



EBSN podcast series on EPALE

Building resilience through basic skills programs

Transcript of the podcast





Building resilience through basic skills programs

EDITOR: Welcome to EPALÉ's podcast made in collaboration with the European Basic Skills Network.

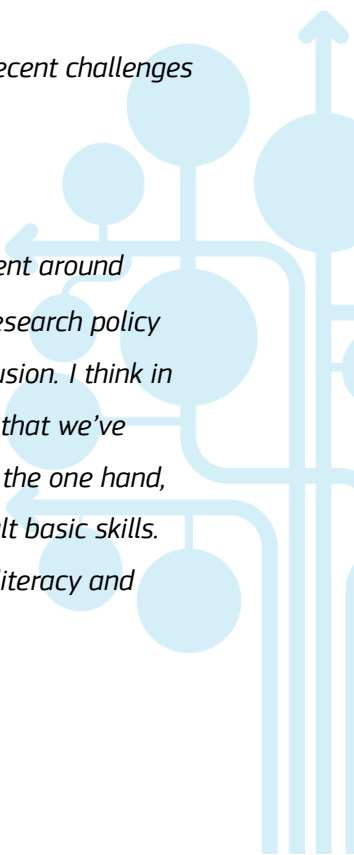
Today we are asking experts from EBSN to talk about their experiences and give a general status of basic skills' capacity to build resilience for citizens and communities. The emphasis on promoting basic skills has been apparent in recent European policy. The European Council's recommendation on Upskilling Pathways and the recently published communication on the EU Skills Agenda have put skills provision into the centre. The recent COVID crisis has shed new light on the importance of basic skills. It has shown its significance in making citizens and societies more resilient to unexpected and disruptive challenges and more prepared to adapt quickly to fast changing circumstances. General experience and the thematic focus of the European Skills Agenda reflect the need for provision in important areas of people's lives such as health, work, social welfare and finances.

In this session today we are:

- focusing firstly on what lessons we can learn from the current policy context and the COVID crisis in terms of basic skills for the future.
- Then, addressing the role of financial and health literacy in basic skills training,
- and finally, on how we can build resilience for citizens and communities through basic skills training?

We asked Alex Stevenson from the Learning and Work Institute to tell us a bit about the recent challenges in basic skills training and how governments can go about them.

ALEX STEVENSON: I am Alex Stevenson and I lead a program of research and development around essential and life skills at Learning and Work Institute in the UK. We are an independent research policy and development organisation that focuses on lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. I think in terms of basic skills within the context of Upskilling Pathways there is a number of things that we've learnt from the recent crisis, in terms of coronavirus and responding to that pandemic. On the one hand, we've always known in the UK for quite some time now that we have an issue around adult basic skills. The OECD estimates that there are around nine million adults who don't have good basic literacy and

