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Editors

Changing Configurations
of Adult Education in Transitional Times
Conference Proceedings

ESREA
European Society for Research on the Education of Adults

7th European Research Conference, 4 - 7 September 2013 at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Changing Configurations of Adult Education in Transitional Times – Conference Proceedings

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Berlin

Note: The papers included in this volume are those whose abstracts had been peer reviewed by the Conference Scientific Committee. The content and the opinions expressed in the papers, and/or the writing style, represent the contributing authors.

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FUNCTIONAL ILLITERATES AND THEIR CONFIDANTES: A NEW APPROACH TO THE QUESTION OF NON-PARTICIPATION IN ADULT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

At the end of the UN Literacy Decade literacy has reached stronger public and scientific attention. Several European studies on functional illiteracy offered striking results (France 2012: 7%, England 2011: 16%, Germany 2011: 14.5%). Studies inform us that the clichés of functional illiterate people do not fit reality. In the working place and in their private life, people affected often have strong networks of support.

Despite recognizing the crucial role of networks for continuing education, research rarely focuses on those people and on their role in the learning process. The study introduced here shifts its focus from the functional illiterates to their supporters. As the project is at an early stage, in this paper we will concentrate on the development of our research questions instead of presenting own empirical results. We will hence focus on two crucial topics of the study: nonparticipation in adult basic education and networks of support.

INTRODUCTION

As long as literacy programs continue to publicize a homogeneous image of inadequate, dependent illiterate adults, we will continue to attract only a small number of potential program participants. Fingeret, 1983, p. 142

In 2012 the EU High-Level-Group of Experts on Literacy stated:

> An estimated 20 % of adults lack the literacy skills they need to function fully in a modern society. An estimated 73 million European adults lack qualifications above upper secondary school level, many because their poor literacy makes educational progress impossible (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012, p. 21).

Several international and national surveys support this view while they also show differences between the European countries as well as between different studies. For instance IALS quantified in 1994 the ratio of those on level one on 21.8 percent for the UK. The Skills for Life Survey showed that about 16.2 percent of the adult population can be found are located on the Entry Levels in 2003 and about 15.9 percent in 2011 (Department for Business, 2011, p. 5). According to the IVQ-survey in France in 2004, 9 percent of the adult population, who had attended school in France were functionally illiterate (ANLCI, 2005, p. 3); this proportion

decreased to 7 percent in 2011 (ANLCI, 2012, p. 5). According to ALL in Switzerland, about 16 percent of adults lack fundamental literacy skills (Notter & Erlach, 2006, p. 6). For Germany IALS depicted about 14.4 percent of adults on level one (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000, p. 136). This ratio was confirmed by the leo. – Level-One Survey in 2011.

The results of these surveys evoked several major questions, such as:

1) How can this high ratio of functional illiteracy be explained? What are the reasons for functional illiteracy in Europe?
2) How do functional illiterates manage their everyday life?
3) How can the people in question be reached and addressed to at least inform them about their possibilities to improve their skills?

How to reach people with low levels of formal education poses a core problem for adult education (von Hippel &Tippelt, 2009). To gather information about functional illiteracy so far only functional illiterates themselves or staff working at education centers has been interviewed or surveyed. As a result those not participating in classes of adult basic education (ABE) have remained invisible for research and public attention. Social networks of functional illiterates have not yet been in the focus of research, although it is well-known that they play a major role in lifelong learning.

The research study 'Functional Illiterates and their Confidantes' will focus on these networks of support by shifting the perspective. Its focus lies on the persons of trust of functional illiterates – their confidantes – i.e. on those people who help and assist functional illiterates in their daily life. From this perspective the three questions above can be re-stated as follows:

1) What do the confidantes know or think about the reasons for functional illiteracy?
2) How do they help them in their daily life? What does this support mean to them concerning the time needed for support or possible emotional conflicts?
3) Which different groups of confidantes can be identified and can these groups support adult education programs in addressing functional illiterates?

As the project still is in a very early stage the major part of this paper presents the state of research on nonparticipation in ABE and on networks of support.

