

## ADULT LITERACY: THE NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper tries to uncover the history of adult literacy from 11<sup>th</sup> century to date. It straightens the records and puts the date in order. Various efforts made by Nigerian government to develop and promote adult literacy were discussed. Approaches to literacy teaching and factors that may promote adult literacy were highlighted. The benefits of adult literacy education to its recipients were also emphasized. The paper concludes by recommending the creation of the ministry of Adult Education both at the Federal and State levels in Nigeria to ensure proper growth and development of adult literacy education in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Adult, Literacy, Adult literacy, literacy teaching.

### INTRODUCTION

Adult illiteracy is a growing problem despite efforts to curb it. Each year, an estimated 2.3 million persons join the pool of those 23 million adults considered to be functionally illiterate (Imel, 1985). Bown and Tomori, (1980) stated that while world percentages of illiterates are declining absolute number of illiterates are actually increasing. Literacy is defined as the ability to read, write, and compute with figures ( Ani, 2003). In 1965 at UNESCO conference in Tehran in Iran, the concept of functional literacy emerged which describes the use of basic skills in specific context (Agbionu, 2014). Adult illiteracy is simply defined as the inability of adults to read, write and compute the figures.

literacy education was brought to Nigeria successively by the two religious groups of Islam and Christianity. Agbionu (2014) further observed that Islamic scholars and traders came around eleventh (11th) century and introduced literacy in Arabic language in the Northern part of Nigeria. Their main aim was to teach the adults on how to read the holy book called Koran and to expand their trade. On the other hand, the history of meaningful Western education in Nigeria was traceable to the activities of the early Christian Missionaries which started with the arrival of Thomas Birch Freeman in 1482 at Badagry. Taiwo (1980) and Adesina (1988) recorded that the primary aim of these early Christian Missionaries was to liberate the dark minds of the Africans from barbarism and idolatry. It was much later in 1930s and 1940s that the colonial government in Nigeria started to show interest in the education of adults in the country. Consequently, in 1942, Mr. Cameron started Jos Local evening schools while Mr. E.R. Chadwick started literacy efforts and community development at Udi, Old Anambra State (Igbo, 2008). In 1971, the Nigerian National Council for adult education (NNCAE) was formed and in 1977, a chapter on adult education was included in the National Policy on Education (NPE) which was a major landmark in adult education (FGN, 2013). In 1990, the Federal government of Nigeria established the National Commission for mass literacy, adult and Non-formal education and directed all the states of

the federation to do the same with a view to eradicate adult illiteracy in the country. The success or failure of this commission is left to the posterity to judge.

One cannot talk of literacy without mentioning of illiteracy. Igbo 2008 likened illiteracy to darkness, poverty, bondage, ignorance and imprisonment, while Imel, 1985 submitted that literatures have tended to portray illiterate adults as being embedded in a culture of poverty. According to him, most illiterate adults are poor. They live in squalor. They are ignorant and unemployed. They are unable to feed themselves and their families, unable to train and send their children to schools which results to a vicious circle of poverty. Illiterate adults fear failure in teaching-learning situations, have low self-esteem and self-confidence and resist change. Ani (2003) emphasized that adult learner lacks confidence in himself or herself as a student; underestimate himself of being incapable of learning something new. Can you teach an old dog new tricks? They may ask. Most illiterate adults are characterized as inarticulate and unable to cope or think abstractly. In a developing countries of the world like Nigeria, there are two types of illiterates – proximate illiterate and Isolated illiterate. The former refers to an illiterate person who lives in a household with other literates and the later refers to an illiterate who lives in household of all illiterates. According to Lankshear and Knobel (2006), what is of concern is that many people in poor nations like Nigeria are not just illiterates but isolated illiterates.

### **Efforts Made to Promote Adult Literacy in Nigeria**

Various efforts have been made in the past to promote literacy education in Nigeria both by governmental and non-governmental organizations. Before 1922, the major agency responsible for literacy development in Nigeria was the Christian Mission. The early Christian Missionaries organized literacy classes for adults who would later serve as interpreters for them, for they perceived that they cannot succeed in their Evangelization bid in Africa without local interpreters who would pass across their messages to the heathen Africans. It was after the Phelps-stokes commission report of 1922 and 1923 that the British colonial government started to pay lip and half-hearted service to the development of adult literacy in British West African colonies (Aderinoye, 1997).

