

Learning in Adult Years: The Experiences of the Nigerian Adult Literacy Learners

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Abstract

Learning is a life-long process since it goes on as long as a person is alive. Every individual is thus faced with one learning situation or another throughout one's life time. The purpose of this study is to identify the experiences Nigerian adult literacy learners pass through in pursuit of their human right; the right to learn and to offer suggestions on how the adult educator can assist them in their various learning situations. For instance, there are social engagements or community pressures which clash with scheduled literacy classes; there are cultural practices that inhibit women from leaving the home to attend literacy classes elsewhere; there are psychological problems of unfavorable self-concept as well as pressure of work; all affect their regularity of attendance and concentration in learning situations. There are also non-proximity of learning centres especially in rural parts of the country coupled with frequent suspension of classes during peaks of farming and rainy seasons. The onus of assisting Nigerian adult literacy learners to scale through the dilemma they face in trying to overcome such difficulties rests on the adult educator or the facilitator of learning. Some suggested ways of providing the requisite assistance include making the learners aware of the enormous benefits of literacy acquisition, connecting learning activities to the learners' experiences, adopting strategies to ensure continuity in learning even at adverse circumstances, and affording learners the opportunity to participate in the planning, implementation and evaluation of learning programs that concern them.

Keywords: adult educator/facilitator, literacy, adult literacy learners

Introduction

Learning as a concept has been defined variously by social scientists and psychologists. For instance, the behaviorists/reductionists sect of psychologists define learning as a product or outcome; a change in behavior that is relatively permanent through practice, training or experience (Lawson, Goldstein and Musty (1975); Morgan, King and Robinson, (1979). According to this sect of psychologists, temporary changes in behavior due to growth processes, effects of fatigue, illness, drug or alcohol are not considered as learning because such changes are ephemeral and not relatively permanent.

On the other hand, the non-reductionists/cognitivists perceive learning as a process of change in cognitive structures; meaning that learning takes place as a result of reorganization of a number of perceptions and relationships in a given problem situation to enhance understanding. Dewey's definition of learning as the organization and reconstruction of experience, cited in Nzeneri (2008), suggests that learning is a continuous or lifelong process that involves construction and reconstruction of experiences which goes on as long as a person is alive. It is this process of reorganization of cognitive structures that enables learners, both in practical or theoretical learning, to perceive new relationships, solve new problems and gain a basic understanding of a subject area (Bello 1988). Learning therefore is

conceived in this paper as a mental activity performed by an adult person to meet his or her learning/educational needs in order to achieve his/her desired goals. The goals and needs to be met go along way to serve as motivating factors that dictate the level of learning attainable by the individual learner.

Looking at the little of this paper, a question arises: when does a person enter his adult years? It is not in doubt that adulthood sets in at the end of the adolescent phase of life; a period in the Nigerian socio-economic milieu is characterized by financial independence, employment, marriage and attainment of adult status. These social indices of the period of early adulthood according to Havighurst (1972) and Nzeneri (2008) are most prevalent between the ages 18 and 25 years. Premised on this revelation, 26 years and above is taken as adult years. The purpose of this paper is to identify the difficulties Nigerian literacy learners pass through in their adult years and to proffer suggestions on the best approaches the facilitator can employ to enable them scale through such difficulties and dilemma they face.

Why Nigerians Subject themselves to the Rigors of Learning in the Adult years

Mass illiteracy has remained the bane of Africa right from the colonial era. For instance, the recent disclosure by the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NCMANE, 2011) that 46,340,00 or 33.1 percent of Nigeria's 150 million people still wallows in illiteracy is indeed disturbing and worrisome. Of more revealing is Rogers (2008) who stated that in Nigeria, the official figures (GMR 2005:286) suggest that some 22 million adults aged 15 years and over are illiterate. As a nation in a flux, Nigeria needs educated adults who will execute its Vision 2020 with the aim of becoming one of the 20 largest economies in the world. There is no way this vision can be achieved with the burden of illiteracy such as Nigeria has on its back. It is imperative therefore, that Nigerians should learn even in their adults years to enable the country become a literate nation capable of playing a leading role among commity of nations.

Furthermore, illiterate Nigerian adults require to attend literacy classes in their adult years to acquire the knowledge to be politically, vocationally, spiritually and culturally competent in this fast changing era of globalization. In fact, the emergent technological changes taking place in every sector of the Nigerian economy have led to increased availability of information, changes in work ethics, expansion of urbanization and so on, most of which have created socio-cultural problems for developing societies, Nigeria inclusive. Therefore, to cope with the emergent technological changes Nigeria is engulfed in, people in their adult years need to acquire not only literacy skills, but also, the capacity to undertake new ventures, play new social roles, work in new kind of jobs and operate within new organization framework. In this context, Bown (1977) stressed that:

It is essential for any developing country to ensure that people are constantly learning a new, refurbishing their knowledge, to keep up-to-date and to keep up with what is going on in the world.