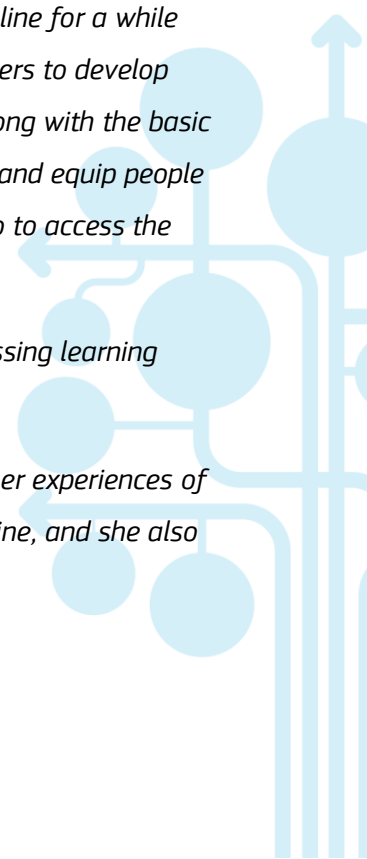




numeracy skills. And so that's been part of the context for a while. More recently we've seen in terms of responding to coronavirus that there has been relative stability of funding for providers and there's been a lot of flexibility because of that to try and respond and move learning online. We've seen quite a lot of experimentation around making learning accessible online and trying to develop new models of doing that. So, there's been a bit of a national experiment going on, and a lot being learnt there about what works and what doesn't and how can we develop new models of learning for the new academic year from September. So, providers are planning a range of different options in order to be able to fit in with what the government guidance will say about rules on social distancing and so on whether learners can return to classes in a physical environment or if the learning needs to continue online or the combination of the two. I think that coronavirus has highlighted particularly those issues around basic digital skills. So, it's become more important than ever before to have those basic digital skills in order to have been able to access learning online during the lockdown, keep connected to communities, family, friends, and particularly around accessing healthcare services and care information. So, for example, if you want to get a test for coronavirus, you need to be able to book that test online and to access that service. In the UK we know that around, again, 9 million adults can't use the internet and further 2.7 million who can access the internet independently and without help, still don't know how to make use of its full capabilities. In that context, some of the responses that we've seen from the government in England has included launching an online skills toolkit and that includes basic and entry level courses in digital skills and in numeracy so that people can learn those skills online and it's hoped that that will both support people in lockdown and also as there will increasingly be a need for people to find work and new employment. Once the economic impact of coronavirus becomes fully known, it could help support them with that as well. We also know that or we're fortunate rather to have from August 2020 there will be a new statutory entitlement to fully funded basic digital skills learning in England. That's something that has been in the pipeline for a while now but I think that's going to become increasingly important in terms of allowing providers to develop new curricula, new models of delivery that link both the basic literacy, numeracy skills along with the basic digital skills and come up with new courses that can look at basic skills more holistically and equip people with those essential skills that they'll need potentially for work and for retraining but also to access the support they need.

EDITOR: As Alex Stevenson highlighted, basic digital skills are of key importance in accessing learning opportunities.

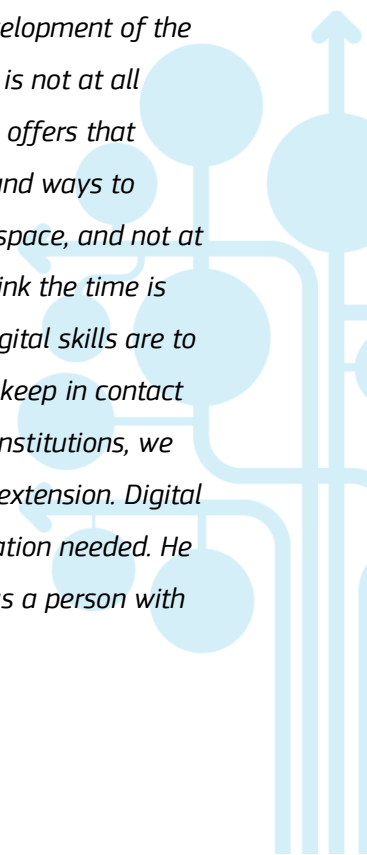
Our next expert, Celia Sokolowsky from the German Adult Education Association shares her experiences of digital learning environments with a focus on learning German as a second language online, and she also tells us why critical media and data literacy have become essential.





CELIA SOKOLOWSKY: *This is Celia Sokolowsky from DVV, the German Adult Education Association.*

