UNDERSTANDING THE ADULT LEARNER: THE SUBSTANCE FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING

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Abstract

The adult learners are those who sometimes had no access to formal education, before attaining adulthood. Adulthood in this context involves psychological, sociological, political, financial, spiritual, cognitive or intellectual, professional and biological maturities alongside with various characteristics. The educators or facilitators or instructors should understand these variables in the adult learners in order to attain effective teaching and learning. The psychological and other forms of the adult learners must be viewed against their needs, emotions; anxiety; fear; adjustment; self-esteem; self-concept; self-fulfillment; and motivation. Besides, the facilitators or instructors should also consider the following functions of the adult learners in order to make learning effective such as arousal function; expectancy function; incentive function; and, disciplinary function. There is need for the educator to be less formal in dealing with adult learners, need to promote self-confidence in the adult learner; to reduce fear; and, the need to make learning more relevant. The applications of these factors will not only make the facilitators or instructors to understand the adult learner, but it will bring about the substance of learning for effective teaching.

Key Words: Adult Learner, Teaching

INTRODUCTION:

Teaching as the inter-personal relationships between the instructors and the adult learners, remains the complex act of manipulating relevant variables, in the learning environment in order to guide or direct the adult learners towards a set of responses aimed at bringing about certain desirable changes in their attitudes. Such changes in attitudes or behavior could be cognitive and non-cognitive. Teaching entails the teacher making series of choices, decisions and, judgments regarding what to teach; why to teach; how to teach and so on.

To a very large extent, the nature; needs; interest; and, capabilities of the adult learners in form a number of decisions made by the facilitators or instructors. These variables are bound to differ amongst adult learners of different ages and the following characteristics such as psychological maturity; sociological maturity; political maturity; financial maturity; spiritual maturity; intellectual maturity; and, biological maturity (Obidiegwu, 2023)

Hence the adult learner is in many ways different from the young learners or teenage learners. For any effective teaching in adult literacy programme, it is imperative, that, the instructor takes into considerable consideration, the unique psychological characteristics of the adult learner as they influence his learning.

WHO IS THE ADULT LEARNER?

Briefly put, the adult learners are those who did not have access to formal education before attaining adulthood. They also include those who drop-out prematurely from the formal school system or those who were forced out of the formal school system for various reasons, ranging from finance or health problems. According to Orobor (2009), the adult learners have wider differences among its members, than among a class of youth with regard to age; level of formal education; time lag since leaving school; spiritual maturity; places of birth; cultural background; occupation; position; status; prestige; and, even sometimes sex.

Similarly, Obidiegwu (2023), opined that, adult learner is a person who identifies a learning gap or a need to learn in his life pursuits and strives for continuing inquiry and learning, and which are necessary for mental development; freedom; and, wisdom through updating his knowledge, skills; values; and attitude. These the adult learner can acquire through formal, informal and non-formal education; and in any area of study, irrespective of age, for constant adjustment and adaptation to his/her environment.

According to Orobor (2009), adult learners who are fifteen years or thereabout, will have difficulties integrating themselves into the primary school system, considering their unsuccessful previous school experience s which may be unpleasant. They are likely to find it difficult to adjust to the formal school environment made up of learners of younger ages. These adult

learners combine literacy schooling in the evenings with regular socio-economic activities. Due to their age and their commitment, they are bound to differ significantly from the younger people. Such differences may be in terms of emotional or psychological state or value disposition, all of which influence their learning process.

If we must foster their learning, we should be conversant with the peculiar factors which influence them in the learning process. There is no doubt, that such acquaintance will help the educator or instructor to know the appropriate variables to manipulate. One of such variables is the psychological makeup of the adult learner. This psychological makeup or psychological maturity, brings us to the following question; "what are the psychological characteristics of the adult learner?"

The psychological characteristics of the adult learners can be viewed against the following:

a. Their needs
b. Their emotions
c. Their anxiety
d. Their fear or phobia
e. Their adjustment
f. Their self-esteem
g. Their self-concept
h. Their self-fulfillment, and

i. Their motivation

The needs of the adult learners include amongst other things such as aesthetic value, disposition, visceral needs, and the need for food, water, and oxygen, elimination of body wastes, sleep, leisure, relaxation, sex, and muscular activity. Olayinka (2018) observed that the expression and satisfaction of these needs are socially modified. The author stated that the obtaining and eating of food and the gratification of the needs for sex are controlled by many laws and culture of communities. There is also the need to counsel the adult learners towards the choice of a partners, the choice of a career and the need for shelter.