STATE OF RESEARCH

NONPARTICIPATION IN ADULT EDUCATION

In general most scholars state that educational systems tend to be quite selective (McGivney, 1993, pp. 12-14). This is also true for the German system of adult education. Adults with higher school diplomas and those in highly skilled jobs are far more likely to participate in adult education than those with low or no school degrees as well as those who are unemployed (Bremer, 2007, p. 16). This is even more true for those with low literacy skills (Bilger, 2012, p. 261).

In Germany, the figure of about 7.5 million functional illiterates forms a sharp contrast to only about 20,000 participants in ABE-classes each year; this is less than 0.3% of the population

affected (Rosenbladt, 2011). While comparing the large number of functional illiterates with the small number of participants, major questions have to be answered, such as: how can people be reached, addressed and informed more effectively and what are the reasons for nonparticipation?

Bremer (2007) critically discusses the fact that low literacy in general is approached from a perspective of deficit and that lifelong learning is being looked at from a strong normative point of view. He states that in reality the concept of lifelong learning is based on living conditions and life situations which are not equal and valid for everyone. There might be strong reasons against participation. Bolder (2008, p. 29) describes these reasons as being embedded in a subjective logic or a subjective rationality of the people in question.

But what are these reasons for nonparticipation? The discussion about nonparticipation is not a new one. In the early 1980s, Cross pointed out that barriers to participate in ABE can be 'divided into situational, institutional, and dispositional factors' (1981, pp. 97-100). This distinction is useful to differentiate reasons for nonparticipation more precisely (see table 1) although these three factors for nonparticipation have been criticized for being 'oversimplified' (McGivney, 1993, p. 17).

In the early 90s McGivney (1993) reviewed the literature on participation and nonparticipation starting from the 1970s until the 1990s. Beder (1990) also summarizes reasons for nonparticipation in ABE from several studies from the United States from the 1970s and 1980s. A study run in Ohio by Boggs, Buss and Yarnell in 1978 identified the aspects of 'being too old', 'being too busy', 'being not interested/seeing no necessity', 'poor health' and 'family responsibilities'[1]. In 1981 Kreitlow, Glustrom and Martin ran a study in Wisconsin, adding as new aspects 'having to work', and 'poor past experience in school'. Fingeret in 1983 highlighted the aspect of 'missing information'. And in 1988 Hayes identified the aspects of 'low self-confidence', 'social disapproval', 'situational barriers', 'negative attitude to classes' and 'low personal priority'. Through his own empirical research Beder confirmed most of these reasons mentioned above and identified four main factors for nonparticipation. These factors are: 'low perception of need', 'perceived effort', 'dislike for school' and 'situational barriers' (1990, p. 214).

These findings also apply to the situation in Germany. In 1994 the Commission of Experts on Funding Lifelong Learning published its final report summing up a number of reasons for nonparticipation in adult education in general and not exclusively looking at adult basic education. Among other findings, they highlighted 'financial barriers', 'barriers related to the workload of employed women, especially those who have children', 'seeing no necessity', 'no adequate offering', and 'reasons related to family or partnership' as possible reasons for nonparticipation (Expertenkommission Finanzierung Lebenslangen Lernens, 2004, pp. 91–94).

Bremer links the aspect of participation and nonparticipation to milieu affiliation. He emphasizes the aspects of 'uncertainty', 'low self-confidence', 'negative experience made in school', and 'no apparent benefit' especially in the case of low skilled and unskilled

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[1] The results of the studies of Boggs, Buss and Yarnell, of Kreitlow, Glustrow and Martin, of Fingeret and of Hayes are quoted from Beder, 1990, pp. 208-209.

employees (Bremer 2007, p. 111).[2] Tippelt et al. (2004, p. 56) also discuss participation in adult education from the perspective of social milieus. As reasons for nonparticipation they highlight the 'lack of information' about adult education options.

