

# Relevance, Equivalence and Progression in an Adult Basic Education Curriculum for Botswana

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## *Abstract*

*The Department of Out of School Education and Training, Ministry of Education and Skills Development, Republic of Botswana has been engaged in a rigorous exercise to reform the adult basic education program. In this paper, we discuss briefly how the issues of relevance, equivalence and progression have been applied to the planning process built into the adult basic education program. We argue that a suitable progression scheme is required to enable adult learners to move on to an adult relevant post-basic education program which would enable them to acquire a recognisable certificate that can help them fit into the learning society and knowledge economy being created in Botswana.*

## *Introduction*

In many nations, adult education is being urgently asked to specify ways and means by which it seeks to enhance directly the total living, productive and competitive capacities of its target audience. This is expected so in a world inundated with searches for ways of promoting the competitiveness of the human resource and national economies in the global market. In other words, adult education is being asked to metamorphose into a *vade mecum* for coping effectively with globalization in its entirety. The Government of Botswana has since committed itself to having a system of quality education that is able to adapt to the changing needs of the country as the world around changes (Botswana Government 1997, p. 5).

For many developing countries like Botswana where there are still pockets of illiterates in the population, it would seem that the first task of adult education

should begin with laying a solid foundation through the implementation of an effective adult basic education curriculum. In Botswana, the concept of adult basic education is used to describe and define adult literacy programs. It is therefore important for us to state at this point that the ontological—methodological frame Bholá (1996–1998) had always applied in similar contexts apply with some modifications to our circumstances.

The ontological-methodological frame is usually situated within an epistemic space defined by systems thinking, dialectical thinking and constructivist thinking (Bholá, 1998, p.487). Under its application, one can assume some considerable degree of dialectical relationship between adult basic education as a process and national development as a goal. This process ostensibly requires meeting individual adult learners' expressed needs, the needs of their societies and communities and the usually over-arching national, social, cultural, political and economic needs.

It is realized that there is no way adult basic education can really achieve the goal just specified without first of all guaranteeing access, equity, equality, relevance, equivalence and progression between it and the formal education sector. That is why improvement in relevance, the quality, and access to adult basic education should guide our curriculum development efforts for the future. The goal of progression nursed by relevance and equivalence could best be achieved if both policy direction and strategies for addressing these issues are implemented.

Hence, this paper has been structured along the lines of examining:

- The rationale behind the Department of Non-formal Education effort
- Basic considerations in curriculum designs
- Some models or progression in adult basic education programmes in Africa
- Some progression issues for consideration in the design of adult basic curriculum in Botswana.

### *The rationale*

Before independence in 1966, adult literacy programs were under the jurisdiction of the welfare officer in the then Department of Education. The program activities were conducted by community development assistants. Adult literacy was not a priority at the time mainly because of the poor economic situation of the country. The 1977 National Commission on Education and the National Development Plans that came after, recommended that adult basic education be given some visible consideration. As a result, the Department of Non Formal Education was established in 1979, and during the same period, it produced a document entitled the "Eradication of Illiteracy in Botswana – A National Initiative". It is this document that provided the baseline for the National Literacy Program (NLP). One of the objectives of the National Literacy Program was to eradicate illiteracy, an ambitious objective at that time but which has been achieved to a large extent as of today. For Botswana has achieved well over 83% adult literacy to date.

The search for a competent curriculum equivalent in Botswana is therefore not fortuitous, neither is it a

baseless and cosmetic mere quest for novelty as an end in itself as is usually found in the nascent practices aimed at throwing overboard just any idea administrators cannot comprehend. The need for this search had been dated as far back as 1992 when the Second National Commission on Education was inaugurated. But it has taken close to a decade to manifest ostensibly because Botswana's planners and administrators of Non-Formal Education could not afford to be accused of just introducing something with which they are not familiar. They cannot and do not have to be seen as initiators of schemes based on "guessed" "needs of the time. For the introduction of the adult basic education curriculum equivalent has gone and would go through due processes which could remove the final product from the precept of a "dud", unworkable document with utopian goals. Thus, the implementation of the program has been preceded by several programming meetings, the implementation of a needs assessment survey and the participation of all stakeholders in the production of a refined, acceptable, workable and relevant document. All things being equal, Botswana is once again embarking on a laudable, novel innovation in non-formal education which could set the pace for many other African countries to emulate as necessary.

