

DISTANCE/OPEN LEARNING FOR MASS LITERACY: A MUST FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Mass literacy remains a panacea for sustainable development in developing countries given the fact that education has played a major role and continues to play major role in genuine world civilization. And given the fact that Education For All (EFA) is a major millennium developmental imperative, the importance of mass literacy in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. However, the fact remains that the normal/formal education/school system cannot accommodate majority of the Nigerian populace who need the basic education to be able to make their input for sustainable development initiative in Nigeria. The Distance/Open learning system of education becomes handy. This paper is to historically discuss the nature, characteristics and organizational typology of the Distance/Open learning system of education; highlighting the extent the programme has gone so far in Nigeria and the major problems confronting the programme. The paper proffers solutions to tackle these problems, thus making the programme a veritable tool in achieving mass literacy in Nigeria and subsequently actualize one of the millennial developmental goals.

Give the need for sustainable development in Nigeria, a step in actualizing millennial development objectives, and given the role education has played in world civilization, mass Literacy-Education for All (EFA) has become imperative in Nigeria. However, the fact remains that due to some socio-historical variables majority of the Nigerian populace who should meaningful contribute their quota towards sustainable development are still behind the “iron curtain” of illiteracy. This group cannot

also be accommodated any longer in the formal school system. If Education For All (EFA) must be a reality in Nigeria given the fact that the western form of education transplanted to a new territory can also aid developing countries to attain genuine world civilization as in the western developed countries (Wilds & Loltich, 1961:17), then the Open/Distance learning due to its flexibility and uniqueness becomes handy to accommodate this disadvantaged group in Nigeria.

This paper will adopt a socio-historical method of analysis in discussing the historical development of the Open/Distance Learning in Nigeria and the journey so far. It will also bring to the fore the relationship between mass literacy and National Development and proffer solutions/recommendations where there are yawning gaps between what should be done and what is actually taking place to make the programme a success in Nigeria, thus enhancing sustainable development in the country.

The question is, is there anything to be done to get this group educated as to enable them contribute meaningfully towards sustainable development in Nigeria? What suitable method and strategy should be adopted in teaching this group in Nigeria? What has the Nigerian government done so far towards getting this group educated? What are the obstacles militating against the education of this group and how can these obstacles be contained? This paper will try to see how these questions raised can be answered.

In response to the educational problem of the disadvantaged group, the Open/Distance learning becomes handy.

According to Mcalees (1980) in Jeda (1997), Distance education methods can be successfully used for the catering for the group who for physical economic or social reasons are unable or unwilling to make use of the traditional (classroom based) provision. In so doing they can liberate them from the constraints of space, time and age.

Background to Statement of the Problem

At any given period and in any society the educational system has always been informed by the prevailing social needs in relation to the environment. Prior to the civilizing mission in Africa education was informal and was determined by the environmental needs of the various communities.

According to Fafunwa and Aisiku (1982:9) functionalism was the main guiding principle in the African Societies. Education was for an immediate induction into the society and preparation for adulthood. Children and adolescents were made to learn through ceremonies, rituals, recitation, imitation and demonstration, education was participatory, flexible and integrated experience devoid of formalism. Education was continuous and combined physical training, character building with intellectual training. There was no age limitation nor barriers to learning so education starts early in life and continuous throughout ones life time.

However, with the coming of the missionaries, coupled with colonialism education assumed a new dimension in terms of context and content with a new method of administration. Consequently, education became formalized as mission school sprang up here and there. On the other hand, these schools were not located given the focal point through which most of the missionaries penetrated the shores of Nigeria and the Socio-cultural variables and some historical specificities that informed school establishments and enrollments at that material time. It is