During the lockdown under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic we experienced something that I would call a spontaneous digitisation in adult education. I mean digitisation is a process that is taking place completely independently of the coronavirus crisis, but the condition of the lockdown really enforced the use of digital media in adult education. From one day to the other, educational institutions were locked down and there was either a digital offer instead of the classroom, or nothing. When I take the example of VHS-Lernportal, our platform with courses for basic skills training and German as a second language, it experienced the growth of 30 000 new students in the first two weeks of the lockdown, and then another 100 000 new students in the next four weeks of April 2020. People were absolutely prepared to use the time of the lockdown for learning, for education and personal training, in this case the training of German as a second language, of literacy and basic skills. We also saw many teachers coming new to our platform which they can use for tutoring their courses. When before there was perhaps reservation and even fears about the digital world, teachers and students have now broken new ground and many have learnt a lot of new things, which thus also includes the handling of digital tools for learning and teaching. I have to say that there has already been an incredible development here. We have experienced so much motivation among students and teachers to make the best out of the lockdown and use the time intensively for learning. And the feedback of many of our students and teachers goes like this: "I despise the coronavirus and I really want my good old normal back, but I am very happy that this situation opened me the way to your platform and to digital learning. Among teachers there was also a very strong demand for extra training to handle our platforms and the tools for group activities, conferencing, tutoring etc. So now is the time to provide trainings and digital skills to prepare for the very new future, if that is not even the present day. Everybody understands that this is not only necessary with regard to the further development of the pandemic, but also concerning the general digitisation of society. And now, of course this is not at all confined to the training of the use of digital media and tools for education. We need also offers that introduce you to critical media literacy, as a vaccine against fake news, to data security and ways to protect your privacy, to offers that build knowledge how to create your identity in digital space, and not at least to the training of technical skills like for example the setting up of a wifi. Again, I think the time is right now as everybody had just recently experienced how helpful and necessary basic digital skills are to be more flexible and to handle the daily life challenges in a difficult situation like this, to keep in contact with others, to get important information and to participate in social life. As educational institutions, we have to draw the conclusion that every educational offer now needs a digital option and extension. Digital literacy is like a vaccine. A digitally literate person is able to get and evaluate the information needed. He or she is able to get help an assistance online, and (one) is in general not as vulnerable as a person with



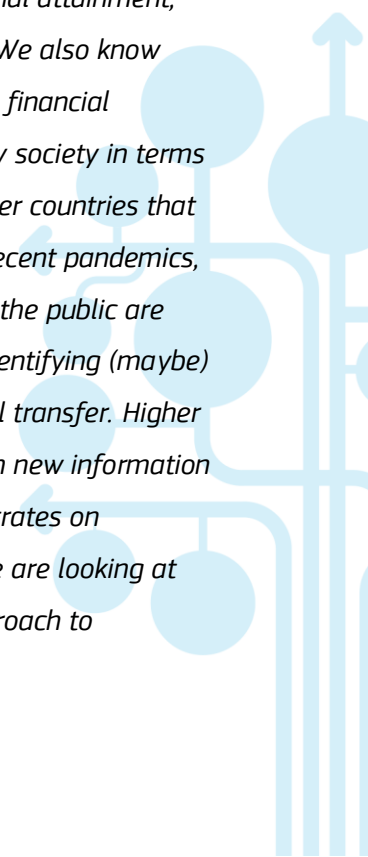


underdeveloped digital skills. Digital literacy is connected to social status, to age and gender, as we know from statistics. Practically, we could see during the COVID-19 lockdown, that it was much harder to continue literacy in an online environment than for example language courses for highly skilled workers. So definitely and undisputedly, we have to improve very quickly the digital competences of the educationally disadvantaged, the socially and educationally deprived population in order to make them less vulnerable to the consequences of lockdown and economic crisis in general. There will surely be initiatives on the side of the German government and its institutions to support basic skills training. On the level of educational institutions, like the Volkshochschulen in Germany, we understand that we have to integrate elements of digital literacy in every program and every course in order to develop an overall competence in the digital field.

EDITOR: *We know that the link among different basic skills (literacy, numeracy and digital skills) is significant and that they are quite affected by the context in which they are applied. Let us now turn to two domains of our everyday lives: health and finances to see how they can contribute to improving resilience of individuals.*