### *Brief Historical Sketch*

At independence in 1966, Botswana was one of the world's poorest nations. The education system was underdeveloped. Following independence, attention was given to a rapid expansion of the education system at all levels with priority given to secondary education and to some extent also to tertiary education, to the relative neglect of primary education (Modise, 2005).

Ten years later (in 1976) a National Commission on Education was appointed by the then President of Botswana to formulate a philosophy of education for the country, to set up goals for the educational sector, and to suggest strategies for accomplishing these goals. Its report popularly known as *Education for Kagasino* provided the basis for the formulation of the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1977. The aim of the policy was to correct the pattern of unequal educational access in the country which originated from the colonial period and restricted education to a privileged few. It gave priority to improvements in primary education, provision of nine years of basic education, re-orientation of the curriculum to incorporate the four national principles, and the acquisition of basic knowledge and

skills needed for national development (Mokubung, 2000; Ministry of Education, 2001; Scanlon, 2002; Mukumbira, 2005; Modise 2005).

In 1993, the National Commission on Education recommended a strategy for educational development in Botswana. Among the goals to be pursued was the bringing about of a fully literate society and universal access to basic education for all Batswana. The 1993 National Commission on Education recommended and the government agreed that provision is made for adults to gain literacy skills and to progress to Primary and Junior Certificate levels (Republic of Botswana, 1993, p. 291). The importance of the wish expressed comes out clearly in the fact that Batswana were reasonably unhappy about the acquisition of rudimentary literacy skills. In other words, the concern was about the need for some form of 'permanency' in the use of both literacy and numeracy skills.

The desire expressed in the report of the 1993 National Commission on Education was reinforced in the Revised National Policy on Education, April 1994 (Republic of Botswana, 1994, pp. 2–8.34:). Contained in the 1994 National Policy on Education were clear references to the intentions to encourage progression in the Adult Basic Education program which was conceived as part of the general strategies to: a) enhance access and equity, b) prepare Batswana for life, citizenship and the world of work and c) develop education and training in such a way as to make them responsive and relevant to the needs of economic development in a rapidly developing economy.

Under the recommendations on out-of-school education, the 1994 policy emphasized the goals of establishing a learning society in which education is seen as a lifelong process beginning at a basic level. It also emphasised the need to guarantee universal access to basic education for school-age children and adults so as to bring about equity and social justice. But even much more importantly at least in the context of this discussion, the Revised National Policy on Education restated one of the goals of out-of-school education as follows:

"To provide opportunities for young people and adults to further their initial education to higher stages in order to raise the general level of education of the population." (Republic of Botswana, 1994, p.35).

The goal enunciated above in the policy actually gave expression to the need for ensuring equity and access, equality, quality and permanency in the acquisition

of literacy and numeracy skills by structuring, implementing and promoting progression. The end results intended were perhaps obvious to everyone: that is, the promotion of a learning society in Botswana which indeed, is an irreducible minimum for a dynamic and effectively competing economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The intensions and goals expressed in the policy were further confirmed by the 1997 Presidential Task Group on Long Term Vision for Botswana. A presidential task group was set soon after the RNPE in 1994 to articulate a long-term vision for Botswana. The Group came out with a document titled 'Long Term Vision for Botswana. Towards Prosperity for all'. This important document which is otherwise known as 'Vision 2016; Towards Prosperity for All' did not only emphasize needs of the country as the world around changes but the need to guarantee relevance, as well as quality and access.

