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Restructuring Literacy Education for Global Best Practices and Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Illiteracy affects all areas of life. Low literacy limits access to good jobs and there is synergy between people with low literacy skills and high poverty level. Literacy education at the global level encompasses practical and contextually relevant approaches that transcend national boundary. It is beyond the issue of reading, writing and simple arithmetic, but view it in the area of acquisition of skills, in order to assist participants in literacy programmes out of poverty and into prosperity. This paper therefore, examined the concepts of literacy education, poverty alleviation and literacy education: The paper takes a critical look at literacy education and global best practices and the need for restructuring literacy education as well as the benefits of restructuring literacy education in Nigeria. Based on the findings, it was recommended among others things that stakeholders in education sector should embrace literacy education as one of the major ways of alleviating poverty in Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Literacy education is fundamental to all areas of learning, as it unlocks access to the wider curriculum. Being literate increases opportunities for an individual in all aspects of life; and lays the foundation for lifelong learning and work. The literacy experience and outcome, promote the development of the critical and creative thinking as well competence in listening and talking, reading, writing and the personal, interpersonal and team-working skills which are critical to life and in the world of work. The framework provides, for learners and facilitators, broad descriptions of the range of learning opportunities which will contribute to the development of literacy (Abott & Snidal, 2021).

Those with low literacy skills are more likely to live in poverty, face health problems because they cannot read prescription labels or instructions, and grow isolated in a world increasingly dependent on computers. Another major problem is the impact of illiteracy on future generations. To Arnold (2015) and Beribe (2023), more children are raised in household where parents are low-skilled or illiterate, as only a certain amount of learning happens in the classroom. It implies that one is raising the incoming generation with the expectation that if one increases the amount of money into their education, one will get better results. But that is only partially true if nothing is done to address the households from which they are coming. For individuals, lack of basic skills can lead to unemployment or low-paying, dead-end jobs; as well as status as permanent political outsiders, with no opportunity to have their voices heard; and to the possibilities of watching their children repeat the circle. It can also affect economic development, diminish the effectiveness of citizen participation, and place a heavy financial and educational burden on the formal school system.

Global best practices according to Asogwa (2024), denote the most proficient methods of conducting business, managing resources, and attaining goals across different nations and culture. It encompasses a distinctive mode of global governance that relies on existing practices to establish chains of political authority. It has facilitated fruitful collaboration between the academic community and practitioners of literacy education. In a clear term, global best practices in literacy education encompasses practical and contextually relevant approach that transcend national boundaries. These practices have significant implications for literacy education curriculum development, teaching methodologies, assessment practices, and overall literacy education quality.

UNESCO (2025), stated that there are about 739 million youths and adults in the world are illiterate, who lacked basic literacy skills in 2024 and have been deprived of access to education because they are required to be present in the formal school system before they can gain access to quality education. This implies that around the world, millions of adults are unable to read or write, and therefore struggle to earn a living for themselves and their families. National Institute for Literacy (2003) found out that almost half of residents over age 16 were functional illiteracy - unable to use reading, speaking, writing, and computer skills in everyday life. In essence, illiteracy affects all areas of life. According to Omolewa (2001) corroborated by Sarumi (2002) stated that government and people no longer look at illiterate as merely the ugly phenomenon that deprives its victims of the inspiration, recreation and contact with a wider world which books afford. Hence, illiteracy is now globally seen and decried as the twin sister of poverty.

Poverty is the state of living with less than the smallest income necessary to provide the minimum standard of living. According to Zou (2024), stated that inability to acquire, use or have access to the most basic essentials of life due to poor income, handicapping conditions, unemployment, wars and governments inability to provide such essentials. Poverty alleviation therefore involves all the various personal, government and private agencies initiatives made available to a person for him to use and overcome poverty.

