

**ADULT LITERACY, SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND ACTIVE AGING IN NIGERIA:
A CRITICAL DISCOURSE**

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Abstract

Adult literacy refers to the education that equips adult learners with necessary literacy, numeracy and other important skills needed by the learners to perform optimally within their families and the communities they belong to. Besides, it is a good platform through which social participation among adult learners could be enhanced. Despite these laudable attributes, the acquisition of literacy to foster social participation can be hampered by active aging which has proved to be an unavoidable factor in the life of adult learners. This paper therefore presents a critical discourse of adult literacy, social participation and active aging in Nigeria. In order to achieve this, the paper attempts critical analysis of key concepts like adult literacy, social participation and active aging. It equally raised counter arguments of the three concepts in order to establish the link between them. Based on the discussions in the paper, it was concluded among others, that government needs to do more to encourage adult learners by giving needed supports and required legislation need to be made for adult literacy programmes, individuals and stakeholders need to get more involved in adult literacy programmes in their domains. The older learners themselves should get more involved in social participation to encourage active aging.

Keywords: Adult Literacy, Active Aging, Social Participation, Literacy Education

Introduction

The population of adult citizens of any nation is a significant order that must be reckoned with. Apart from making decisions, they also take part in social activities which may be beneficial to them or to the communities they belong to. In order for these adults to perform optimally in their various

communities, they must acquire a considerate level of education which will basically help to broaden their knowledge towards realization of set goals. Acquisition of literacy Education for active participation in social activities by adults in communities can prove to be an uphill task; especially when one considers the varying problems associated with adults that are well above fifty years. Among such notable problems confronting adult learners is the issue of active aging. Active aging at the early stage of adults' life can help to facilitate learning while the latter stage of adulthood can in turn experience difficulties posed by age related problems which can be detrimental to learning. Idowu (2021) submitted that aging is a factor which may either promote or hinder learning. Adult literacy which is a subsidiary of adult education is designed to make non-literate adults fit into the category of literate citizens that are well equipped with all the necessary knowledge and skills required to participate actively in community affairs, Eleberi, Mbadiwe-Woko and Owede (2014) argued that a person is said to be literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group or community. Ifeanacho, Ojowuochim, Chukwuji and Godwin (2021) affirmed that adult population of any given community is significant since the adults therein are always saddled with the responsibility of making decisions for the rest of the community members.

Conceptual Clarification

There are certain concepts that need to be critically conceptualised in order to fine-tuned this research paper. The concepts are: adult literacy, social participation and active aging among others

Concept of Adult Literacy

The term adult literacy when viewed from a lay man angle simply connotes the ability to read and write and to converse in a particular language. Adult literacy is an ambience of the broader adult education which has a very broad scope and encompasses so many other programmes of education that people that are referred to as adults benefit from. These according to Roger (1999) cited by Ojo (2014) includes "all planned purposeful learning opportunities offered to those who are recognized and who recognize themselves as adults in their own society and who have left formal initial system (or who have passed beyond the possible stage of initial education if they were never in it), whether such learning opportunities are inside or outside the formal system, as long as such

learning opportunities treat the learners as adults in decision making, use appropriate adult learning methodologies and styles and purposes and to meet their own needs.

Adult literacy therefore in the opinion of Akinpelu (2002) refers to the education of the categories of people who “are matured physically, mentally and psychologically... socially responsible persons... have self-respect and dignity...”. Sarumi (2006) listed some criteria for conceptualizing adult literacy. The activity that is being referred to as adult education must be educational in nature; it must be relatively organized, purposeful and the target clientele must be adult. It must be voluntary, need-oriented, situational relevant, learner-centered and flexible. Therefore, adult literacy can be summarily defined as the education that is designed for the category of people that are referred to as adults. Such education is not only one form; it includes formal, informal and non-formal education. Hence, any form of education that satisfies the above criteria is adult literacy. It can be basic literacy, post-literacy, continuing education, remedial education, extra-mural study and functional literacy among others. The adult citizens of the nation constitutes majorly the nation’s workforce. Besides, their engagement in social activities which will be of immense benefit to them and to their entire communities. In spite of these laudable contributions, majority of these adults are not literate.

