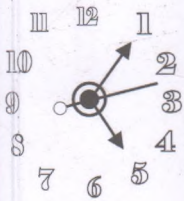




International Journal of Literacy Education

Volume 9. No. 2, July, 2019

ISSN: 0189-6687



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Published by
Department of Adult Education
University of Ibadan, Ibadan

Contents

Pages

Literacy Education for Active Citizenship and Sustainable Development Professor M. B. Avoseh	1-3
Use of ICT as an Innovative Strategy for Expanding Access to Nomadic Education in Borno State: A prescription <i>Alhaji Ali Bulama, Oluremi Eyitayo Oni, and Samaila Moh'd Tomsu</i>	4-19
Achieving Sustainable Development Goal One for Adult Learners through the Adult Literacy Programme in Rivers State <i>Christian N. Olori and Henry V. Peterside and Martin O. Obama</i>	20-29
Family Career Success Indicators as Tools for Literacy Sustainability among Urban Youths in the Ibadan Metropolis <i>A. O. Adeyemi and K. C. Lawrence</i>	30-48
Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) and State Universal Basic Education Commission (SUBEC): Dual Responsibilities in Promoting Digital Literacy in Nigeria <i>Ayobami A. Oyedeji and Oluwayemisi R. Olateju</i>	49-68
Enhancing Literacy Education and Skills Development in Nigeria: Information and Communication Technology Intervention <i>T. G. Muibi</i>	69-87
Access to Literacy Skills Training as a Pathway to Better Jobs for Poor Urban Youths <i>John Onimisi Edeh and Abiola A. Omokhabi</i>	88-100

Extending ICT Literacy to Women Entrepreneurs in the Fashion and Textile Businesses in Edo South Senatorial District of Edo State, Nigeria <i>Caroline O. Olomukoro and Iyobosa Humphrey Omoregie</i>	101-118
Impact of Skills Training on Employment among Young Entrepreneurs in Selected Local Governments in Ibadan, Nigeria <i>Ihezio Donatus Ukpabi</i>	119-131
Patronage and Effect of Herbal Medicine on Residents of Bodija Community in Ibadan Metropolis <i>Funmilola E. Akinyooye and Motunrayo O. Oyebami</i>	132-148
Nexus between Women Literacy Education and Family Economic Improvement in Poverty-ridden Economy <i>Ronke Christiana Ojo</i>	149-165
Literacy: The Missing Link in Boko Haram Insurgency <i>Tajudeen A. Akanji and Christopher O. Omoregie</i>	166-176
Ikeoluwapo B. Bartuwa Mapping a Multiple Frameworks for Financing Literacy in Nigeria <i>K.O. Ojokheta and S. U. Omokhabi</i>	177-198
Attitude and Preparation of Civil Servants toward Retirement in Ekiti State <i>Olubunmi Adebola Olanipekun and Damian Kehinde Adebò</i>	199-211
Effectiveness of UBEC and SUBEB on Adult Literacy Education in Osun State, Nigeria <i>Olayemi Benjamin Oyegbade and Omolola Fausat Aromolaran</i>	212-232

Promoting Literacy Education Initiatives through
Intergenerational Learning for Sustainable Cities and
Communities in Nigeria

Mercy Ebere Omeje 233-245

Exploring the Potentials of Emerging Technologies for
Literacy and Skills Development: Spotlight on Artificial
Intelligence

*Omobola Omoyeni Adelore and
Solomon Oluwaseun Ojedeji* 246-260

Health Literacy and its Relevance for Disease
Prevention at the Individual and System Levels

*S. Akinmayiwa Lawal, C. Adebimpe Akindemowo
and ³Luqman Muraina* 261-281

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Access to Literacy Skills Training as a Pathway to Better Jobs for Poor Urban Youths

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Abstract

Literacy skills are all the skills needed for reading and writing. Literacy is not merely the ability to read and write, but is a major vehicle for holistic social change and community development. Youths are very important stakeholders in any society. They are not only the future hope of Nigeria, but also major stakeholders and very useful resources in nation building. There is a great need for youths, especially the urban youths to engage in a form of education that seeks to equip them with capacities, skills, knowledge and understanding in specific skills to enable them become productive citizens of their nations and also to enable them live productive and meaningful lives. This study therefore aims at examining access to literacy skills training as a pathway to better jobs for poor urban youths. Literacy skills training emerged as a proactive response to the practical needs of and challenges facing poor households. It promotes literacy among learners through developmental activities that address their basic and practical needs, thus helping them to break out of the cycle of poverty. The study concludes and recommends that access to literacy skills and training will make urban youths to be self-reliant, therefore

government and private sectors should seek the promotion of skills acquisition.

