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**LITERACY FOR ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT****FOLUSO OLUTOYIN OKEBUKOLA Ph.D**

And

**JIMOH AKINOLA SALIU***Lagos State University, Nigeria***Abstract**

*This paper explores the impact of literacy on economic and political empowerment. The trend that emerges is that literacy and literate practices encompass a greater range of knowledge, skills, processes and behaviours than before and that these practices will continue to change. The concept of literacy as reading, writing, listening and speaking is no longer a concept about print and oracy but also includes digital technology, sound, music, words and still moving images. Thus, technology shapes literacy practices. This has led to changes in work places, political, agricultural and scientific as well as social and economic events and activities. The far reaching technological changes of the times mean that the emanating literacy practices have implications for economic, political and social empowerment, literacy pedagogy and andragogy. Students and adult learners will encounter changes in social behaviours and work places. Consequently, the contents and pedagogy of literacy programmes must reflect the literate practices that will enable them to meet new situations and live life as active and informed citizens.*

**Introduction**

The title of this paper emphasizes the notion that fostering literacy is as much about pedagogy teaching and learning in mainstream classrooms and andragogy (adult education) and andragogy as it is about political and economic emancipation. The form of educational endeavors must include the preparation of students and adult learners for social futures in which they actively participate and influence; that is, they are the designers of their social futures.

With this goal in mind, the paper reflects on common literate practices; in other words, the ways people have used literacy in the past and present as part of their social, cultural, economic and civic lives. From these reflections, teachers in mainstream classrooms and adult educators can extrapolate the knowledge, skills and processes about literacy that are required in order to operate successfully as citizens of the local and global community in the present and future. That is, they can begin to understand how they use literacy differently for different purposes and that knowledge, skills and understandings about literacy have to be deep and flexible in order for them to use literacy successfully across all parts of their lives. Knowing this, teachers can develop appropriate pedagogies to ensure their students have literate futures.

**What is Literacy?**

The traditional definition of literacy is considered to be the ability to read and write, or the ability to use language to read, write, listen, and speak. In modern contexts, the word refers to reading and writing at a level adequate for communication or at a level that enables one understand and communicate ideas in a literate society, so as to take part in that society. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) defines literacy as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals,

to develop his or her knowledge and potential and to participate fully in the wider society.

What constitutes literacy has changed throughout history. At one time, a literate person was one who could sign his or her name. At other points, literacy was measured only by the ability to read and write Latin (regardless of a person's ability to read and write his or her vernacular) or by the ability to read the Bible.

The definition of literacy has been expanded to include the ability to use numeracy, to handle information, to express ideas and opinions, to make decisions, solve problems as citizens, the technologies – mastery of new tools such as internet browsers, word processing programmes and text messages. This has given rise to an interest in a new dimension of communication called multimedia literacy (Achtermann 2006).

Furthermore, the standards for what constitutes 'literacy' vary, depending on social, cultural and political context. For example a basic literacy standard in many societies is the ability to read the newspaper. Increasingly, many societies require literacy with computers and other digital technologies.

In view of this, definitions of literacy are based on ideologies. New literacies such as critical literacy, media literacy, visual literacy, computer literacy, multimedia literacy, information literacy, health literacy and digital literacy are all included in contemporary literacy studies.

Thus, the concept of literacy as reading, writing, listening and speaking is no longer a concept only about printed words on paper and oracy but also include digital technology, and the development of skills for social, political and economic empowerment. It involves keeping people abreast of current technological innovations in the challenging organizational environment in the society that will enhance efficiency and effective service delivery.

To this end, Luke and Freebody (2000,P.9) define literacy as the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communications technology via spoken, print and multi media. From this definition one can conclude that a literate person must possess the following characteristics:

- **Flexibility** - being positive and strategically responsive to changing literacies
- **Ability to sustain mastery** - know enough to be able to reformulate the current knowledge or access and learn new literate practices.
- **Repertoire of practices**- having a range of knowledge, skills and strategies to use when appropriate.
- **Ability to use traditional texts** - use print and paper, and face to face oral encounters.
- **Ability to use new communications technologies** - use digital and electronic texts that have multiple modes.(e.g. spoken and written).

In addition to the above, a literate person should be able to use literacy for work and leisure, active participation in the democratic process, social, cultural and economic activities and personal growth.

#### **Literacy and Social Economic Empowerment**

The word Bank has defined poverty as personal income lower than us - \$2 a day. This definition as noted by Buarque (2006) has been accepted as a universal truth.

Consequently, the strategy for fighting poverty has consisted in investing resources in productive activities, job creation, income generation and improving literacy rates.

Being literate is related to wealth, because the higher a person's level of literacy, the higher their potential earnings. The conditions of wealth and literacy are highly correlated. While wealth may probably not be a good barometer of what it means to be literate, the truth is that people who are functionally

illiterate cannot read well enough to hold a good job or an above poverty level job.

