

Ewa Przybylska

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8338-5484>

Warsaw University of Life Sciences

Adult literacy and basic education as a contemporary educational trend in the affluent West

Alfabetyzacja i edukacja podstawowa dorosłych
jako współczesny trend oświatowy na bogatym Zachodzie

Summary. This article aims to present the current state of research, contemporary education policy, and educational practice in the field of adult literacy and basic education in selected countries of the affluent West. The text draws on the literature on the subject and the secondary analysis of empirical research conducted mainly in German-speaking regions. It provides a definition of “adult basic education” and outlines key initiatives in areas such as basic digital, health, political, financial, and mathematical education. In the conclusion, the article addresses the situation in Poland, particularly the neglect of warnings about deficits in basic knowledge and skills among parts of the population, and the resulting inaction and disregard by policy-makers and adult education institution in meeting the needs of certain community members.

Keywords: adult literacy, adult basic education, basic digital education, basic health education, basic financial education, basic political education, basic mathematical education

Streszczenie. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie aktualnego stanu badań, współczesnej polityki oświatowej i praktyki edukacyjnej w zakresie alfabetyzacji oraz edukacji podstawowej osób dorosłych w wybranych państwach bogatego Zachodu. Tekst opiera się na literaturze przedmiotu oraz wtórnej analizie badań empirycznych, przeprowadzonych głównie w niemieckim obszarze języ-

kowym. Zawiera wyjaśnienia definicyjne terminu „edukacja podstawowa dorosłych” i szkicuje główne działania realizowane w ramach podstawowej edukacji cyfrowej, zdrowotnej, politycznej, finansowej i matematycznej. Jego zakończenie nawiązuje do sytuacji w Polsce, konkretnie – do lekceważenia sygnałów o deficycie podstawowej wiedzy i podstawowych umiejętności części społeczeństwa, a co za tym idzie – bierności i lekceważenia przez politykę oświatową i instytucje edukacji dorosłych potrzeb niektórych członków społeczności.

Słowa kluczowe: alfabetyzacja, edukacja podstawowa dorosłych, podstawowa edukacja cyfrowa, zdrowotna, finansowa, polityczna, matematyczna

The terms “adult literacy” and “adult basic education” have not yet become well-established concepts in contemporary Polish adult education as relevant ideas for today. In both academic and social contexts, these terms are primarily associated with past eras. Adult education is now largely viewed beyond its compensatory role, which was its primary function during a time when a significant portion of Polish society was illiterate.* After all, written language is now ubiquitous in the lives of the country’s inhabitants, surrounding them at almost every turn.

Written messages have become so deeply ingrained in our psyche that it seems almost impossible to imagine a world without writing – without books, libraries, magazines, maps, road signs, television, or advertisements. [...] Every day, from the moment we wake up, we encounter printed text: from the first glance at the clock face, to setting a radio station, to the brand of shampoo, toothpaste, and cereal, we are bombarded with written messages vying for our attention – and that is even before we reach for the morning newspaper (Baines & Haslam, 2010, p. 10; my own translation).

The concept of illiteracy is primarily associated with impoverished and underdeveloped countries of Africa, Asia, or South America. In contrast, the term “adult basic education” often evokes confusion, especially in refer-

* In 1914, 41% of the population living in Polish lands were illiterate. This number decreased following the introduction of compulsory schooling for children and youth aged 7 to 14 by Józef Piłsudski in 1919. By 1921, the percentage of illiterates had dropped to approx. 30%, and by 1932 it had further declined to approx. 23%.

ence to Europe, the United States, or Australia. After all, compulsory education, which requires participation in schooling until the age of 16 or 18, applies to everyone, and compliance with this requirement is subject to oversight.*

