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LITERACY REIMAGINED: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO READING AND WRITING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: The traditional definition of literacy, encompassing reading, writing, listening, speaking, and numeracy skills, has evolved in the modern era to include proficiency in a diverse array of technologies. Beyond mere functional abilities, literacy is now understood as a crucial determinant of access to power and participation in society. While Essien (2005) emphasizes literacy's core elements of reading and writing in a language, contemporary perspectives recognize that literacy standards vary across different societies. This abstract explores the multifaceted nature of literacy in the modern context, highlighting its role as a gateway to social and economic empowerment. By examining diverse definitions and standards of literacy, we gain insights into the complex interplay between literacy, technology, and societal norms. This nuanced understanding is essential for developing effective literacy policies and interventions that address the evolving needs of individuals and communities in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Literacy, Technology, Empowerment, Societal norms, Education

INTRODUCTION

The traditional definition of literacy is the ability to read and write, listen and speak and enumerate. However, in the modern context literacy involves the ability to use and communicate in a diverse range of technologies. In general terms, literacy is a condition whereby one can successfully function at certain levels in a society where literacy plays a role in providing access to power. Essien (2005) maintains that literacy is concerned with the ability to read and write in a language. A literate person is, therefore, someone who is able to read and write in a language or languages. Thus, the standards for what level constitutes 'literacy' differ from society to society. Literacy has also been expanded to include skills in computer, basic numeracy, sound, still and moving images and graphical elements in digital based communication. Also, it is reported that the National Council of Teachers

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of English (NCTT) and the International Reading Association (2008) have added "visually representing" to the list of communicative competences that constitute literacy.

The condition whether one has achieved a certain degree of literacy differs and is dependent on who is defining the standard and why. Functional literacy achieved through basic education, is the key to a nation's ability to develop and achieve sustainable developmental targets. Functional literacy is an intellectual equipment for an individual to enable him or her not only literate, but also perform other tasks that are of benefit to him/or her and to the society in which he or she lives (Asiedu and Oyedeji, 1985). It enables people to use their acquired knowledge to promote activities for economic gains or academic performance or gains. It is in the light of the importance of functional literacy to the individual and societal emancipation that the teaching of it in a multilingual environment like, Nigeria attracts a lot of attention (Etor, 2002). In this paper, we intend to discuss functional literacy problems in the Nigerian educational system with particular reference to primary and secondary levels. Strategies to enhance literacy education at these levels of education in the country are also discussed.

Importance of literacy

The higher the level of literacy a person has the more his or her ability to earn. Street (1995) argues that the socio economic level of a family has more to do with a child's literacy level and that literacy levels have to do with income. The higher the family income the more likely it is that the children would have a high literacy level, in other words, though illiteracy does not cause poverty, poverty does cause illiteracy. The United States Department of Education (2003) in its programme tagged "Promoting Educational Excellence for All mericans" has as its maxim "No child left behind." It stresses functional literacy that would enable an American citizen to be gainfully employed and survive effectively in the global labour market.

Literacy enhances the status of women, reduces population rate, enhances environmental protection and generally raises the standard of living of individuals and societies. Literacy can improve agricultural productivity. The Nigerian government presently emphasizes agriculture and with various agricultural projects like the Fadama project sponsored by the World Bank, farmers need to be functionally literate in order for these efforts to succeed (Falusi et al., 2005). According to the United Nations Development Programme UNDP (1999), a minimum of 4 to 6 years of education is required for increasing agricultural productivity. Literacy and numeracy allows farmers to adapt to new agricultural methods, cope with risks, document their yield and sales, respond to market signals, mix and apply chemicals according to manufacturers' specifications. A basic education also enables farmers to seek and obtain facilities from financial institutions.

Literacy is also closely associated with health. In their study on functional health literacy among patients at two public hospitals in the United States, Parker et al. (1995) found that 2.36% of patients with inadequate functional health literacy did not know how to take medication four times a day compared to 9.4% with marginal functional literacy and 4.5% health literacy. Also, it was reported that in Kerala, India female and child mortality rates declined dramatically in the 1960's when girls who were exposed to the country's literacy reform after 1948 began to raise children (UNESCO, 2005).

In Nigeria, education is perceived as the passport for a good life. Nigerians wish their children to acquire quality education and to be gainfully employed after their studies. To fulfill this, many families sacrifice a large part of

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their income for their children's education in institutions with better teaching facilities. Also, Ayodele (2001) maintains that national unity, economic growth and technological development in the country cannot be forged without recourse to literacy and effective communication among citizens.