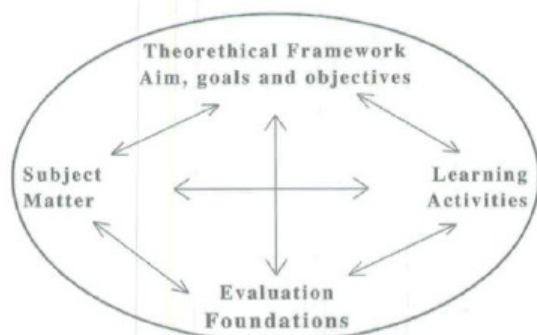
The Vision was influenced by the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. The conference called for the declaration of universal literacy as a fundamental human right. The call resulted from concerns among most nations that the type of education that was provided at the time was neither relevant nor successful in bringing about the desired socio-economic changes.

For all intents and purposes, the guarantee of relevance, quality and access begins with basic education, including adult basic education. Thus, from the point of view of policies, (some of which we have not practically reflected in detail, and follow-up documentation like Vision 2016), it would appear that the desire for access, equality, relevance and progression is popular. The views strongly expressed on the need for the Adult Basic Education curriculum to reflect the hopes were equally popular. But the achievement of ambitious goals such as this one would require careful thought, planning and management. Consequently, under the National Literacy Program, the Department of Non-Formal Education of the Ministry of Education was rightly saddled with responsibility for coming up with an adult basic education curriculum which can effectively satisfy the expressed hopes through the structuring of effective progression scheme which could be relevant to Botswana and serve as a model for other actions that may wish to do something as expected by UNESCO. One of the major goals of this discussion, therefore, is primarily to examine all possible issues surrounding the task of bringing into fruition the elements of relevance, equivalence and progression in Botswana's adult basic education programs.

It would be noted that, first of all, progression is a curriculum design issue. Successful curriculum designs are based on some considerations. It might be rewarding to discuss these considerations, albeit, very briefly.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Before a discussion on considerations in curriculum designs and organization, it is useful to define what we mean by curriculum and curriculum design. We are informed by Gravett and Geysler (2004, p. 147), Smith (1996, 2000, pp.1–5), Conway and Little (2008, pp.1–5) Conway, Jeffries and Chen (2000, p.15), McInnis (2000, p.150), Little and Conway (2000, p.23) Wilkie (2000, p. 25), that the term curriculum ‘refers to the entire range of educational practices or learning experiences: it could mean the total provision of a particular institution, it could also refer to a program, as well as to a module or a single lecture or learning experience’. This basically means that a curriculum is a roadmap or organized plan for making practical the teaching and learning processes. On the other hand, curriculum design is defined in this paper as a basic frame of reference or template for planning a curriculum which enables the organization of its components or elements, noting the relationships that exist among its components. It is ‘the way we conceptualize the curriculum and arrange its major components (subject matter or content, instructional methods and materials, learner experiences or activities) to provide direction and guidance as we develop the curriculum’ (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004, p.16). Schematically this frame of reference can be illustrated as follows.



Adapted from John Ritz, <http://www.odu.edu/~jritz/oted885/ntg4.shtml> 26/03/08

Traditionally, curriculum design and organisation activities seek to promote ways and means by which the best possible learning experience and instruction could be made available to learners (Smith, Krouse (Jr) and Atkinson, 1961, p.385). The process allows sufficient room for flexibility so that new learning needs of the local community, continuity in the promotion of relevant knowledge, skills, concepts and generalizations, variations and the most recent research findings can all be accommodated as much as possible. This is the first basic considerations in almost every nation where curriculum innovations are deliberately encouraged. Clearly, this process requires substantial knowledge and skill to succeed (US Department of Education (2008). Thus, scholars in the literature have been proposing ideas as to how we can best design curricula by way of paying attention to the use of an interdisciplinary approaches, relevant theories, research process, innovative pedagogies, assessment, institutional context and faculty support strategies (Repko, 2007, pp.110; Wassers, 2006, p.5, Repko, 2005a, p.5; Repko, 2005, pp.5–10; Klien, 2005, p.69; Nikitina, 2005, pp.27–44; Rogers, Scaife and Rizzo, 2005, p.p.265–285, Seabury, 2002, pp.38–64; Spooner, 2004, pp.85–111; Szostak, 2002, pp. 103–122; and Wolfe and Haynes, 2003, pp.126–169)

The second basic consideration has to do with the choice we have to make as to which approach to adopt. Generally, approaches are known to vary greatly according to prevailing circumstances, preferences and the people’s awareness. The review of the literature (Eraut, 1990, p.546) would reveal that prominent among the approaches adopted are the political, bureaucratic, marketing, public relations, scientific, knowledge structure, extinsic, expedient course design, problem solving and engineering approaches. We cannot within the limits be allowed to examine all of these approaches but the Department of Non-Formal Education is likely to adopt more than one of the approaches in an attempt to design a viable curriculum.