The concept of adult basic education is not clear-cut. A review of various definitions helps to formulate a thesis that, in contemporary European discourse, a functional perspective prevails. This perspective leads to an understanding of basic education as an area encompassing literacy as well as the development of other competencies essential for an adult's daily life. While common understanding – and as educational practice often demonstrates (Euringer, 2016, p. 251) – places precedence on the ability to use writing in basic education, the theoretical perspective highlights the dynamism of the concept and its contextual nature. This is especially relevant to the social and individual conditions inherent in the lives and work of individuals, which should be considered in the offerings of basic education. There is no doubt that the concept of “adult basic education,” currently promoted by education policies, has gained popularity thanks to numerous studies conducted over the past four decades, which have comprehensively illuminated the phenomenon of contemporary illiteracy in wealthy Western countries (Przybylska, 2018). Research conducted primarily in Anglo-Saxon and German-speaking regions, examining the causes of illiteracy of adults, their biographies, social backgrounds, living environments, and educational paths, as well as the consequences of functioning in society with low literacy skills, has led to literacy being viewed as part of the broader concept of adult basic education. They have shown that mastering writing does not improve individuals' life situations unless the development of other skills, such as digital education, economic education, or political education, accompanies the learning of reading and writing (Abraham & Linde, 2011; Grotlüschen, 2018). In the third decade of the 21st century, the literature on the subject predominantly embraces a holistic approach to the basic competencies of citizens. While reading and writing skills are prioritised as fundamental conditions for lifelong learning, they do not en-

* In Poland, municipalities and school principals are responsible for overseeing compliance with compulsory schooling. Parents are obligated to enrol their children in school, ensure regular attendance in classes, and provide the necessary conditions for learning. Additionally, parents must inform the principal of the primary school about their compliance with compulsory schooling outside of school (Article 40.1.4 of the Polish Law on School Education).

compass the full range of competencies necessary for individuals to function effectively in society. To sum up, adult basic education is a term that is much broader than literacy. Its main feature is contextuality, expressed through the relationship between its content and the social, cultural, economic, and technological demands of individuals' and social groups' living environments. Therefore, the thesis that adult basic education develops in a "field of tensions" among the specific positions, interests, and claims of various social actors seems justified (Mania & Tröster, 2015). In other words, adult basic education is guided by the practical application of written language in professional and social everyday life (BMBF, 2012, p. 1).

Adult literacy and basic education in education policies of selected countries

In some Western European countries, such as France, Germany, and Austria, policies delayed recognising functional illiteracy as a social problem requiring attention for at least two decades. In the affluent West, which prided itself on its modern education systems, it was challenging to accept that, for a significant portion of the population, primary education was failing to fulfil perhaps its most important obligation, namely teaching students how to read and write. While the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Belgium, and the Netherlands made efforts in the 1970s to implement legal regulations regarding adult basic education, expand infrastructure for literacy courses and other programs, and promote participation among citizens with low qualifications, actions in France, Germany, Switzerland, and Austria were slow and lacked determination. However, the poor performance of these countries in international comparative studies (OECD, 2000) prompted policy-makers to conduct representative studies on literacy levels. For example, a study on adult literacy conducted in France from 2004 to 2005 identified 3.1 million functional illiterates, representing 9% of the working-age population, out of 40 million working-age adults.* In contrast, a 2010 national study in Germany revealed that 4.5% of the population aged 18–64 were com-

* The study included only individuals who attended schools in France. The vast majority of the functionally illiterate population (74%) had learnt French as their only language during childhood in a home environment.

pletely illiterate, while 10% were functionally illiterate. These two groups accounted for 7.5 million citizens. Additionally, over 25% of the German population (13.3 million) struggled with reading and writing. In total, nearly 40% of the working-age population in Germany were classified as completely illiterate, functionally illiterate, or as individuals with insufficient reading and writing skills (Grotlüschen & Riekmann, 2012).

The second German study on illiteracy/literacy levels, conducted in 2018 (Grotlüschen & Buddeberg, 2020), revised the data from the previous study completed in 2010. Most notably, it showed a reduction in the number of people classified within the first three levels (functional illiteracy) and the fourth level of the literacy scale (significant difficulties in reading and writing).^{*} As of 2018, the end date of the study, 12.1% of the population was classified as functionally illiterate, amounting to 6.5 million citizens, compared to 7.5 million in the previous study. Nearly one-third of the population in Germany was classified at level four, indicating difficulties in reading and writing. Detailed findings indicate a higher representation of men than women in this population, older individuals, those with low levels of education, and youth from families where a language other than German was spoken as the first language. The mathematical competencies of the German population are equally concerning, as documented in the research reports *So Rechnet Deutschland* [How Germany calculates] (Kortenkamp & Lambert, 2014) and *Bürgerkompetenz Rechnen 2023* [Civic competencies] (Kortenkamp, 2023). The reports reveal that the majority of adult citizens in Germany are unable to apply the knowledge they acquired in school to their daily lives. They struggle to understand graphics and information for consumers, are confused by longer texts, lack spatial imagination, and cannot assess the reliability of mathematical data. Over the 10 years between the studies mentioned, the situation has not visibly improved.