Key words: Literacy skills training, Urban youths, Jobs

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 (Edem, Mbaba, Udosen and Isioma, 2011).

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2013, literacy is the ability to understand, evaluate, use, and engage with written texts in order to participate in society, achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potentials. Literacy skills training is the ability to acquire a literacy level that is functional, whereby people will be able to handle information, express ideas and opinions, make decisions and solve problems as individuals, family members, citizens of nations and as lifelong learners – because functional literacy is a lifelong process (Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland: www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc7-11-11).

The functionality of a literacy activity is the extent to which it is able to empower; combine awareness creation and active participation so that recipients will understand the situation and take steps to redress their conditions (Olaleye and Adeyemo, 2012). This may be why Bhola (1993) asserted that without literacy development will only limp on one leg. The International Council for Adult Education (2003) further expanded this by explaining basic literacy to be a system of learning to read and write (text and numbers), reading and writing to learn, and developing these skills and using them effectively for meeting basic needs, while functional literacy is seen as the broader concept of literacy. For instance, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (1997) defines functional literacy as: the ability to understand and employ

printed information in daily activities at home, at work, and in the community to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential. Similarly, the Canadian Council of Learning Report (2007) has the following to say about functional literacy: true literacy encompasses much more than just these basic skills. It includes the ability to analyse things, understand general ideas or terms, use symbols in complex ways, apply theories, and perform other necessary life skills including the ability to engage in the social and economic life of the community.

The submissions above show that, unlike basic literacy, which focuses majorly on acquiring skills, functional literacy deals with how people actually use such skills to live and work in society. Furthermore, Schlechty (2014) defined functional illiteracy to be reading and writing skills that are inadequate to manage daily living and employment tasks that require reading skills beyond a basic level'. In other words, functional literacy could be seen as the ability of individuals to possess the reading and writing skills that are adequate to manage daily living and employment tasks that require reading skills beyond a basic level. 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). This shows 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. For example, a Tanzanian, Rubagunmya (2003) appraises education to be functional in orientation because it helps the people to become self-reliant, though he did not give more specific instance of what he refers to as 'self-reliant'.

Concept of Youth

Youth is defined by Webster's New Oxford Dictionary in Adebayo (2002) as the time of life when one is young, especially the period between childhood and maturity of the early period of existence,

growth or development. The words youth, adolescent, teenager and young people are often used interchangeably. Youth generally refers to a time of life that is neither childhood nor adulthood but rather somewhere in between. Youth is an alternative word to the scientifically oriented adolescent and the common terms teen and teenager. According to Jega (2012) youth can be defined as a special group of people with strong stamina and passion for realizing certain set goals and objectives. The way in which a nation defines its youth is related to the objective conditions and realities that exist on the ground especially historical and contemporary socio-economic and political issues that need to be addressed. That is why nations use different parameters and variables in defining their youths. Nigeria's National Youth Development Policy 2009 defines youth to comprise all young persons of age 18-35 who are citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This category represents the most cultured, the most volatile and yet the most vulnerable segment of the population, socio-economically, emotionally and in other respects. The youth share certain characteristics that distinguish them from other generations. Such characteristics include, impatience for change, zealously, radicalism, rebellion, curiosity, hard work, ego and ambition. Looking at the above definition, it is safe to say that youths can be the engine and agents of change for national development, if their mindsets are channeled in the right direction.

The Concept of Youth Empowerment

The youth are the future of every society as their energy and skills contribute to the development of any society, hence, the need for empowerment. Omotere (2011) defines youth empowerment as a process through which adults begin to share responsibility and power with young people. Omotere, defining youth empowerment within the African and Nigerian context, asserts that it is a means of encouraging young people to gain the skills and knowledge that will allow them to overcome obstacles in life. Youth empowerment according to Jimba (2006) involves different ways the youth can be facilitated to cause changes in their life style. He maintained that youth empowerment means a way of inculcating into the youths the spirit of transformation of ideas into creativeness. Youth