Consequently, in 1925, the colonial office issued a memorandum on education policy in British Tropical Africa. This memorandum re-affirmed the colonial administrations responsibility for the moral advancement of the native population in each colony. It also stated that a complete educational system in any colony should include adult education. In 1935, the colonial office issued another memorandum on the Education of African Communities. This emphasized the need for cooperation between schools and other educational agencies to raise the level of community life and the need to develop adult literacy in the colonies. In Nigeria, it was the recommendation of the colonial secretary's Advisory committee set up in 1941 that brought about the need of adult literacy. The committee recommended that education of the adult should be given greater attention if illiteracy rate should be reduced and if socio-economic status of the people should be improved (Ani, 2003). It was after this that government institutions started to organize evening classes for adults. Hence, in 1942, Mr. Cameron started the Jos Local evening school while Mr. E.R. Chadwick started experimenting in the community development coupled with literacy at Udi. The Udi campaign turned out hundreds of men and women literate in Igbo and some in English (Agbionu, 2014).

In 1944, a document titled, *Mass Education in African Societies*, was issued out by the British colonial government. The main focus of the document was to capture those who have never been to school or whose schooling had been rudimentary in nature (Igbo, 2008). This programme took off in Nigeria in 1946 with the appointment of Major A.J. Carpenter as the first Mass Education Officer for the whole country. He launched, for the first time, a ten-year mass literacy campaign with little or no success. The first Mass literacy campaign failed because of lack of real political will on the part of the Nigerian government. Another document titled, *Education for citizenship in Africa* was published in 1948. This document suggested the use of village study and discussion groups as well as mass media for the education of the masses. All these documents produced significant changes in the direction of adult education in Nigeria. Macpherson's constitution of 1951 was another factor that helped the development of adult education in Nigeria. The constitution provided for regional governments which had legislative powers over Education, Health etc, hence these Regional Governments initiated policies that geared towards the development of education in general and adult education in particular. The Eastern and Western Regional governments introduced Universal Primary Education (UPE) in the regions while the Northern region opted for free primary and adult literacy education in its war against ignorance (Igbo, 2008).

In 27<sup>th</sup> March, 1971, the Nigerian National Council for Adult Education (NNCAE) was formed. It was a non-governmental organization (NGO). This body pressurized the federal government of Nigeria to establish Adult Education unit at the Federal Ministry of Education in 1975. This adult education Unit was charged with the overall administration of adult education in Nigeria (Ani, 2003). Another Historic landmark for adult education was in 1977 when a chapter on adult education was included in the National Policy on Education (NPE). In that chapter, the objectives of adult education were clearly stated. Stated therein also was the promise for a ten-year mass literacy campaign which officially took off on 8<sup>th</sup> September, 1982. This mass literacy campaign also failed due to poor funding, faulty implementation strategies. The National Policy on Education (NPE) also identified mass literacy, remedial, continuing, vocational, aesthetic, cultural and civic education as major components of adult and non-formal education in Nigeria. This National Policy on Education (NPE) was revised in 1981, 1998 2004, 2008 and 2013 respectively.

In 1990, the Federal government of Nigeria, as part of the activities for the celebration of international literacy year in Nigeria established the National commission for mass literacy, adult and Non-formal Education by decree no. 17 of 1990. The federal government also directed all the states of federation to establish agencies for adult and non-formal education (Ani, 2003). The Commission was inaugurated in July 5, 1991 and charged with the responsibility of eradicating illiteracy in Nigeria on or before the year 2000. Whether the commission succeeded in eradicating illiteracy in Nigeria in the year 2000 remains to be seen. In 1991 also, the National Mass Education commission (NMEC) was established with its centre at Kano. This centre was to act as a training, research, development and documentation centre. It is important to note that during the 1980s, many states governments in Nigeria set up their own adult education agencies with a view to changing the adult literacy condition of their people for the better. Two agencies, on the federal level, namely directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) and Directorate for Mass Mobilization, Social and Economic Recovery (MAMSER) were established in 1982 and 1986 respectively. They were charged to address the adult education needs of Nigerians.

## Approaches to Literacy Teaching

Adult educators should resist the temptation of teaching literacy to adults the traditional way. The traditional approach of teaching is the primary education approach for teaching children. Children are regarded as *Tabularasa*, that is, empty mind: The mind in its original form before they have learned anything. The adults come to literacy classes with experience, the instructors should know, and therefore, must respect the experiences of adult learners in adult literacy classes.