It is also worth noting a unique study in Europe on the competencies of older adults conducted in Germany as part of the Competencies in Later Life (CiLL) project, which focused on the age group of 66 to 80 years (Friebe et al., 2014). The study focused on measuring competencies in text comprehension, mathematical reasoning, and the use of information and

* The “LEO 2018” study used the same literacy scale as the previous study, known as “LEO One,” which aimed to enhance the compatibility of the obtained data. Both studies employed identical methodologies.

communication technologies. The findings indicated a significant need for a substantial portion of the senior population to engage in adult basic education, particularly in courses in reading, arithmetic, and computer skills. By enhancing understanding of the intensity with which respondents participated in specific activities related to the measured competencies, as well as the changes in their use with advancing age and evolving social engagement, the study also highlighted the correlation between education, lifestyle, and competency levels (Przybylska, 2017).

Areas of adult basic education

The ability to read and write constitutes a central category of adult basic education as it provides a foundation for expanding knowledge resources and developing competencies that enable individuals to function effectively in their lives. Currently, as the pragmatic approach to writing gains more supporters,* other areas of adult basic education are becoming increasingly significant, particularly those that have a substantial influence on the quality of human life. The most popular areas include courses in new technologies and media, basic health education and nutrition, basic financial and economic education, basic mathematics, and basic political education. The need for their organisation, along with the participation of diverse social groups, is justified by empirical research showing that individuals with the lowest language qualifications are more adversely affected in areas such as health, financial management, and political participation than those with higher reading and writing competencies.

Digital education

The first area of adult basic education that has undoubtedly found a permanent place in the offerings of educational institutions is digital education.

* Proponents of a liberal approach to writing criticise the model imposed on society and reproduced by the education system. This model is characterised by strict rules and a disregard for the language used by citizens in their daily lives. There is a growing demand for the acceptance of written language that reflects spoken language, including its unique dialectical features. This approach gained popularity with the publication of "New Literacy Studies" (Street, 2003).

Its concept is based on the assumption that digital skills facilitate learning processes and are essential for lifelong educational activity. On one hand, the pedagogical discourse focuses on supporting individuals' learning processes in reading and writing by developing their digital competencies. Empirical research clearly demonstrates that the use of new technologies enhances the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes, particularly positively influencing participants' engagement (Howe & Knutzen, 2013). Researchers have identified six teaching areas where modern technologies hold the greatest educational potential: access to information and content; visualisation, animation, and simulation; communication and collaboration; structuring and systematisation; recognition and testing; and conceptualisation. However, the benefits of using new technologies in literacy and other areas of adult basic education depend on various factors, including the integration of these technologies with appropriate content, forms, and teaching methods (Howe & Thielen, 2016).

On the other hand, the pedagogical discourse on digital education confronts the belief that the widespread use of computers, the Internet, smartphones, and other modern technologies has eradicated the digital divide in society (Grotlüschen, 2018). Yet, a representative study on the daily use of modern technologies by individuals with low literacy levels (Grotlüschen & Buddeberg, 2020) shows that, compared to individuals with higher competencies, they use the Internet less frequently, send emails less often, and approach digitalisation in various areas of social life, such as work, relationships, or housing, with caution and lack of enthusiasm. They are aware that their limited digital skills prevent them from fully utilising opportunities that are available to those with higher literacy qualifications. This weakness is reflected in their reduced ability to critically analyse information or access appropriate sources to evaluate differing viewpoints. Only one in two individuals with low literacy levels reports that they "manage" or "rather manage" to assess the credibility of information, compared to 80% of those with higher reading and writing competencies* (Grotlüsche & Buddeberg, 2020).