empowerment can also be seen as a means of exposing the youths to skills or training that make them productive. It encompasses different ways youth can be exposed to different trades that may help them to engage in sustainable paid work and self-employment. Ezeanu (2012) submitted that youth empowerment sprang from the need to enable young people to have a say in decisions that affect them. This would give young people means to contribute to the economic, social and cultural advancement of their countries, and to gain self-fulfillment. Young people are empowered when they acknowledge that they have or can create choices in life, are aware of the implications of these choices, make informed decisions freely, take action based on that decision and accept responsibility for the consequences of that action. Youth empowerment is an attitudinal, structural, and cultural process whereby young people gain the ability, authority and agency to make decisions and implement change in their own lives and the lives of other people, including youths and adults (Sasaki, 2006). Empowering youth in this context means creating and supporting enabling conditions under which young people can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms, rather than at the direction of others. This involves providing economic and social base, political will, adequate resources allocation and supportive legal and administrative frameworks, a stable environment of equality, peace and democracy, as well as access to knowledge, information and skills and a positive value system (Ojo, Abayomi and Odozi, 2014).

The various youth empowerment programmes can be classified into four main types: economic empowerment, productive empowerment, marketing empowerment, and skill acquisition empowerment.

- **Economic empowerment:** Economic empowerment according to Ogbе, (1996) is the way of motivating individuals in the society to be productive and self dependent by inculcating into the individuals entrepreneurship skills such as personal business initiatives and basic skills in business development. In fact, the best foundation for any business success is to have several possibilities for creating profits. However, profit creation is determined by the choice

of the business, self-concept, interest, resources, and aspirations which in turn would enable the person to achieve self-development, self-actualization and self-fulfillment.

- **Production empowerment:** Production empowerment according to Idachaba (2006) is a basic focus of entrepreneurship initiatives. It is determined by what the person trained wants to produce, how to produce and for whom those goods are produced. Personal trait and initiative will influence the person on what to produce, which also depends on the resource available. How to produce the goods depends on the factors of production available to him. Finally, who the consumers of such goods are depends on the market. Knowledge of the factors of production which determine how the goods are to be produced and for whom they are to be produced can be imbibed mostly through training and marketing strategies.
- **Marketing empowerment:** Marketing of goods and services produced in any economy according to Magbagbeola (2004) is one of the crucial attributes of a businessman. This is because it demands from a businessmen or women the ability to convince a customer that what has been producing is the best. Acquisition of adequate marketing skill through training enables the entrepreneurs to market their products easily. Usually, different marketing strategies are learnt and are applied to convince the customers of the need to purchase the products. The marketing strategies include effective communication, self-confidence and self-esteem.
- **Skill Development:** Empowerment skills are defined as the ability of individual or group of individuals to acquire more skills for the resolution of a particular situation. Youth empowerment as an act of skill development therefore signifies different creative measures of developing basic ideas through training in skills that are relevant to the social and economic survival of the nation (Ochiagha, 1995). The above empowerment strategies are expected to imbibe in the urban

youths the spirit of craftsmanship and entrepreneurship, which makes them job creators instead of job seekers.

Literacy Skills Acquisition and Urban Youths

The foundation skills needed by all youths include the literacy and numeracy skills necessary for getting a paid job that can pay enough to meet their daily needs. These skills are also a prerequisite for continuing in education and training, and for also acquiring transferable technical and vocational skills that enhance the prospect of getting good jobs. Young people are key players needed for the rapid growth and development of all countries. However, in most countries, young people are constrained by factors that limit their contributions to the society; chief among these is the lack of employment opportunities. Evidence from literature abounds that literacy skills acquisition could assist youth most especially the urban youth in overcoming this challenge of unemployment. There are various programmes through which urban youths can acquire literacy skills. An example of such is vocational skill acquisition programmes, which seek to provide youths with different vocational skills meant to equip them with employment and income generating skills for poverty reduction. Also, there is the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) which is one of the most recognised and effective means by which developed nations such as Germany and Australia, through quality and up-to-date information have been able to prepare and train workers to be both knowledgeable and proficient in particular skill areas. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2004) defined TVET as a comprehensive term referring to those aspects of the educational processes involving, in addition to general education, the study of technologies and related sciences, the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life.

It is therefore evident that TVET prepares humans for the ever-changing world of works. Among its core goals and aims is to prepare people for employment and also to be a source of change for people in the world of works, through which these individuals can aspire to have a better life and then develop the necessary skills

needed to attain such aspirations. Consequently, TVET is seen as an instrument for reducing extreme poverty (Hollander & Mar, 2009). These distinctive features of TVET make it an effective tool that can be used to achieve a globally recognised workforce, peace and national security for a nation. According to Zarini, Wilson, Mar, and Varis (2009) TVET facilitates the development and strengthening of youths around the world thereby enhancing peace and strengthening national security.