... progress in the good sense, in the sense of general betterment of conditions will be possible unless we do deploy resources for training older people (P. 12).

Considering the enormity of developmental tasks facing most African countries including Nigeria, Nyerere (1969) in his New Year message as cited in Bown (1977) wished that those in their adult years were educated first because their attitudes had immediate impact on economic development whereas children had to wait for years before putting what they learn into practice. In tandem with this view, Akinpelu (2008) submitted that no nation can afford to neglect the education of her adult citizens and remain in the state of civilization. The quest for economic development and civilization is a strong reason why Nigerian's should subject themselves to the rigors of learning into adult years. Also to sustain the country's democratic process, those in the adult years on whom the burden of development and good governance of the country rests at present must continue to learn to master the rules of the game of politics. Accordingly, Bown (1977) advised thus:

If Nigeria is really to have political stability and national unity; if the nation is to have democracy, Nigerian electorate (who are mostly in their adult years) must be given the opportunity to learn and continue learning, to be informed and to make their own judgments and contributions (p. 15).

The submission of this paper is that learning in adult years is not only something which lies within the capacity of people in their adult years, but something which has become a necessity for adaptive life later. Nigerians in their adult years have great learning needs to enable them adjust and adapt to the economic, social, democratic and technological changes which have become inevitable in the global world. It would be useful at this point to identify some of the experiences encountered by Nigerian adult literacy learners in pursuit of their human right; the right to learn.

Social Engagements

In Nigeria, the adult literacy learner could be the family head, the bread winner who belongs to different organizational groups in his community and who must attend the social engagements especially those of the organizations to which he is a member. In addition to his numerous functions or what Havighurst (1972) called "social roles", he must also learn how to read, write and handle calculation of

figures and numbers to improve his way of life and participate actively in the development of his community; all of which may seem to him like teaching an old dog new tricks. In the midst of all these pre-occupations, the adult literacy learner has to forgo a relaxing evening with a pot of palm wine or locally brewed gin, folklores and riddles after a tiring day in the farm, market or fishing port for a literacy class. The busy life-style of Nigerian adult literacy learners without doubts, interferes with their ability to concentrate in learning situations and sometimes, according to Thomas (1981), their minds may be working on personal or family problems rather than on the learning tasks at hand; thus they find it difficult to pay voluntary attention to what the instructor is putting across.

Psychological /Emotional Prejudice

In fact, psychologically, most adults especially the illiterates among them, given the option, would not ever attempt attending literacy classes because they feel too old to learn. Friends and relations, even their children may discourage them by telling them it is a waste of time because little or nothing will be added to their knowledge at their ages. In fact, being ashamed of being seen attending literacy classes, many Nigerian adult literacy learners sandwich their primers into newspapers to give false impression of where they are heading to. More than that, some of them are scared and feel belittled meeting their instructors who may be of same age bracket, if not younger than they are. Realistically, under such situations, Nigerian adult literacy learners are emotionally unstable to pursue what is their human right, the right to learn.

Low Self-Concept

This is another experience of Nigerian adult literacy learners that negates conceptual understanding. Onuoha (1984) postulated that illiterates, whether old or young always face the problem of low perception of self. Supporting this view, Eheazu and Ebong (1984) confirmed that “the illiterate has an inferiority complex because he cannot read or write”, (or communicate in the official language). Ukpung (2000:156) added a voice in this argument when he postulated that “a person who doubts himself is like a man who enlists in ranks of his enemies and bears arms against himself and thus makes his failure certain by himself being the first person to be convinced of it”. On the other hand, adult literacy learners who trust themselves and their abilities perform more effectively and successfully than those with negative self-concept. Studies such as Irwin (1967) and Ukpung (2000) support the thesis that positive conception of one’s self is central when considering optimal scholastic performance. Nigerian adult literacy learners should be encouraged to have positive self-concept if they are to benefit from participation in learning transactions. Another problem experienced by Nigerian adult literacy learners concerns none proximity of learning centres and facilities.

None Proximity of Learning Facilities

Majority of Nigerian adult literacy learners have little or no time to study, whether in urban or rural areas. In urban areas, for instance, such people work full-time to earn a meagre wage because of their low level of education. Omolewa (1981) revealed that they have to leave their places of work after a tiring eight-hour day and wade through the difficulties of traffic congestion to get to the learning centres which may not be near. He further adumbrated that they go into classes already tensed and exhausted. Furthermore, he contended that the monotony of work they engage in causes lack of motivation, reduced interest and divided attention in class.