In the past, adults, were introduced gradually into knowing how to read and write via bible stories. For the reading of the bible in one's own language was considered as a big factor, by the early missionaries, in the development of adult life. Bown and Tomori, (1980) but in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, many new approaches have been tried. One of them is Dr. Frank Charles Laubach literacy approach or technique. Dr. Charles Laubach was regarded as the father of literacy. He hailed from Philippines and had initiated successful literacy campaigns against illiteracy in Philippines in the early 1930s and had advised many countries of the world including Nigeria on how to eradicate illiteracy. Although he developed many variations, the Laubach method has two essential bases. One was the campaign approach known as, "Each one teach one", the other was the use of specially prepared cards, each depicting a familiar everyday object with the name of the object printed on it. The learner would then associate the letter with the picture and reminded of the relevant word and sound. Such word-pictures proved a useful way of enabling adults to learn easily and quickly how to read and write. This method is known as synthetic or phonic method. Nigeria had adopted this method of "Each one Teach one" in her ten years mass literacy campaign from 1990-2000 but failed due to the 'Nigerian Factor'. The then Federal Ministry of Education had explained "Each one Teach one" to mean that each educated Nigerian would be expected to teach at least one person per year or pay for the teaching of one person per year, and that the modes of adult literacy programmes would be adapted to local, cultural and sociological conditions and each will contain basic civics aimed at promoting good citizenship and active involvement in national affairs.

### Factors that contribute to the Success of Adult Literacy Education in Nigeria

1. **Personnel** – All agencies working for adult literacy education in Nigeria should be well staffed. Not only that they should be staffed, they should be well staffed with trained professionals in adult education. Their staff should be well equipped with special skills to teach adults. Gone are the days when primary school teachers who had little or no knowledge in adult education are used as instructors in adult literacy programmes. Adults should be taught with the theory of "Andragogy" in mind. Andragogy consists of learning strategies focused on adults. It is often interpreted as the process of engaging adult learners with the structure of learning experience. The term, Andragogy, was originally used by Alexander Kapp, a German educator, in 1833 but was developed into a theory of adult education by the American educator, Malcolm Knowles. Andragogy which can be defined as the art and science of helping adults learn, is a Greek word meaning man-leading as against pedagogy which is child-leading.
2. **Funding:** For adult literacy education programmes to be successful in Nigeria, it must be adequately funded. This is because any aspects of adult literacy programmes require money for execution, for instance, production of reading materials, distribution of reading materials, curriculum development, instructional material,

training and remuneration of adult educators and other personnel, provision of vehicles and research in adult literacy education etc.

UNESCO had instructed that 26% of total annual budget of any nation be allocated to education. This is never done in Nigeria (Unachukwu, Ojiakor & Okafor, 2003). This may be one of the reasons that make eradication of illiteracy in Nigeria a hard nut to crack.

3. **Publicity:** Effective publicity for the goals of adult literacy education to be achieved is very essential and needed. This can be done through multimedia or multi-dimensional approaches such as posters, use of jingles, fliers, radiotalks, dramatization, films and use of town criers. Many countries in Africa has succeeded in their literacy efforts due to effective publicity e.g. Tanzania. Publicity is necessary because most of the vital information's concerning literacy education are unknown to our adult illiterates. So, it will serve as a medium for disseminating information 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.
4. **Motivation** – Adult learners and instructors must be adequately motivated so that they can give in their best. They, both, in variably, respond to internal and external motivators. By this the authors mean that adult educators should be adequately remunerated, opportunities for in service training, workshops and seminars be open to them so that they will have the chance to update their knowledge. In the areas of research, grants for research should be given to adult education professionals or practitioner to carry researches in adult education. For adult learners, educational materials should be free or highly subsidized, schools fees should be free or highly reduced so that the poor learners could pay. Government should pay some amount of money monthly to adult learners for the economic losses they encounter for attending literacy classes two or three times a week.
5. **Political and National will:** Most mass literacy campaigns fail in Nigeria due to lack of political will by the government in power. Political will refers to the goodwill and support any government in power gives to a programme. The problem with political will in Nigeria is that once the particular government is out of power, the programme may collapse, that is why, National Will is better than the political will, because national Will is the citizen's support to a programme. It is a mass movement. It involves the masses. It lasts much longer.
6. **Creation of ministry of Adult Education:** For adult literacy programmes to succeed in Nigeria, a ministry of adult education should be created in every state of the federation to handle adult education matters. The scope of adult education is big enough to deserve a ministry of its own. Hitherto, the ministry of education is handling both the formal education system and adult education system. Most at times, the ministers or commissioners of education are not adult education professionals and this impedes the development of adult education programmes in the country. By creating a ministry of adult educations, means that a professional of adult education must be in charge. He or she is better placed to develop adult education in Nigeria. He has the experience, the knowledge and the skills to do it. He recruits qualified personnel and adult instructors to work with him instead of using primary school teachers who have no knowledge in adult education as we do today. In Nigeria today, less than 10% of total amount of money available to education sector goes into adult education. This is unfair (Igbo, 2008). But if adult education is made a full fledged ministry of its own, the story will be different. Both federal and state governments will be allocating greater amount of money annually to adult education ministry for its