The first national survey on low literacy in Germany – the leo. – Level-One survey – was conducted as an add-on survey to the Adult Education Survey (AES) (Bilger et al., 2012). The combination of the AES-questionnaire on participation in adult education and the skills assessment of the leo.-survey provided information on the participation in adult education by the level of literacy skills. Bilger (2012, p. 269) refers to the fact that people with lower levels of formal education do not participate as much in adult education as other groups. Focusing on the functional illiterates she shows that their participation is even lower. As reasons for nonparticipation among functional illiterates she emphasizes four main aspects: 'people in question do not want to learn again like in school', 'they do not see it worthwhile going back to learn because of age', they mention a 'poor state of health' and they declare that they 'do not have any confidence in their own skills' to cope with the tasks of learning.

To summarize, the findings discussed above show that there is a wide range of reasons for nonparticipation in adult education in general and more particularly in adult basic education. These reasons obviously do not differ a lot in an international comparison and they do not tend to change over time.

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[2] The leo. – Level-One Survey showed that some 57 percent of the functional illiterates are employed but that a big proportion of those work in unskilled positions. This makes the leo.-Survey compatible to Bremer's results (Grotlüschen 2012).

Table 1: Synopsis of reasons for nonparticipation

Cross (1981)	situational barriers	institutional barriers	dispositional barriers
Boggs et al. (1978)	- family responsibilities - being too busy		- being too old - not being interested - poor health state
Kreitlow et al. (1981)	- having to work		- poor past experience in school
Fingeret (1983)	- lack of information		
Hayes (1988)	- situational barriers		- low self-confidence - social disapproval - negative attitude to classes - low personal priority
Beder (1990)	- situational barriers		- low perception of need - dislike for school - perceived effort
Expert Commission (2004)	- financial barriers - barriers related to workload - reasons related to family or partnership	- no adequate offering	- seeing no necessity
Tippelt et al. (2004)	- lack of information		
Bremer (2007)			- low self-confidence - uncertainty - negative experience made in school - no apparent benefit
Bilger (2012)			- do not want to learn like in school - it is not worthwhile to learn again because of age - poor state of health - no confidence in their own skills to learn

Let us now respond to the second major question resulting from large numbers of functional illiterates on the one hand and very low rates of participation on the other hand: How can people in question be informed more effectively? Accepting that there are strong reasons for nonparticipation but at the same time being aware that missing information plays a role for nonparticipation (Beder, 1990, p. 209; Tippelt et al., 2004, p. 56) we should at least be sure that functional illiterates are well enough informed about the offering of ABE-classes to make a decision of whether to participate or not.

As a reaction to high rates of illiteracy in several countries, national strategies have been implemented to improve adult literacy. In England, the Skills for Life strategy was launched in 2001. Recently, fighting illiteracy was declared 'grande cause nationale 2013' in France. Germany started a national strategy in 2011. Part of the German national strategy includes research and practice in workplace oriented ABE, a scheme also followed in other countries, such as Norway (Gutthu & Bekkevold, 2009, p. 26).

In our research study described in this paper, we follow a broader approach: 'Functional Illiterates and their Confidantes' shifts the focus from the functional illiterates themselves to their confidantes – persons of trust – within their networks. These networks of support in general go beyond the sphere of workplaces as confidantes can also be found in families, circles of friends or within leisure clubs and community associations. One outstanding question is whether the confidantes can be reached to disseminate information about ABE options and— in cases of low self-confidence of the illiterate adult—encourage them to participate.

NETWORKS

The ability or inability to read and write is not responsible for the circumstances of poverty, crime, poor housing and ill health (…) Fingeret, 1983, p. 141

It is a widespread common belief, that the majority of functional illiterates have a network of support or persons of trust respectively to deal with written language in their daily life. Although the importance of support networks is frequently stated in adult education research, very little studies concerning the support networks of functional illiterates can actually be found.

For Germany, Döbert and Hubertus state that every person with insufficient literal skills has one person of trust, who knows about the problem and who takes over tasks of reading and writing. The authors specify that this person of trust might be the spouse, a friend or a relative. In this relationship functional illiterates often feel dependent on the partner to whom they delegate the writing tasks (Döbert & Hubertus, 2000, p. 70). The German study AlphaPanel touches, amongst other things, on the theme of the supporters. One question asked was who is informed about the reading and writing problem and who is asked for help.

