Epistemic Groundings for the Role of Literacy in Sustainable Development at the Level of Local Governance

GORDON O. ADE-OJO
University of Greenwich, United Kingdom

MIKE ADEYEYE
Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria
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ABSTRACT This paper examines the significance of our understanding of the concept of literacy within the context of its role in development at local governance level. It argues that there are different understandings of literacy which require us to make a choice in terms of our epistemic preferences. While such preferences are seen to be informed by our allegiance to conflicting paradigms in the contexts of sustainable development, education and literacy, the paper submits that the different paradigms are not mutually exclusive. It argues that it is important that the choices made are consciously registered because it will necessarily become instrumental in our choices within other conflicting paradigms. Although the paper does not advocate the supremacy of any of the available options, the authors suggest that understanding the rationales underpinning these choices is essential for those interested in development at local governance level in order for the vision of the what and how of development to be properly articulated and evaluated.

Keywords: Literacy, Sustainable development, Local governance, Development programme
Introduction

The literature on development is replete with inferences and claims about the role of literacy with a seemingly widespread international consensus on its importance (Myhill, 2009). Yet, there is a paradoxical debate about the extent to which programmes built around this assumption have been successful with a distinct divide in opinions about the extent and dimensions of success in different settings. This divide has in fact assumed a ‘gladiatorial’ dimension with one side claiming that these programmes only have a superficial success (Ade-Ojo, 2009a, 2009b; Moss, 2009), and the other side; proclaiming resounding success of such programmes. What has however not been contentious is the agreement amongst all parties that literacy has an essential role to play in facilitating sustainable development, particularly at the level of local governance (Myhill, 2009).

In its set of Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations has at the core of one of its goals, the universal achievement of literacy and numeracy for all children who attend school (United Nations, 2008). Congruent with this goal is the recognition that being literate is ‘a means of access to empowerment and autonomy’ (Myhill, 2009, p. 129). Indeed, across the continental divide, treatises on development initiatives have inevitably drawn on the need for literacy development. Illustrating such convergence in the United Kingdom is the multi-billion pound Skills for Life initiative that was essentially built around the development of adult literacy and numeracy (See Moser, 1999; DfEE, 2003a, 2003b). In Australia, Hartley and Horne (2006) carried out an exhaustive review of perceptions on social and economic benefits of improved adult literacy. Robinson–Pant (2010) explored similar developments in Nepal, just as EDRS (2001) provides a comprehensive review in Asia and the Pacific. Of more relevance in this context, Skinner (2010) takes a journey into the evolution of literacy campaigns in Ghana, highlighting the impact on development at different stages. It is, therefore, clear that the interest in the relationship between literacy and development is more universal than regional.

Sadly, the consistency of the argument about the importance of literacy in development is matched, if not surpassed, by the seeming inconsistency [arguably] between the rhetoric of policy claims and the realities of implementation. In our view, one of the factors that could be held accountable is the mismatch between the epistemic groundings of literacy that informed the development programme and those that inform the tools used in the evaluation of such a programme. In particular, the salient question is what constitutes our source of knowledge about the importance of literacy in local development and to what extent are we using
this understanding in the evaluation of the [development] programme? This is an important consideration because the evaluation of the success or otherwise of any programme must take its reference point from the epistemic groundings of literacy which informed such a programme. If this is not factored into the process, we risk using conflicting paradigms to evaluate programmes, thus resulting in a mismatch.

In order to establish the epistemic groundings for literacy, it seems to us that this rationale must draw from two main sources: the nature of literacy and the issue of what we should see as sustainable development. If we must make any knowledge claims about the relevance of literacy in development, a central plank of such claims must logically draw from our understanding of literacy as a distinct variable, the related issue of literacy as a constituent of basic education, and our perception of what constitutes sustainable development. It is in the context of these variables that the why and how of literacy’s role in development can be better understood. More importantly, if we achieve such epistemic clarity, it becomes inevitable that our perception of the impact on reality becomes more consistent.

The rationale for advocating the need for a consciousness around the epistemic groundings for literacy is twofold: first, such an understanding of epistemic groundings will empower us to make informed choices based on the proposed goals of the decision makers, and second, it provides the rationale for opting to use the elements of multiple paradigms if and when required.

In our exploration of the epistemological groundings of literacy in local development, therefore, we will be drawing from three different but inevitably related paradigms: the paradigms of sustainable development, education and literacy, making clear their inherent features and thereby creating the opportunity for decision makers to have an understanding of the groundings for whatever paradigm they opt to draw from at any one time.