According to Ekpenyong, Tawo and Ojong (2020), illiteracy refers to a state in which one is unable to read and write which connotes lack of sufficient knowledge in a particular subject or a specific skill. Adult literacy is basically designed to cater for adult members of the society that did not have the opportunity of attending formal school system. Obetta and Egwuekwe (2018) affirmed that adult literacy provides an opportunity for persons who no longer attend school on regular and full time basis to enroll in organised learning activities geared towards acquisition of knowledge, skill and attitudes required to function optimally in the society. Through adult literacy, adult learners are able to upgrade themselves economically, socially and politically since they must have acquired the skills of reading and writing which are the basic requirements for pursuance of further studies, Apart from this, ability to read, write and compute in simple arithmetic afford learners the opportunity to get exposed to better conditions of living that make life more meaningful and purposeful. Ugwumadi and Obetta (2020) submitted that adult literacy enhances the value of human capital, productivity and efficiency; and it also makes learners keep tab with issues relating to environment, health, social cohesion, religious tolerance, ethnicity among others.

Adult literacy also helps to transmit life skills to its recipients which lead to self-actualization, sustained peaceful co-existence, rights and responsibilities of individuals, income generation strategies, creation of business opportunities and a host of others. Acquisition of life skill offers adult learners the opportunity of facing life challenges as they unfold due to the dynamic nature of the world. In attesting to this assertion, this instance can be found in the Almajiris education which is given to the grown ups on the streets especially the young adult boys and girls who are provided with basic and functional literacy education, to enable them become productive, self-reliant and contribute meaningfully to the society; and utilization of mass education as a potent tool to rescue people from generational and situational poverty (Ugwunnadi & Obetta, 2020).

Social Participation

Social participation is a broad concept that can be described from different perspectives. It could be viewed from various angles which include involvement in festive activities, association and club activities, school related activities like end of the year party and prize giving day among others. Others social activities that adult belong are Community Development Associations' meetings, funerals, wedding and other social engagements and Community Based Associations' activities, socio-economic, socio-political and sociocultural activities among others. Hashidate, Shimada and Yatsunami (2021) argued that despite the interest in social participation, no standardized definition of the term exists. Social participation in the context of this paper refers to involvement of adult learners in all activities that give them the opportunity to interact with other people in their communities. These interactions may arise from school and political gatherings graced by the adult learners. Such gatherings bring people together, thus giving them the opportunity to air their views on trending issues, exchange ideas and make valuable contributions to issues of concern in their communities. Involvement of individuals in interactions can be classified into different distinct levels. Levasseur, Richard and Guavin (2020) identified six (6) proximal to distal levels of involvement of individuals. These levels include:

- Doing an activity in preparation for connecting with others
- Being with others
- Interacting with others without doing a specific activity with them
- Doing an activity with others

- Helping others
- Contributing to society

Social participation among adult learners involves all engagements geared towards their wellbeing and subsequent survival in the ever challenging world. According to Dahan-Oliel, Gelinas and Mazer (2008), such engagements include community life, interpersonal relationships, recreation, leisure, religious activities and spirituality. Ideally, the rationale behind social participation of adult learners by a way of interaction in social gatherings and the likes is basically to provide succor which will in turn make them live a fulfilled life even as they age steadily. Levasseur, Stiyr, Tribble and Desrosiers (2009) corroborated the assertion by reporting that social participation is highly valued by older adults as it offers them immeasurable fulfilment.

Active Aging

Aging is known to be an inevitable phenomenon in the life of every individual. It is a complex phenomenon that has defied all measures targeted at curing it. However, experts especially in gerontology believe that aging can be well managed if the guidelines in regards to its management are strictly followed. Active aging which emanates from the word “aging” according to WHO (2002) refers to the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age. Likewise, Wongsala, Anbacken and Rosendahi (2021) identified health, participation and security as the basic pillars of active aging.