Many policy analysts consider literacy rates a crucial measure of a region's human capital. This claim is made on the grounds that literate people can be trained less expensively than illiterates, generally have a higher socio-economic status and better health and employment prospects. Policy makers also argue that literacy increases job opportunities and access to higher education.

Literacy is not only the primary medium of economic buoyancy and control. It is also a reflection of an individual's identity and economic and social standing. In fact, literacy is itself a tool or passport. It is important in any discussion of economic emancipation because literacy determines who has access to power and economic resources. Thus, lack of access to literacy leads to diminished individual and national capabilities, therewith furthering cycles of poverty. An equitable education system meeting individual literacy needs represents not only a human right but also a means for reducing poverty, promoting productivity and sustaining development.....

Globalization and economic change require different literate practices. As Luke and Freebody (2000) suggest:

*Being a child, being an adolescent and indeed, becoming literate, have changed in some fundamental ways. The toolkit of basic skills that served many of us well in the 1950s is inadequate today (p.7).*

One cannot but agree with Luke and Freebody's opinion considering the effect of globalization and the increasing use of digital technology on work places and working lives and consequently on the literate practices necessary to succeed in the workplaces and to secure jobs.

Many employers of labour now require employees to work together as a team on tasks in such a way that employees can do other people's jobs when they are away in order to get the job done. Simply being able to read and write effectively is only one set of literacy skills necessary to these workplaces.

The ability to communicate orally, listen productively and critically, negotiate, use higher order thinking skills and cooperate are some of the other literacy skills now required. Being able to access and use new technology and to identify people with specialized skills and work with them as part of a team are also important characteristics of the new workers.

As noted by Anstey and Bull (2006) changes in the nature of work places are not limited to industries and corporate business. Rural occupations require higher levels of literacy as technology and environmental protection influence agriculture. Farm machinery is often computerized and programmed using global positioning technology to enable the most efficient ploughing and planting of seeds. Clearly, the people selling, maintaining, and using the global positioning systems and computer equipment need to be technologically literate.

UNDP (1990) asserted that people must be at the centre of all development initiatives. In recognition of this development, universalizing compulsory education has been a priority of many nations of the world. The overall policy on social development emphasizes adequate social investment, particularly in human capital development through education. Inadequacies in relation to meeting basic needs like education and participation in social, political and cultural life feature prominently in virtually all countries action plans for poverty eradication (Nhamo 2006).

In china as reported by Zhang and Minxia (2006) the objectives of universal nine year compulsory education include the extension of nine year compulsory in areas with 85% of the nation's total population, aiming at an enrolment rate of 85% at the lower secondary level and over 99% at the primary level; and to reduce the rate of illiteracy among youths and adults to less than 5%.

In like manner, the Nigeria government has embarked on a reform agenda through the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) aimed at reducing poverty, creating wealth, providing education, political power, physical security and empowerment.

Also Bangladesh through BEES started providing Functional Education (FE). This course was designed to provide literacy, numeracy, knowledge, skills, values of the target beneficiaries through functional and basic education to enable them to take charge of their own lives..

The National Development Strategy in Guyana sets out priorities for the country's economic and social development policies. Emphasis is placed on literacy as a tool for poverty alleviation. In Southern African countries, policies and programmes to eradicate poverty through literacy has gained prominence. One of such initiatives is the new Partnership for Africa's Economic Development (Nhamo, 2006) Maruatona (1995) cited in Bagwasi 2006 emphasizes that adult education programmes in Botswana help illiterates to read, write, count and provides them with practical skills to improve their social economic status.

The findings of a study conducted by Walingo (2006) revealed higher literacy rate and occupation and employment levels among beneficiaries of dairy development projects in Kenya.

All these point to the fact that people must not only be provided with functional literacy but they must also be kept abreast of current technological innovations in the challenging organizational environment in the society that will enhance efficiency and effective service delivery.

### **Literacy and Political Emancipation**

Literacy embraces all aspects of life. In any endeavour, there is usually a degree of literacy exhibited. The ability to get informed and inform others presupposes that one is able to read. The ability to read provides one the advantage of using available information and furthering one's goal in life. To this end, one becomes politically active and is able to get what one is entitled to without any one stepping on one's right. Again being literate helps one to function effectively and efficiently in any environment and to be self sufficient. Literacy therefore is a means to an end.

The development of literacy efforts in any society is a pointer to the fact that, that society is preparing for and is marching towards political and technological advancement because literacy liberates from ignorance, illuminates the mind and enables an individual to gain access to unprejudiced information especially in democratic governments. If the electorate must participate effectively and meaningfully in political decisions, they must be literate so that they can understand the philosophy of the government which seeks their approval to govern them.

For one to have a fair share of the power and the resources in one's country, one needs to be able to take part in the democratic processes of the country. They need to have a literate practice that will enable them to negotiate, influence and to have a voice. Illiteracy especially in the rural areas, gives undue advantage to contemporary politicians who can keep on neglecting real issues of socio-economic development and continue with corruption especially in the developing countries. Thus, literacy plays a number of roles in modern politics.