Literacy education has been viewed globally (especially developed countries) as a tool which can be used for the aim of eradicating poverty, ignorance and diseases, and the only form of education that they can acquire to make them contribute to their environment meaningfully and also be self-reliant citizens. For example, in the United Kingdom (UK), literacy education, which includes skills acquisition, is handled by various agencies including the government, academic institutions, and non-governmental organizations. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), that serves England and Wales works to support an increase in the total number of adults engaged in formal and informal learning in England and Wales through advocacy to national bodies, institutions, and industrial (Okenwa & Akintola, 2014 and Byrne, 2022).

Nigeria has made considerable efforts to address the adult illiteracy issue. The efforts have been largely in the area of mass literacy campaigns and policy. Nigeria, in 2000, 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 target. However, a global review of achievements and challenges of EFA since inception shows that some of the targets remain unattainable, especially in many sub-Sahara Africa, including Nigeria. The 2010 National Literacy Survey conducted jointly by the National Mass Education Commission (NMEC) and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) put the national literacy rate for the country at 56.9percent (NMEC and UNICEF, 2010). The survey further revealed that Nigeria houses about 40 million people who are unable to read and write in any language out of which only 500,000 (0.13%) are currently enrolled in adult literacy classes. With such a huge population of illiterates, according to Garuba (2014), it is not surprising that Nigeria is a prominent member of the E9 countries (and the only one from Sub-Sahara Africa), meaning that she is among the nine countries with highest population of illiterates in the world along with Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, and Pakistan. It is instructive to note that Nigeria is the present chair of the E9 countries. Thus, adult literacy remains a big issue in the resource endowed Nigeria.

However, most of the public institutions which helped out in adult literacy efforts naturally stop to function as soon as the government of the day that shows some level of interest in the programmes seized to be in power, coupled with other factors inhibiting the growth of literacy education. Some of which are: lack of commitment on the part of the government, policy makers and societies, poverty, poor economic growth, bad governance, high illiteracy rates, mismanagement of scarce resources, and so on (Okemakinde, 2025).

Concept of Literacy Education

The general perception of literacy is ability to read, write and do simple arithmetic. People were considered literate if they could write their names, a qualification that would certainly be woefully inadequate today. To be literate, do you have to be able to at least add subtract, multiply, and divide, so you can balance your checkbook and so on? Do you need a certain amount of general knowledge in order to be literate? Literacy has bigger dimensions than mere ability to read, write and do simple

arithmetic (Rabinowitz, 2014 and Black, 2022). According to Ogunbiyi (2015), literacy is a bridge from misery to hope. It is a basic tool for daily life in modern society. It is a wall against poverty, and a building block of development. Literacy is a vehicle for the promotion of cultural and national identity. To Learning and Teaching Scotland (2014), literacy is defined as the set of skills which allows an individual to engage fully in society and learning through the different forms of language, and the range of texts, which society values and finds useful.

The literacy experiences and outcomes promote the development of skills, particularly those that are used regularly by everyone in their everyday lives. These include the ability to apply knowledge acquired in day-to-day activities. They reflect the need for young people to be able to communicate effectively both face-to-face and in writing through an increasing range of media. They take account of national and international research and of other skills frameworks; they recognize the importance of listening and talking and of effective collaborative working in the development of thinking and in learning.

Researchers (Brian, 2003; Rabinowitz, 2014; Ghai, 2024) in the area of literacy education have contributed significantly to a restructuring on the concept of literacy and Nigeria cannot be an exception.

1. Literacy aids capacity building, an enabling factor, core engine of human development, its impact must be seen in terms of benefits to communities and individuals.
2. This century portends a lot of challenges for the developing countries as more skills are demanded to survive under the terrible poor economy. Hence, literacy acquisition demand is increasing be it functional, income generating, capacity building, and computer, civic, environmental and global knowledge.
3. The unique quality of individual should be recognized regardless of whether he can read or write.
4. The newer technologies such as ict, internet and technologies should be used to build bridges between the haves and have-nots.

What is Poverty Alleviation?

