The USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project provides increased access to quality alternative basic education (ABE) classes, social and leadership development opportunities, and livelihoods skills training for out-of-school youth, ages 15 to 35, with marginal literacy and numeracy skills. Project activities support the continued growth of economic opportunity through work-based learning and an emphasis on clubs and local alliances to support the education and livelihoods of youth. The Advancing Youth Learning Agenda focuses on research questions that have arisen during project implementation, enabling the exploration of the effectiveness and sustainability of the integrated learning, leadership, and livelihoods model.

INTRODUCTION

The Advancing Youth Project’s Learning Agenda provides a space for understanding youth asset development in the specific context of Liberia. To develop a clearer understanding of how Liberian young people define success, the Learning Agenda explored the following research question:

What are youths’ measures of success, and what are youth perceptions of change since they started the program?

The goal of this research question is to learn how youth define success in the context of their lives in Liberia and to better understand how, if at all, such success is attained by youth who participate in the USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project (Advancing Youth).

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The findings of the Youth Measures of Success Study fall into the following three categories: literacy, numeracy, and livelihood skills. The general importance of literacy was reinforced by the overwhelming majority of participants in this study. While not proving to be directly linked to increased income, literacy functioned as the social capital that youth needed for fuller participation in their communities. Building on that improved social capital, learners found numeracy and livelihood skills more directly helped them to realize financial improvements.
The general importance of literacy was reinforced by the overwhelming majority of participants in this study. However, the utility of literacy in Liberia was not directly correlated to financial advancement. Instead, literacy functioned as the social capital youth needed for societal improvement and advancement.

**Methodology**

The research team implemented a non-experimental qualitative study to examine which assets youth felt were important for success and how they felt they had developed those assets through participation in the Advancing Youth Project. Two phases of qualitative data collection occurred. First, in early 2014, Advancing Youth tested the concept of “youth assets” with 54 learners at the Grand Bassa County Youth Summit to determine if the tracking of specific assets over time would inform our understanding of the support youth need to succeed. (Search Institute, 2006).

Second, the research team interviewed each learner to collect additional data about the most significant changes to learners’ lives since they enrolled in Advancing Youth’s integrated program of ABE, livelihoods skills training, and leadership development opportunities. The interviews were semi-structured, with staff asking initial prompt questions and probing for additional information. Interviewers audio-recorded the stories while taking notes. Later transcripts of the learner interviews were produced to supplement the assessors’ notes.

The stories were then analyzed to identify the types of changes highlighted in each story and the factors identified by each respondent as contributing to changes related to his or her individual success. Learner responses were aligned with four categories of factors: (1) education, (2) familial and friend support, (3) community connectedness, and (4) personal characteristics. Thereafter, these categories of responses were used to generate a picture of the relationship between the relevant experiences and perspectives. This process led to identifying themes across individual stories, which in turn gave the findings a narrative focus. Interview findings were constructed to highlight each learner’s voice. This approach maintained the individual agency of the participants while grouping responses into the three themes that emerged: literacy, numeracy, and livelihood skills.

**Key Findings**

**The Social Importance of Success Through Literacy**

Overwhelmingly, learners’ responses demonstrated the importance of literacy as a success factor in their lives. Literacy and improved oral language capacity improved learner confidence and social acceptability. For the learners, literacy was necessary to improving their futures and a means of alleviating what learners perceived as their ignorance and “shame.”

The need to redeem and improve oneself through literacy was a consistent theme of the learner responses. According to one female learner, “Now I can read and write. I can talk to my friends. I can go and sit among people. I can’t be shame” (Grand Bassa County, Lowerhardlandsville site).

Similarly, many learners focused on how ABE classes taught them “how to speak.” In this context, learning how to speak refers to learners’ improved ability to understand and speak in Standard English. Additionally, the desire to improve their social standing in the community motivated a large number of Advancing Youth learners. Being uneducated was seen as akin to being blind. According to one male learner, “It is important because you not go to school that mean you blind… I can be free in anywhere [because of literacy]” (Grand Bassa County, WVS Tubman site).

The data indicated that the ability to read, write, and calculate is highly prized by the broader community, and many learners felt that by participating in the ABE program, they had started to remove the social stigma of being uneducated and begun to improve their general social capital in a group.

In addition to societal advancement or acceptance, the majority of learners described literacy as a tool that improved a particular aspect of their day-to-day life. Connected to the social dimension of literacy was learners’ new ability to actively participate in public events, such as church services. Overall, literacy was a skill critical to improving the independence of Advancing Youth learners. However, it is the combined social and functional utility of literacy that makes it so important for Liberian youth. Literacy denotes education and improved social standing and responsibility.

