

Ngbaka adult literacy program in Northwestern Zaire

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1. Background information

There are over one million speakers of the Ngbaka language which is classified as a Niger-Congo—Adamawa Eastern—Ubangian language. The Ngbaka people live in the northwest corner of Zaire in an area about 150 miles east to west and about 100 miles north to south. They live mainly in villages scattered in forested areas in the southern half and in savanna in the northern half. The administrative center of the area is Gemena which has a population of about 40,000. Traditionally, the Ngbaka were hunters, but now they are farmers with the main food crop being maize and the main cash crop, coffee.

The Ngbaka are a closely knit group. There has been less fragmentation of the traditional social structure than is often seen in Africa today. The Ngbaka are divided into seven clans, and everyone, even young well-educated people, still knows his clan. They are the largest group in this part of Zaire, have a strong sense of self identity, and traditionally have been aggressive rather than passive.

Protestants missionaries first began work in the area about 60 years ago, Catholic missionaries 80 years ago, and the area is largely Christianized. Most villages have both a Protestant and a Catholic church, and 90 percent of the population considers itself Christian. Amongst the Ngbaka, the division between Protestant and Catholic is about half and half. There are two Protestant church denominations in the area, one to the west and the other to the east. They only overlap in the main central town of Gemena. The Catholic church in the Ngbaka area comes under two dioceses. There are some nontraditional churches also, but Islam has made little impact in the area.

Zaire is experiencing a very depressed economy at present, and government services are virtually nonfunctional. In the Ngbaka area, as in the whole of the Ubangi, the situation has remained peaceful, but there is civil unrest or intertribal conflict in some other parts of the country. Zaire is an unstable country with an uncertain future.

(1995). *Notes on Literacy*, 21(4).

Page 1.

2. History of the literacy project

2.1. General outline

Members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) arrived in this area in 1978. The New Testament was published in 1983, and the translation of the Old Testament has just been completed. It is hoped that the whole Bible will be available in the area in 1995. Trial literacy classes were begun in 1981 after establishing an orthography for Ngbaka that both Protestants and Catholics agreed to use. At the end of 1993, there were 24,000 students in 2,300 classes with a full-time Zairian literacy coordinator and seventeen full-time Zairian literacy supervisors.

2.2. The literacy situation in 1978

About 10 percent of church members were literate to some degree. The percentage amongst nonchurchgoers was somewhat lower. Amongst those who were literate, about 10 percent could read French, and the rest could read the trade language, Lingala. They had become literate through the formal school system or through church adult literacy classes in Lingala. These classes had been at their peak in the 1960s and early 1970s. By 1978, one church community had no adult literacy classes, while the other had some classes among women as part of a women's education program. There were two major problems with this program:

- (a) The primer in use to teach Lingala was based on the syllable method and tended to produce "readers" who had memorized the passage.
- (b) Many of the Ngbakas do not know Lingala, or they only have the vocabulary needed to buy and sell.

There had been an abortive attempt by the Protestant missions to teach Ngbaka reading in the 1960s. The orthography had been reasonable, but the materials available were not adequate. Some adults who had attended Catholic schools as children learned to read Ngbaka well at that time.

2.3. The formal school situation

Up to independence in 1960 there had been good primary schools in reach of nearly every Ngbaka child. It is estimated that about 50 percent of the boys and 10 percent of the girls went to school. Today in the churches, the best readers are often men over 50 years old. After 1960, the local primary schools deteriorated slightly but not radically so until 1973 when the government took control of the church schools. These were handed back to the church authorities in 1977, by which time the schools were barely functioning. They improved somewhat until the mid-1980s when a marked deterioration set in. Since the troubles of 1991, many parts of the country do not have functioning schools, except for private fee-paying establishments.

In the Ubangi, the teachers have been on strike for periods of time since then, and the schools are open only intermittently. The poor morale of the teachers due to the nonpayment of salaries means that, even when the schools are open, not much is being taught.

2.4. History of the Ngbaka adult literacy program

2.4.1. 1978–1980

The initial emphasis was on teaching Ngbakas, who were already literate in French or Lingala, to read their own language. The first group of people involved in this were those who could read French, and the first transition manual was written in French. This turned out to be a good decision, as French speakers in this area are the elite influential members of society. After this, a transition manual in Lingala was prepared which was used to help the rest of the literate Ngbakas to read and write their own language.

As the problem of the large number of illiterates was faced, certain decisions were made that had far reaching effects.

1. It was decided to base the adult classes in the churches. This decision was made for two reasons: (a) the church seemed to be the only functional infrastructure in the area; and (b) 90 percent of the population considered themselves Christian and, therefore, would feel free to go to church based classes. At this time, the classes were only established in Protestant churches. The Catholic churches became involved later at the time of the interconfessional translation project of the Ngbaka Old Testament in 1987.
2. It was decided to ask the churches to provide the teachers, who would teach without pay as a service to their fellow Christians. By this time there was a small group of people in most churches who could read Ngbaka because of the *Scripture in Use* courses.
3. It was decided to choose a learning method for the primer that would be simple to teach, consistent from lesson to lesson, and could be contained in one book for reasons of economy.