Sustainable development, sustainable education and the niche of literacy

The concept of sustainable development has been and will probably remain one of the most contested in social discourse. Emanating from the divergence in opinions formulated around this discourse, over five hundred definitions have emerged (Carroll, 2002; Woods, 2002). Contrary to general assumptions that sustainable development is a relatively novel area of research interest, the notion of sustainable development can actually be traced to as far back as the Magna Carta of 1297 which contains a statement on the relationship between environmental conserva-
tion and intergenerational equity (Woods, 2002). Clearly, such a contested terrain is bound to generate divergent epistemic paradigms of what constitutes sustainability.

But before we engage with the aftermath of this divergence in opinions, it is perhaps more fruitful to make an attempt at classifying the different positions in this debate by looking at some of the more prominent definitions offered:

‘Sustainable development is maintaining and enhancing the quality of human life—social, economic and environmental—while living within the carrying capacity of sustaining eco systems’ (Drummond and Marsden, 1999).

‘A better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come’ (DETR, 1999).

‘Treating the earth as if we intended to stay there’ (Tickell, 2000).

‘The ability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (Adeyeri, 2002 citing from World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

What is clearly represented by the sample of definitions offered above is the fact that behind each definition and, therefore, view of sustainable development, there are imperatives which are informed by different priorities.

In a seeming acknowledgement of these diverse priorities, Harris (2001) endorses the recognition of three aspects of sustainable development: the economic, the environmental and the social. The economic strand advocates a system that must be able to produce goods and services on a continuing basis, to maintain manageable levels of government and external debts, and to avoid sectoral imbalances that damage agriculture or industrial production (Woods, 2002). The environmental strand demands the maintenance and non-overuse of non-renewable resources with a strong emphasis on the process of replacement of such resources. The social emphasises equity, provision of social services and political participation and transparency. Developing from these divergent anchors to our perceptions of sustainable development are differing epistemic realities. It is clear that for the proponents of each of the strands of sustainable development, understanding and knowledge of what constitutes the concept will inevitably be driven by the three
different imperatives. In effect, the epistemic realities of each group of advocates will vary, one from another, just as the perception of achievement and realisation will vary along the same line.

In spite of the divergence of views, however, there is a common ground amongst all the proponents of differing perceptions of sustainable development. This centres on the role of education in general and literacy in particular in the achievement of sustainable development. As noted by EDRS (2001, p.10), regardless of the divergent views on what constitutes sustainable development, ‘Development cannot take place by itself’ … as ‘education becomes the most important factor for development…’ While this unanimity appears to have manifested in the notion of sustainable education, it has not eliminated the polarisation of views on what constitutes sustainable education which is the second contested paradigm of interest in this paper. In effect, we are again confronted with conflicting paradigms which evokes a stance of implacability between proponents of different viewpoints on what constitutes sustainable education.

Paradigms of sustainable education

The framework of sustainable education is usually seen from two perspectives (Mandolini, 2007, p. 9): the ‘formation of a sensibility about the urgency of the environmental crisis and responsible development’, and, as ‘a concept of intrinsic educational sustainability’. The distinction between these perceptions captures the paradox inherent in the perception of education of being at once, an instrument which ‘builds and strengthen the individual’s means to shape his/her life autonomously and to be able to lead himself/herself on’ (Jamsa, 2006), and a wider instrument which must now ‘catch the historical needs, seize good development directions, and make culture attentive to the values that it expresses’ (Konsa, 2004). While one role focuses on the practical consequences of being educated as manifested in economic development, the other relates to a hermeneutical responsibility and moral prominence.

Sustainable education as proposed by the adversaries, on the face of it, aligns to two seemingly [arguably] irreconcilable epistemic drivers with one identifying it through the prism of overall economic development and well-being, and the other, through the prism of self development, participation and empowerment. Following from this, there is a suggestion that our preferences in terms of how we know what constitutes sustainable education will reflect what we provide in terms of content and use of education. EDRS (2001, p. 11), in its acknowledgement of this relationship notes: ‘the relationship between education and development is not as simple as it appears to be. In fact, the impact of education on development
depends basically on what we teach and how much the learners learn.’ By direct implication, our acceptance and recognition of development based on education will depend on what type of education we provide and our perceived goals for providing such an education.

But the differences in perceptions need not be irreconcilable. In our view, the crucial point is to understand what the preferred option represents and therefore, how it aligns to what needs to be achieved. Making a choice need not be a permanent position. Rather, it should be seen as a consideration of suitability at any one time. What the flexibility implied in the understanding that the options are not necessarily infinitely parallel and irreconcilable offers is the avenue to converge different paradigms for different components of the same project. As such, opting for one paradigm at a particular stage does not eliminate the other paradigms which can be utilised if and when found suitable.