“The reading, writing and everything is important. The thing that made it important is because I never knew it, but Advancing Youth made me know it.”
—Nimba County, Flomo Wenneh site, F
Numeracy – Math and Life

In tandem with literacy, improved numeracy skills were also highly valued by youth participating in Advancing Youth. According to learners, the ability to recognize numbers and complete simple arithmetic had an immediate impact on many aspects of their day-to-day lives. Many learners noted that the ability to understand proper pricing and payment for market goods affected their businesses, with a large proportion of the learners remarking that now they “can’t be cheated.” Similar to the social capital of literacy, being able to protect one’s business from the perceived threat of disreputable figures was deemed enormously important. For Liberian youth, presenting the image of an educated individual meant they could not be duped, which in turn elevated their social standing. One female learner stated, “It is important to be seen as an educated person, because if you are educated in one sense, no one will trick you, corrupt you, or even lie to you, dump or play on you” (Montserrado County, CDB King site).

For many learners, “the most important thing there is… to save my own money” (Grand Bassa County, WVS Tubman, M). The ability to save for the future is a way for learners to both protect themselves against future hardships and improve their social standing. In Liberia, people either place their savings in banks or utilize informal saving techniques, such as susus (informal savings collectives) or VSLAs (village savings and loans associations), to help them improve their business ventures. Being able to better gauge financial need and future financial demands allows learners to improve their overall fiscal health. These savings can then be used to help themselves and their families. Over time, as learners accumulated more savings and were increasingly seen as “wealthy” by the community, they were approached by others for help. With skills gained in ABE numeracy classes, learners felt the community perceived and interacted with them in different ways. Stronger numeracy skills, when coupled with strengthened literacy skills, opened a new world of social and economic opportunities for Advancing Youth’s learners.

Livelihood Training – A New Trade and a New Approach

Advancing Youth complemented ABE classes in literacy, numeracy, life skills, and work readiness with livelihood skills training and opportunities. Livelihoods skills development focused on individual trades and skills, such as tailoring, masonry, and soap making. These short- and long-term skills trainings were complemented by the ABE work readiness course, which included topics such as personal goals, workplace behavior, and customer service and communication. The tangible work skills acquired through Advancing Youth were enthusiastically and positively viewed by the majority of learners.

In general, many of the skills learned through livelihoods training were particularly advantageous for female learners, who accounted for 68.8% of all enrolled learners in Advancing Youth. For some, it gave them a sense of purpose: “[before] I was to the house, I not doing anything. I was sitting down. [But] since Advancing Youth, people bring the trade” (Grand Bassa County, Lowerhardlandsville, F). Participants from both sexes appreciated the skills they learned during Advancing Youth. However, the higher proportion of female learners amplified the effect of these trainings for female youth.

Many of the soft skills included in the work readiness course were meant to improve and augment learners’ existing livelihoods. For example, a number of learners reported that work readiness training taught them how to better interact with their customers. Learning customer service skills, including how not to lose their temper, was a critical skill for many learners.

In addition, many went a step further stating that Advancing Youth taught them how to be “good” people. The combination of work readiness and life skills with the rest of the ABE curriculum motivated learners to dedicate themselves to their families. According to one male learner, “The change is very, very important to me. It changed me automatically. The result is that I am good now and committed to the family” (Lofa County, Ansaru site). Despite differences in how the learners understood the benefit of livelihood skills, it is clear they didn’t limit the benefits only to improved financial

“When I was coming up, I didn’t even know A or B… one of the words I didn’t know altogether was facilitator; I didn’t even know how to pronounce it as I am pronouncing it now. I just used to say teacher. But now I can say the word facilitator and know from A to Z.”

—Nimba County, Johnny Voker site, F
capabilities. Instead, livelihood training and soft skills were understood by the learners as additional tools for social improvement and advancement, contributing to their aspirations for success.

**IMPLICATIONS**

By tracing the perception of youth assets, we learned that improved skills in literacy, numeracy, and livelihoods are the most important measures of success.

1) **Literacy and numeracy skills development matter.** Learners described the ability to read and write as being very important and as contributing to increased self-respect. Although learners did not link literacy skills to explicit financial improvement, they understood the skill as life-changing nonetheless. For Liberian youth, being perceived as educated changed their social standing. The self-confidence and sense of being an active, respected citizen that comes with learning to read plays a significant role for Liberian youth, especially for populations not engaged in the formal school system.

2) **Linking classroom learning and real-life application is crucial.** Advancing Youth’s integrated approach motivated learners to stay in the program. Using real-life contexts and everyday practices to teach skills and concepts provided opportunities for learners to grow and develop in multiple ways. Combining ABE and livelihoods training allowed learners to increase their financial, social, and educational capacities. The success of the Advancing Youth’s alternative basic education classes demonstrates the need to make the content of non-formal education relevant to learners’ daily lives.

3) **More research needs to be done.** More research is needed to better understand the connection between improved literacy and numeracy skills and learner’s capacity to earn more money. Liberian youth reported increased self-esteem and social standing as a result of ABE classes. However, it is not yet clear whether or not participation in ABE translates into improved economic status.

**REFERENCES**