More often than none the adult learners is at the receiving end of challenges, shocks, job insecurity, hypertension, and, high blood pressure due to his inability to do what he ought to be capable of doing in the overall interest of his family and community. The adult learner is continuously under stress, arising from the consciousness of unfulfilled life dreams. When this occurs at a very high degree, his learning is in jeopardy.

One of the attributes of perception of the adult learners is his ability to identify his self-concept, which itself has three components such as self-recognition, self-worth and noble self. The idea of self normally grows as an adult develops with age and comes in touch with his environment or community.

In this connection, Oyedeji (2008) opined that before any meaningful learning can take place in an adult, he must be able to know who he is definitely. What he sees himself to be is not isolated from the society he lives in culturally, politically socially, religiously, aesthetically band economical activities, all of which help to shape the adult learners to the attainment of self-recognition. The degree of the perception of self-concept helps in determines the level of self-esteem which is an assessment of self. Oyedeji (2008) remarked that those who are ambitious may not be impressed by their achievement which would be regarded as a high standard of self-fulfillment by mediocre. This, he stressed helps to determine the vigour with which the adult learners would go about fulfilling his desires. It also helps to determine the degree of the individual's needs.

One of the characteristics of adult learner is his fear of failure. The adult learner is more painstaking and slower in action in the learning process in the attempt to avoid mistakes. According to Nworgu (2018) the adult learner tries to avoid mistakes and failure, because they reduce his personality before his children, who he often scolds when they fail such consciousness and sensitivity slow down their learning, as their response levels fail.

MOTIVATION OF ADULT LEARNER

According to Mittler (2012), most adults have family responsibilities, which include learning to live with marriage partners, being parents; responsibilities of sending their children to school; caring for their aged

parents where there are no social security schemes, and cultural responsibilities. The author further stated that, many adults are willing to enlist in adult education programmes, but may have to procrastinate, due to other vital pressing demands or responsibilities. Majority of adult do in fact, register for, and attend adult education programmes for a while, but discontinue their attendance due to conflicting interests.

It is axiomatic to state, that, human beings may be perceptive and confident, but the level of morale of individuals is not always constant. When the level of morale goes down, there is no doubt, that, it needs assistance to raise it up or the individual my lose interest and discontinue the activity which he started to undertake with great enthusiasm.

Consequent upon the above, Olayinka (2018), suggested four necessary teachers' motivational functions as follows:

a. Arousal function: According to Olayinka (2018), educators should encourage learners to learn by spurring and arousing their interest and enthusiasm. This he said could be done by helping the learner to see himself as a successful figure. When a learner is told, that, there is nothing too difficult in what he is doing; and, people who are less intelligent and handicapped that he is have gone through the programme successfully, he is likely to garner hope and determination to stay on and succeed.

b. **Expectancy function:** The educator or facilitator should take time to explain to the learners, what they will do in future with the knowledge being acquired.

c. Incentive function: The educator gives incentives or rewards (material, verbal or symbolic, such as in test scores), to commensurate with each learners achievements.

d. Disciplinary function: Aside rewards, the educator can employ appropriate types of appeals; deprivations, punishment; and, other psychological approaches to encourage the adult learner to learn. However, punishment should be the least thought of, when dealing with adult learners.

INFLUENCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MATURITY OF THE ADULT LEARNER ON HIS LEARNING

The psychological maturities of the adult learner, which can positively affect his learning, are as follows:

a) Curiosity and the desire to understand one's self and, one's world; through science; social studies; literature; observations and problem-solving experiences.

b) Individuals pursuit of interest-satisfying knowledge, understanding; and, skills.

c) Opportunity to use what is learnt- such as studying English in order to write better reports.

d) Masterly: this could be achieved by adjusting learning tasks in every curriculum aspect, in order to achieve individual's development level and pattern of abilities and capabilities.

e) Knowledge of progress through regular tasks and quizzes marked without delay; progress charts; and, evidence of improvement.

f) Affection of the educator, identification with loved and admired persons; a sense of belonging; being accepted; and, valued by one's peer group, club, associations, committees or classmates.

g) Approval by parents or guardians, teachers or classmates for good academic achievement.

h) Opportunity to win prizes or special privileges.

i) Rivalry for ascendency in group competitions, as a debate, spellings and athletic contests.

j) Feelings of confidence and security about one's status.

