

Adult education is many things: Its meaning and implications

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Abstract

Many adult educationists have laboured in an attempt to define what is meant by Adult Education. Some of the definitions are confined much more to the philosophical aspect of the concept, while others restrict themselves to the functional or clientele criterion. Consequently, vital shades of some Adult Education activities are left out of the concept. This paper attempts to bring out together all the different shades of Adult Education by firstly considering the two words 'Adult' and 'Education' separately. Then, the meaning of Adult Education is further derived at by its function (especially in the Third World), clientele, content and pedagogical aspects. It is then concluded that unlike other professions, 'Adult Education' simply means many things; a situation that relegates it to an inferior position.

Introduction

To ask for the meaning of 'adult education' is to ask for the meaning of life. To choose to continue to live is to opt for education; since the longer one lives on earth the more it is assumed that one sees the reason for life, hence 'lifelong learning'. The prime purpose of living is not just to be able to fit in one's society. On the contrary, it is to engage in continuous mentation; the act of thinking and provide mentation to one's progeny. A person who will never have mentation usually serves no desirable purpose in life (William, 1974). The act of continuous thinking can be no less than 'lifelong thinking' which is another way of defining 'Adult education' (Kelly, 1973). Therefore, adult education can be said to mean many things; it could mean all that goes on during one's adult life. Because of its delimited scope, I shall in this paper, first give a broad definition of adult education; thereafter, limit its meaning in terms of its clientele, function, content and methodology.

Defining adult education

The term 'adult education' consists of two words each of which conveys a separate meaning. An 'adult' for instance, can be defined as a grown up person who is not a child. However, this statement alone does not cover all the implications of the term. According to Bown and Olu – Tomori formal attachment of adulthood is often marked by special ceremonies and rituals, varying from traditional initiation to twenty-first birthday party. It is also recognised in law, which sets a given age at which a person begins to take responsibility for his own affairs. The UNESCO recommendation on adult education refers to 'persons regarded as adults by society to which they belong (UNESCO, 1976). For the purpose of this paper, it may be useful:

The entire body of organised educational process, whatever the content, level and method, ... whereby persons regarded as adult... enrich their knowledge; improve their technical or professional qualifications... and bring about changes ... of full social, economic and cultural development;....

On the other hand, Knowles (1980) sees adult education as the bringing:

Together into a definable social system all the individuals, institutions, and associations concerned with the education of adults and portraying them as working toward such common goals as the improvement of the methods and materials of adult learning, and advancing the general level of culture,...

The broadness of the scope covered by these definitions only confirms the variety of meaning of adult education. Because of the broadness of its function, adult education tends to take a variety of definitions; and all seem to suit it. Every other definition at least suits one area of its function. Liverright and Haywood (1969) for instance, define adult education as a 'process whereby persons who no longer attend school on a regular and full time basis (unless full-time programmes are especially designed for adults) undertake sequential and organised activities with conscious intention of bringing about changes in information, knowledge, understanding of skills, appreciation and attitudes; or for the purpose of identifying and solving personal or community problems'.

While part of this definition fits the concept of 'continuing education', the others go to the extent of covering what could be 'vocational training', adult basic education, and functional literacy. Indeed, these are the many shades of adult education. They range from what is referred to as formal education, informal, to non-formal. One sees adults in formal school certificate or 'O' level classes, in relaxed and flexible non-formal farm or business management classes, and in more informal incidental learning situations like libraries, museums, archives and pleasure resort amenities, and yet educative institutions provided by different agencies including city councils. All the multitude of ways in which people are helped to improve themselves are often collectively known as adult education.