worthy of note that denomination, distance, age, tuition (school fees), cultural practices, beliefs and taboos all constituted barriers to some group of persons from receiving the missionary and Western education in the new dispensation and as such belonged to the illiterate group. Many who were disadvantaged by the above mentioned variables became redundant and were left out of the “new” educational system. Till today these variables continue to manifest and constitute barriers to a great part of the Nigerian population. According to Louett ed. (1988) the barriers created by the formal school system to education has placed “majority of Nigerian population behind the iron curtain of illiteracy”. Many women, house wives, young adults and what Karl Marx called the “Lumpen proletariat” fall within this group. The problem still persists and prevails today leading to a high incidence of drop-out from school. Hallak (1990:24) maintained that Nigeria is suffering from what he refers to as “functional illiteracy of significant segments of their population”. Of course, this is a truism. The fact remains that despite all the effort being made by the nation at actualizing the EFA (Education for All) a policy to which many countries of the world including Nigeria appended their signatures at the Jomtem Conference in March 1990.

Majority of the Nigerian population still remain behind the “iron curtain of illiteracy”. This is the case in most of our rural areas, even in the cities majority of the adult population and most young adults and housewives though might be interested in receiving education, but are

very unwilling or not ready to leave home or work (business) and attend classes for full time or formal education program.

Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this paper, I shall adopt the functionalist model of analysis in highlighting the function of education in the society as it informs national and sustainable development. In its broadest sense, education is simply one aspect of socialization. It involves the acquisition of knowledge and the learning of skills whether intentionally or unintentionally. Education also helps to shape beliefs and moral values.

From the biological analogy view point the structural functionalist views the society as an organism with different parts performing different functions for the survival of the entity.

Thus any malfunctioning of any part of the body will automatically lead to the breakdown of the whole system. Therefore it becomes imperative that special care be taken so that the various parts of the body be given the attention they deserve so that there will be autarchy in the whole system, thus making for the wholeness of the whole.

There are two related questions posed by the functionalist in order to highlight the function of education in the society.

What are the functions of education for society as a whole?

What are the functional relationships between education and other parts of the social system?

The first question is concerned with an assessment of the contribution made by education to the maintenance of value consensus and social solidarity. While the second question is concerned with the examination of the relationship between education and the political economic system etc., and a consideration of how this relationship helps to integrate society as a whole.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the positive contributions of education towards maintenance of the social system and development using the functionalist analytical paradigms on education.

Emile Durkheim in Haralanbus and Holborn (2008:6110) maintained that the major function of education is the transmission of society's norms and values.

He posits that;

Society can survive only if there exists among its members a sufficient degree of homogeneity, education perpetuates and reinforces this homogeneity by fixing in the child from the beginning the essential similarities which collective life demands.

He maintains that without these "essential similarities," cooperation, social solidarity, and therefore social life itself would be impossible. Thus for him, education performs two functions – social solidarity and social rules. In a complex society he maintains, the school serves a function which can't be produced by the family. The individuals learn to cooperate with those who are neither their kin nor their friends in the school. Education

teaches individuals specific skills necessary for their future occupation.

Another functionalist Person (1961), in Haralarbus and Holbin (2008:601), posited that the school takes over as the focal socialization openly, after the primary socialization within the family. The school he opines prepares children for their adult role and establishes universalistic standards in terms of which all pupils achieve their status. The school he further maintains prepared young people for their adult roles. In other words, school socializes young people into basic values of society and this value consensus is essential for society to operate effectively.

From these functionalist perspectives of the society, for the relevant skills for homogeneity, for peaceful coexistence and rules and norms needed for development to take place in that society education - the school is very necessary.

Review of Related Literature

Discussing human development, Kenedy in Ojo (1984), maintained that for any country to advance economically, manpower is the basic resource because it is an indispensable means of converting other resources of mankind into use and benefit. Therefore, he stressed that education is the best way to achieve full human potential of every individual in the society.

On their own, Demison and Schultz (1961:62), opined that formal education is highly instrumental and even necessary to improve the productive

population. This is because the skills and the motivation for productive behaviour are imparted by means of formal education. Therefore, an investment in education is an investment in the productivity of the population leading to economic growth. Gould (1993:12), maintains that education for any government is a necessary component of development. This is because an educated population will readily promote development of objectives. He further argues that education is seen by government and individuals as a key to increase national and individual incomes and bring about economic growth - a major force for social and modernization of attitudes, values and economic and social behaviour.

