

RESTRUCTURING FUNCTIONAL LITERACY EDUCATION FOR ILLITERACY REDUCTION AMONG ADULTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The need for restructuring functional literacy education is highly imperative. This is because, acquisition of education by individuals, illiterate adults inclusive, not only enables them enhance their status in different aspects of life; social, economic, educational, and moral among others, but also helps them add value to the society. In addition, acquiring skills and knowledge reduces illiteracy level among adults in the country. It is on that note that, functional literacy education, illiteracy situation in Nigeria, and the importance of functional literacy education for illiteracy reduction were examined. The paper further highlighted ways of restructuring functional literacy education in Nigeria. It then concluded that with favourable learning environment, functional literacy education is achievable and can be used as an effective means for gainful equality, and access to education for different categories of individuals, especially adults. More so, it recommended, among others, that efforts should be made by governments at different levels to ensure that educational curriculum is periodically restructured to give room for innovations.

Keywords: Restructuring, functional literacy education, Illiteracy, and Adults

Introduction

Literacy is the ability to read, write and enumerate. It involves the ability to use and communicate using different technological tools. Some scholars observed that, literacy by definition is still narrowed down to mean the ability to read, write and calculate. They opined that, until literacy is understood to mean having problem-solving and critical thinking skills which are necessary to bring about positive changes needed in individuals, particularly adults, and then the nation, literacy efforts will remain at its lowest ebb and one that will not make any meaningful impact on the people especially adults and

the nation at large. Thus, literacy that empowers and is functional should ensure active participation of the new literates in continuous learning so that they will not only realise the reasons for their disempowerment but also make moves to improve their situation. This therefore, leads to the idea of functional literacy education.

It is pertinent to focus on functional literacy education rather than literacy alone because, the former allows individuals to use the already acquired literacy to function well in any environment they might find themselves. In the Nigerian society, an adult especially illiterate one who acquires literacy and functional literacy impacts not just himself or herself, but the whole community. Selber (2004) cited in Momoh (2017) established that such an individual becomes a role model to his or her family members and also contributes to the development of his/her community. Thus, in order to reduce the level of illiteracy, and ensure that Nigeria continues to produce effective citizens, there is an urgent need for education restructuring through functional literacy education. This is because despite governments' efforts towards improving education and to make it accessible to all, both at the formal and non-formal levels, there is still a large number of people that are still illiterates, adults inclusive. Olojede, Adekunle and Samuel (2013) acknowledged the fact that several investments are being put on education, but that in spite of these efforts, literacy the level still remains at 60% of the total population.

This could be attributed to poor funding of literacy education. Thus, given that the population of adult illiterates in Nigeria is still high, it is therefore, germane to restructure functional literacy education given its importance so that more adults are empowered academically. This could be through redesigning of education curriculum, training and re-training of instructors, provision of adequate and appropriate educational resources, among others, as stated in the paper.

Functional Literacy Education

Functional literacy is the acquisition of literacy skills with the socioeconomic needs of the recipient in mind. UNESCO (2010) defines functional literacy as the ability of an individual to be function in all areas that literacy is needed in his or her personal life and for active participation in the community. In other words, a 21st Century adult must possess functional literacy skills required to function or cope with the dynamics and complexities of today's society. He must be able to read newspapers in both print and digital formats, complete a job application, understand government policies and

programmes, and be able to make decisions through them, understand what it means to have a climate change and what actions of individuals contribute to it (Olaniran, 2020).

Furthermore, in discussing the meaning of functional literacy education, Momoh (2017) observed that it is a form of education that is tailored towards achieving a particular goal. It focuses on the fact that teaching within vocational skills will enable individuals perform well in their occupational tasks. Agbionu, (2014) opined that it was in 1965 at UNESCO conference in Tehran, Iran, that the concept of functional literacy emerged, which described the use of basic skills in specific contexts.

Furthermore, functional literacy education is a form of adult education that is linked with the occupation of the adults. It is also linked with the economic, social or cultural purposes of the society. It usually goes along with the job of adult learners with the objectives of improving their abilities and skills in job performance, thereby improving productivity to the advantage of individuals and the community (Owoade, Akanbi & Oyelade, 2000 cited in Okemakinde & Ogunyinka, 2016). This form of adult education, as observed by Owoade et al., (2000) is specific in that, what is taught is useful to the learner. For instance, a programme may be designed to teach farmers how to use insecticides on their farms or how to apply fertilizer.

Farmers are prepared to acquire a skill in reading, writing and numeracy (3Rs) so that they would be able to read the instructions on the materials they handle. Interestingly, from the above definition, it is clear that, acquisition of different skills is needed for humans, especially adults for their survival in any nation, particularly, Nigeria. Therefore, a learner has to combine literacy education with a specific skill in order to acquire the relevant knowledge that will enable him or her survive in Nigerian society (Aruma, 2014). Thus, it could be deduced from the above explanations, that functional literacy education is an education that enables the recipient to live a better and more meaningful life, and also function very well in any environment he/she lives.

