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THE ILLITERACY SITUATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Illiteracy sets limitations to a nation in many spheres; it inhibits realistic growth and development. This paper focuses on the illiteracy situation in Nigeria. In advancing its purpose, the paper presents some relevant aspects of illiteracy such as its concept, historical perspective, causes, and an overview of global literacy rate. The paper further makes suggestions to address the challenge of illiteracy in Nigeria.

Introduction

Literacy is the ability to read and write and use numeracy skills (Oyetunde, 2015). Literacy can be a survival tool for any modern society; in fact, it is vital to the achievement of every growth index of a nation. Nevertheless, many Nigerians are not literate (UNESCO, 2012). In other words, they fall within the illiteracy bracket. Illiteracy is the opposite of literacy. No doubt, it can set limitations to individuals and nations in many spheres.

According to Oyetunde (2015), research findings and observations by Nigerian scholars and international bodies do not depict a happy picture in relation to the level of illiteracy in Nigeria. Further more, Ogunbiyi (2015) stated that despite government efforts to address the issue of illiteracy, there has not been progressive

increase in the literacy level.

The Concept of Illiteracy

Illiteracy is a term that has varied definitions; therefore, for the term to be used meaningfully, it must be defined according to specific cases. In other words, purpose may determine the definition. In 1930, for example, the US Bureau of Census defined as illiterate any person over 10 years of age who is unable to read and write in any language. By the next census in 1940, the concept of functional illiteracy was introduced and adopted and any person with less than five years of school was considered functionally illiterate or unable to engage in social activities in which illiteracy is assumed (Electronic Encyclopedia, 2012). Foucambert in Agbada (2007:20), in distinguishing between illiteracy and functional illiteracy, defined illiteracy as "not knowing the techniques of using written words (analphabestism) and functional illiteracy as being "unlettered" or lacking familiarity with the world of written materials and exclusion from all or part of this mode of communication."

Oyetunde (2015:20) gives the term, "illiteracy," more clarity in distinguishing two levels of illiteracy: basic illiteracy and higher illiteracy. Basic illiteracy, according to him, is "a situation where individuals cannot read or write or where their literacy skills are not adequate to help them meet the challenges of everyday living.". Higher illiteracy on the other hand refers to a situation where individuals who can read and write do not make effort to develop the habit of reading and writing either for leisure or otherwise and do not allow these skills to influence their lives functionally.

Standards of definition of illiteracy have continued to change with the increasing complexity of social, political and economic activities. In line with this thought, and applying the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 's definition of literacy, illiteracy is the inability to identity understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute, using printed and writtez materials associated

with varying texts. In simpler terms, illiteracy is the inability to meet a certain minimum criteria of reading and writing skills.

A Brief Historical Perspective

Throughout most of history, most people have been illiterates (Jeffrey, 1967). The ability to read and write in the feudal society, for example, was of value only to two classes of people: the clergy and the aristocracy (Jeffrey, 1967). According to Jeffrey, the first reference to "illiterate laymen" did not appear until the end of the 14th century as illiteracy was not seen as a problem until after the invention of printing in the 15th century. It was noted that the first significant decline in illiteracy came with the reformation, when translation of the Bible into the vernacular became widespread, and protestant converts were taught to read. Revolutionary political movement from the 18th to the 20th century, included attacks on illiteracy as one of their goals, with the former Soviet Union, China, and Cuba being most successful in the 20th century. These attacks on illiteracy recorded great increase and became widespread. It touched Africa down to Nigeria through the slave traders and colonists (Otagburuagu, 2007). And today in Nigeria, most administrations, both past and present have supported in one way or the other, the great struggle towards the eradication of illiteracy.

Causes of Illiteracy

There are many factors that cause illiteracy. These include the following:

1. Poverty

Poverty is the general state of living with the lack of basic human needs like food, clothing, shelter, sanitation, education and so on. According Bhauya (2016), out of 2.2 billion children in the world, almost a billion of them are suffering due to poverty and 121 million of them are deprived of education. In Nigeria as in most developing countries, poverty presents chronic stress for children and families. Research has shown that children raised in low-income families are at risk of suffering academic and social problems as well as poor health and well being. These consequently undermine their educational development. Most poverty stricken families cannot afford a meal a day and therefore may have no intention of educating their children, rather, they use them for child labour in order to put food on the table. These children

never get enrolled in schools.