* The reliability of respondents' subjective assessments remains an open question. Studies conducted in Sweden among student and young adult communities (Nygren & Guath, 2019) indicate a significant discrepancy between the self-assessments of those surveyed and their actual competencies in this area, as confirmed by testing.

Health education

Basic health education aims to improve course participants' competencies in three key areas: first, handling health-related information; second, communicating about health matters; and third, applying knowledge and skills to daily practice. This particularly involves developing the ability to make informed decisions about lifestyle and nutrition based on reliable data. Interestingly, what comes to the forefront is access to and the ability to use information, rather than concerns like the relationship between daily diet and physical activity (Rose & Sturzenhecker, 2009). Implementing these tasks obviously presents a significant challenge when the beneficiaries of the educational program are individuals with low literacy skills. They are unable to fully utilise the widely available sources of information or critically assess which ones are reliable. They take advantage of opportunities, such as applying for benefits or other forms of social assistance, less frequently than those with higher literacy skills. Additionally, they rarely read information leaflets included with medications and only occasionally evaluate the risks associated with their work and poor living conditions. Overall, they have limited knowledge about health and preventive healthcare. In the case of providing first aid, 48.7% of individuals with low literacy skills report that they can place an injured person in a safe position, compared to 61.7% of the general population. As many as 15.8% of individuals with low literacy levels claim to have no knowledge of this at all, while only 2.9% of respondents with higher literacy skills provide the same answer (Heilmann, 2018).

Research on the health status and awareness of individuals with low literacy skills clearly indicates that they are at greater risk of health problems, struggle with various illnesses, and are unable to take responsibility for their health and treatment. A sense of helplessness and powerlessness contributes to the exacerbation of mental disorders (Döbert & Anders, 2016). Researchers suggest that basic health education programs should be based on the method of biographical learning, which enables participants to reflect on their strengths and recognise that their life situations are not solely their fault, but are largely the result of a series of unfortunate circumstances affecting individuals from disadvantaged social backgrounds.

The concept of health literacy provides clear theoretical arguments regarding the social disadvantages faced by individuals with low educa-

tion and non-functional literacy levels (Döbert & Anders, 2016). Knowledge about health and a healthy lifestyle depends on socialisation, skills, and habits acquired in childhood, such as perceptual and communication skills, reading and writing skills, as well as motivation, cultural literacy, social structures (civic literacy), and mastered techniques and methods (science literacy) (Zarcadoolas, Pleasant, & Greer, 2005).

Basic financial education

There is no consensus on the definition of basic financial education. Some view it as a subcategory of basic economic education (Engartner, 2016), while others use the terms “financial” and “economic” interchangeably (Mania & Tröster, 2015). Still, other researchers consistently use “financial,” emphasising its connection to consumer protection and social policy, which encourages citizens to take responsibility for risks related to social insurance, such as disability, retirement, injury, and sickness (Piotrowsky, 2009; Grotlüschen, 2018). The definitional confusion is further compounded by terms that appear in the scientific discourse, such as “Financial Literacy,” “Financial Competency,” “Financial Capability,” and “Financial Inclusion.”

There are many arguments in favor of including financial education in the general programs of basic education, such as global economic and financial crises, dynamic political, social, and economic changes, rising household debt levels, the importance of voluntarily purchasing insurance, and the increasing complexity of the goods economy and other resources, including financial services (Mania & Tröster, 2015). The extensive literature on the subject, partly based on biographical research, highlights the immensity of financial problems faced by illiterate and low-literate individuals. These individuals often have modest household budgets, struggle with communication with banks, are unable to manage debts, loan repayments, or tax payments, and frequently fall victim to fraud (Genuneit, 1996; Döbert, 2009).

