

Review

Developing functional literate citizens in South Western Nigeria

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This paper examines strategies of developing functional literate citizens in Western Nigeria because it is believed that the problems of unemployment in the area are caused by the non-functional literacy programmes that have been on for long. The aim of the study is to promote the teaching of functional literacy to adults and those who are out of the formal school system so that they can effectively tackle their unemployment situation and then solve their socio-economic problems.

Key words: Functional literacy, basic literacy, unemployment, literacy development, western region, gainful employment.

INTRODUCTION

Although Nigeria is said to account for 3% of the total 862 million illiterate people in the world (UNESCO, 2002) and its literacy rate is as low as 47% when compared with other African countries with higher literacy rate, the South Western Nigeria remains the first part of the country to have a major literacy campaign for its people. History has it that the Action Group – the political party in power in the now defunct western region in 1955, introduced an ambitious literacy programme in form of free and compulsory primary education before other regions began their own programmes.

The programme guaranteed basic literacy for the people thus setting the pace for literacy development in Nigeria. Thus, it can be argued that Nigerians had access to basic literacy early enough to prevent a situation where most citizens are illiterates. So, it can be well argued that the major cause of socio-economic problems, that have become endemic in the area, is not lack of basic literacy but functional literacy because most of the people can read and write.

In Nigeria today, the area referred to as South Western is populated by Yoruba speakers who now mainly inhabit six states of Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo and Ekiti. Some Yoruba speakers can nevertheless be found in Kwara and Kogi States. The free education programme introduced in the region in 1955 made it possible for the

people to have a head start above those in other parts of the country. This is why the literacy rate in the area is far higher than the literacy rate in other parts of the country. A major indication of the level of literacy development in the area and good education standing of the people is the preponderance of articulate and vocal press, other media as well as economic activities. Until recently when the capital of Nigeria was moved to Abuja, Lagos was both the administrative and economic capital of the country. Similarly, seventeen (17) out of the seventy-two private and public universities in Nigeria are located in the south west.

In spite of this however, the rate of unemployment in the area is very high considering the number of people who live there. The high rate of unemployment has led to a high level of abject poverty, urban pollution and incidence of political thuggery particularly in the area. The level of abject poverty has also resulted in high incidence of HIV/AIDS and prostitution through the government as battling to tackle the problems. The observation by Greaney (1996) that there is a strong link between literacy rates in a society and general development levels does not seem to be true of the area because of the problem of unemployment and social dislocation in spite of the seemingly high rate of literacy in the area.

Today, many able-bodied men and women now roam the streets for lack of gainful employment. This state of affairs where many literate and able-bodied men and women in the society are not gainfully employed has led to various intervention efforts on the part of the various state

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and the federal governments. One of the efforts was the creation of the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) in 1986 by General Babangida administration. The agency was created to retrain people so that they can acquire basic skills that they would need to create jobs where government could not offer any and to offer them soft loans so that they could start their own job. Recently too, the Obasanjo administration has created another agency known as National Economic Advancement and Development Strategy (NEADS) to address the same problem because the unemployment situation is becoming more critical everyday. But painfully, they have not been adequate enough to meet up with the high need of the population.

This state of unemployment has led researchers to question whether the people are actually functionally literate. This is because it was expected that those who are functionally literate would not wait endlessly for the government to give them jobs that are no longer in existence due largely to gross mismanagement and economic down turn but will fend for themselves if they have acquired appropriate skill that would help them to become self reliant.

This is because in a fast changing and unpredictable environment, fostering flexibility relies on solid general education and on broad functional skills which can be updated and completed through functional literacy programmes. But basic education problems in the south west seem to have less to do with the availability of school and schooling facilities, however, but rather with the quality of these assets, in terms of practical skills development component and human resources and pedagogical practices needed to make them functional.

The recourse to functional literacy can be anchored on the benefits that are derivable from general literacy and more specifically, functional literacy. According to experts, who have worked in the field of literacy, functional literacy goes beyond being able to read and write (basic literacy). It is an emancipatory practice that requires people to be able to read, speak and understand (whatever is read) and be able to use the knowledge to solve their socio-cultural and economic problems.