2. Gender Bias/lgnorance

   Gender bias is more often than not based on ignorance. Some people in certain cultures have been led to believe that it is preferable for a male child to be enrolled into school rather than the female child because they esteem male children more highly, based on the belief (among some) that males are supposed heirs and controllers of family wealth, and would not be married out of the family someday. Thus these group of people and cultures still restrict education to male children only.

3. Population Explosion

   The world's population as estimated by the United States Census Bureau (USCB) in 2013 reached 7 billion. China tops the chart accounting for about 19% of the entire world population. Unchecked increase in population without accompanied increase in schools and educational facilities surely inhibits the prospects of literacy.

4. Insufficient facilities

   Insufficient facilities are one common cause of illiteracy. Often literacy policies and laws fail to reach many villages. Thus, children and young adults who may desire to be in school end up as farmers because of lack of sufficient educational facilities or outright absence of them.

An Overview of World Literacy Rate

A look at the world literacy rate would provide an idea of the illiteracy situation. In 2015, UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) on behalf of UNESCO recorded lists of countries by literacy rating with Global Age- Specific Literacy Projection Model (GALP). This revealed that global literacy for all people aged 15 and above is 86.3% - 90% for males and 82.7% for females (Wikipedia). The rate varied throughout the world with developed countries having the rate of 99.2% with Oceania having 71.3%; South and West Asia 70.2% and sub-Saharan Africa at
64.0%. It is pertinent to note that sub- Saharan Africa and women represent almost

two- third of illiterate adults globally.

The Illiteracy Situation in Nigeria

There is no gainsaying the fact that the illiteracy situation in Nigeria has reached a desperate level. Despite all efforts by local, state and federal governments to address illiteracy, there has not been a progressive increase in the literacy level especially among adults (Ogunbiyi, 2015). According to the bureau of statistic, adult illiteracy rate in Nigeria stands at 56.9%. The implication is that about 70% of Nigerians are illiterate. Considering the fact that globally the illiteracy ratio is approximately 20%, the Nigerian situation in truly disturbing.

According to Ogunbiyi (2015), the country comparison index in literacy level in 2012 shows that Nigeria ranked 161st out of the 184 countries with 66 percent illiteracy rate. This implies that Nigeria belongs to the mainstream of the world's most illiterate countries. A recent USAID study also indicates that an estimated 10 million Nigerian children are not registered in school. A disclosure by the former minister of education in the past administration, Nyeson Wike, at the flagging off of the 2014 International Literacy Day, equally indicates that the number of adults who cannot read and write in the country estimates at about 60million which is about 38% of the country's population estimated at 170 million.

UNESCO Global Monitoring Report (2012) reveals the following pathetic education indicators of Nigeria:

i. Many Nigerian children who manage to enter school do not learn the basics.

ii. There is gross decline in the ratio of primary school enrolment from 61 % in

1999t058%in2010.

iii. Insufficient quality of primary schools to ensure that children learn the basics.

iv. Many young Nigerians were still illiterates after six years of schooling. Specifically, the 2008 report has it that 28% of such school leavers were illiterates and 39% were semi- illiterates (for the males) and for the females, 32% were illiterate and 52% were semi- illiterates after being in school for

six years.

Research findings and observations by Nigerian scholars are not any more comforting. Oyetunde (2015) noted that the result of a national survey showed that many of the children in primary schools lack basic literacy, numeracy and life skills. Many of the primary four pupils surveyed could not write their names not to mention carrying out simple arithmetic operations such as addition and subtraction, nor read a simple passage. The situation is no better even at the secondary school level where results of public school examination continue show a decline in students' academic capability.

The story is not better even at the tertiary level. Using the English language as a tool for both written and oral communication for academic purposes presents a great difficulty to many Nigerian students, bearing in mind that these students have passed through both primary and secondary schools and in most cases were instructed in English (Oyetunde, 2016). Many students at the tertiary level even experience difficulty in simple tasks such as reading instructions to fill forms.

Oyetunde further reiterated that the complaints from parents, government officials, employers, the general public, and even teachers themselves is that many students are not able to gain admission into universities due to their poor academic abilities.