Majority of the people of Africa are said to be poverty stricken. They are caught in a various circle of poverty contrived by the vagaries of nature, flawed political and economic policies, a punitive and exploitative word order (Thompson, 1995; Sarumi, 2002; Abbort & Snidal, 2021).

Poverty alleviation involves the strategic use of tools such as education, economic development, health and income redistribution to improve the livelihoods of the world□s poorest by governments and internationally approved organizations. Poverty alleviation aims to improve the quality of life for those people currently living in poverty. It is an effort to support transformational change which brings about real improvements in people□s lives (UNDP, 2013)

The poverty alleviation programmes can be categorized based on whether it is targeted for rural areas or urban areas. Most of the programmes should be designed to target rural poverty as the prevalence of the poverty is high in rural areas. Also targeting of the poverty is challenging in rural areas due to various geographic and infrastructure limitations. The programmes can be mainly grouped into (1) Wage employment programmes, (2) Self-employment programmes, (3) Food security programmes, (4) Social security programmes and (5) Urban poverty alleviation programmes (Vasudeva, 2010; Shea, 2022).

Literacy Education: A gateway to Poverty Alleviation

The relationship between level of literacy and poverty is clear. Poverty is closely connected with illiteracy. Adults living in poverty face a host of challenges that their wealthy peers do not: food and housing insecurity, poor health care and unsafe environments, limited exposure to books and language. Any of these obstacles can affect their ability to learn; some adults face all of them at once. There is no magic to teaching reading, but it is magical once an adult learns to read. Reading opens them up to new worlds and experiences, cultures and countries, and builds their self-esteem (Rhonda, 2010).

The National Institute for Literacy estimates that 43percent of adult with very low literacy skills live in poverty. About 70percent of adult welfare recipients have lower literacy skill on the National Assessment of the Adult literacy (NAAL). According to US Census Bureau Reports, more than 20 percent of children under 18 years of age live in poverty, the highest child-poverty rate in 15 years. That’s 15.5 million children. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2013) stated that despite progress achieved since the endorsement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by

world leaders at the UN in September, 2000, human poverty still remains widespread in certain parts of the world. Globally, the number of extreme poor has dropped by 650millon in the last decades, a level of progress humankind had never seen. But still, there are more than a billion people living in extreme poverty.

World Bank (2024), estimated that Nigeria□s poverty rate rose to 56%. Leaving roughly 129 million citizens living below the national poverty line. Also, National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2022) 40.1% of people in Nigeria are poor and 63% are multidimensional poor. Multidimensional poverty is higher in rural areas, where 72% of people are poor, compared to 42% of people in urban areas.

The United Nations Development Programmes (UNDP) (2013) stated that simple economic growth will not reduce or alleviate poverty, improve equality or produce jobs, unless said growth is inclusive of all individuals in the economy. For instance, a recent study by the African Economic Outlook showed that economic growth in Nigeria has not resulted in poverty alleviation or the creation of jobs. Despite policies for inclusive growth and employment generation, the report showed a 3 percent increase in unemployment between 2010 and 2011. The report explains that this was because the oil and gas sectors, the areas increasing economic growth, do not have much potential to create jobs. Though Nigeria projects a 6.7 percent growth in 2013 and a 7.3percent growth in 2014, there are potential problems. Security problems arising from religious conflict in certain states, as well as the continued cost of flooding, all constitute potential drag on projected economic growth. The report also stated that literacy education should be promoted by the Nigerian government to see continued progress in economic growth, a key component of poverty alleviation. (Jordan, 2013; Beribe, 2023)

Literacy education has a very great role to play as it is a part of an integrated programmes for poverty alleviation because it would enable the people to critically analyses their situations. Besides good governance, provision of basic social services, security of people, democracy and the rule of law, the values of social justice and equality should characterize an enabling development environment in which the capacity of the people can be built through literacy education (Sarumi, 2002; Shea, 2022).