Illiteracy Situation in Nigeria

Illiteracy basically is the inability to acquire the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. Igbo (2008) likened illiteracy to darkness, poverty, bondage, ignorance and imprisonment. Illiteracy is associated with ignorance, which deepens dependency and social backwardness (Alumona, 2016). It constitutes a big mishap to an individual and the society at large. This is why Bakare (2015) in Nkamnebe and

Nkamnebe (2018) stated that people who are illiterates are more likely to live in poverty, facing a lifetime marred by poor health and social vulnerability. Thus, Nkamnebe *et al* (2018) established that the rate of illiteracy in the country is alarming despite heavy investments in education. This is confirmed in *Illiteracy Rate in Nigeria Alarming* (2017) where it was emphasized by the Honourable Minister of Education, Adamu, Adamu, that the country had about 65 million to 75 million illiterates. However, despite many continental and global literacy interventions, several countries in Africa, Nigeria inclusive are still overwhelmingly illiterate, youths and adult adults alike.

In Nigeria, for instance, the data released in 2018 by the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education (NMEC), through its Executive Secretary, put the number of illiterate adults and youths at 60 million. This comprises out-of-school youths and non-literate adults, including illiterate women who are mostly found in rural communities doing petty trading and other agricultural businesses without reading, writing and arithmetic skills (Aroge & Olaniran, 2012). Illiteracy therefore poses a serious threat to the overall development of any society; hence it is considered a serious socio-economic problem. This is because illiteracy leads to high level of poverty, increases marginalisation, oppression and underdevelopment. Unarguably, those who are literate and educated have the tendency to participate actively in the activities that support and promote the sustainable development of their communities.

According to Abdullahi (2015), the 2013/2014 Global Monitoring Report (GMR) established that Brazil, China and Indonesia had attained 70 to 89 percent literacy rate, while Nigeria, Bangladesh and Pakistan had literacy rate of less than 70 percent. In 2012, it was observed that, out of 184 countries with 66 percent literacy rate, Nigeria ranked 161 (Okemakinde, 2017). With this, it is clear that Nigeria belongs to the group of the world's most illiterate countries. As established by Okemakinde (2017) more than 75 percent of the world's 781 million illiterate adults are found in South Asia, West Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Then globally according to IMF (2015), women represent almost two-third of illiterate adults.

Ogunbiyi (2015), as cited in Okemakinde (2017) also stated that, the Education for All (EFA) Global Report placed Nigeria among countries with the highest levels of illiteracy.

In addressing adult illiteracy issue, Nigeria has made considerable efforts in the areas of mass literacy campaigns and policies. In the year 2000, Nigeria joined other countries to commit to the

Education for All (EFA) goals and later the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which had 2015 as deadline for achieving their set targets (Okemakinde, 2017). However, a global review of achievements and challenges of Education for All (EFA) since inception reveals that some of the targets remain unsustainable, especially in many sub-Saharan African countries, Nigeria inclusive. NMEC and UNICEF (2010) opined that the 2010 National Literacy Survey conducted jointly by the National Board of Statistics (NBS) placed the national adult literacy rate for the country at 56.9 percent. However, the implication is that, large numbers of adults are still illiterate despite programmes put in place to address the issue. The survey shows that out of 40 million Nigerians who cannot read and write in any language, 500,000 (0.13%) are currently enrolled in adult literacy classes. According to Garuba (2014), cited in Okemakinde (2017), Nigeria is a prominent member of E9 countries, and the only one from Sub-Saharan Africa. This means that, she is among the nine countries with the highest population of illiterates in the world together with Bangladesh, Brazil, and China. Others include Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico and Pakistan. Therefore, curbing this menace is pertinent, especially through functional literacy education.

Importance of Functional Literacy Education for Illiteracy Reduction

The importance of functional literacy education for illiteracy reduction cannot be overemphasised. With functional literacy, people, adults in particular, will be able to handle information, express their views, take appropriate decisions and solve problems as individuals, family members, and also as citizens of nations. (Adult Literacy and Numeracy Scotland, 2001). The acquired knowledge through functional literacy helps adults in promoting activities for economic gains and academic performance. (Enem, Uduak, Udosen & Enang, 2011). Indeed, functional literacy education helps adults to understand the social reality, and their ability to contribute to improved living conditions in the society (Aruma, 2017). According to Jayeola-Omoyeni (2003), literacy can aid man's liberation if it is associated with vocational and occupational disposition. Therefore, there is need for literacy activities and programmes in the society in order to take man out of ignorance and make him add value to his life and that of the society.