Specifically, Okedara (1981), remarks that for literacy to have impact on the recipients, it must be functional as well as permanent. Olaofe (1991), also remarks that:

Functional literacy is the ability to use reading and writing to widen and display one's intellectual and economic horizon well enough to be able to tackle very effectively many of the socio-economic problems confronting individuals and the country as a whole.

Rubagunmya (2003) appraises Tanzanian education to be functional in orientation because it helps the people to become self-reliant even though he did not give more specific instance of what he refers to as 'self-reliant'. Kagitcibasi et al. (2005), sum up the importance of functionalism in literacy when they noted that:

Functional adult literacy is particularly important in

developing countries such as turkey where education has not reached the significant proportion of adult population, particularly in the rural area.

Literacy educations, already strengthened in the past, will therefore, have to be supported to an even greater degree and made functional to continue to be the main contributor to development in developing countries of the world. Arising from this background therefore, one can infer that more literate people in the South Western Nigeria are not functionally literate because they have not been able to use their knowledge and skills (if any) to rescue themselves from their socio-economic problem of unemployment and poverty. Thus, it has become imperative therefore, to suggest how the people can be helped to become functionally literate through appropriate strategies, hence the present study. The aim of which is to examine the strategies that can be adopted to develop functional literate citizens in the area. This is because; the problem of unemployment is a major factor in most African countries, in spite of the pretence that our educational system is functional.

METHOD

The study was conducted over a period of three months. The survey questionnaire used contained questions on the participants' age, qualification, gender, employment status and possible strategies of promotion gainful employment. The survey questionnaire was administered on participants who were randomly selected from across the six states of South Western Nigeria over a period of three months.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were selected through a stratified sampling technique. Specifically, the technique helped the researchers to eliminate those who are graduates of higher institutions and are gainfully employed and those who are not literate at all and are unemployed but do menial jobs. In all, a total of three hundred voluntary participants were randomly surveyed and used for the study.

PROCEDURE

Twelve research assistants who were themselves post-graduate students under the investigators were used to administer the copies of the questionnaire to the participants across the states. The participants were then expected to fill out the questionnaire on the spot where possible to facilitate easy retrieval. The research assistants finally returned two hundred and thirty-seven representing 79% of the total copies which were administered. A follow-up discussion also followed the collection of copies of the completed questionnaire.

RESULTS

Data analysed show that 58.0 and 42.0% of the respondents are male and female, while 35, 26.1, 32.1 and 6.8% of them fall into 20-30, 31-40, 41-50 and 51-60

years bracket respectively. In sum, it is obvious that 93.1% of the respondents are expected to be gainfully employed irrespective of the fact that more male than female responded to the questionnaire. It was also evident that all the respondents are literate because they have had one form of education ranging from the elementary to the graduate level. In spite of this, however, a majority of them are not functionally literate hence they are not gainfully employed. Data shows that 156 (65.8%) of the respondents are employed and 81(34.2%) of them are unemployed. It is interesting to note that those who indicated that they are employed are engaged in menial jobs which do not help them to be self-actualized. This is why they have not been able to make impact on their environment in a positive way and they also feel that they are unemployed going by what they feel they could do, which they are not doing. The summary below shows what the people identified as possible causes of unemployment in the area:

- Non-availability of good jobs 20 (8.5%)
- Lack of access to soft loans to stimulate job creating 40 (17.1%)
- Lack of requisite skills 15 (6.6%)
- Absence of challenging/creative environment 06 (2.0%).

As indicated above, the major reasons why the people, who do menial jobs, could not secure good or better jobs are clear. It is clear that all of them are educated but they are not functionally literate because they could not deplore the knowledge they have acquired to change their situation. This is aptly supported by the information given below which in the respondents' assessment of the impact of literacy on their employment status. While 216 (91.1%) of them indicated that literacy has impact on their current employment status, 21(8.9%) are of the view that literacy does not have impact on their current employment status. One can therefore imagine what would have happened if the majority (91.1%) had had functional literacy education. 208(87.8%) of the respondents also indicated that they would have been more gainfully employed if they had been exposed to skill-based (functional) education.