Adult education may, thus include activities like literacy teaching, women's club work, fundamental, foundation and social education, liberal correspondence studies; all of which are undoubtedly within the province of the concept of adult education (Coles-Townsend, 1969). Such generalisation about adult education could render an important enterprise of the profession useless. This, as earlier said, rises from the multiplicity of its functions. But care must be taken and avoid the impression that adult education is simply no more than a hotchpotch of activities whose purpose is less significant than those facilities whose major function it is to provide entertainment. Admittedly, there can be no blueprint to lay down for adult education as we would find in other branches of education. But this should not stop us from looking at adult education as something special; something unique, and specifically concerned with a special group of people known as 'adults'.

The meaning of adult education in terms of its clientele

The clientele of adult education are the 'adults'. Adults are not grown up children. Unlike a child, an adult is a person whose mental and physical development have almost reached their peak. His social roles and responsibility in society tend to grow. An adult may be receiving some education and a result may be called a student. This student may well be a father, a top politician, a chairman of a club, or may even be a teacher. Children, on the contrary, do not become fathers neither do they occupy such top political and other positions in society. Moreover, most adults do experience some sensory loss as they grow older. Their bodies do not respond as quickly as they did in their youth; also hearing and vision is often not as good (Himmelstrup and Robinson, 1981). More often adults constitute a major labour force of a country whose time is mostly spent at work. Therefore, when we talk about 'adult education', we mean the education of persons who are involved in many activities. Their education may well comprise the activities that go with their occupation; (for instance, a mother taking some lessons in parenthood) or that it may concern the improvement of their skills in relation to their work.

Hence, it is important that we distinguish adult education from other forms of educational provision by reference to the nature of its clients (Kiddie, 1980). Primary, secondary, further and higher, or call it, university education are differentiated from each other in terms of notional stages in the unfolding of the educational enterprise. The clientele of each one of these play a role in their being distinctive, thereby contributing to the meaning of each one of them. It is true that primary education does not mean the same as secondary or adult education. The meaning we derive from them is not only differentiated by words like 'primary', 'secondary' and adult but that each of these words conveys further meaning which reflects the size and the general status of the clientele. The status of each of the educational paradigms is a result of its function. Hence, we can also explain the meaning of adult education by examining its functions.

Functional meaning of adult education

The multiplicity of activities in which adult education is involved makes it unnecessary to search for its functions. Nevertheless, the exercise of careful sifting of what is adult education function from what is not is a necessary starting point. There are two reasons for doing this: firstly, there is, as we have seen, an unspecified border line between adult education on one hand, and other educational provisions on the other. Secondly, if adult education has to be explained in terms of its function, we must try to identify functions that are peculiar to adult education; for it is these peculiar functions that give it its identity, and a meaning peculiar to it alone.

Laidlaw (1961) has contended that 'in the underdeveloped areas of the world, where international agencies are engaged in a gigantic struggle against the evils of hunger, disease and poverty, adult education is one of the principle tools being used for the betterment of countless millions of depressed people'. He further argues that adult education is the most significant educational aspect of the social adjustment taking place throughout the world today. The function of adult education especially in underdeveloped countries is of peculiar significance. Most underdeveloped (Third World) countries have the highest rate of illiteracy in the world. In 1951 only 16% of the Indian population was literate, leaving 220 million illiterate. By 1971, it was estimated that whilst 30% of the population would be able to read and write, 344 million people would, however, be unable to do so (Coles-Townsend, 1969). The high illiteracy rate in the Third World countries is a colonial legacy during which all educational provisions were limited to a few people.

Professor Lewis has contended that 'the quickest way to increase productivity in the less developed countries is to train the adults who are already on the job,' (Coles-Townsend, 1969). Coles-Townsend (1969) has further argued that the re-creation of pride in one's cultural heritage is one of the tasks to which adult education must address itself. Nyerere (1982) says that adult education has to be directed at helping men develop themselves. It has to contribute to an enlargement of man's ability in every way. Education, Nyerere argues, should inspire both desire for change, and

an understanding that change is possible. It is thus, a highly political activity which must work like a spider's web to connect all human activities and make a coherent whole.