There is the need to restructure literacy education in Nigeria in line with what operates globally by:

1. Increasing the primary school enrolment rates in the country.
2. Increasing funding on education generally and literacy education in particular; increase investment in literacy education contribute to a more productive labour force, which became one of the country's engines of growth.
3. supporting the poor households on the condition that children attend school regularly. This will significantly improve primary completion rate, reduce adult illiteracy rates and reduce poverty level in the country.
4. Creating and using new and inexpensive mobile technologies, there is potential for increased economic growth in the country. Not only is there growth, but the positive changes are impacting those living in the worst conditions. While nigeria design□s mobile phone charger will give independence to those living in poverty.

There is the need to empower the rural and urban dwellers as development is always accompanied by a minimum level of basic education and training in a range of economic, social and cultural skills. Lack of literacy education rendered the people incapable of articulating their problems and developing coherent strategies, including the effective mobilization of resources, to address their identified problems and needs.

Literacy Education and Global Best Practices

Literacy has ceased to be individualized as all efforts are now towards making the literate environment so that the community itself can serve as resource for learning. Literate environment can also be seen as a basic human right. Literate environment is an enabling environment that promotes or give people opportunities to continue to learn. Such learning should also accommodate the knowing of the □other□ societies and the world. Illiteracy characterizes the sub-Saharan Africa at a very high level compare to other regions of the world□s highest illiteracy rate of 54 percent. The situation varies from one country to the other in countries such as Uganda, Malawi, Burundi and Rwanda the literacy rates are below 49 percent. Although, many developing countries realized the importance of literacy, for creating a conducive learning environment at home for children, crucial in the context of integrated

programmes for imparting messages on population, health, and agriculture and the struggle to escape poverty. (UNESCO, 2010; World Bank, 2024)

The global literacy rate for all people age 15 and above is 86.30 percent. The global literacy rate for male is 90.0 percent and the rate for all female is 82.7 percent. The rate varies throughout the world with developed nation (like Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, South- Korea, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United State) having a rate of 99.2 percent. South and West Asia represent 70.2 percent and Sub-Sahara Africa at 64.0 percent. Over 75 percent of the world□s 781 million illiterate adults are found in South Asia, West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa and women represent almost two-third of illiterate adults globally (IMF, 2015).

To Abdullahi (2015), of Nigeria□s 180 million people, the number of illiterate Nigerians is estimated at 54 million. She further stated that, the 2013/2014 Global Monitoring Report (GMR) showed that countries like Brazil, China, and Indonesia have attained 70 to 89 percent literacy rate. Nigeria, Bangladesh and Pakistan had literacy rate of less than 70 percent. The country Compares Index of Literacy Level by country in 2012 further testifies to the worrisome literacy situation in the country as it shows that Nigeria ranked 161 out of 184 countries with 66percent literacy rate. This implies that we belong to the mainstream of the world□s most illiterate countries.

World Bank (2024), study also indicates that estimated 10million Nigerian children are not registered in school. The decline fortune of literacy ratio among Nigerian children is indeed, an embarrassment to the nation as we have over 10.5 million children out of school. EFA Global Monitoring Report ranks Nigeria as one of the countries with the highest level of illiteracy. The EFA report on Nigeria affirmed that the number of illiterate adults has increased by 10million over the past two decades, to reach 35million.

The current literacy trend in Nigeria, has obstruct the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the objective of meeting the national mark of reducing illiteracy by 50percent has failed. This is not unconnected with the fact that past governments gave more attention to formal education than non-formal sub-sector, which accounted for a larger number of illiterate adults and out-of-school youths. Low level of literacy can impede the economy development of a country in the current rapidly changing, technology-driven world. There is the need for concerted efforts of all stakeholders in the educational sector to improve the negative trend. Okemakinde (2025), therefore, emphasis the need for the federal government of Nigeria to address the issue of out-of-school children without further delay and adult illiteracy to him if not properly addressed, would have a negative impact on the investments the Federal Government had made in the area of literacy education.