Table 2: Dealing with reading and writing difficulties in the social environment

My difficulties with reading and writing	Who knows about it %	Who is asked for help %
Parents	61	22
Other family members	56	22
Friends, Acquaintance	56	24
Partner	46	35
Colleagues at work	40	15
Superiors at work	40	14
Children	33	22
Care givers	27	22
Neighbors	21	4
Others	6	2
Course instructor	X	48
Course participants	X	11
Nobody	2	4
Sum (multiple answers possible)	215	177

Source: Bilger & Rosenbladt, 2011, p. 23, own translation, n=332

When asked who knows about their poor reading and writing skills, interviewees in the first place mentioned parents or family members, as well as friends. Neighbors on the other hand are not informed regularly and hence they do not form such an important part of the network of the functional illiterates (Bilger & Rosenbladt, 2011, p. 23). When asked who they ask for support, the interviewees in the first place mentioned course instructors, followed by partners and children.

We have to take into account that this study was conducted in Germany and that its results might only count for Germany. Who participates in the networks of functional illiterates might vary strongly from country to country and depending on cultural background.

A study from the US shows that even the individual networks differ, although the people live in the same area and have the same cultural background. Fingeret already pointed out in 1983, that 'one of the challenges adult basic educators face today is the need to understand illiterate adults in their social world.' (1983, p. 133).

> Individuals create social networks that are characterized by reciprocal exchange; networks offer access to most of the resources individuals require, so that it is unnecessary to develop every skill personally. (ibid, p. 134)

Some of the networks are quite reciprocal. That means it would be unjustified to describe the individuals as dependent. But Fingeret also finds individuals that are more engaged in asymmetric relationships; these could be described as more dependent. She defines the positions of the individuals as a continuum between the 'cosmopolitans' at the one end of the scale and the 'locals' at the other end of the scale. The 'cosmopolitans' are illiterate adults 'who work in public roles, pass as literate daily, and are comfortable with the demands and institutions of the larger society' (ibid, p. 138). The 'locals' are described as follows:

> These adults often live in some ethnic or class-related subculture. Social networks primarily are composed of kin, but many include co-workers and friends. Generally,

local adults are not geographically mobile, which reinforces close-knit networks in which all of the members know each other (ibid, p. 139).

Fingeret concludes that educators should know about and become involved in the networks of illiterates, in order to understand that learning to read and write has a major effect on the relationships in their networks and will change the social role which individuals play in their networks.

In addition to Fingeret's quite unique study, different European national studies of the last years give some hints in terms of the role of networks. The very extensive background questionnaire of the IVQ study in France examines in detail if people need support in daily activities like shopping, reading a map or a letter, looking for work or using a vending machine. Moreover it examines who is the person of support (spouse or child, friend, relative, other persons).[3]

The Scottish Survey of Adult Literacies found that the need for assistance for daily activities ('Reading information from government departments, businesses or other institutions' or 'Filling out forms such as applications or bank deposit slips') depends on skills levels (St. Clair et al., 2010, p. 36 and p. 85), leaving the question unanswered of who is the person of trust.

Despite this first focus of looking at the importance of these networks for everyday situations, networks could also help to bridge the distance between adult illiterates and the system of adult education. If we look at the reasons for functional illiterates to take part in a literacy course, we also find some references in the studies.

The Skills for Life Survey shows that participation in adult basic education partly depends on information and motivation given by people of trust. Of all respondents who had attended a basic skills course in the last three years (n=466), about 16 percent had heard about basic skills courses from friends or family, 30% had heard about courses from employers and 29% from college or university (Williams, 2003, p. 203). This finding supports the importance of research and programs in workplace oriented basic education; such programs have started in different countries, Germany being one of them. It also supports the importance of research on social networks.