Literacy problems in Nigeria

According to UNESCO (2005), illiteracy is most prevalent in developing countries. South Asian, Arab, and Sub Saharan African countries are regions with the highest illiteracy rates at about 40 to 50%. East Asia and Latin America have illiteracy rates in the region of 10 to 15% while developing countries have values of a few percent (Table 1). Nigeria, one of the countries in sub- Saharan Africa, has illiteracy rate of 25.6% adult males and 40% adult females. The country's illiteracy rate for males between 15 to 20 years of age is 9.3% for males while that of females in the same age is 13.5%.

Literacy is a good indicator of educational achievement of nations and may also be a better indicator of enrolment in schools, since it usually reflects a minimal level of successfully completed schooling. In developing nations, the illiteracy rate of young people between ages 15 and 20 (secondary school age) is high (Table 1). These figures show the percentage of young people who cannot function successfully in their societies in terms of access to power and resources. It also depicts the percentage of young people who can only write figures, their names or memorize ritual phrases or who are only familiar with the basics of reading and writing as posited by Udosen (2004).

Literacy in primary education in Nigeria

Etuk (2005) traces literacy problems in primary education in Nigeria to the Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme, first introduced into Nigerian educational system in the former Western Region in 1955 and later in Eastern Nigeria in 1957. According to her, six years of primary education and automatic promotion are legacies bequeathed to the primary school system in Nigeria by the Universal Primary Education (UPE). The reduction in the number of years of learning in this important stage of education, that is, from 8 to 6 years and the automatic promotion of pupils, irrespective of their learning capabilities, in order to cut cost, has resulted in what she terms "rushing out of children" from primary schools with most of them lacking in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy.

The problem is further compounded by the use of a foreign language (English), as a medium of communication and learning in schools. English is of particular importance in the field of education (Adeyemi, 2007). It permeates the entire curriculum and is closely linked to the achievement of the Basic Universal Education in Nigeria. It is also the official language of government and a core subject in the Nigerian education system. Adeyemi (2007) notes that, there is a peculiar problem of learning English as a second language (L2) in many Anglophone African countries. Most students are exposed to English too late in school; additionally, they are taught by teachers who themselves are not proficient in the language (Okon, 2003). Thus, the burden of learning and understanding the new language rests on the weak shoulders of pupils. The result is poor oral language skills, reading and writing difficulties at the primary education level. Most primary school leavers in Nigeria constitute Okedara's (1997) class of "newly created illiterate Nigerians." The problem of illiterate learners continues, through secondary and tertiary education as primary education is the foundation for any educational system and the key to the success or failure of the whole educational system.

Table 1. Estimated illiteracy rates (%).

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Ages 15 – 24

Country	Men	Women	Year	Men	Women
Albania	0.8	1.7	2001	0.6	0.5
Algeria	22.0	40.4	2000-2004	6.0	14.4
Angola	17.7	46.4	2001	17.3	37.4
Argentina	3.0	3.0	2000-2004	1.6	1.1
Bangladesh	49.7	68.6	2000-2004	42.2	58.9
Barbados	0.3	0.8	2000-2004	0.2	0.2
Nigeria	25.6	40.6	2000-2004	9.3	13.5
South Africa	15.9	19.1	2000-2004	6.3	5.6

Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2005).

Literacy in secondary education in Nigeria

Secondary education provides a link between primary and tertiary education. It trains people who are immediately employable as well as provide future university students. The demand for higher education is in the increase globally, as nations embrace the UBE and Education for All (EFA). Globalization and the demand for sophisticated workforce, the growth in knowledge-based economies and technology has given rise to more demands for secondary education. Secondary education is therefore, a gateway to the opportunities and benefits of economic and social development.

In Nigeria, proficiency in English language at this level of education cannot be overemphasized, as it is also the language of instruction. It is also a prerequisite for academic performance as well as communication. However, Udosen (2004) maintains that reading for instance, has no place in the school curriculum at the secondary education level and argues that this has a carry-over effect on students' literacy level and teacher practices in the classroom. The author found that there is a complete or partial loss of reading and writing skills among secondary school children in Nigeria and attributed it to lack of practice among students and the instructional methods adopted by teachers.

The author wondered how the goals of secondary education as specified in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004) which among other things include; "to inspire students with a desire for self improvement and achievement of excellence" and 'to raise a generation of people who can think for themselves, respect the views and feelings of others, respect dignity of labour, appreciate those values under our broad national goals and live as good citizens" can be achieved. Since there are no reading instruction books, course books, for the teaching of general language skills are used for reading instruction in schools (Omojuwa, 1991).