To achieve this stride, he maintains that government has to muster large proportions of her often meagre budget on education.

A study carried out by Armer (1974), on the transition of Middle East societies from traditional to modern ones revealed that there was a direct relationship between exposure to western type of schooling and individual modernity. That it is the curriculum of the western type school rather than its organization that accounts for its modernity.

Inkeles and Smith (1974), posited that no society can hope to successfully embark on a programme of social and economic development until it has modern citizens.

This is because adherence to traditional customs and beliefs, while they become modern citizens can only come through education. Similarly, Ferginand and Saha

(1989), posited that at least for a certain level of economic and industrial development, a fairly high level of literacy is required. From the above related literature it is clear that there is a strong link between development, economic growth, modernity, desired social values/skills, human development and mass education of the western-type curriculum. Since it is not possible for the greater illiterate population to be educated through the normal school system, the distance education programme becomes the best option.

Sustainable Development and Education

Talking about sustainable development – a development that can sustain the Nigerian nation, shake off poverty, ignorance, disease, sectarianism, primordialism, increase the gross domestic product of Nigeria, eliminate corruption and above all sustain a healthy replenishable environment. This type of development can only come by when people acquire the relevant skills, the understanding and the consciousness which education alone can provide. Above all sustainable development can only take place in a peaceful society and egalitarian society where no one is oppressed or afraid of his neighbour. Since other countries of the world have attained sustainable development through education, it is believed that this can be achieved in Nigeria and this can only come through mass literacy made possible by the open distance education.

Tilak (2003:615), in his summary on the future challenges of education and sustainable development stated *inter alia*:

- (1) Training youngsters in logic manipulation of abstract symbols and increasing language skills.
- (2) Ensuring flexibility in syllabus and installing a management structure which accommodates changes with ease.
- (3) Betraying the entire population frequently.
- (4) Cultivating a spirit of tolerance and inculcating a positive appreciation of cultural differences
- (5) Impacting training in social skills and inoculating minds against xenophobia.
- (6) Imparting knowledge of religions, other than one's own and training students to tolerate if not appreciate multiplicity of religious experiences.
- (7) Sensitizing students to the issue of the critical balance between environment preservation and economic progress.

This in a nutshell is the bright step towards sustainable development if not the compass which is also attainable through mass literacy devoid of the formal school type, but through distance and open education programme.

The Concept of Distance and Non Formal Education

What is Open/Distance Learning

(a) Many educationists have put forward different definitions about distance learning. According to Nwana (1990:1) distance education is seen as "any form of education which adopts such strategies as to enable the teacher and the learner to get so physically

separated from each other that they are beyond the unaided sight and hearing of each other yet interacting reasonably enough for meaningful learning to go on". This means that while in the formal education, the teacher and the learner have physical contact with each other while in the case of distance learning, there is no physical contact between the teacher and the learner yet teaching and learning are being carried out as in the formal school system.

(b) Rao (2008), defined distance education as a form of education that becomes depersonalized both for staff and students. It is a form of indirect instruction. It is impacted by technical media such as correspondence printed materials, teaching and learning aids, audio visual aids, radio, television and computers. Basic to this definition are two elements; separation between the teacher and the learner and the use of technical media.

(c) It is seen as, according to Faur's (1972) in ABSU (1997) "a flexible alternative system of education which endeavours" to redistribute teaching in space and time" promotes, "assisted self learning and enables the person choose his part more readily in a more flexible framework". It is a factor seen as an industrialization form of teaching which emphasizes rationalization, mechanization, mass. production, division of labour, concentration and controls evolution from postal teaching to open distance education.