The authors of the British study 'Progression. Moving on in life and learning' examine networks of support. They conclude that 'the combination of effective support in the learning environment with strong support in social networks is key to helping people sustain their learning and to progress' (Hodge et al., 2010, p. 6). This study also states the significance of networks of support but examines these networks from the perspective of learners rather than their persons of trust.

Summing up, networks of functional illiterates and their role for the learning process move more and more into the focus of research. The role and importance of networks can be investigated with the theory of social capital. The French structuralist Pierre Bourdieu shows the meaning of social capital as an individual resource (Bourdieu 1983). Social capital exists in all relationships of people. But Bourdieu only focuses on the relationships that are positive

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[3] Unfortunately we couldn´t find any published results for this so far.

for people; social capital – in his point of view – is always something that could be used for own interests. In contrast to Bourdieu, Robert Putnam differentiates between 'bridging' and 'bonding' social capital. In this case he does not refer to Bourdieu, but to Hanifan, who coined the term 'social capital' already in 1916 (see Putnam, 2001, pp. 16f.). Bridging capital brings together different people; bonding capital tends to form a homogenous group:

> Bonding social capital brings together people who are like one another in important respects (ethnicity, age, gender, social class, and so on), whereas bridging social capital refers to social networks that bring together people who are unlike one another. This is an important distinction, because the external effects of bridging networks are likely to be positive, while bonding networks (limited within particular social niches) are at greater risk of producing negative externalities. This is not to say that bonding groups are necessarily bad; indeed, evidence suggests that most of us get our social support from bonding rather than bridging social ties (ibid, p. 11).

Quite compatible to the idea of bridging and bonding networks is Granovetters research on the kinds of relationships that are important for successful job search. In his publication 'The strength of weak ties' Granovetter describes the relevance of loose ties in the search for information. He points out that via loose ties people get more information, because it is more likely that people have different information sources, if they do not see each other regularly. Often these different sources of information could be used for a successful job search (see Granovetter, 1973; Avenarius, 2009). Therefore a network that is homogenous could be negative for the career compared to a network that is built from groups who are not connected with each other (see also Hennig & Kohl, 2011, p. 63). The probability of having a heterogeneous network however increases with a higher societal position.

Examining the process of learning, it seems to be a promising start to look at the role of confidants because they might serve as a link to other networks. If the confidant can provide connections to authorities, schools, the adult education system, companies and doctors, he or she can provide 'bridging capital' for the functional illiterates. If he or she is the member of the same network, only bonding capital can be provided and this will give fewer links to new resources.

To illustrate networks, some graphics exist drawn by the learners themselves as part of a study by Hodge et al (Figures 1 and 2). This shows the normal focus of ego-network research (2010, pp. 93ff.)

Figure 1: "Libby's wheel of support"
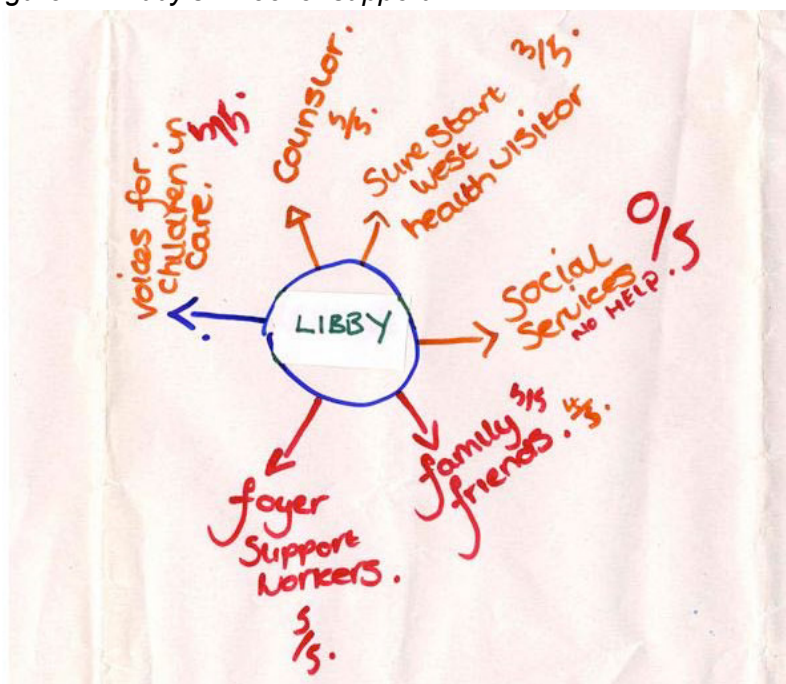
Source: Hodge et al., 2010, p. 95