services and programmes thereby ensuring sustainable growth and development in adult education.

Other factors include, Networking: Networking means partnering with other stakeholders to develop adult literacy education, for example, the ministry of Health, Agriculture and finance, the religious leaders, the traditional rulers, the NGOS – Non Governmental Organization etc. Secondly, providing of monitoring team to supervise the success or failure of adult literacy programmes in Nigeria will go a long way in enhancing the status of adult literacy in Nigeria.

### **Relevance of Adult Literacy Education**

The importance of adult literacy cannot be over emphasized. Adult literacy education leads to self development and national development. Nzeneri and Ogili (2000) stated that literacy is essential to the development of both individual and the Nation in that it involves the liberation of individuals and groups from diseases, poverty, pains, ignorance and unemployment. To achieve the modernization of the economy and democratization of the political system, literacy is the key. This is because no democratic government can thrive in the midst of illiteracy and no economy has space for the illiterates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because of high technological changes and globalization (Ogili & Nzeneri, 2001).

There is high correlation between education and standard of living. When an adult learner acquires new knowledge or skills or attitudes, he can use it to get a better job, thereby improving his standard of living. He can become self- employed using his new skills, thereby increasing his earning capacity (Igbo, 2008). Adult literacy helps its recipients to change age-long practices customs and attitudes, and to imbibe new technology and new styles of living. It is an instrument for awareness creation, for enlightenment and for self- actualization. Adult literacy contributes to the health and general well- being of an individual. A literate person is conscious of his health, nutrition, personal hygiene and environmental sanitation. An illiterate person calls a doctor when it is late. No wonder the notion that illiteracy is a disease! Adult literacy education contributes to economic development because it helps its recipient to be productive and to acquire the needed skills in the labour market. It also provides manpower of all kinds to the economy and influences the attitudes of adult learners towards work, investment, productivity, saving and profit-making. In order words, it helps to develop human resources via skill acquisition. Adult literacy education helps in the success of child education because it takes a literate person to value the importance of the education of his children. Adult literacy is cheaper to acquire compared with formal education system. In the formal education system you pay high school fees, buy uniforms and shoes and books. In adult literacy education the cost of educational materials is subsidized.

Adult literacy education helps in the eradication of illiteracy. That is why it is of much concern to the federal government of Nigeria. Adult literacy creates a new confidence and joy in the recipient and imbues him with a feeling of a new identity. For instance, in confintea V which was held at Germany, a lady from South Africa named Ms Nonkosinathi Hathuku, who was a former adult illiterate, but now has become literate through her participation in the Masakhane literacy project, was called upon to present her experience and opinions on how useful and important it is to become a literate person. And she was very excited about it. It is important to note that there is no limit to the benefits of literacy. The general health of the whole people in a community, their well- being and prosperity can only be guaranteed and maintained if all of them or greater majority is educated.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on discussions in this paper the following recommendations were made:

1. Ministry of Adult Education should be created to take over the administration of Adult literacy programmes in Nigeria.
2. Adult Education should be adequately funded so as to meet the demands of its various programmes.
3. Professionals and well qualified adult educators only should be employed to teach in adult literacy programmes in the country.

## CONCLUSION

Adult literacy education in Nigeria has a long history. It started in the 11<sup>th</sup> century via the activities of moslem traders. The federal government of Nigeria should look into the factors that promote adult literacy as elucidated in this paper and try to implement them. The adult populace of this country should be made to embrace literacy so as to escape the shackles and all other negativities associated with illiteracy.

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