Whatever the approach we are adopting in the design, there is always a concern for what the scope should be. In general, the factors of course duration, the degree to which current practices are to be modified and the quantity, quality and levels of consultations to be accommodated are some of the basic considerations. One final consideration we have to pay attention to is the problem associated with curriculum design and organisation. Although we cannot examine in any profound details all the problems that designers contend with in curriculum reforms, it is important to highlight just a few that are relevant to our identified

contexts. In our context, it is obvious that by far the greatest problem usually emanates from materials. For example, designers have to decide on which material to include or remove, emphasise or de-emphasise and the criteria to adopt in the process of making that decision. Perhaps, all we can say here is that most of those considerations would eventually influence the structure of the issues we will identify and apply to the Botswana experience.

### *Issues for Botswana*

Arising from the major ideas already highlighted are some major issues we must address in the context of Botswana. There is no doubt that some of the issues have already been taken care of by the Department of Non-formal Education's National Adult Basic Education Curriculum Development Committee. Therefore, it is pertinent to detail briefly what has been done and, perhaps, what remains to be done.

#### *What has been done?*

The Department of Non Formal Education has rightly deemed it fit to involve very early in the process all stakeholders. This involvement began with the planning and implementation of a needs assessment survey geared towards the design of an adult basic education curriculum equivalence.

In 1999, a stakeholders' conference was held to bring into fruition a modified, acceptable and relevant adult basic education curriculum as recommended by the Second National Commission on Education and accepted for implementation under the 1994 Revised National Policy on Education. The conference attracted curriculum experts to ensure an error proof product.

Specifically, the involvement of all stakeholders was to a) take collective decisions on what needs to be included in the curriculum; b) develop a common understanding of the new curriculum outline and c) identify the role each stakeholder would be playing in the process of implementation. Within those aims and objectives, the planning committee rightly intended that stakeholders assess at that point the existing relationships and partnerships as to whether or not they could move the nation forward. Perhaps more importantly, it was to determine and strike the equivalence of an adult basic education curriculum to that prevailing in the formal education sub-sector of the entire education spectrum in Botswana.

The next section recalls some of the areas where there was need to focus attention during the stakeholder conference. It was hoped that the Curriculum Committee of the Department of Non-Formal Education in the Ministry of Education and Skills Development would refine and produce a blueprint for Botswana's Adult Basic Education Curriculum which would adequately address the issues of relevance, equivalence and progression. Towards realizing that goal, we proposed a few ideas on what needed to be done.

#### *What needed to have been done?*

We intend to examine the issues of what needed to have been done under relevance, equivalence (featuring largely issues of assessment), credit accumulation and transfer schemes, progression and implementation.

#### *Relevance*

Since modern formal education was introduced in developing countries, there have been complaints that education was too academic, not preparing children for life. The relevance of education was challenged, and particularly so for rural areas. This is a worldwide, longstanding debate (Bergmann, 2002, p.1).

There is no doubt that we need to bring into fruition an integrated, learner centered, problem and cultural environment oriented and effective curriculum. As an objective that has to be attained, the relevance of education leads to a process that will guarantee the purpose of education, mainly, to provide the citizens with the knowledge and skills for responding to societal needs (Halaoui, 2003.).

For sure, the basic socialization issues that our children require to get integrated into Botswana culture may not be adequately addressed if the issue of relevance is not addressed as part of curriculum design process.

#### *Equivalence*

This is one major issue that needs to be tackled. First, we offer a definition of assessment as used in educational practice. Assessment in education is defined by Harris and Hodges (1995) as "gathering data to understand the strengths and weaknesses of student learning" (p.12). On the other hand, literacy assessment is defined as "gathering data to understand the strengths and weaknesses of student reading and writing abilities

and practices in various contexts” (Kruidenier (2002).