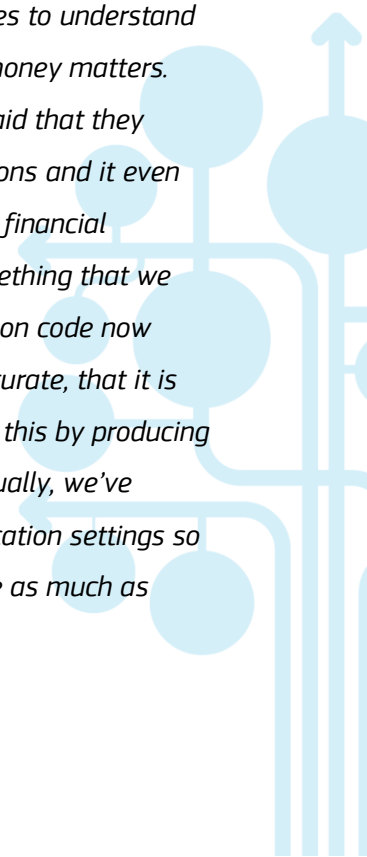
Our next expert Clare McNally from NALA, the National Adult Literacy Agency in Ireland tells us how they address financial literacy.

CLARE MCNALLY: *In Ireland, one in six of the population are at low level 1 on the five-level literacy scale, and one in four would have low levels of numeracy. Even more, about 48% of the population would have low digital skills. So, people with the lowest skill levels, they generally have low educational attainment, they earn less income, they are more likely to be unemployed and to report poor health. We also know from PIAAC, that they are less likely to vote, to trust others, to understand health or even financial information, so that costs individuals in terms of lower life chances and more importantly society in terms of increased costs for social services and supports. So increasingly, we are looking at other countries that are focusing on the link between basic skills and resilience. For example, if we take the recent pandemics, strong literacy, numeracy and digital skills are an essential part of this resilience, and as the public are faced with ongoing public health messaging, (you know) accessing services online and identifying (maybe) fake news. So low literacy is directly related to that misinformation and reliance on social transfer. Higher literacy will allow people to engage with public institutions to understand and to act upon new information or indeed to use technology. This thinking fits with the capabilities approach that concentrates on improving and tracking what people are actually able to do and certainly that's where we are looking at now in getting in the program for the government this holistic, whole of government approach to*





improving and supporting people with literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs in Ireland. When we talk about financial literacy, we are talking about individuals' ability to be able to understand how money works, how you make it, how you manage it, how you spend it. That's important, because it really equips us with the knowledge and skills we need to be able to manage our finances effectively. So, poor financial literacy is obviously bad for individuals and their families, and the economy because it can cause many people to become victims of predatory lending, to make poor financial decisions, resulting maybe in bad credit or having large amounts of debt. So, there are many barriers for individuals managing their money and accessing good financial services, and this can include not having the literacy, numeracy and computer skills which underpin everyday financial activities. We would really say that the lack of plain English and the regular use of financial jargon by banks and by other financial institutions is one of the greatest barriers to understanding financial information. Since 2000, the National Adult Literacy Agency has been involved in a number of projects to address the issue of financial literacy, to raise awareness of it. This includes doing research and advocacy work, developing teaching and learning resources, and providing even financial literacy awareness training for staff working in financial institutions. Our financial literacy research that we did identified that adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties would be more excluded than others, you know, as banking products became more complex and are delivered online. Interestingly, the research also showed that low financial literacy is not confined to those with literacy and numeracy difficulties but exists in all income levels. For example, when we did some research into whether people knew what the meaning of the term APR is the third of adults did not know that. These really act as a barrier for somebody to be able to make a decision about their finances because we are asked to look at this kind of language all the time in our everyday kind of interactions with our finances or with financial institutions. One of the areas that we have tried to advocate for is that these institutions use more plain English and less jargon, because, you know, financial jargon is difficult to the best of times to understand but for somebody with low literacy or numeracy levels it is going to be a real barrier to money matters. Other research that we did showed that the majority of people, almost 90% of people, said that they preferred if banks used less financial jargon and more plain English in their communications and it even showed that over the fifth of people that we did the research with, would actually switch financial institutions if they provided their information in a more user-friendly manner. That's something that we very much advocated for, and I am glad to say that the Central Bank's consumer protection code now requires financial services to ensure their information for customers is clear, that it is accurate, that it is up-to-date, and that it's written in plain English. We've tried to assist organisations to do this by producing kind of A to Z guides of financial terms in plain English that they can use quite easily. Equally, we've produced workbooks and teaching resources for anybody delivering courses in adult education settings so that they can also incorporate this into their teaching and learning. We've tried to provide as much as