In a study carried out by Egbo (2000) on literate adult women in Nigeria, it was found that, the women understood their rights and were able to participate in community matters and make autonomous decisions in their families. Alongside, research was conducted in Rivers State, Nigeria by Adekola and Kumbe (2016) on the effects of women education (Literacy and Vocational) on their

participation in community development in Ogoni land, Rivers State, Nigeria. The descriptive survey design research was employed, that had a reliability index of 0.76 and the hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. The findings indicated that the ability of women to acquire literacy and vocational education has a great impact on their personal lives and the entire community. Furthermore, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2008) summarised what functional literacy will help an individual achieve in today's knowledge economy. These include:

Develop proficiency and fluency with the tools of technology, build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others, design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes. In addition to the above are to manage, analyse, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information, create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts and attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments. Therefore, unlike basic literacy which focuses majorly on the acquisition of reading, writing and arithmetic (3Rs) skills, Aroge and Olaniran (2012) and Olaniran (2018b) established that functional literacy deals with how people actually use 3Rs and other essential skills and competencies to solve both personal and societal problems.

Ways of Restructuring Functional Literacy Education in Nigeria

The following could be seen as some of the ways or measures to be used in restructuring functional literacy education to allow the actual use of 3Rs and other essentials, and competences for social problem solving.

Nigeria needs education that is majorly functional and practical based to fortify its citizens, adults included, with skills needed to perform excellently in today's world. This, of course can be achieved only through innovations and changes in school curriculum. The 1969 Curriculum Conference held in Ibadan and organised by the National Educational Research Council (NERC) which gave rise to the National Policy on Education was a giant step in the decolonisation of the country's educational curriculum, but more changes still need to be made in its content and organization to make it suit our own environment.

Training could mean educational programmes geared towards acquiring specific knowledge and skills for the purpose of an educational task. It is an organized instruction and development activities to promote learning (Armstrong, 2004 in Alumona, 2015). Then, retraining refers to engaging

an individual in additional training after the initial one (Odu, 2011). Therefore, in sustaining functional literacy education, it is imperative that instructors are exposed to not only training, but retraining to enable them acquire more knowledge and skills that will help them function well in their societies.

According to Okojie (2001), cited in Alumona (2017), learners' learning outcome in schools or learning centres is largely dependent on availability and appropriateness of resources because the learners acquire skills using the resources. Educational resources therefore, are those materials/aids which are used in learning centres or schools by the teachers and learners to facilitate teaching and learning. Provision of adequate and appropriate educational resources, thus, increases the retention rate of students, and makes learning permanent.

Funding is a central factor to an effective functional literacy education. All systems of education today complain of poor infrastructures, dilapidated classrooms, poorly equipped libraries and laboratories and consequently poor educational standard. All these are linked to underfunding of education. An effective functional literacy education is hinged on adequate funding, equipment, facilities, and materials. Behgo (2010) observed that the Nigerian education sector has deteriorated rapidly over the decade due to lack of monetary investment in this area. Adebola and Ugwoegbu (2011) asserted that, inadequate allocations of funds impede whatever little progress that could have been made to eradicate illiteracy. Thus, enhancing the education sector of any nation needs some measures of funds/adequate funding, without which it cannot attain optimal performance. Based on that, high premium should be placed on effective funding of educational institutions by all their stakeholders.

Effective publicity for the goals of functional literacy education to be achieved is very important and needed. This can be done through multimedia or multidimensional approaches such as posters, use of jingles, fliers, radio talks, dramatisation, films and use of town criers. Many countries in Africa have succeeded in their literacy efforts due to effective publicity, an example is Tanzania (Chieke, Madu, & Ewelum, 2017). Publicity is necessary because much of the vital information concerning functional literacy education is unknown to the adult illiterates. So, it will serve as a medium for disseminating information and correcting misinformation about literacy programmes in Nigeria. In fact, it is stated that the level of information put into literacy programmes determines the level of success of such programmes.

Adult learners and instructors must be adequately motivated so that they can put in their best. The adult instructors should be adequately remunerated, workshops and seminars be open to

them so that they will have the chance to update their knowledge. For adult learners, educational materials should be free or highly subsidised, tuition should be free or highly reduced so that the poor learners could afford it.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it could be deduced that in Nigeria, the illiteracy rate among the citizenry with particular reference to adults is still high. Based on that, this paper has established that, with restructuring functional literacy education, every Nigerian adult especially the illiterate ones will be provided with the opportunity to acquire quality education. Therefore, with favourable learning environment, functional literacy education is achievable and can be used as an effective means for gainful equality, and access to education for different categories of adults. This hopefully will lead to reduction of illiteracy rate in Nigeria given that, a large number of people are reported to be illiterate. In addition, it will promote national development.

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