**Epistemic groundings of literacy**

The main focus of this paper is on the different understandings of literacy. Where does literacy fit into all of this? In order to properly locate literacy in the context of development, it is important that we look at our epistemic groundings of literacy. What does literacy mean to us? As is the case with sustainable development, there are two contesting and seemingly [arguably] irreconcilable paradigms of literacy and it is not a coincidence that the two paradigms have a kind of ideological alliance to the paradigms of sustainable education we highlighted above. In the context of the understanding of literacy, there are two dominant and crucial questions which have assumed a near axiomatic dimension: is literacy a set of skills which allows us to meet economic demands through employment and capital regeneration? On the other hand, is it a multi-dimensional constituent which includes the input of the learner towards their empowerment, participation and engagement? To this, we would like to add a third; could literacy be a combination of the two?

The two dominant ways of knowing literacy have historically being at counterpoints. From the seminal categorisation provided by Street (1984) which classifies literacy into the autonomous and ideological models, through the work of the New Literacy School in the UK (See Barton, 1994; Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Hamilton and Hillier, 2006 and Ade-Ojo, 2009a, 2009b), to the contributions of the New London group in America and Australia (See Luke and Freebody, 1997; Gee, 2004), it is clear that there are two ways of knowing literacy. The first, a cognitive approach, projects literacy as something we have or do not have (Street, 1984). In the view of its opponents, it offers a one-dimensional structure of liter-
The second view, which is represented by the Social Literacy model of the New Literacy School, sees literacy as a social practice. Barton and Hamilton, (2000, p. 7) see the core of this model as the assertion that ‘literacy is a social practice’. Crucial to this perception of literacy as a social practice is the argument that the basic unit of a social theory of literacy must be literacy practices. Illustrating this cardinal point are six propositions: Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices which can be inferred from events and mediated by written text; there are different literacies, which are associated with different domains of life; social institutions and power relationships pattern literacy practices thus making some literacies more dominant, visible and influential than others; literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices; literacy is historically situated; and literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making (Barton and Hamilton, 2000, p. 8).

A fastidious [excessive] allegiance to the principles inherent in each of the perceptions above will instigate a totally conflicting and different epistemic essence of literacy. Thus, in the context of the role that literacy has to play in development at local government level, these conflicting understandings of what constitutes literacy suggests that we will be confronted with another paradigmatic choice. What type of literacy do we see as significant for the desired development?

From the viewpoint of the advocates of the social model of literacy, a preference for the cognitive model is likely to evoke questions around the cognitive effects of literacy and how this might impact on development. In this context, it is likely to draw from the logic of its proponents that there are major differences between people who are literate in the cognitive sense and those who are not (Vygotsky, 1978; Luria, 1976; Gee, 2004). Inevitably, therefore, an adherence to the principles of this epistemic reality of literacy might be expected to generate a number of features. It will for example, start on the assumption that ‘without literacy, an adult will be unable to function on an equal basis in society—and that an individual can be easily categorised as either literate or illiterate’ (Robinson-Pant, 2010, p. 136). This viewpoint, the proponents of social literacy are likely to argue, is an offshoot of the conflation of child and adult literacy on the one hand, with the notion of literacy as schooling (Robinson-Pant, 2008, 2010).

The argument of the opponents of this epistemic grounding of literacy suggests that this view is likely to be associated with such principles as: Literacy without context, a banking education view of literacy (Freire, 1974), an emphasis on skills development, a value for money ideology, and a focus on economic development. There is no doubt that an association with the principles above evokes a natural
affinity with a particular epistemic reality of sustainable development and sustainable education. Thus, we are left with a preliminary conclusion that whatever choice we make in this contested area is likely to inform, and to have been informed by, other choices that we make.

Furthermore, the proponents of an epistemic reality of literacy that sees it as a social practice will challenge the cognitive stance which sees literacy as merely a ‘second chance schooling’ (Robinson-Pant, 2010; Papen, 2005). In particular, they are likely to see literacy as ‘a set of initiatives tailored to the particular demands of adults in particular context’ (UK Literacy Working Group, 2007, p. 10). Understandably, it becomes inevitable that they argue that this epistemic reality of literacy is likely to be associated with: a notion of literacy for empowerment, a notion of literacy to meet individual needs and for critical thinking, a focus on understanding issues of inequality, a learner centred curriculum in the context of Lifelong education, a goal of building capacity to challenge inequalities through informal and non-formal routes, a pro-poor participatory strategies and a goal of raising awareness of rights, responsibilities and potential for change.