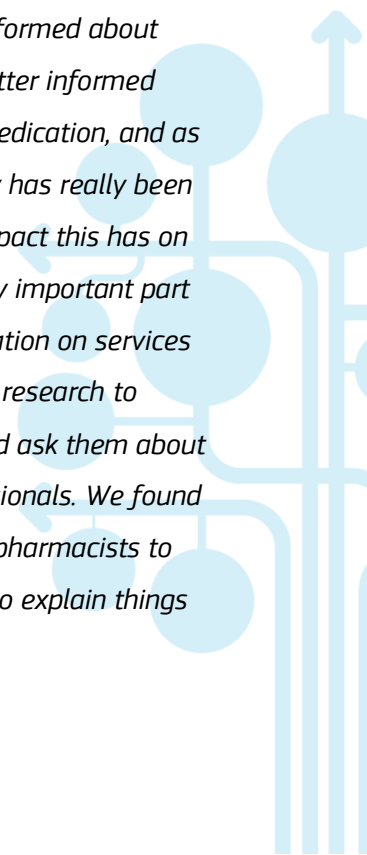




training and advice to staff in banks and financial institutions so that they also can make their services more accessible to people. Our services and our training is really about making sure that no one with a literacy, numeracy or digital difficulty is excluded from a service or from a promotion or from other important decisions because they have low literacy. When we do this training, we are very much trying to inform staff of the difficulties that some of their customers might have. The fact that just because they are fairly familiar with the terminology that they use that it can be a barrier to other people understanding their information. Indeed, when we are doing this training we try to encourage, we ask often students that are currently in a course to improve their reading, writing or math skills to come and to talk to the staff in the bank just to let them know of the difficulties that they find when they go and interact with a group like them. So, we find that financial literacy is a growing area that people are interested in, and they acknowledge that there is a lot of gains to be made by making their information clearer and also there is going to be less mistakes made at the end of the day if the customers understand the information they have been given in the first place. We would really say that everybody has the onus on to try to provide that information in plain English and to make their service then as accessible as possible to the public.

EDITOR: Making health-related decisions is something that became just as important as managing finances during the lockdown. In the next section Clare McNally tells us a bit about NALA's initiatives focusing on literacy training in health-related themes.

CLARE MCNALLY: Many people who deal effectively with other aspects of their lives find health information difficult to obtain or understand. Patients are often faced with complex information and treatment decisions. An international research has shown that patients who are better informed about their health have more effective consultations with their healthcare provider, they are better informed about the medicines they are prescribed, and they are more likely to comply with their medication, and as a result, have better health outcomes. So NALA, that's the National Adult Literacy Agency has really been to the forefront of this work making the link between literacy levels in Ireland and the impact this has on people's health. We work very closely with the healthcare sector because they play a very important part in improving health literacy and numeracy by communicating clearly and making information on services very accessible to patients. So, like I said, we work with healthcare providers, we've done research to promote this work. Over the years we've done research with the general public that would ask them about their understanding of health terms or how they find interactions with healthcare professionals. We found in that research that nearly 40% of Irish people were calling for doctors and nurses and pharmacists to use more understandable language and less medical jargon, to speak less formally and to explain things