The situation is worse in rural areas where learning centres and facilities are concentrated at local government headquarters. Like their counter parts in urban centres, those in rural areas have to attend classes after exhaustive farm work in the day and still have to forgo moon-light relaxation with family members only to attend literacy classes, majority of which operate using lanterns or kerosene lamps with poor visibility. Worst still, it is pitiable to see some fat women at literacy classes squeezing themselves in seats vacated by school children. Moreover, at some critical times, learning centres are forced to be suspended due to poor attendance particularly during farming, rainy and fishing seasons thereby interrupting continuity of learning. This paper is too short to undertake an indept account of the experiences of the Nigerian adult literacy learner, but suffice it to say that they need assistance in the struggle for self improvement and enlightenment to resolve their approach-avoidance conflicts.

Suggested Measures to Counter Nigerian Adult Literacy Learners' Difficulties

The responsibility of assisting adult literacy learners to cope with the difficulties and dilemma they encounter in various learning situations is mainly a function of the adult educator who is also known as the instructor or facilitator of learning.

Salient among the facilitator's role in this context is provision of opportunity for social interaction among the adult learners, some of who come to learning programs not necessarily to learn new skills, but to "run away" from tensions at home (Ihejirika, 2000). Others who attend after the day's toil in the farm, market or fishing port are already wearied before joining the rest members in a learning situation. To enable them cope, the facilitator must present his teaching activities in such an invigorating and stimulating manner that all become interested as to pay voluntary attention. In that way the facilitator tries to reduce tension and anxiety among the literacy learners thereby ensures relaxed atmosphere which is best suited for adult learning.

Among other things, the facilitator should strive to encourage active participation in the learning experience by giving the adult learners the opportunity to exercise their maturity of purpose by being allowed to select content of

instruction, choose leaders, determine the time, place and length of class meeting (Houle, 1976). By being so involved, adult literacy learners put their respective situations in the mind so that those who are occupied at a particular time or place see to it that the time or length of class meeting does not conflict with the time they attend their normal work. Under the guidance of the adult educator, each learner proceeds at his own pace to reflect his individuality without competing with another person. To assist them further, ample time should be allowed for solving problems.

In areas where literacy classes are sometimes suspended because of farming, fishing, migration or adverse weather conditions, learners can be given some learning tasks to perform at home till classes reopen to avoid relapsing into a state of illiteracy. For instance, at such non-contact periods, portions of primers or other reading materials such as books, newspapers, magazines, addition and subtraction exercises could be assigned to the learners to keep them busy throughout such trying periods. For learners who cover long distances before reaching learning centres, the facilitator can arrange for local centres within the vicinity for extra-mural and continuing education to avoid more strenuous journeys to classes. Those who are working and attending evening class in urban areas need to break the monotony at work before settling down for studies. This, the facilitator can achieve by guiding them to undertake some interesting extra-curricular activities which are necessary for relaxation and enthusiasm.

Literature is replete with evidence and the facilitator's disposition with adult learners can mar or promote meaningful learning. Nigerian adult literacy learners detest to be treated like children rather, they like to be accorded some measure of respect and so prefer to be addressed by their surnames like Chief Amadi, Mrs. Eke, Elder Nwosu, etc, instead of being called by their first names. Accordingly, the facilitator needs to establish a good rapport with the learners and keep lesson durations brief to avoid boredom. Since adult learners easily develop positive view of and love for the facilitators with high sense of responsibility and intellectual ability coupled with teaching effectiveness, adult educators should always prepare sufficiently before going to class, else poor subject presentation will result to loss of interest in what is being taught as well as withdrawal from involvement in learning activities (Ukpong 2000).

Another important strategy is for the instructor to make the adult literacy learners aware of the enormous benefits of literacy acquisition. With the knowledge of such benefits, the learners become encouraged and motivated to overcome difficulties in their way to acquire literacy skills that can change their life for personal improvement and community development.

Conclusion

Learning as a natural phenomenon, is a psychological construct without which education would be difficult to come by. It is not limited to people of younger ages, but transcends to those of older stages. A person who failed to learn how to

read, write and compute numbers at his younger age but tries to do so in his adult years is an adult literacy learner. There are legions of them in Nigeria who, after acquiring literacy skills continue learning to achieve self-actualization and the capability to adapt to social and technological changes that are rife in the country.

Nigerian adult literacy learners go through their learning spree with difficulties associated with social engagements, psychological or emotional trauma, low self-concept, non-proximity of learning centres and some cultural barriers. Adult educators, who are the facilitators of learning, need not rest on their oars because the great population of adult illiterates in Nigeria, about 22 million aged 15 years and over, need to be brought out of their dilemma and shown the light if Nigeria is to mobilize its total human resources for social, economic, political and national development.

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