Some countries implemented basic financial education strategies and programs years ago. For instance, in Australia and New Zealand, numerous online portals are dedicated to self-education in financial management. In England, adult education institutions offer seminars for young parents and employees, while in Austria, multi-day workshops are available for voca-

tional school students. In Germany, public universities run courses for seniors, individuals with low literacy levels, and other target groups (Mania & Tröster, 2015). Model programs for basic financial education are already available. One example is the concept developed by the German Institute for Adult Education (DIE), which identifies six domains corresponding to specific financial competencies: (1) generating income, (2) managing money and payment transactions, (3) spending and purchasing, (4) controlling household expenses, (5) loans, and (6) retirement planning and insurance. The specific requirements of each domain are linked to competencies in four areas of basic education: (1) declarative and procedural knowledge, (2) reading, (3) writing, and (4) arithmetic (Engartner, 2016).

Basic political education

Since the 1990s, political participation among social groups with the lowest incomes, low education, and/or low literacy skills has been steadily declining. This phenomenon is referred to as an ongoing “crisis of political representation” (Linden & Thaa, 2011). It primarily affects individuals who, besides the aforementioned resources, also lack confidence that political engagement and community action can bring about positive change in their lives (Geißel, 2015). To date, European adult basic education has not developed effective concepts for political education aimed at social groups with insufficient literacy skills, although various initiatives are being undertaken in this regard. Researchers emphasise that a prerequisite for developing basic political education for adults is broad dialogue among actors in political education and institutions involved in adult basic education. The aim would be to create an education concept that is acceptable and responsive to the needs of potential course participants, presenting elementary political content in a clear and creative manner (Detjen, 2009). Inspiration is currently drawn from the model implemented by the Austrian Society for Political Education, which is integrated into basic education programs at public universities across the country. The program aims to equip participants with the skills necessary for full and equal participation in social processes and resource distribution. The courses are taught by political education teachers and trainers who are qualified through the Basic Political Education programme. The educational approach emphasises exercises, dialogue, participation, reflection, and self-expression by the

participants (ÖGPB, 2014). Although the relationship between literacy levels and social inclusion has not yet been definitively established (Zurstrassen, 2015; Korfkamp, 2016), written language is undeniably an instrument that helps remove barriers to accessing information about laws and political programmes, thereby facilitating citizens' self-determination.* In basic political education for adults, the primary task is to convince participants of the significant role politics plays in their daily lives and to show them that they can effectively influence it through participation in decision-making processes. It also aims to raise awareness that, in a pluralistic society, it is impossible to meet all demands (Korfkamp, 2016).

Mathematical education

Whereas publicly admitting to an inability to read and write or to difficulties in expressing oneself in a written form is often an act of courage that exposes the individual to stigmatisation or ridicule, very few people feel ashamed of their deficiencies in mathematics. There is a significant level of tolerance and understanding for individuals who, for various reasons, did not sufficiently master the basics of mathematics to manage it effectively in their daily adult lives. This phenomenon can be considered a European specificity; in other cultural contexts, such as Asia, a lack of mathematical skills is a sensitive issue that can discredit individuals with such deficits in the eyes of others (Kittel, 2016). There is still no consensus on the content that should be included in adult mathematical literacy. According to OECD:

Mathematical literacy is an individual's capacity to reason mathematically and to formulate, employ, and interpret mathematics to solve problems in a variety of real-world contexts. It includes concepts, procedures, facts, and tools to describe, explain, and predict phenomena. It helps individuals know the role that mathematics plays in the world (OECD, 2022).

* Based on empirical research, literacy is viewed as a prerequisite for individual autonomy and emancipation. Its development leads to change. An intriguing article on education primarily focused on cultural transmission and the adaptation of individuals to existing social conditions (on the example of India) was published by Beata Pietkiewicz-Pareek in *The Andragogy Yearbook* (2015). The author employs the term "illusory struggle against illiteracy."

There is no doubt that applied mathematics permeates almost every area of human activity, including shopping, making payments, calculating household energy consumption, determining distances and percentages, and entering into insurance agreements. It is an essential component of general education, necessary for individuals in adult life, as it encourages critical thinking, understanding, and rational action (Heymann, 2013).

German universities are systematically expanding the range of their offerings in basic mathematical education courses. One educational concept envisions three levels of instruction. The first level focuses on addition and subtraction within the range of 30, the second involves working with larger numbers and using a calculator, and the third level emphasizes applying the knowledge and skills gained in the previous modules to real-life situations. This final stage particularly aims to help learners make informed and beneficial financial decisions (Meyerhöfer, 2014).