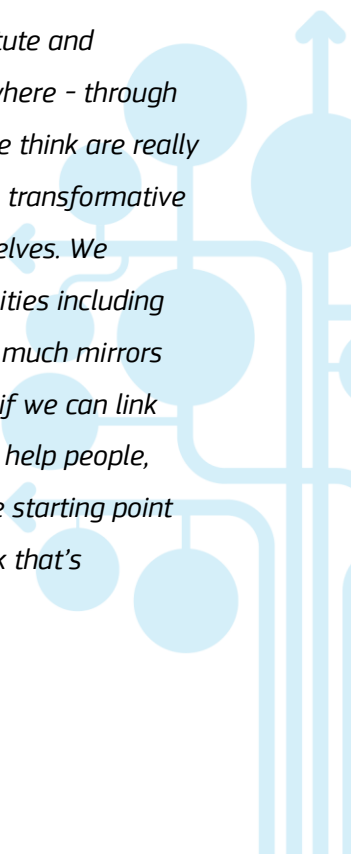
more clearly. 17% of the people actually said that they are taking the wrong amount of medication on at least one occasion because they didn't understand their prescription. What was interesting to us is that young people, 15-32-year-olds, were least likely to ask a doctor or a nurse or a pharmacist to explain things that they don't understand. Embarrassment was ranked as one of the main reasons for not seeking more information from healthcare professionals. So, starting with those working in the health sector we provide training and it's really about helping staff to reflect on how they communicate with their patients and checking its effectiveness. The point here is not to assume that just because you tell the person the information, your responsibility is over. You have to be very clear and explain any medical terminology or (for example) has the patient been asked to give you their understanding of what they heard. So, simply techniques in communicating and using visuals and perhaps using the teach-back method are very useful for people working in healthcare settings. Similarly, we work with organisations like hospitals and healthcare settings to do an audit of their environment. This is really designed to help workers understand what the literacy demands of the place that they work in mean and to give them a little bit more guidance to make it more accessible. This can be from walking into a reception: how many things does someone have to take on board as they walk in, is everything written in heavy text, is it easy to understand, is the first thing they're asked to do is to fill in a form. So, by doing this audit and actually picking out all the areas that somebody may have a difficulty with, and you can help address them. We've done that for many years and produced many publications to assist healthcare professionals in making their services what we would consider more friendly to the public and more understandable, because, like I said, it's not just individuals who have literacy difficulties who find this information difficult, it's many people (who) have difficulty understanding health information because you know it's a different terminology and you tend to be quite stressed, I think, when getting this information. We also encourage the public to be more confident in their communications with healthcare professionals. We try to encourage people to be more prepared perhaps when they are going in for a consultation. Sometimes it's difficult to remember everything you wanted to know or ask your doctor, or healthcare worker. One way to avoid sometimes unsatisfactory consultations is just simply to be prepared, write a note or any questions or concerns you may have before your appointment, so you don't forget anything that's important. Indeed, all the better if you can take somebody with you who can be a second pair of ears. Similarly, to ask questions, we would say that there's you know three simple questions the patient should ask of their doctor, nurse, pharmacist during every visit. Those questions are: What is my main problem? What do I need to do? and Why is it important me to do this? That helps in relation to be able to understand what's been required of you and why it has been required. Even better is to – if you want to really check your understanding – is that you repeat back what you have been told. It's often very useful to check your understanding of what has been said to you by explaining the information back to for example your doctor. That way they can be sure that



you understood the discussion and correct anything that you've misunderstood. Health literacy is very important because, really, it's about people being able to make informed choices, to understand information and to be able to act on it. We find the work that we do in health literacy can make a huge difference and certainly the healthcare agencies and the departments of health as well as the hospitals and other people that we work with are very open to learning these techniques and to making their information as clear as possible to the public.

EDITOR: *Alex Stevenson talks about what we need to consider when we focus on the term resilience. He mentions the concept of Skills for Life as a framework to consider basic skills from a resilience perspective.*

ALEX STEVENSON: *So how could basic skills contribute to the development of resilience of citizens and communities? Well, I think that we would need to be a little bit cautious around the term resilience, there's lots of different understandings of that term. I think we need to recognise that a lot of the things that will support people to find work, to upskill, to generally cope and manage with the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic are to do with structures and systems and a wider support that's in place for them, it is not their sole responsibilities as individuals to do all of that unassisted. I think in terms of basic skills what's interesting, we've seen in the UK context that there's a great linkage between basic literacy and numeracy skills, basic digital skills and they now have the same statutory entitlement to fully funded provision for those skills. In the European context, something in terms of the Skills Agenda, the action around Skills for Life is really interesting here because that recognises the value of a broader set of basic skills and capabilities. And that's one of the things we've been calling for at Learning and Work Institute and particularly in our partnership with the European Association for the Education of Adults, where - through a project on life skills for Europe we developed a wider set of skills and capabilities that we think are really important in terms of not just helping people to cope but actually equipping them to make transformative change in the communities where they live, in the circumstances in which they find themselves. We extended beyond basic literacy, numeracy, digital skills and we have a wider set of capabilities including health, financial, environmental and civic awareness to name a few. And that, kind of very much mirrors the approach that we piloted and tested around the Citizens' Curriculum in the UK. I think, if we can link basic skills needs in terms of upskilling towards approaches that very much recognise and help people, and start with the issues that they're facing around health and money, and use that as the starting point as a way in to basic skills, to engage people in learning and boost participation than I think that's something that's going to be beneficial and clearly important now more than ever.*