As a follow up, the respondents suggested the following strategies that can be adopted in the study area to make the people functionally literate during a focus group discussion with them: i) make literacy education proactive in nature and practice (ii) embark on grassroots mobilization to create awareness, (iii) give access to soft loans and encourage the people to apply, (iv) create conducive environment for literacy to thrive,(v) literacy education should be skill-based and be more functional (vi) functional literacy programmes should be introduced and sustained (vii) use media to create enlightenment on the need for functional literacy, (viii) motivate the practitioners of the programme to deplore their skills, make the

people functionally literate during a focus

DISCUSSION

Arising from the foregoing, one can explain that the level of literacy in the area is very high and the people have had access to one form of literacy programme or the other but that they are not gainfully employed because of the form of literary education they had. It thus becomes obvious that the level of education has not had the desired effect because it has not been appropriate to the needs of the individuals and the communities concerned. Hence, there is the need for functional literacy. Through functional literacy, the individuals fulfill themselves within the framework of their society and thereby, develop their personalities while at the same time, bring a measure of reputation to their society as a whole. It is also evident from the information given that the people in the study area are willing to take full advantage of any form of education that will enable them to improve their skills so that they can improve on their lots. It is expected that if the strategies suggested by the respondents can be added to the contents of literacy education in the area and better procedures are used to disseminate the programme, many of the socio-economic problems of the people will be solved. To achieve that, literacy education has to be made relevant to contemporary realities on ground. For example, today, the people are battling with the outbreak of HIV/AIDS, environmental pollution and many more problems and they need to be empowered, on a sustained level, to combat and solve them.

Functional literacy is a form of literacy that is tailored to a particular need. It focuses on the fact that teaching within the context of vocational knowledge and skills will help the people to acquire what will enable them to demonstrate some added proficiency in the performance of their occupational tasks. The place of literacy in development cannot be under-estimated. It can be seen as the key to the development of the capabilities and growth of mankind, which aims at improving the growth, development and awareness of participants on social, cultural, economic and community relations. The government should therefore create and locate conducive environment for functional literacy programmes and nurture them to create room for the development of skills such as weaving, dyeing, computer literacy, carpentry and other social and occupational one. It should also encourage people to take advantage of such programmes through adequate mobilization and enlightenment. The participants also suggested that the government should put in place structures and policies that would encourage those who participate in promoting literacy education. This is because they believe that such structures and policies would motivate such people to continue on the programme even when the target audience is not immediately responding as expected.

From the lessons of the past, it has been realized that literacy should not only aim at just reading, writing and calculating but also helps in improving the social, political and economic systems of given society as a whole. The implication of this discussion is that literacy programmes in the South Western Nigeria must revolve around some of the suggested/identified strategies if they are to be meaningful and useful to the citizens. Kagitcibasi et al. (2005) lend credence to this in their remark that literacy should be seen as a means of enhancement of a sense of well-being and must involve a more positive self-concept and greater competence. This had been aptly captured by Rogers (1993) when he wrote that: no one ever benefited economically or socially by learning literacy. People only benefit economically and socially by using literary skills.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the strategies that could be used to develop functional literate citizens in the South Western part of Nigeria. It was also aimed at examining the employment and literacy status of the respondents with a view to assessing whether literacy has impacted on their current employment status. The findings and discussions have shown that the level of literacy in the study area is high even though, it is not all those who claim to be literate that are in gainful employment. It was clear from discussion with the respondents that the literacy programmes currently in use in the area need to be improved so that the programme could take into consideration some of the strategies suggested by them. It is the writers' view that if these strategies are incorporated into the literacy programmes, most, if not all the problems associated with unemployment, social unrest and the inability of literate people to positively impact on their socio-economic life and general well-being, would gradually be solved.

What is missing and which forms the bedrock of the suggestions made are the components of functional literacy. Functional literacy, which has now replaced traditional literacy, is linked with functional adult education.

This concept has a direct relationship with mankind and its work in its broadest sense. It thus, links mankind with the development of the community and reconciles the interest of the individual with the society.

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