As is the case with the cognitive paradigm of literacy, their preliminary conclusions become inevitable: a preference for this epistemic reality of literacy will surely evoke an affinity with a particular epistemic reality of sustainable development and sustainable education. In effect, we are again left with the preliminary conclusion that choices that are made in this contested area are likely to inform, and to have been informed by, other choices that we make. As with the other parts of the equation on the role of literacy in development, we are again confronted with competing epistemic realities: the cognitive and the social, out of which the purists will argue, it becomes mandatory that we make a choice, if we intend to contribute to development through literacy.

However, a realistic exploration of these options again suggests that such an enduring level of irreconcilability need not be the case. Indeed, the defining boundary imposed by the different proponents of the different viewpoints is in our view totally impractical and unreasonable. Why, for instance, could the two paradigms not co-exist? It seems to us that the importance of defining the epistemic groundings should not be to take side on the supremacy of either of them. Rather, the goal should be to raise the awareness that there could be different understandings, and more importantly, that there is a need to understand which of the groundings could be tapped into at any one time in order to facilitate the development programme at hand. This suggests, therefore, that the choice of one does not necessarily signal the end of the other. Rather, it should be seen as an indication that there is a clear understanding of what the achievement goals are and, therefore, that a conscious effort is being made to draw from the principles of the rele-
vant paradigm at the point in time. A combination of the two paradigms for different developmental goals cannot, therefore, be ruled out. Why for instance, could a development project not draw on the principles of cognitive literacy in order to further educational development while at the same time drawing from the principles of social literacy for emancipator development? The challenge for the managers of development, in our view, should be to understand that there are different rationales underpinning each paradigm and that these rationales can either individually or jointly promote development agendas.

Conclusions

There are three preliminary conclusions that we can draw from the ongoing. First, for a defined vision of how literacy might impact on development, a decision must be made about the epistemic essence of the literacy in question. This is largely because the evaluation of the success of literacy within development programmes must draw from the epistemic grounding that informed the development programme in the first place. Second, and as is often the case, our epistemic groundings in literacy can be reflective of our perceptions in terms of sustainable development and sustainable education. The choices we make within these contested paradigms are also very significant for the process and outcomes of our evaluation of development through literacy. Finally, there is a potential for a chain of reaction in terms of the choices we make. Recognition of sustainable development through the optional prisms of the social, the environmental and the economic (Woods, 2002) will inevitably trigger our choices in the other contested and related areas of sustainable education and epistemic realities of literacy.

But why is the question of choice and decision-making so important? There is abundant evidence that in spite of the growing recognition of the importance of literacy in development at local levels, the output of literacy programmes has been considered by many as less significant. This has led to frustrations on the one hand, and outcries on the other. For example, United Nations (2008, p.1) laments: 'Illiteracy is receiving minimal political attention and remains a global disgrace, keeping one in five adults (one in four women) on the margins of society'. Similarly, while there is a growing recognition of the importance of literacy, evidence suggests that resource allocation has not kept pace with this growth when compared with primary education (Robinson-Pant, 2010). Given the huge outlays on literacy programmes in various countries and the sheer volume of literature on its importance, it seems to us that the major issue where literacy and development is concerned are the conflicting perceptions held by different schools of thought of the nature of literacy that is promoted and funded. Herein lies the importance of
having a clear epistemic grounding of what constitutes literacy in development. An engagement with the epistemic groundings of literacy makes clear the following: What constitutes our understanding of the type of development we desire? Based on this, through what model of literacy can we achieve this development and what model of literacy is best suited for achieving these goals?

Drawing from existing literature on literacy and development, there is a dominant claim that development at local level is more about emancipation and empowerment as proposed by the social model (ERDC, 2001) rather than the development of individualised cognitive skills as proposed by the cognitive model (Luria, 1976; Vygotsky, 1987; Wertsch, 1985). In reality, however, such a distinction is on its own of no use to managers of development programmes. In our view, understanding the epistemic grounding that informs the development programme provides a valuable tool for evaluating the success of such a programme. In essence, the success of the programme can be better measured if we have an understanding of the epistemic reality that informed it. If, for example, we assumed that the claims of the social model of literacy were all true, there would be no point in using the features of the social model to evaluate a development programme that was built on a cognitive perception of literacy. Such a mismatch would give us an inaccurate picture of the progress made with the programme. This, in our view, is one of the factors responsible of the sometimes unsubstantiated claims on the failure of literacy in development programmes. In essence, therefore, knowing what is available, the impact of the choice made, using this knowledge to make an informed choice and to evaluate and monitor the progress of development programmes should be the challenge facing those who intend to use literacy as a tool for development at the local level.

Correspondence

Dr Gordon O. Ade-Ojo
Department of Professional Learning Development
School of Education
University of Greenwich
Bexley Road, Eltham, London SE9 2PQ
England, UK
Tel: 0208 331 9230
Email: g.o.adeojo@gre.ac.uk
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