In addition, the psychological maturity of the adult learners that can negatively affect his/her learning processes are as follows;

a) Sympathy from the teacher or educator and classmates for one's weaknesses and shortcomings

b) Thereat of insecurity, such as, possibility of failing a test, of understanding the adult learner: a substance for effective teaching.

c) Blame and criticism: for some mistakes committed; lack of effort; and, undesirable behaviours, promoting blame-avoidant behaviours in the future.

d) Punishment: personal criticism, sarcastic comments, scolding, isolation from group or classroom, expulsion or corporal punishment.

e) Deceit: the adult learner who knows, that, he is not achieving, sees it as ridiculous; mockery; and deceitful, when the educator or teacher tells him that he is trying. This tends to make him look unreasonable and negative to the learning situation.

f) Consciousness of one's status; the adult learner tends to be conscious of his or her status, in terms of age; spiritual maturity; cognitive or intellectual maturity; sociological maturity and so on, in relationship to other adult learners and the teacher in some cases. If the teacher and other classmates and are younger than him in age; he expects them to acknowledge his status and reflect same in the learning process. He may be offended if the expected respect is not accorded to him, and he may drop-out for this reason.

TOWARDS THE EFFECTIVE TEACHING OF ADULT LEARNERS

According to Nwaogu (2018), one of the fundamental condition for effective teaching, is the instructor's understanding of the various characteristics of the adult learners which he interacts with. He requires such understanding, in order to know their needs, interests and capabilities as a

basis for being in a position to make the best judgment on giving to the learners their relevant needs.

Thus, there is emphasis on knowing the various characteristics of the adult learners, so that the teacher will be able to know the relevant learner-variables to manipulate, in order to foster effective learning. In dealing with the adult learners, one is interested in his whole life and the important socio-psychological maturity alongside with the characteristics which distinguish him from the young learners. Guided by this understanding, the instructors in the adult literacy programme should seek to explore these characteristics, in order to enhance effective teaching.

Consequently, emphasis should include the following:

a. Informality: There is the need to be less formal in dealing with the adult learners. Apart from making the classroom an extension of the community life, the adult learners should be treated with some sense of equality, respect and friendliness. For example, the adult learner can be addressed as "Mr" or "Mrs" or "Chief" in the class, when asked to respond to a question or perform a task. This gives him or her impression that his or her age and social status of various stages of maturity are acknowledged and respected. To a large extent, the adult learner is motivated and made more willing to learn. The point being made here is that the instructor should be less rigid, proud about rules and regulations that govern normal class situations. For instance, the adult learner could

be allowed to eat biscuits, kola nuts or the like in the class if that is his habit. Necessary clarifications are needed to make the learner see why he or she cannot smoke in the class.

b. Promoting self confidence in the adult learners: One of the problems which the adult learner is likely to have arises from that which he is not too sure of being able to make. He has the impression that his brain has been blocked and memories shallow due to the stress of life such as lack of self-confidence, kills his moral and motivation, the adult learner is likely to find learning difficult. It therefore becomes the responsibility of the educator to help provide the needed moral and motivation. He does this in a number of ways including praising his efforts at learning and helping to provide rationale for his involvement in adult literacy programme. Some confidence can be built in the adult learners for them to have a feeling that they are capable of learning.

c. Reducing fear: The adult learner is afraid of failure. He would not want to make mistakes. He should be told that, mistakes are part of learning and that people we think know everything, sometimes make mistakes. The facilitators or instructors should avoid ridiculing the adult learner when the makes mistakes. More importantly he should be helped to taste success at intervals so that this serves to motivate learning. This requires that the facilitator or instructor uses differentiated individualized method of teaching.

d. Making lesson relevant: One of the factors which motivate the adult learner in order to remain in adult literacy programme is his perceptions of the socioeconomic implications of his studies. He expects that the education so received will contribute to his life in terms of social relationship or economics earnings. He becomes more interested if the education is meaningful in his life and social experiences. It is also important to adopt the problem-so-process. He further needs to involve the learners actively in the learning process by guiding him to contribute to the generation of his knowledge.

e. Rapport: The adult learner is conscious of this social status and wants this to be acknowledged and respected. There is therefore the need for the facilitators or instructors to promote rapport with the adult learner. There should be cordial relationship between the facilitator and the adult learners. Such rapport helps to free the learners from a lot of tension and makes them to have a sense of belonging. In fact, the adult learner is a human being like himself and treats them the way he would like to be treated.

CONCLUSION

The unique socio-psychological characteristics of the adult learners have been identified including the influence of such traits on the adult learning situations, have also been highlighted. The emphasis of this discourse has been that the adult educators should recognize such socio-psychological

maturity and characteristics of the adult learners and be guided by them in their instructional decisions and judgments. It is important in this regard, the need to build adult literacy programmes on the felt needs and problems of the learners. Help the learners to build up more self-confidence, help to alleviate their fears and seek ways to motivate them to remain in the programme.

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