Furthermore, the French government defines Distance Education (tele-enseignement) as containing two basic elements: the physical separation of teachers and learners and the changed role of the teacher who may meet students only for “selected tasks such as counseling, giving tutorials or seminars or solving study problems”. The open learning system is a multi-dimensional approach or rather is described as course flexibility designed to meet individual requirements. It is an attempt to break down the traditional barriers to teaching such as pre-requisites, age, geographical location, availability scheduling style and cost. Thus the open distance learning is an organized education provided outside the formal educational system. For example, it could be for the upgrading of the proficiency of agricultural extension workers through short courses or raising the awareness of poor adults about the sources of their problem and how to organize to overcome them. The programme can take any form, adult education, continuing education, on the job training, accelerated training, farmer or work training, functional literacy, extension services, second chance school etc. The basic thing is that it provides education to those millions of people who by accident of birth and place would otherwise be deprived of the stuff or learning.

Sigh (2007) on his own, maintained that formal education in schools, colleges and universities, cannot help to achieve goals of universal education for citizens of a democracy. This is because it has been alleged that “formal education serves the

privileged few”, hence the tremendous need for open learning through distance education system. He posits that in the facilities of education starting from school to university level distance education is an innovative dimension, also called correspondence instruction or education through correspondence; it is popularly known as distance learning or distance education, according to him, all these concepts have the same meaning, and as an effective alternative to formal education, it helps in bringing equalization of educational opportunities.

Historical Development/Origin of Distance/Non-Formal Education

At any point in time in the history of any nation, the educational practice has always been informed by the prevailing societal needs. The context and mode of administration is also determined by the historical specificities of the given period. For example, during the middle ages education was administered for and through the church. Also in Europe, during the industrial revolution which led to mass production in the factories occasioned the employment of many hands to tend the machines. To meet the demand many children were herded into large classes where they were given basic skills and knowledge to warrant them fit into and work in the industrialized society. Similarly, at the turn of the 20th Century, The American University system was faced with a lot of Challenges given the method applied by the seminary training procedures which has become obsolete, sterile and unproductive. To arrest the ugly situation, the authorities from the leading

universities met and came up with a solution.

According to Efebo (1997) the authorities redefined the purpose and mission of the American universities, this gave rise to a lot of innovations in teaching and learning processes in education; one of which is the distance learning which is being emulated the world over. Infact in many advanced countries, distance learning has come to be regarded as a supplement to regular educational process.

Major Characteristics and Features of Distance Learning

Besides the issue of physical separation of teachers and learner, scholars like Holberg (1981) in Jeda Vol. 11 (1997) identified six main characteristics and features of Distance learning. These are:

- (a) The use of reproduced courses as the main basis for study.
- (b) The existence of organized two-way communication between the students and a supporting organization that is, the university, college or school with its tutors and counselors.
- (c) The planned and explicit catering for individual study.
- (d) The cost effectiveness of the educational use of mass communication methods when large numbers of students follow the same produced courses.
- (e) The application of industrial work methods to the production of learning materials and to the administration of distance learning scheme.

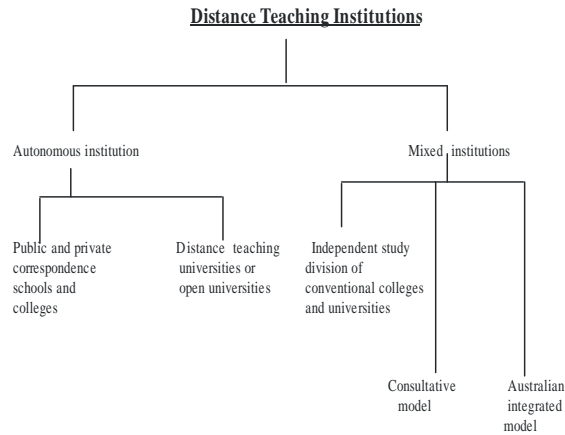
(f) The notion of distance study as a mediated form of guided didactic conversation.