In 1980, the SIL team drafted the first version of a basic reading primer and tested it in a pilot course of 18 women meeting in a local church. At the end of six months, most had learned to read, and the primer had been revised and was ready for wider use.

2.4.2. 1981–1983

The SIL team duplicated 300 copies of this primer, and two church regions were chosen for the first pilot scheme. Five churches in each region were invited to send two teachers to a teacher training course. The 10 classes started and eight finished. From this experience, further changes were made to the primer. At the same time, postprimer materials were being prepared, mainly by the translation personnel. (The folk stories, for example, had been used in the study of discourse features in Ngbaka.) At that point, a three-stage program was envisaged (cf., [Section 4](#)).

The SIL team felt that at the end of this program Ngbaka adults would be both functionally literate and numerate, and they would be able to go on and read books available in Lingala, if they so desired. Most of the above books were available in a preliminary form by 1983. At this time the original classes were moving on to the later stages, and many other churches were asking to join the program.

By 1983, it became clear that the classes were not going to function properly without local supervision. (The translation project was going on in Gemena which was 70 miles from both centers of literacy classes.) The problems of literature distribution and sales were also becoming more obvious. In addition to this, the SIL team was about to begin a translation in another language. The following decisions were made at this time by the SIL team after long discussions with the Ngbaka teachers involved with the classes, church leaders, the translation personnel, and local missionaries.

1. It was decided to find two qualified men to serve as full-time literacy supervisors in the two church areas where the classes were underway.
2. It was decided to seek outside funding for the following:
 - a. Salaries of these two people
 - b. The cost of two motor bikes for their use plus such things as fuel and spare parts
 - c. Subsidies for the printing costs of books
 - d. T-shirts for the teachers who have always taught without salary as a form of tangible reward
 - e. Chalk (which is hard to obtain and very expensive)
3. It was decided to find an expatriate who would be willing to work full time in organization, training, and supervision of the program.

2.4.3. 1983–1987

By the summer of 1983 all these things had fallen into place. Christian Aid UK had agreed to fund the project for three years. A short-term single man had agreed to work with the program for two years (which later became three), and he was later joined by a second short-term single man. (Neither of them were at that time members of SIL, but they were members of the two missions working in the area). One of them had received SIL training, but not as a literacy specialist. They were assigned full-time for this work with the enthusiastic blessing of their missions.

After learning Ngbaka, the first short-term man worked with the SIL team for about four months, running courses to choose the two supervisors, running teacher training courses, and visiting the existing classes. After that he took full responsibility for the work at the village level. The SIL team continued to work on literature production and helped with some teacher training. By the time the two short-term men returned to the United States in 1986, there were 250 classes and four more full-time supervisors were working in four more church regions. (There are 21 Ngbaka church regions).

In 1986, Christian Aid sent two people to visit the project. One of these had considerable previous experience with similar programs in developing countries and was able to give good advice. As a result of the visit, and also because of the rapidly growing size of the program, the following changes were made in 1987.

1. A central literacy committee was set up with representatives of the two denominations to guide and coordinate the program. This committee has met approximately four times a year since then. From 1991, the Catholic Church has also been represented.
2. Each group of classes in a village was encouraged to start a development project and set up a development committee. Half of the proceeds from the development project was to go to the teachers and half to the local literacy classes. These projects were slow to get started, but by 1994 approximately three quarters of the villages had one.
3. One of the original supervisors was unanimously chosen by all concerned and officially appointed by the central committee to be the coordinator of the program. This meant he continued to supervise the work in his own area but also coordinated the overall work.
4. Under pressure from the coordinator, central committee, the other supervisors, literacy teachers, and students, the SIL team agreed that there should be six stages to the literacy program. Passing the exam at the end of Stage 6 would result in a primary school equivalency certificate.
5. Everyone agreed that the ultimate goal was to have literacy classes in every church in all of the 21 church regions.

Beginning from 1987, the SIL team was once more working with an Ngbaka translation team to translate the Old Testament and revise the New Testament. Catholics were now members of the translation team, so that all the churches would use the printed Bible. A Belgian priest also joined the team as an advisor and later helped the Catholic churches to join the literacy program.