The first pillar which is health emphasizes the need for prevention of diseases and disabilities; participation lays emphasis on work, voluntary activities and learning opportunities according to individual’s needs while securing places premium on protection, safety and dignity of older people by addressing their social, financial and physical needs (Walker & Zaidi, 2016). Active aging which can as well be regarded as aging well demands that adult learners must engage themselves in activities that will make them exercise their body in order to keep fit. Bowling (2008) argued that active aging involves maintaining physical and mental health, involving in social activities and involving in activities that promote life fulfilment in old age. Adult learners that have advanced in age often derive joy and happiness especially when they do things that are beneficial to themselves, family members and their communities. Abyad (2018) noted that active aging presents a situation whereby healthy active and independent older adults contribute their skills, knowledge and experiences to their

communities. Abyad (2018) further stressed that active aging as a term used in describing all measures taken to maintain positive subjective wellbeing, good physical, social and mental health and continued involvement in activities that concern one's family, peer group and community as one grows old.

Synergy among Adult Literacy, Social Participation and Active Aging

It is pertinent to consider the relationship that exist among the major concepts in the topic of this paper. The concepts are basic literacy, social and active aging. First and foremost, it is important to lay bear here that these three concepts link congruently. It is a known fact that education is a way out of social stigmatisation and at the same time help in providing require knowledge to improve aging and of course to encourage active aging. In the opinion of Obashoro (2018), literacy help adults surmount life challenges including aging relate problems. Knowledge is power and it gives power to those that acquires it, therefore literacy provides needed skills to making an older members of the society solve many of the problems that may likely not be solved by illiterate older persons. Similarly, literacy empowers older person to participate actively within the society they belong thereby making them socially participating in all social activities in and outside their communities. In actual sense, the concept "adult literacy" has gone beyond mere reading and writing, but encompasses the ability to communicate ideas in a literate society through reading, writing and oral communication. One major attribute of adult literacy is the ability to rescue non-literate members of the society from the shackles of ignorance, illiteracy and poverty through acquisition of skills specifically meant for social, political, economical and technological development. Odunuga, Idowu and John (2020) reported that literacy remains the basic tool needed for liberation from all manners of oppression and constraints. To this end, adult literacy is an appropriate channels for promoting social participation among adult learners. Attending adult literacy classes affords adult learners the opportunity of interacting with one another. Through this forum, adult learners exchange ideas, share knowledge make friends and develop interpersonal relationships with others. Omemu (2020) identified maintenance of good understanding and healthy relationships among learners as one of the benefit of adult literacy education. Acquisition of literacy education also help to fortify adult learners by equipping them with immeasurable confidence, good communication skills and understanding required to contribute effectively to all community affairs. Afolabi (2012) maintained that adult literacy

education helps to move people from whatever level of consciousness they currently operate to a level of critical consciousness, wherein they can ask questions about things around them, as well attain capacity to change their lives positively to the benefit of the society. It is worthy of note that contributing to vital decision in the community is the height of social participation any adult learner can attain.

Adult literacy education can as well help to minimize the spate of sickness, pains and discomfort experienced by older adults as they advance in age just as social participation will ameliorate the spate of loneliness, emotional instability, pains and many other old age related sicknesses. Through health literacy, adult learners are fortified with sound knowledge of healthy living and other issues associated with it. The knowledge acquired offers them immense opportunity of making informed decisions geared towards living healthy life. According to McTavish (2009), in order to increase and maximize people's contributions to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and maintain a prosperous and sustainable economy, government and industries around the world are challenging education system to focus people's attention on literacy education. Adult learners who engage themselves in sporting activities and exercises are unconsciously enhancing their mental alertness for quick assimilation of subject matters in classes. Smart School Programme (2018) noted that sporting activities played significant roles in the advancement of education and in enhancing knowledge.