Measures for improving literacy levels in Nigerian schools

There are four major areas that need to be improved in the educational system so as to improve the literacy levels of students in the country. These include; a) improving teacher quality, b) increasing students' motivation through improved instructional strategies, c) improved management and administration of schools, and d) improved links between schools and communities.

Improving teacher quality

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International evidence strongly supports investment in teacher education to address educational priority. In Ghana, the major national priority is improving the quality of basic education through improved pre-service and inservice teacher training (Akumfi, 2001). It was found that achievement in science and mathematics in Ghana was quite low when measured by international standards. Three factors were found to be responsible for this result namely; insufficient foundation in basic skills, high reliance on rote learning and poor preparation of teachers starting from the primary level.

Improving the quality of teachers makes it possible to make gains in teacher retention and hence students' learning achievement. The challenge therefore is to critically examine pre-service training of teachers in Nigeria with a view to standardizing teacher training as well as identifying appropriate teacher competencies for each level of education. Literacy in secondary education should help Nigerian adults get the basic skills they need to be productive workers and citizens. Thus, adult secondary education program should be introduced in the country. The programme should include basic skills such as reading, writing, mathematic, English Language competency and problem solving in the form of projects.

The programme should be funded through a Trust Fund.

Improving student's motivation through improved instructional strategies

Arguments exist on how to teach literacy. While some argue that the most effective methods of teaching literacy involve direct instruction of simplified phonics system, others however, suggest a more holistic method modeled after the way language is acquired. Nta et al. (2003) reported that inductive teaching is useful and effective because it presents units of knowledge from simple to complex, known to unknown, immediate to distant and specific to general.

Learning something new enriches and stimulates the brain. Enang and Afangideh (2009) maintain that, when an individual faces a novel stimulus, there is an indication of higher brain activity. Novelty challenges the brain for more activity. Thus a variety of innovative approaches which include; group work, reading camps, films, field trips, peer tutoring, use of resource persons in the community and project based learning are strategies that can be used by Nigerian teachers to develop literacy skills of students.

There is also a need for the development of curriculum and instructional practices for teaching reading and writing to 'struggling children and adolescents' and to address the underlying causes of their reading and writing difficulties. Also, it is necessary to evaluate curriculum materials e.g. textbooks, workbooks etc used for teaching reading and writing in schools. It is equally important to provide up-to-date school libraries and instructional materials for the improvement of students' reading skills at primary and secondary levels of education in Nigeria. Reading is a fundamental skill in literacy. Thus, aids should be provided to Non Governmental Organizations like the Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN), to provide reading programs both inside and outside the school. It should also allow youngsters to select books and keep them at home. Prizes and Awards for reading and recitation should be introduced. This would help to improve verbal communication and reading and writing skills.

Improved management and administration of schools

Akpan (2005) notes that, the Federal government of Nigeria has established the education standards the nation wants to attain in the National Policy of Education but the problem is in the implementation of the plan. The school administrator implements policies at the school level. He or she is responsible for providing instructional

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leadership, monitoring and supervising students' activities and performance. He or she also operates and maintains the school plant, materials and facilities (Akpan, 2005). To improve literacy education, school administrators in Nigeria should adhere to the basic principle of quality control. These include monitoring literacy education in their schools to ensure accomplishment of stated objectives and planning how best to achieve them.

One of the reasons for poor implementation of education policies in Nigeria is lack of funds. Also, Ehiamaetalor (2004) maintains that, the monies available for education are never carefully used. The administration and management of the education enterprise in Nigeria needs to be rooted on accountability, transparency and efficiency, so as to ensure optimum use of scarce resources. The UNESCO recommendation that at least 20% of a nation's annual budget, should go into funding education, needs to be adhered to. Nigerian government needs to embrace strategies that are likely to bring about positive change in the educational system.

Improved links between schools and communities

There should be accountability in learning and teaching. Nigerian society should expect good behaviour to schoolwork from teachers and students. Automatic promotion of students should be abolished. Students should be accountable for their learning capabilities. Also, there is need for community partnership in education as government alone cannot fund education.

CONCLUSION

Educators in Nigeria need to research on appropriate methods for achieving effective literacy development in the country's bilingual/ multilingual educational system. There is also a need for the development of literacy in the mother tongue. Obute (1991) maintains that learning the skill for literacy in the first spoken language, makes it easier to speak and acquire literacy skills in a second language. The task of societies is to transform their educational system and schooling practices to align with the demands of globalization and a technology-driven world. For Nigeria to join the League of Nations in terms of human and technological advancement, high literacy education must be given priority attention.

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