The current Education for ALL (EFA) report also ranks Nigeria as one o of the countries with the highest level of illiteracy. EFA report on Nigeria affirms that the number of illiterate adults has increased by 10 million over the past two decades to reach 35 million. Ogunbiyi (2015) also noted that the current illiteracy trend in Nigeria, if not speedily halted, could obstruct the attempt of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Also, the statistics of National Literacy Action Plan for 2012-2015 indicates that seventeen (17) out of the thirty- six (36) states in Nigeria did not achieve EFA goal 4 by 2015 because of the high rate of youth and adult illiteracy which was ranking between 14.5% to 48.3%. These states were noted to have concurrently experienced very low enrolment rate in primary education. This gloomy picture is

worsened by the ravaging onslaught of the Boko- Haram sect in parts of Northern Nigeria, particularly the North East region were the number of displaced persons is high, resulting in the increase of internally displaced persons camps (IDPCs). The number of people taking shelter in these camps heralds the great number of adults who are forced out of school and a greater number of children who are not registered in schools. Also, UNESCO report (2013) indicates that majority of Nigeria's 32 million labour force are illiterates. These shocking figures are tragic realities of the illiteracy situation in Nigeria. It is sad to note that the objective of meeting the national mark of reducing illiteracy by 50% by 2015 remains unattained.

Addressing the Illiteracy Challenge

Illiteracyis akin to blindness. A nation whose 32 million work force is predominantly illiterate has a crippling number of "blind" workers. The implication is low quantity and quality of product and services as literacy, is vital to achievement of every growth index. Despite the gloomy picture of the past and the present, optimists such as these writers believe that Nigeria can still win the war against illiteracy, if her efforts are rooted in a strong national will to succeed.

One way to win this war is that government at all levels needs to make pragmatic legislation as well as improve funding for the relevant agencies of government saddled with the execution of mass literacy programmes. Also, literacy inclined groups and other NGOs should be encouraged to step up activities and campaigns to increase awareness of the importance of literacy. Similarly, the various State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEB) need to intensify effort to ensure that no child is left out in the mass literacy drive. In view of this, it is suggested that every state in Nigeria should adhere to the spirit and principle of child right laws which make denial of access to any child to school a criminal offence. Nigeria's illiteracy rate burden, experts say, aptly supports the argument that the neglect of teacher and education has dire consequences for the populace (Ogunbiyi, 2015). In line with this thought, when education is neglected, a greater number of people end up as illiterates who contribute little or nothing to real

development of society. The government must therefore determine to allot adequate funding to the education sector to enable it overcome its challenges. Literacy is so critical to national development that it should, perhaps, be considered only next to health as it is tied to the quality of the life of the people.

Literacy enables the country to conserve resources. During elections, for example, the country needn't spend huge amounts of money on advert on political consciousness and conscience. To this end, there is need for investment in formal basic education, youth and adult literacy and non- formal education, in order to ensure that children, youth, and adults have adequate educational opportunities which will help develop their literacy skills.

Literacy is so vital to global development and co- existence that September 8 of every year is celebrated as International Literacy Day. This day is set aside to call attention to the importance and impact of literacy skills on individuals, communities and societies. Since the inauguration of international literacy in 1966, UNESCO requests governments, employers, trade unions and other key global organizations to get involved and appreciate the importance of being able to read and write. This is a great pedestal for Nigeria to front her efforts against illiteracy, not just by delivering great speeches but by "doing" the speeches.

Another key to tackling Nigeria's illiteracy issue lies in emphasizing functional literacy, that is, the knowledge in reading and writing which enables one to engage effectively in normally assumed activities in one's culture. Akwanya (2006) suggests that such can be achieved through literature. Nsude (2007) further suggests that the expanded mass media and new information and communication technologies (NCTs) should also be employed to encourage functional literacy. This is to be achieved through educational programmes, particularly Adult- Based Education (ABE) research studies.

Wang (2010) proposes that if Nigeria is to successfully reduce or eradicate illiteracy, she must commit a strong and exhaustive effort in promoting literacy in rural areas as well by:

* giving farmers reason to adopt literacy by making literacy a necessary element of their work.
* getting the government to allocate substantial funds to literacy education. * creating more decipherable national quota for literacy by clarifying orthography.
* establishing what is really meant by literate by initiating a national standard which must be met by all to be considered functionality literate.

The suggestions made call for concerted efforts by government, organizations and individuals for none can succeed without the other in the fight against illiteracy.

Conclusion

The struggle to eradicate illiteracy is what Nigeria must intensify if she is to gain a respectable position among countries of the world; if she is to have a meaningful vibrant economic, political and social existence as a nation; and if she is to be able to confront the minions of illiteracy which are poverty, disease, religious fanaticism, ethnic bigotry, political chaos, and gender discrimination.

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