Conclusion: *What needs and can be done?**

In Poland, during the 2022/2023 school year, there were 1,206 individuals attending adult primary schools, including 398 women (33%) (Statistics Poland, 2023). This number is quite modest and significantly diverges from statistical data from other European countries regarding the size of the adult population participating in various forms of basic education. This may indicate that primary education in our country fulfils its statutory obligations more effectively than in other countries, where graduates have not developed basic competencies. However, this thesis is somewhat questionable, as numerous Polish empirical studies have indicated a deficit in knowledge and skills among students graduating from primary or vocational schools (e.g., Kwieciński, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c; Śliwerski, 2012). Doubts are also heightened by the findings from international comparative studies, which indicate that the competencies in literacy and numeracy among adult residents of Poland are significantly lower than those in other countries. For example, in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) conducted from 1994 to 1998, Poland ranked among the lowest countries. Addition-

* [My own translation] This question appears in one of Zbigniew Kwieciński's (2018) recent articles under the provocative title "Czy skazani jesteśmy na bezradność?" [Are We Doomed to Helplessness?].

ally, it fell below the OECD average in the 2013 Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) study (IBE, 2013).

Encouraging adult Poles with reading and writing deficits to re-engage with the formal education system and pursue learning in primary schools is neither an optimal solution nor a practical approach. Actions taken in other countries show that investing in reading, writing, and arithmetic courses outside the formal education system is beneficial as part of adult education programs. Currently, these courses are still unavailable in our education market. We have a lot of work to do in this area. It is essential to conduct nationwide studies on the reading, writing, and arithmetic skills of Poles using a representative statistical sample. Some hope can be associated with the project currently being implemented by the Education Research Institution (IBE) (2022), titled *The Cognitive Basis of Functional Illiteracy*. This project aims, among other things, to develop a test for assessing reading difficulties and to gain insights into the underlying causes of these challenges.

It is also important to take preventive measures aimed at raising awareness among institutions and associations involved in adult education regarding deficits in basic competencies among adults. Additionally, these measures should encourage collaboration with schools and the development of educational programs that adequately address these needs. The experiences of other countries demonstrate that addressing low literacy levels necessitates collaboration among various social entities and the establishment of stable institutional structures and networks that extend beyond the education sector. The aim is to engage various sectors in literacy processes, including social assistance programs, family support services, employment offices, sponsors of literacy courses, and media outlets that can help break existing taboos and encourage individuals with low literacy levels to participate in these courses. Moreover, the list of challenges facing adult education in Poland is extensive. A primary focus should be on developing a public, local basic education offer for adults that integrates literacy with issues related to everyday life, such as health, household management, financial resource management, and legal and social matters. Following the examples set by other countries, it would also be beneficial to integrate the issues of illiteracy and deficits in basic competencies into academic training programs for educators, teachers, social workers, and counsellors. The well-documented relationship between reading and writing skills and an individual's ability to function in the social world ne-

cessitates addressing the knowledge and competency deficits of adult citizens with due attention and care. These deficits pose a problem for both individuals and society as a whole, as coherence and overall social well-being are in everyone's interest. In this context, it is essential not to overlook the obligation to include foreigners residing in our country in the offerings of adult basic education.* Currently, the education of national minorities living in EU countries is becoming increasingly important, as it can determine the integration of residents or lead to unrest and conflicts that threaten social order.

It is also important to remember that supporting the most vulnerable members of society is a moral obligation for andragogists, rooted in honorable traditions that, if neglected, could have repercussions for us all. Zbigniew Kwiecieński (2018, p. 22; my own translation) emphasizes that:

Just as water is essential for life, so too is critical literacy for all generations, especially for children and youth; that is, the ability to read the world, its history, culture, nature, communities, and differences without the filters of ideology and worldview imposed upon them. Critical education is the capacity for independent understanding of the world and finding meaning in one's life and fulfilment.

If we aim to enable our society to “read the world,” we must address what appears, from the perspective of the third decade of the 21st century, to be a fundamental issue: providing adults with the opportunity to master essential skills.

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* The significance of this issue is illustrated by Olga Czerniawska (2013) through the example of the Italian education system.

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