If, therefore, we were to give the meaning of adult education in terms of its function, the above functions would give the enterprise some definitive meaning. Adult education would be seen as a type of education concerned with the immediate solution to the problems of hunger, diseases and poverty; in short, the problems of underdevelopment. It is the type of education which increases adult's working skills, which in turn increase productivity. Adult education is the education that is aimed for adults who are already on the jobs. It is the education of the adults whose responsibilities is to make important political, cultural and social decisions; and it is the education which tries to change the attitudes of adults whose old values are incompatible with contemporary social, economic and technological development. Adult education, therefore, could be remedial, innovative and in a sense, a warehouse of cultural values.

Content and methodological meaning of adult education

Perhaps the most important way by which we can determine the meaning of adult education is by looking at what is taught to adults (content) and how adult educationists teach their clientele. To a large extent, though, adult education content is dictated by formal schooling. This is much so where adult education takes the role of 'continuing education', and where the learners aspire to join the formal structure of educational provision. For this part adult education tends to be oriented towards dominant or middle-class values that are reflected in the education system as a whole and are evidenced by its clientele.

Subjects like mathematics, languages, geography and sciences may, however, play a dual role when studied. Some adults may study them with the aim of passing an examination while others may study them for pleasure and interest. But if we are looking at adult education content that will help us explain the concept we should be looking at courses offered in areas like parenthood, leadership, karate and extension services.

'From the curriculum point of view.... a definition in terms of content and goals would be a much more useful way of characterising adult education,' (Lawson, 1979). Adult education is, therefore, the education that offers vocational courses and civic education to adults. It also offers education for enjoyment, leisure, and it is offered on the basis of people's needs. The content of adult education is noted for its flexibility, as it is often easily altered. And because the content of adult education is reflected in the people's needs, adult education is normally taken to the people, while formal education asks people to come to it. In this context we can define adult education as a type of education that goes to the people wherever they may be.

The major differences between adult education and other educational provisions has been its shift from subject-centeredness to student-centeredness. Adults control what they learn, how they should learn, and even when they should learn. In secondary school, the teacher controls what he has to teach and even takes responsibility for determining what is to be learned. In other words, students depend for their learning on the teacher. On the contrary, adult education sees its clients as independent mature persons; and the learning process is much more self-directed. This is what Knowles has called pedagogy and andragogy respectively (Knowles, 1980). Adult education, therefore, could mean a particular type of education in which students tend to have more say than the teacher in what they are learning, how they learn it and when they learn it. Its student-centeredness has a historical link with primary school characteristics. It is argued that like primary education, the status of adult education is low because of its shift from subject-centeredness (which is characteristic of secondary school and university education) to student-centeredness.

Because of its low status which results from the factors which include its boundless coverage in its function, adult education has posed considerable problems for the planners in education. The insurmountable problems are often at the back of the planner's head to rest in peace, leaving adult education out of priority list when it comes to financing projects (Coombs, 1968). A study in Columbia has shown that expenditure on non-formal education equals roughly one-third of government spending on primary education, (Morales, 1983). This is not in any way negligible figure, and it certainly reveals the underlying interest in the type of activities and the legitimacy of the education function they provide. The peripheral nature of adult education is manifested in these sub-status allocations. The resounding government statements about its unquestionable contribution to national developments prove how much lip-service support these activities are meant to receive. Consequently, the adult educator also receives lip-service support and empty morale boosting statements. More often words never equal deeds (Coombs, 1968).

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that possibilities of descriptive, including those of clientele, function, content and methodological definitions are almost endless; and all are probably valid for certain purposes. As a result, it may be right to say that there is not one, but a variety of meanings of adult education. In other words, the term adult education has a multiplicity of uses which depend upon the context and the intention of the user. This characteristic has cost it a status and funding. Nevertheless, the discussion in this paper has revealed that adult education is open to adults and becomes specifically and uniquely related to adulthood in terms of what is taught, and how it is organised. It is, therefore, different from other education provisions.

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