- I. These were summed up and grouped into two main features by Kaye and Ruble in Efebo (1997) as: 1, an enlargement or opening of educational opportunity to new target population previously deprived either through geographical isolation, lack of formal academic requirements or employment conditions and
- II. The identification of particular target groups and their key characteristics, (needs, age, contribution, time available for studying, local facilities etc) to enable appropriate courses, learning methods and delivery systems to be designed on systematic basis.

It is note worthy that distance learning does not make room for rigidity rather flexibility and multi-dimensional approach is encouraged in terms of administration and time to achieve the desired result. Thus any approach which tries to remove barriers that prevent attendances at more traditional courses is applied.

Organizational Typologies of Distance Education

Many scholars have tried to create a typology for distance education system. However, the most accepted typologies of distance education is that given by Keegan in (1998). According to him in distance teaching institutions can be divided into two main groups: these are autonomous and mixed institutions.



Autonomous institutions are further sub-divided into two types. The first type is described as public and private correspondent schools and colleges. While the second type is called distance teaching universities or open universities. He argues that these types of universities have complex methods through which learning and teaching take place. The distance learners are supported by as much provision of support services as possible.

Figure 1: *Organizational Typologies of Distance Education*

According to him autonomous institutions are those totally committed to distance education while mixed institutions are those distance deliverer formed within conventional educational institutions.

Journal of Teacher Perspective

Mixed institutions are divided into three types, the first type which is type three (three) is the independent study dimension of conventional colleges and universities. This includes correspondent schools and others who support and deliver learning through a whole range of technologies. They usually depend upon the faculty of the larger institution for course development and the facilities (facilities) are often contracted on an overloaded basis. In this case distance students are made to study the same materials and sit for the same examination as regular (campus) students.

The consultation model is what he referred to as type four institutions. In this model, study normally commences with residential seminar on campus after which students continue to study at home from the learning materials provided.

The type five is what Keegan referred to as the Australian integrated model. This type exists within a conventional college or university but is different from others in the sense that lecturers are given dual mandate and allocated group of both internal and external students in equal number. Furthermore, efforts are made to integrate on and off-campus students by designing compulsory periods of

time for face to face session for the off campus students.

However, it must be pointed out that there is no hard and fast rules as to the administration of distance learning given the above typologies. Rather different institutions in different countries adopt the best typology most convenient to it and the learner. The basic idea is that the system is concerned with eliminating geographical, socio-economic and psychological barriers in learning. Emphasis is laid on maximizing access to education in terms of time and space and supports the learning process through choice of methods and mode of communication.

Distance and Non-Formal Education in Nigeria

Prior to this time, there existed some non-formal distance learning programmes through which some Nigerians who were not opportuned to receive their desired education through the regular school system were educated even up to G.C.E, Diploma/Degree levels. These were manifested in form of correspondence courses with some overseas and local agencies. Prominent among these agencies were the Rapid result college, the Wesley Hall, the exam success correspondence college (course) etc. It will be worthy of note that Chief

Jeremiah Obafemi Awolowo of the blessed memory and other prominent Nigerians received their educations through this process when it would not have been possible for them to do so through their formal school system given their social and economic background at that material time. There were many who could not take such bold initiative and were left behind the “iron curtain of illiteracy”. We will be able to know how much loss the nation has suffered through the illiteracy of these group by assessing the contributions of Chief Obafemi Awolowo to the educational, economical and political development of this great country. The legacy still lives on.

The Nigerian Response

It was in attempt to fully encourage distance learning that the Nigeria government considered distance and national education as a necessary education policy to be pursued in the country.

According to the National Policy on Education (2004:25) the objectives of the adult and continuing education should be:

- (a) To provide functional literacy education for adults who never had advantage of any formal education.