Another significant contribution of literacy to political awareness is the way it connects people to their local community, states, country and global world. People participate in global political events either directly or vicariously via technology. Not everyone can fly to different parts of the world and experience other cultures and political activities but they can all view distant areas via various media platforms.

### **Implications for Pedagogy and Adragogy**

The implications of literacy education for political, social and economic emancipation are vast and apply not only to the content of literacy programme but also to pedagogy and adragogy.

The texts that students produce, or write or consume or read often require processing several modes simultaneously in order to make meaning. For example students read words, watch moving images, and listen to spoken language simultaneously when viewing a news broadcast on television.

Furthermore, depending on the purpose, the context students find themselves in, and the people they are interacting with, their literate practices also include certain types of behavior, turn taking and role playing.

At the most rudimentary level, this means it is not sufficient simply to know the vocabulary; students need to know how and when to use it and with whom. At more sophisticated levels, it means having the problem solving skills, flexibility, and strategic awareness to work in groups, move between tasks and work places and use or adapt knowledge to live life as an active and informed citizen.

Students must not only consume and produce texts but engage in literate practices using texts in a variety of situations that require different behaviors and interactions with increasingly diverse social and cultural groups. Increasingly, they will need to work collaboratively with others towards common goals. Therefore literacy pedagogy must teach students to be flexible, tolerant of different viewpoints, and able to solve problems, analyze situations and work strategically. They must be able to identify the knowledge and resources they have and combine and recombine them to suit the particular purpose and context. Consequently, school classrooms and teachers pedagogy must encourage, model and reflect these sorts of behaviors. Targeting students in mainstream classrooms alone leaves out the very poor who also require economic empowerment, including literacy to improve their livelihoods. It is therefore necessary to raise the provision of adult education generally, and especially for those who have had no education at all so that they can participate in development projects. It should be noted that Adult Education plays an important role in poverty education.

The aim of empowerment is to change the larger social structures and institutions that keep people in positions of powerlessness and poverty. Empowerment activities are meant to help people to initiate, take control of, and lead development. Societal and individual empowerment imply that each member of the community enjoy participation in democratic decisions and take control of their own life's circumstance. Adult Education plays an important role in their regard.

It has been recognized as a vector of development in that it provides skills needed for the day to day activities of individual and their communities, and helps tackle issues of poverty, inequality, underdevelopment, environment preservation and sustainability (Bagwsi 2006). Irrespective of the particular political ideology of a nation and of the specific strategy for mobilization, adult education can and must play a significant role in reducing poverty, including preventing its inception.

The content and pedagogy of literacy programme must reflect the literate practice of local to global communities and equip students for functional and active life. Educators cannot hope to teach students all they need to know, as this will change constantly. But teachers can equip their students with the knowledge, skills, strategies and attitudes that will enable them to meet new situations and cope with them.

### **Recommendations**

The response to new technologies and multi- literacies as agents of economic and political emancipation demand that students see themselves as text analysts from early childhood. Hence, critical



literacy should be seen as a special curriculum in the later years of the elementary school. They should be provided with opportunities to become socially critical in sectors of schooling.

The secondary school curriculum should include the range of spoken, written, visual, multimedia and performance texts.

Adult educators must re-socialised and re-trained in terms of their potential roles as multiliteracy educators.

Curricula for adult education have to be viewed to include the use of the computer and multimedia.

Poverty education strategies must be integrated in adult education curricula.

The Ministry of Education has to strengthen its staff's capacity and provide resources for monitoring and evaluating the delivery of and interventions in education.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly past concepts about what constitutes a text have been challenged. Being literate can no longer be regarded as being only about the printed word on paper and oracy.

Understanding the concept of literacy as being inclusive is a very recent phenomenon. In the recent times, literacy was limited to the ability to read and write. In medieval times, literacy was extended to include reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing and numeracy and ability to process documents. It also involves the use of all symbols for personal, community and social communications.

In modernity, due to change in technological, social and economic ways, the concept of literacy continues to change. For example, the ways we use literacy change as purposes and contexts change and literacy knowledge, skills and processes will continue to change. The literate person must be able to combine and recombine existing and new literacy knowledge, skills and purposes for new purposes and new contexts using new technologies. Because work places, leisure, social, cultural and civic environments are changing as people deal with globalisation and technological advances, the ways people practise literacy are also changing.

Consequently, the teaching and learning of literacy need to change. Students not only need a broader knowledge base about texts and literacy; they also need the resources, attitudes and strategies to adjust to and develop responsive and appropriate literate practices when necessary. They need to be able to cope with changing times and changing literacies.

Literacy programs must include the ability to consume and produce the multimodal texts that are increasingly large part of student's lives. This means being literate with still and moving images, music and sound, as well as the printed and oral word and being able to combine them meaningfully when consuming or producing texts. This has very clear ramifications for the content of literacy programme and the links with other discipline areas such as music, art, graphics, and media studies. These challenges to literacy education in a climate of constant change invite educators to focus on how literacy teaching can equip students for the changing world in which they live.

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