More so, participating in social activities will to a large extent help adult learner age gracefully. Their involvement in social engagement, especially those that are energy sapping is essential for living an active, satisfactory and independent life in old age. Has (2007) asserted that social participation is related to survival, health related quality of life, functional ability, emotional wellbeing and cognitive skills. Therefore, active aging demands constant involvement of adult learners in social activities for healthy and longer life. Active aging which emphasizes independence and participation in school, productive and leisure activities affords adult learners in literacy centres the opportunity of sharpening their brain for successful academic pursuit. According to McCrobe (2016) older adults tend to be better equipped with crystalized information owing to the accumulation of age and wisdom. McCrobe (2016) observed that capabilities of the brain that are dependent on knowledge acquisition and experience are affected with time. However, advancement in age can as well lead to a decline in memory, intelligence and other indices that are associated with learning.

Serious Quagmire Hindering the Synergy among Adult Literacy, Social Participation and Active Aging in Nigeria

That there are benefits in the inter-woven of the three concepts of adult literacy, social participation and active aging do not indicate that there are no inherent problems emerging from their synergy. For instance, an adult learners who have advanced in age do find it difficult to cope in adult literacy centres. Not only that, despite the fact that adult literacy as a platform through which adult learners better their lots and delivered from being confronted by series of problems,, but the fact that literacy centres are being confronted by funding, poor remuneration of facilitators, inadequate number of qualified facilitator, poor record keeping, poor publicity and awareness, mismanagement of funds, and of course inaccessibility of adult literacy programme centres by the would be beneficiaries constitute serious constrains to the benefits that may be received from these centres. Odunuga, Idowu and John (2020) noted that many states do not pay the facilitators like teachers in government owned schools, yet, they still owe the facilitators' salary arrears which are paid at their convenient time. This and so many issues are responsible for the lack of social participation that plays significant role in helping adult learners' live active aging. This is a quagmire which Hikichi, Kondo, Takeda and Kawachi (2017) reported as serious problem for older learners because social participation is associated with better cognitive functions.

Further, the problems confronted by adult literacy centres may discourage adult learners from taking part in active learning, and this may further pose a serious threat to the delivery of adult literacy programme itself. Conversely, social participation by adult learners in different social activities can be hindered by series of problems which include age, health status, level of education, gender, working status and activity limitation. Many of these problems keep adult learners away from participating in different social activities that are noted for their capability of keeping people fit both physically and mentally. Different health challenges which restrain older people from taking part in many social activities can as well stop adult learners especially, those that have attained the age of sixty years and above from attending literacy classes, World Health Organization (2014) reported that nearly 5% of men and 6% of women aged sixty (60) years and above are affected with Alzheimer's type of dementia worldwide, these can limit their social participation and attendance at literacy centres.

Active aging has so many problems. As people grow older, they experience double burden of diseases and increased risk of disability. Generally speaking, older people are prone to chronic conditions like cardiovascular disease such as coronary heart diseases, hypertension, stroke, diabetes, cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, musculoskeletal conditions such as arthritis and osteoporosis, mental health conditions such as depression and dementia, blindness and visual impairment (W.H.O, 2014). Ideally, active aging ought to be a good platform for achieving optimum learning since people age with increased memory and intelligence levels. Idowu (2021) submitted that aging is often accomplished by indices such as quick assimilation, comprehension, maturity, intelligence, understanding of concepts and other indices that promotes learning. However, active aging can as well be linked to health conditions that can possibly hinder cognitive function of adult learners, especially those that are well above sixty years. Waldstein (2000) affirmed that hypertension has been linked to poorer cognitive functioning which often has adverse effects on learning prospects of learners.

The submission above ultimately confirms that decline in cognitive functioning of adult learners in literacy centres often result to failure, since assimilation and comprehension of subject matter now become an uphill task. The basis of argument here is that adult learners in literacy centres across the state can only learn when they are physically and mentally fit and void of any health related hindrances that can obstruct the free flow of learning. They can also participate socially when they do not lack basic literacy education and they have good health. Therefore, these three variables work hand in hand and they serve work together to benefit the society at large.