- (b) To provide functional and remedial education for those young people who prematurely dropped out of formal school system.
- (c) To provide further education for different categories of completers of further education system in order to improve their basic knowledge and skills.
- (d) To provide in-service, on the job vocational and professional training for different categories of workers and professionals, in order to improve their skills
- (e) To give the adult citizens of the country necessary aesthetic cultural and civic education for public enlightenment

To accomplish the above objective a mass literacy campaign was launched by the federal government to awaken the people on the need to be educated not minding the age and other barriers. In response to this many Nigerian universities started adult non formal education programmes. A national commission for adult education was set up to co-ordinate adult education activities.

While we appreciate the government gesture the question still remains how many of the Nigeria illiterate population have been reached by the government effort, or what practical effort is the government

making to translate the above mentioned objectives to reality, and not just mere lip service. Distance/non formal education etc had been tried in other countries like India with high illiteracy level and had the percentage reduced to the barest minimum. Nigeria can borrow a leaf from these countries.

Practical Approach for Effective and Successful Distance Learning Programme

Radio Audio Cassette and Other Wireless Devices: To be able to reach the rural population and the masses, there must be a well developed radio, audio cassette and other wireless devices other agencies like religious groups, political associations and economical institutions can organize education programmes for their members. For example religious groups can expand their Sunday school programmes and other study periods to accommodate secular and civic education.

This method was adopted in Sweden some years back and through this method many of their illiterate population were educated.

Effective Radio School System: The government can improve on what is on ground by embarking on massive radio programme or radio school and TV schools. The radio programme was

used in Ghana and Brazil to reduce illiteracy level! ratio in their countries. Likewise in Kenya through the school Broadcasting, over 5000 persons were educated.

This system can help to educate the rural and isolated areas of the country.

Satellite or Sad Project: This project can be use to provide mass education direct to satellite schools. This project was used in the north-east of brazil in 1972 to train 1,600 teachers and 14,000 students in 500 schools Nigeria can also do same.

Free Vacation Schools: This programme was adopted in India, tagged "Operation Random" (named after the pioneer, General Random). Every year (during the period of the programme) several students' volunteers spend their summer vacations visiting and helping the Indian settlement at the Amazon basin. The Nigerian government can give this programme a trial.

Mobile Libraries: Government can provide more written materials to assist the distance learners. This could be located at strategic places that will cost the learner little or no effort to get at. For example at the rural areas more reference materials and books could be made available.

National Literacy Crusade: The government can embark on national literacy crusade to encourage the people to engage in educational activities through non-formal means. In Nicaragua, this was referred to as “War on Ignorance”. There was also the “Pleasants’ Literacy Army”, “The Urban Literacy Guerillas” and “The Workers Literacy Militia” these three groups of “army” were used to reduce the illiteracy rate *in* the country from 57 percent in 1979 to 11.8 percent in 1980.(UNESCO)

Audio Video Means: The distance learning programme should use the audio video means as part of its delivery methods This should include all electronic means which are; - radio, video tape, cassettes, and computers with fitted modules and communication infrastructure, by post and telephone. The usage of these modules should be encouraged and improved to expand the programme.

Then finally on the issue of time, different (slow and fast) learners should be allowed to learn at their own pace.

Conclusion

Although the above recommendations may sound funny, and utopic, well no one can tell how much Nigerians will achieve until they

are tried here. After all there is nothing wrong in trying. The fact that a greater percentage of the Nigerian populace are still illiterate should give every well thinking Nigerian a concern especially, now that we are talking of development, millennial goal, integration, economic and political democracy, patriotism and civic culture. These variables are easily tenable in a literate society than in an illiterate society. In fact, there has always been a close relationship between literacy and power and illiteracy and revolution in human history. Literacy has always been a powerful weapon which helped in bringing about desirable socio-economic and political changes. Most countries that were under colonialism can attest to this. If we must transform this nation from what it is to our desired state of being, where no man is oppressed then literacy is necessary for all and should be pursued through the formal and of course, the distance non-formal learning system and must be declared as a national emergency. The government, the universities, philanthropist, NGO^S/CBO^S and other religious and humanitarian organizations should take up the challenge and advance this country through investing in the distance/non-formal education programme.

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