Rationale for Restructuring Literacy Education in Nigeria

However, the world has seen success in increasing access to basic education, raising completion rates, reducing adult illiteracy rate and improving the quality of education through the greater attention from the global community and the concerted efforts on the part of individual countries. Some of the successes recorded by European Unions in some countries that holds a lot of promises for Nigeria in her present effort to universalize access to literacy education and promote an inclusive society where individuals□ capacities are brightened and broadened are as follows:

Somalia

Somalia has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world: More than an estimated 80 percent of Somalis are not literate. Since 2010 the European Commission has helped the country in the area of access to education. To its credit, more than 40,000 students have gained access to basic education, primary and secondary education; more than 330 classrooms were built or rehabilitated. This has led to the reduction in the illiteracy rates and poverty in the country (EU, 2013; World Bank, 2024).

Afghanistan

Decades of conflict in Afghanistan have led to widespread of poverty which means that many children are forced to help support their families. The project initiated by European Commission provided 9,115 vulnerable street or working children with an education and a better start in life (EU, 2013; World Bank, 2024).

Swaziland

Fees are the major obstacle for the poor to attend schools in Swaziland. The project organized by European Commission helped to pay fees for 26,000 vulnerable children in 558 schools, rehabilitated schools and finance the equipment of 2 vocational institutions (World Bank, 2024).

Namibia

One of the priorities has been early childhood development and pre-primary education by European Commission, which help to lay the foundations for acquiring basic literacy and numeracy. The increase attendance of pre-primary education since 2008 is building the foundation for quality education and has already resulted in reduced drop-out rates in the first grade. Also, reinforcing school attendance is providing school meals. In fact, the number of children with access to the provision of meals programmes has increased from around 200,000 to around 270,000 in 2012 (EU, 2013; World Bank, 2024).

Benefits of Restructuring Literacy Education in Nigeria

Some of the benefits of restructuring literacy education in Nigeria are as follows:

a) It solves the problem of unemployment; it trains the adult in commercial production, scientific and industrial trades according to their interest.

b) It makes an adult independent while studying. They may get a part-time job in other industries which mean they can combine training and earn income while studying.

c) It teaches adults the lessons of manual work. The physical labour done makes them strong, healthy and active.

d) It brings about the much-desired transformation to the economy of any nation.

e) There is therefore the need for the stakeholders in literacy education to improve upon the curriculum to enable the country to change for better (Ibrahim, 2015; Asogwa, 2024)

Conclusion

The bane of the above is that literacy can no longer be simply defined in terms of reading, writing or simple calculation, nor can it be perceived as an end in itself. This is unconnected with the fact that simple economic growth will not reduce or alleviate poverty, improve equality or produce jobs, unless said growth is inclusive of all individuals in the economy. No wonder that the world is now talking about making the literate societies instead of individualizing literacy. Literacy education helps developing countries (Nigeria inclusive) analyse the impact of the economic crisis and come up with policies to better deal with consequences of the crisis on poor and vulnerable people.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings, the following recommendations are made for improvement:

There is the need for more investment and effective policies to embed action by government for literacy education within wider development policies.

Government at all levels should prioritize education, especially literacy education, as this would bring about sustainable development across the country.

Sustained training and re-training of facilitators to enable them to be well equipped with what transpire in developed world since literacy education is dynamic and nation need to be dynamic too.

Mobilizing the learners on the need to enroll and complete their literacy education to make them more creative, this is possible through establishing more literacy centres in both urban and rural areas.

Government at all levels should give priorities to early childhood development and pre-primary education in order to build the foundation for quality education and invariably bring about reduction in drop-out rates in the country.

Federal government should introduce the provision of meals programmes as soon as possible in primary schools as promised to reinforce school attendance by primary school pupils.

Government at all levels should promote inclusive and sustained human development and works to reduce poverty in all its dimensions through literacy education. This is necessary on the ground that simple economic growth will not reduce or alleviate poverty, improve equality or produce jobs, unless said growth is inclusive of all individuals in the economy through literacy education.

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