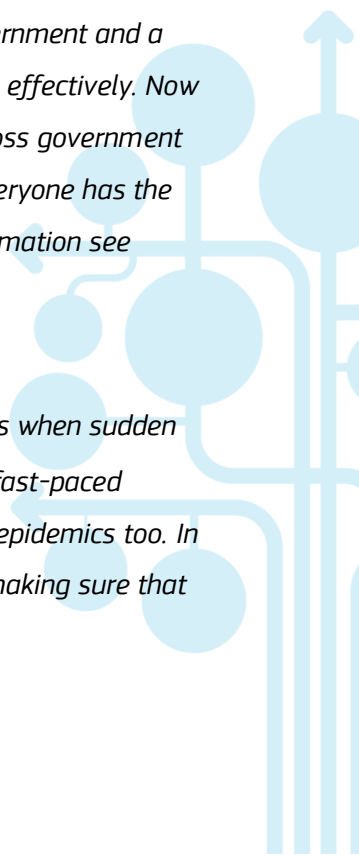




EDITOR: Helen Ryan, policy officer at the National Adult Literacy Agency, advocates for basic skills policies taking up a capabilities approach and focus on resilience.

HELEN RYAN: The most important recommendation for policy-makers here in Ireland is to prioritise those furthest behind first. To do this, we need a new vision, and a new approach. Ireland recently had a general election and we have a new government. In the new program for government we've secured a commitment to develop and implement a new ten-year strategy for adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills within the first year of government. NALA is launching this month in July three new documents, which you will find on our website, and one of these documents is a report called Literacy for life. This report advocates for an alternative approach which connects adult literacy with the concept of resilience. It's suggesting that we adapt a much broader understanding of the relationship between adult literacy and resilience through an assessment of how literacy can contribute to individual agency and the capacity to respond to external events and forms of change. This thinking fits with the capabilities approach from international development and theorists such as Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. In this report recommend three areas. Firstly, to develop a cross-departmental and holistic approach to adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills policy. Secondly, we call for a monitoring framework for adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills across policy-making bodies. Finally, we look for new outcomes and indicators for the impact of adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills learning. We also know when we look at the numbers of people who return to literacy classes, that we are only catering for 12.5%, and also that people don't tend to come back for financial literacy classes. So, we have to design programs that meet people where they are at. We have a real opportunity now with our new program for government and a new government department in Ireland to think differently, design creatively, and respond effectively. Now is the time to invest in lifelong learning and adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills across government departments, and agencies, civil society and communities. A new approach can ensure everyone has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital skills for today and for the future. For more information see NALA's website: www.nala.ie.

EDITOR: Building resilience for people with basic skills needs is of key importance in times when sudden changes in our everyday lives can happen at any time. Disruption can happen due to the fast-paced technological developments, but as we have just witnessed, it can be the result of global epidemics too. In this context, the objectives of Upskilling Pathways have become ever more important in making sure that





people with skills needs are supported in finding employment or securing their labour market positions. Cohesive policies leading to all-encompassing basic skills programs are essential to make sure that the most vulnerable segments of societies are included. Considering basic skills capacities to build resilience needs to account for a series of important domains such as use of digital technology, health and financial services.

Thank you for listening and don't forget to share your views on the topic in the comment section and sign up for EPALE's podcast series to hear more news about adult education!

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