Figure 2: "Martina's wheel of support"
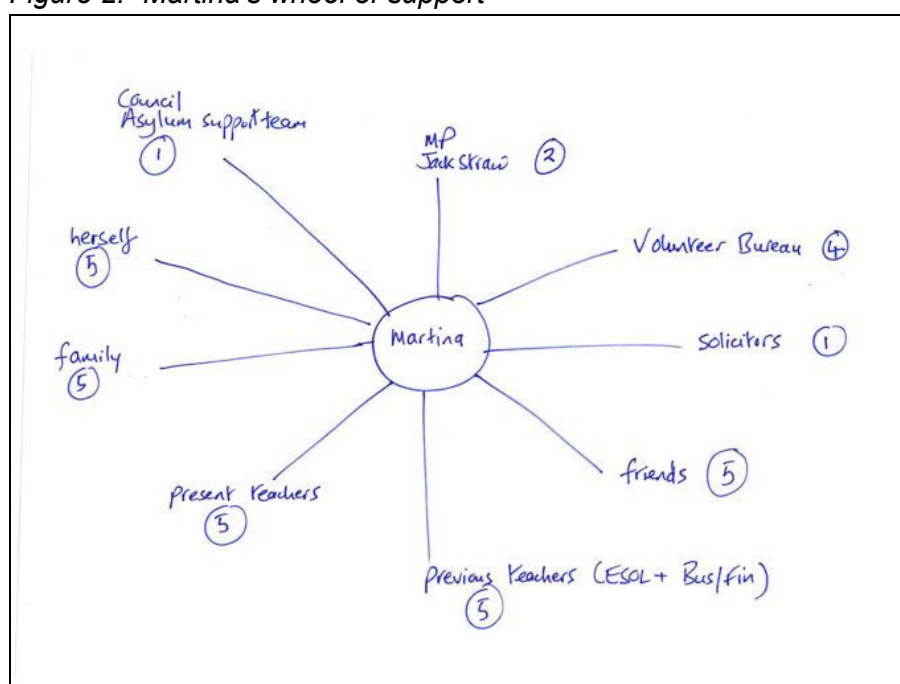
Source: Hodge et al., 2010, p. 93

In our study we want to shift the point of view from the ego-centered version (left part of Figure 3) to the standpoint of the confidant and their view of the functional illiterates and the learning process (right part of Figure 3).

Figure 3: Shift of perspective from the functional illiterates to their confidantes
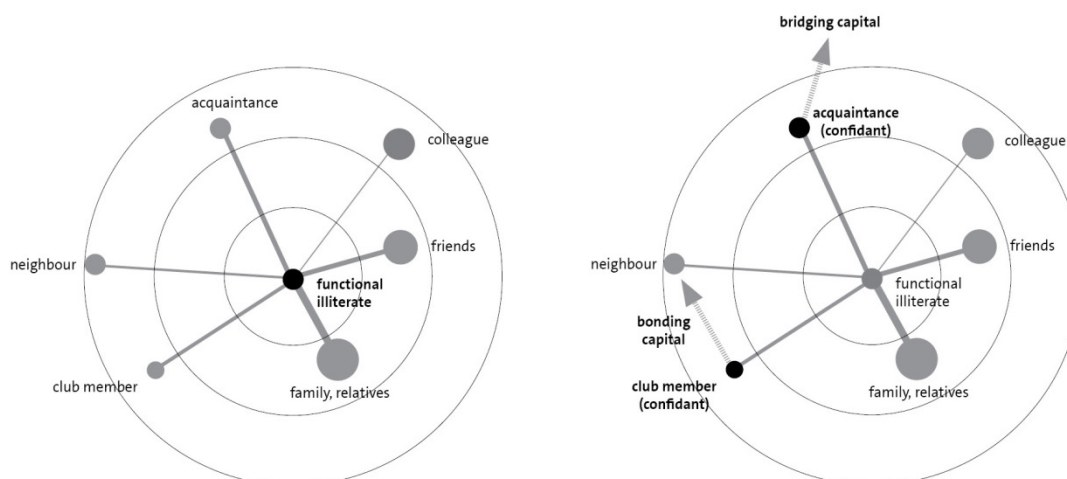
MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Following the new focus of research, the study 'Functional Illiterates and their Confidantes' has the following main research questions:

- Who are the confidantes and what kind of relationship do they have with the functional illiterates?
- Is it possible to characterize different types of confidantes? How could these different types be addressed?
- What kind of support do confidantes give to functional illiterates and why do they adopt this role?
- How do they feel about their role and at what point does the role of a confidante become a burden?
- Which (positive or negative) role do they play for the learning process of the functional illiterate people?

METHODS

Actors in educational policy are looking for answers in the reachability of functional illiterates. In order to explore the role of confidantes on a broader empirical base, a quantitative study should be carried out. As we know too little about the topic of confidantes, a qualitative study has to be done before in order to develop a suitable questionnaire.

DATA COLLECTION – QUALITATIVE STUDY

International and national surveys on literacy show that functional illiteracy is not a niche phenomenon but touches subgroups within entire societies. The topic however still tends to be a highly tabooed subject. Due to this premise the decision was to run individual interviews.

Based on the Grounded Theory, we started with interviews of a quite homogenous group, unemployed people, working in so-called 'One-Euro-Jobs'. These are work opportunities for unemployed people. After that we shifted to a group of confidants who have a relationship to the functional illiterates on a private base, like friends and family. And we were also looking for interview-partners with a more professional relationship to the functional illiterates, also teachers, employers, social workers and doctors. 23 interviews have been conducted and there will be some more at the end of the study. Most of the interviews were done face to face (20) with three interviews via the phone.

DATA EVALUATION – QUALITATIVE STUDY

We will follow the Grounded Theory ideas of data analysis, giving a preference to the systematic approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008). The objective of the analysis will be to examine types of confidential knowledge. This means we are looking for concepts and categories in the interview material with the intent to bind them together with our theoretical knowledge.

The aim of developing categories and at least types is to construct homogeneity for one type and to develop a range of heterogeneity among the types (see Kluge, 2000). The central idea that will be followed is the scientific-theoretical and pragmatic approach to evaluate theories empirically and to consolidate empirical observations to theoretical conclusions (Dewey, 1989; Dewey, 2002).

DEVELOPMENT OF THE QUANTITATIVE STUDY

Once we identified the main categories, concepts and types we start to develop the questionnaire for the representative quantitative study in a major German city (n=1,000). The representative study will provide information concerning the quantity of different types of confidantes and the distribution of the types within the population. On this empirical base we hope to contribute to the question of reachability. Furthermore we will know more about the taboo not being able to read and write and how this taboo is being maintained.

CONCLUSIONS

At this stage of the research we cannot draw any conclusions from the empirical material. However, the deeper we go into the theoretical discussion we find more and more hints about the role of networks and the role of supporters for functional illiterates. This supports us with our view that our research questions are relevant for Adult Basic Education.

At the end of the project we might also contribute to the theoretical discussion of literacy competencies. Once we realize that not every skill has to be developed by the individuals themselves but that some skills could be 'outsourced' to others, then we could start discussing competencies in a broader way. Hence the view of literacy development would go beyond the competence of the individual to read and write. Literacy in this point of view is a construct and a social practice in the community that is being 'co-created' where networks play a crucial role (see Zeuner & Pabst, 2011).

It is important to shift from a conception of literacy located in individuals to examine ways in which people in groups utilise literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 12).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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