If we have an equivalent adult basic education curriculum, then it is possible as noted above to assume the use of the same assessment scores for the non-formal and formal education programmes. This is normal. According to Kruidenier (2002), adult literacy assessment has been heavily influenced by several developments in the field of educational assessment (featuring standardized testing and more recent innovations in assessment, including criterion-referenced testing and performance or alternative assessment).

The issues that will arise in our assessment in the two programs include:

- Will learners be subjected to the same test, i.e. using the same question papers in all subject covered?
- If we are using the same test, how shall we deal with the problem of variations in experience and difficulty between the two programs?

Weber, A.H. (1975) has suggested that if the scores of individuals who take the different forms of tests are to be compared to one another for the evaluation of their relative ability, it is necessary in the interests of equity to calibrate, or equate, the scores on the different forms.

Calibration or the process of equating or developing equivalent scores usually yields an equation or a table for converting scores on one form to scores on the other form (Weber, 1975). The conversion of scores on one form to scores on the other form is based on the grounds that if the two forms are measuring the same ability, then it makes sense to translate scores which are expressed in terms of the units of one test to scores in terms of units of the other test. But concern over equating or calibrating is a complicated area of study in the field of psychometry. This suggests to us that in working out equivalencies there was need to invite at the groundwork stage available psychometricians or, in the alternative, educational measurement and evaluation experts. Considerations for our adult populace in curriculum design must occupy the center stage in the process. Rather such issues as overcoming poverty, unemployment, the scourge of HIV/AIDS amongst others should stipulate the interest of adult learners. It is only this kind of curriculum with a staying power that can attract the participation of our adult population that is already over-burdened by too many problems. Indeed the Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP) has since identified the need for a relevant curriculum

(IDRC, 1979). The issues involved go much deeper. There is a camp that questions assessment in education and the camp that sees value in assessment when appropriately applied.

There is evidence to suggest that many adult educators who for various reasons have not used any formal assessment tools or procedures remain unconvinced that assessment is an important part of the teaching process (Kruidenier (2002); Kutner, Webb, & Matheson, 1996; Condelli, Padilla, & Angeles, 1999). On the other hand, there are also many scholars in the field of adult education supported by others from outside the field who have highlighted the negative consequences brought about by assessment particularly when standardised tests are used. Among these effects they state that the learners may be anxious about testing, and negative results from tests may lead to a loss of self-esteem and motivation (Ehringhaus, 1991). Also, the tests may have some cultural biasness and this could be demonstrable in tests normed on groups that are culturally different from that taking the test (Kruidenier (2002); Garcia & Pearson, 1991; Joint Task Force on Assessment, 1994; Askov, Van Horn, & Carman, 1997).

When used cautiously to minimize possible negative side-effects, however, assessment can be beneficial. The most commonly stated benefits of assessment in adult literacy include:

- Screening to place students in appropriate programs
- Diagnosis of individual strengths and weaknesses in literacy to help plan for instruction
- Measurement of individual growth
- Self evaluation and personal growth
- Program evaluation and accountability (Askov et al., 1997; Askov, 2000).

We also learn that from the point of view of teacher education, “teacher’s use of formative assessment improves their student’s learning, especially if teachers have additional guidance on using the assessment to design and to individualize instruction” (US, Department of Education, 2008, p. xxii). This has relevance for assessment in adult literacy especially when considering measurement of individual growth, self evaluation and personal growth and diagnosis of individual strengths and weaknesses stated above.

### ***Botswana Educational Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (BECATS)***

It might not be possible for us to envision at this stage what we have decided to tag the Botswana Educational Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (BECATS). This may not be a novel idea but we imagine that as time goes on we would arrive at the point of having a unified grading and certification machinery, which allows for easy progression.

The importance of the subject or credit accumulation and transfer schemes cannot be under estimated. Perhaps, we need to shed some light on this subject so that we can better imagine the technicalities.

