lesson learned from the LAP case studies is that literacy assessment practices have a great deal in common at the national level in each country, with a substantial tendency toward self-report information. Furthermore, when in-depth sample
survey data are collected within a partial national sample, there are commonalities in what is measured in literacy, including simple measures of reading, writing and calculating. However, what is key in the present LAP study is the finding that there are few if any commonplace practices that national experts were able to draw upon to determine how to construct literacy assessment measures that would stand up to expert scrutiny (not to be confused with international comparability). And finally, in none of the four LAP countries was there a methodology in place at the national level that could be of assistance to evaluators, policy makers or programme directors at the sub-national or local levels.

In sum, there was little or no indication that data acquired from literacy assessments were actually utilized in improving programs, except to acknowledge that certain populations might require more adult and post-literacy programs. This general conclusion is in no way a criticism of the countries concerned or of the literacy field in general. It is simply a reaffirmation now for over a decade since Jomtien, and reinforced in Dakar in 2000.

6.2 Country-specific lessons learned

In India, a test of learning achievement has been developed according to a standardized framework, which can in turn be adapted for local use. This is believed to provide a more reliable assessment than a single standardized test because it has been made suitable to a great variety of learners. However, the India study reported some serious flaws in data collection (such as the appearance of “literate impostors” posing as literacy programme participants and taking tests for learners who may have significantly less ability). The India study was able to illuminate the great variety of ethno-linguistic backgrounds of learners as an important dimension for any further literacy assessment measures. Further, given the socio-cultural diversity in India, the principle of designing assessment tools at local levels within a larger national frame work seems to be an appropriate strategy.

In China, there are national guidelines on the number of Chinese characters that are required to be considered ‘literate’, which is adjusted for rural and urban environments. Furthermore, test instruments have been developed by provincial level educational departments who have established a database of test papers for individual assessments. Local administrators can draw on the centralized assessment database. This method can, in principle, save on manpower, material resources and time, and has raised the quality of acceptance. While the Chinese government has made great progress on literacy nationwide, it has recognized some significant variations by region and ethnic groups.

In Mexico, evaluation practices are oriented to the measurement of learning achievement in the basic abilities of reading, writing and basic arithmetic. An innovative characteristic for literacy programmes was developed and implemented which includes indigenous languages in assessments and also indigenous learners’ use of the language of
wider communication, and in addition helps to promote participative evaluation. A centralized agency (INEA) maintains a considerable store of background information on learners as well; however, the centralization process has meant that few programmes appear to have their own way of processing data or obtaining information for local implementation.

In Nigeria, assessments of NGO programmes demonstrate attention to personal/attitudinal outcomes and programme sustainability. However, studies on those same programmes lack adequate data on learner achievement. Overall, the relative role of NGOs in Nigeria seems to be greater than in the other 3 LAP countries surveyed here, and this has allowed for a variety of assessment strategies to be undertaken. At the same time, this variety has meant that there is little comparability within Nigeria of the differing methods employed by these NGOs in literacy assessment.

6.3 Cross-national lessons

The four country studies, when taken together, strongly suggest that greater conceptual comparability and technical know-how could have an important impact on the literacy assessment at both national and local levels in these (and other) developing countries. The creation of improved – yet relatively inexpensive – tools for literacy assessment are not beyond the capacity of development on a national level, and important economies of scale could be achieved by combining expertise within and across countries. The lack of available data on NGO programmes, particularly on their methods of direct assessment of learner achievement, appears to be typical across countries, and indicates the need for improved coordination among and across organizations for the collection and dissemination of such data. Finally, as pointed out by Prof. Bown, the regular collection of data is also critical for policy formation as well as programmatic assistance. A census undertaken every 10 years is of very little value for the present purposes; the literacy field, as with education more generally, needs to find ways of gathering data in a more timely way.

It should be reiterated, however, that such cross-national collaboration does not, and need not, imply that cross-national comparability is required or even desirable. Indeed, by trying to achieve such comparability (as in the TIMMS or IALS studies), the cost of the project, and the focus on comparability needs, will often defeat the fundamental purpose of trying to provide tools for the practical improvement of literacy and NFE that is functional in local contexts.

7. Directions for Further Work

As pointed out in the initial design of the LAP project, there is much that can be done to assist in the improvement of data collection that will assist both government agencies and programme implementers in improving literacy in developing countries. In
order to focus on directions for further work, we have selected a few central topics which have come up across the four LAP case studies.