Problems Facing Adult Education in Nigeria

There are so many problems facing adult education in Nigeria. This is not to say that there are no gains in the practice of adult education in the country. One important gain in Adult education is the provision of opportunity to benefit from education that so many would be beneficiaries of Universal Basic Education (UBE) might have lost in their early lives. But the gamut of problems been faced by the adult education can be highlighted as follow; the first one is lack of time. This is to say that the adult are the people who have duties to perform alongside education like engaging in job, cooking, socialising and so on. The ability to balance work and family commitments become a huge task to combine education with. Another issue is financial barrier because of the several financial commitments to their home. Financial barriers couple with problem of budgetary allocation are two other issues

which deter many adults from participating in adult education. The family financial burden and lack of financial support from government, agencies and voluntary organisation. The problem of poor remuneration of teachers, political will and politicisation of education, value for money, supportive, community, social stereotypes, shortage of teaching staff and poor teacher training, lack of proper monitoring and management, inaccessibility of education in rural areas, lack of infrastructure, poor governance and corruption, mindset and family commitments and flexibility are other issues and problems facing adult education in Nigeria. (Ojo, 2014)

Provision for adult literacy, social participation and active aging in the Nigerian Policy on Education

The overall general goal of education in Nigeria is to ensure that the education of the adult population especially the tertiary education contributes to the national development through high-level manpower training. The policy promotes and encourages scholarships, entrepreneurship and community services across Nigeria. In the same policy, adult and Non-formal education is defined as consisting of functional literacy, remedial, continuing, vocational, aesthetics and civic education for youth and adults outside the formal school system. Not only that, the policy on education has not neglected the categories of adult education like vocational skill acquisition, remedial studies, professional training. The following are agencies for Adult Education in Nigeria.

- National Teachers' Institutes (NTI, 1972)
- NMEC (National Commission for Adult Education Mass Literacy and Non-formal Education) (1990)
- National Board for Technical Education (NABTEB, 1992)
- National Commission for Non-formal Education (NCCE, 1989)

Conclusion Remarks

Having discussed the three concepts of adult literacy, social participation and active aging. It is now expected to use this paper to ask; what is the role of state actors in the promotion of literacy education for social participation and active aging; or as the members of the society is there no provision for the older members of the society? In what way can the education of the older members of the society be supported? These and many more questions will continue to rear their heads if Adult literacy education is not given serious attention.

The following are the recommendations of this research work:

- i. Government should do more to encourage adult learners by giving needed supports for adult literacy programmes, while individuals and industries should get more involved in adult literacy programmes in their domains. The older learners themselves should get more involved in social participation to encourage active aging.
- ii. State actors and stakeholder in the education of the older persons are encouraged to create more hope for this kind of education by supporting it the more with goodwill, funds and legislations to enforce the education of the older persons. Not only that, there is the need for serious support for incorporating organised social participation programmes to aid active aging in all local government areas in Nigeria. Older persons are everywhere and everybody is yearning to live to old age.
- iii. All stakeholders in the provision of adult literacy education should strive to introduce relevant social participation and active aging programmes in literacy centres.
- iv. There is the need for the curriculum of adult literacy education to undergo constant review in order to accommodate subject matters that propagate the relevance of social participation and active aging. Through this, adult learners' interest towards participating in social activities and health related issues may be aroused.
- v. Added to these is the fact that the management of literacy centres across the state are enjoined to create healthcare unit within the premises of the literacy centres to cater for adult learners, especially those that are well above sixty years. Apart from helping to minimize the pains and discomfort experienced by these learners, the unit will also help to create more awareness in regard to adult literacy programme in all states in Nigeria.
- vi. Therefore, the older learners themselves should get more involved in social participation to encourage active aging.

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