Empowering young people according to Olabiyi (2013) is the process of encouraging them to be active citizens in their community. Youth mentoring can provide young people with positive role models, support and encouragement, and is thus considered one of the most effective ways of helping them reach their fullest potential as productive members of the society. TVET aims to promote the social inclusion of young people of diverse ethnic, religious, educational and socio-economic background with vocational skills. This would help reduce unemployment among youths and as a result their energy, time and effort would be channelled into more productive things. Hence, youths will be better equipped for work and not be susceptible to socially degrading activities that could disrupt the peace and stability of the nation. TVET programmes offer training to people in areas including auto mechanics, building, metalwork, woodwork, plumbing and fitting, electrical work, business, home economics, agriculture among others. However, based on the current needs of the nation, it is expedient that these youths are trained in specific areas that have been identified from market surveys, needs analyses and employers of labour as needed skill areas. This is necessary to maintain a balance in the spread of workers across all sectors of the economy and to reduce the duplication of skilled workers in already populated skill areas.

The Botswana Core Welfare Indicators Survey, 2009 and 2010 came up with the following objectives of empowering youths: to develop good work ethics, gain entrepreneurship experience, attain employment readiness, develop skills and competencies that will enable them to make positive contribution to the development of their communities, foster the development of behavioural change and instill some level of responsibility and accountability in them,

draw on their creativity and energy to improve the delivery of public services, reduce youth unemployment and eradicate poverty among young people (Ministry of Sports and Youth Culture, 2009).

Strategies for Effective Skill Acquisition

The youth particularly are seen as future leaders, hence, policies and programmes focusing on them should be formulated in the public and private sectors. Ayodele (2006) suggested that in order to solve the problem of skill acquisition particularly among the urban youth in Nigeria, government should establish small business schools in various locations, where interested students and community members can participate, thus making them to be self-reliant. Government should develop entrepreneur internship programmes by matching students with successful local entrepreneurs with clearly stated educational programmes. Also, government should establish an enterprise college aimed at fostering the specific skills required for entrepreneurship. This will serve as a skill-acquisition centre for the youths. Government should create an economic friendly environment by reducing taxes on small-scale businesses. Also, there should be enough incentives for students of vocational and technical schools. This will motivate them to establish their businesses after school. There should be some form of genuine school work based learning incorporated in some studies as part of the national economic development strategies. This implies enriching the curriculum to incorporate more vocational and technical training. The development of apprenticeship schemes would give new graduates some work skills and experiences. There should be school-based enterprises where students identify potential businesses, plan, create and operate them by using the school as mini-incubators.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Urban youths could be empowered to achieve self-sustained national development instead of depending on government for provision of empowerment opportunities though literacy skills and training. When youths are trained, they explore opportunities in their immediate rural environment instead of chasing shadows and

uncertainties in the urban centres. It is believed that training through skill acquisition programmes will enhance the sustainability of the urban youths in different fields of trade. This is possible when the culture of creative ideas is instilled in urban youths to make them productive and self-reliant members of the society. The development of any country depends on how productive and creative the youths are. The government, parents and guardians have obligations to ensure that youths are empowered to discharge their obligations to the society and to better their life through literacy skills acquisition and training.

This study therefore recommends that funding of literacy skills and training should be taken seriously by the federal government. This can be achieved through increase in the budgetary allocation to the educational sector. Literacy skills and training should be inculcated into the school's curriculum to promote human empowerment and development through entrepreneurial skill acquisition. It is a means of reducing unemployment since it is skill oriented and employment motivated. All school programmes should be geared toward providing entrepreneurial skills.

Also, the private partners and non-governmental organizations (NGO) should be encouraged to participate in literacy skills and training through funding or contributions in kind. This involvement should be seen by firms as long term investment, and as an aspect of their corporate social responsibility to the nation. To empower the youth, the federal government should provide an enabling environment and all the necessary equipment and materials for easy teaching and learning of literacy skills needed for economic enhancement and youth empowerment in Nigeria. The youth should shun joblessness and criminality through the acquisition of relevant skills that will launch them into enterprise greatness and economic independence.

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