7.1 Language Issues

Linguistic diversity has long been recognized as a significant issue to be addressed in the promotion of global literacy. The LAP case studies present information on the diversity of languages and scripts included in educational systems in each country. However, it has not been made sufficiently clear, in these reports, which languages or scripts specifically have been used in instruction, in assessment, by the instructors and learners themselves or in the community. More is needed on the roles these different languages/scripts, particularly those of ethno-linguistic minority groups (often with the highest rates of illiteracy), may play in the assessment of literacy.

The development of assessment instruments within national boundaries will have to include much closer attention to such language issues, especially if universal literacy is to be achieved. In addition, as in the Mexico case, as elsewhere, there is a growing demand by individuals and governments for ‘bi-literacy’—mother-tongue and language of larger use (regional or international). As economic opportunity becomes more linked to global economic change, increased linguistic skills (such as Spanish in Mexico and English in India) will naturally become an issue of greater importance both for policy makers as well as for those who create assessment measures.

7.2 Instructional Issues

In literacy, as in many aspects of learning, assessment is inextricably linked to instruction. In the LAP case studies there is some reference to the kinds of literacy instruction conducted in the LAP countries, but rather little detail. In some instances it is stated that evaluation and assessment were integral parts of the program, but it is not clear how assessment was related to instruction, with the exception of the occasional mention that tests were related to primers. The theoretical frameworks behind the instructional approaches need to be more clearly reported, plus systematic accounts of instructional practices and how those are related to the assessment practices.

Further, more information is needed regarding the specifics of curriculum design, materials development, and teacher/instructor/facilitator training, both in their theoretical framework and classroom implementation. Without adequate background information on the instructional context, it is difficult to evaluate literacy assessment practices necessary to measure learning achievement.

7.3 Measurement issues and the notion of a “threshold”
As noted earlier, the country case studies provided a wealth of information on literacy statistics, especially from national and sub-national census studies. Yet, as we know, the reliability and validity of self-report measures are very much in question. Even though statistics may appear to follow a regular progression, it may well be the case that the same methodology produces statistics that appear reasonable but are in fact poor indicators of learning achievement. Further, those studies which were reported to measure literacy learning (for example, in the India sub-national survey) are reported to have insufficient information on how item selection took place, on the relevance of the measures undertaken, and on the statistical reliability of the findings. By singling out India in this case, we hasten to note that we are very supportive of the approach taken by that sub-national study (NSSO, see Annex), which had many interesting insights. Nonetheless, the limitations of time and money put the main conclusions of that valuable study at risk. It is hoped that efforts of the variety undertaken in the LAP project will in the future help to rectify this type of situation.

The notions of standards and threshold of literacy attainment received considerable attention in the Experts’ Meeting, as well as how much (and which kind of) literacy skill(s) is/are needed to achieve ‘functionality’ in a given society. Little global consensus has ever been achieved on this point over past decades (ILI, 2000), but these issues can and should be given more attention at the national and sub-national level. While most experts now agree that a single dichotomy (literacy vs. illiteracy) no longer reflects the reality of diverse societies (whether rich or poor), there is more agreement that it is possible, through better assessment, to determine levels of literacy that are more indicative of what people know, and how to shape policy in light of assessment research. Each of the LAP countries had an official minimum level of ability that was termed to be a threshold to be listed as ‘literate’, yet in each country case there were missing pieces as to how such a threshold was derived, how it was measured, how it was implemented, and how it might be changed as the society changed. The standards issue is a perennial one, and one that needs to be given more attention in the literacy field (for further discussion, see the LAP working document on guidelines, March 2002).

7.4 Other questions

There are a variety of other questions that could benefit from further initiatives of the LAP type. Among these are the following:

- How can outcome (including impact) measures be further refined and utilized more effectively to target the literacy needs of learners?

- To what degree should national governments set the criteria of literacy assessment? What role should NGOs play in this area?
• To what degree should literacy assessment practices focus on workforce literacy, life skills, and/or the measurement of basic skills (reading, writing, math)?

• What should be the roles of community participation in literacy assessment activities?

• How can collaboration among NGOs and governmental agencies on various levels be facilitated so as to streamline efforts within countries, and internationally, in order to assist decision makers in accessing relevant data?
REFERENCES


ILI (March 2002). Towards Guidelines for the Improvement of Literacy Assessment in Developing Countries: Conceptual Dimensions based on the LAP Project. Philadelphia: ILI.