- Ordinarily, credit accumulation and transfer of a learner's credit from one institution to another may present some difficulties since learning contexts differ. For that reason, Bhake and Hanley (1995, p.40) are of the opinion that such a transfer is based on an agreed number of credits for different stages in study programs.

For us in Botswana, our concerns would be:

- How many credits do we expect, say the primary school pupil to accumulate per year?
- How many credits do we expect an Adult Basic Education learner to accumulate per year?
- At what point, based on the accumulated credits, can learners transfer between the two programs if they choose to do so?

### ***Implementation***

The blueprint for the adult basic education curriculum cannot on its own bear fruit. We propose it would work best with the implementation of Adult Basic Education curriculum projects. Based on the engineering approach to curriculum design, the blueprint needed to be subjected to the processes of experimentation and evaluation. Such an exercise would be desirable because of the following reasons:

1. Some textbooks currently in use would need to be reviewed to bring them in line with the new goals, objectives and hopes that would emerge from this exercise.
2. We need to discover the weaknesses and

strengths of the product with a view to making necessary adjustments and amendments to reflect Botswana's national needs.

From what has been said under assessment and credit accumulation and transfer schemes, it is clear that progression of adult learners in the adult basic education program may not be as easy as some people believe.

### ***Progression***

The issue of progression conjectures that adult learners do not have to stop at the basic level of learning. Progression requires a deliberate introduction of the learner to a new learning activity, an upward movement, elevation or promotion to a higher level as a result of successful learning. The adult learners must be able to move on to an adult relevant post-basic education program which would enable them to sit for the junior Secondary School leaving examination and acquire a recognisable certificate. This they might do without subjecting themselves to having to read or learn subject matters that are more suitable for children.

Getting to a suitable progression scheme requires that we need to agree on the duration of study, standardization of programmes across the nation staffing of equal quality strength, recognition and acceptability of outcomes by all stakeholders among others.

Moreover, learning from experimentations is always useful in reducing some of the unanticipated risks and dangers which would have otherwise made worthless our efforts and initiatives.

### ***Recommendations***

In this section we propose short term and long measures that could be undertaken to improve the quality and relevance of the adult basic education program in Botswana. These are stated as follows:

There should be provision for support to motivate high quality formative research on the Adult Basic Education program that is relevant to issues of relevance, equivalence and progression for the program to serve the national needs it is supposed. Issues such as how the assessment in the adult basic education could be made more accurate and more useful need to be interrogated.

In relation to BECATS, we recommend that there should be a Unified Grading and Certification Machinery that would allow for easy progression. The design

of appropriate standards and assessment procedures would play a significant role in promoting the adult basic program.

We also recommend that, for the blue print for the adult basic education curriculum to be effective, it is essential that the basic adult education program projects are implemented.

Finally, we recommend the development of standardization of the program in all regions of the country, provision of staffing of equal quality, effective instructional practices and more relevant and current teaching materials.

### Conclusion

The design considerations for adult literacy programs in the context of this paper should include relevance, equivalence and progression. Relevance, equivalence and progression have occupied a significant position in curriculum design debates. The literacy environment in Botswana, particularly the adult environment, is challenging adult basic programs to be relevant and provide adult learners an opportunity to enroll in higher education programs that meet their choice of

career advancement. In this paper, we discussed how the issues selected for discussion needed to have occupied a significant position in the planning process of the adult basic program in Botswana. The issue of assessment in adult basic literacy program was briefly discussed and debates for and against assessing learners highlighted. The paper concludes by noting that a suitable progression scheme is required to enable adult learners to move on to an adult relevant post-basic education program which would enable them to acquire a recognisable certificate for effective functioning and participation in the learning societies and knowledge economy that Botswana is actively trying to create in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. At the moment, Botswana has come up with a national qualification framework that will enable those who are not in the formal school system to have relatively easy access to higher education on the basis of their prior learning experiences. This new development has apparently lent a great deal of credence to learning programs in the non-formal sector of the economy. Thus, the gains already achieved in introducing relevance, equivalence and progression in Botswana's adult basic education curriculum have begun to be consolidated.

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