2.4.4. 1988–1991

The following developments occurred between 1988 and 1991:

1. At the end of 1989, Christian Aid, after supporting the program for six years, discontinued its funding. In 1990, funding was found through various small donations, and then from 1991, Wycliffe Bible Translators USA began funding the project.
2. The number of full-time supervisors increased to 15. The growth of the classes, teachers, and centers can be seen in the graph in the appendix (cf. [Appendix](#)).
3. The SIL team, together with the translators and certain of the literacy supervisors, continued producing the rest of the books needed for the six stages in a first draft. Then the books were gradually tested in duplicated form.
4. Leaders of Ngbaka Catholic churches requested reading classes for their members. It was agreed that for villages where there were established classes in the Protestant church, the Catholics would attend (1995). *Notes on Literacy*, 21(4).

these classes. Where this occurred, the classes then shared the facilities of the two buildings. If the Protestant church had no classes or if the village only had a Catholic church, then classes could be established in the Catholic church. The priest who was a member of the translation team was able to sort out initial problems as this was put into action. By 1992, many new classes were established in Catholic churches. As time went on, many villages had one set of literacy classes that used both churches to meet.

The year 1991 was a difficult year as most missionaries of the area evacuated due to political unrest in Zaire, and it became much more difficult to obtain supplies for the program. The SIL team remained, and the literacy program continued. There was, however, a slight decrease in the number of teachers because of the general sense of insecurity and the lack of books in some regions.

2.4.5. 1992–1995

The literacy program gathered momentum again, and by the end of 1993 there were seventeen full-time supervisors with 24,000 students in classes. A new SIL literacy team arrived to help with the program. One member of the team is helping the Zairian coordinator to administer the program, particularly in the areas of managing accounts, buying supplies, and doing record keeping. The other member of the team is a graphic artist and is working on the layout and illustrations of books for printing. She hopes to train local artists. A Zairian bookkeeper began work in September 1994.

3. Organization of the program

The literacy classes are based on the village churches, both Protestant and Catholic, though anyone is free to attend. The classes are held three times a week, with each class having two teachers and between 10 and 25 students. The students must be over 15 years of age before entering the class. The teachers are trained to administer a very simple test before admitting students into a class. The test consists of a page of large shapes, such as squares and circles, and the potential student must be able to tell if two shapes are the same or different. About 90 percent of the adults pass this test. Most villages with literacy classes have a literacy committee. These committees help with both the practical organization of the classes and the development project that, in turn, makes money to help the teachers, provides class equipment, and helps the students put new agricultural ideas into practice (cf. [Section 6](#) on development).

The full-time Ngbaka supervisors run teacher training courses, supervise the classes, sell books, conduct exams, and present prizes to successful students at a church service. They come in to the center, Gemena, every three months for one week. At this time they report on their activities which they have written in a daily diary. They also bring in book money with their inventories and give orders for more books. Other activities of the week include such things as studying new books that have been added to the program, revising in groups books that need reprinting, and learning about new development techniques.

The teachers are chosen and sent to teacher training courses by their churches. If they complete the training course satisfactorily, they are authorized to begin a class in their villages. The teacher receives no salary, but at the end of each stage, he receives a special baseball cap if over half of his class pass the exam. This distinctive cap is widely recognized as a badge of office. There are six stages. The first stage

(1995). *Notes on Literacy*, 21(4).

takes from six to twelve months and the remainder take from three to six months each. Once a student has passed the exam at the end of Stage 6, he receives a certificate which is the equivalent to a primary school certificate. The first three stages are basic adult literacy, and the second three stages are adult education with much emphasis on functional literacy and knowledge which can help the adult in his or her everyday life.

Many Ngbaka people perceive education as taking place only in a formal learning situation. The use of both the development projects and the structured classes with exams and teachers is in response to a felt need of the Ngbaka people. This program has developed in ways not envisaged by the expatriates concerned.

All Ngbaka adults, except those who have completed some years of secondary school, are served by this program, that is, 90 percent of the adult population. A person who has some reading skills starts at Stage 2. A person who can read properly, but has not finished primary school, enters the program at Stage 3. A person who has finished primary school and can read fluently may enter the program at Stage 4. No one may enter at Stage 5 or Stage 6. Due to the partial breakdown of the school system, a surprising number of secondary school young people are now joining the literacy classes. There are more women than men enrolled in the classes (about 65 percent are women). This reflects the fact that fewer girls are sent to school. At the end of each stage a book is given to students who pass the test. The dropout rate is the highest during the first couple of months of Stage 1. Probably 30 percent withdraw before they complete the first 10 lessons of the primer. The overall dropout rate in Stage 1 is about 50 percent, of which about half try again at a later point by joining another class. The dropout rates for the other stages is much lower (about 20 percent). The majority of students complete the first three stages, but only about one half of the students go on to Stage 4. Most of the students who begin Stage 4 do finish Stage 6.

The teachers are often people who have finished primary school but have not used their literacy skills significantly since then. They, too, benefit from the stimulation of teacher training courses and the challenge of the teaching. Some students from the classes have now become teachers as well. They are only authorized to teach a particular stage, however, when they themselves have completed two stages beyond that.

4. An outline of the program

The student progresses through six stages as described below.

Stage 1

They learn to read from a booklet with the first four lessons only. Once students can read these booklets, they are allowed to buy the primer. Learning to read and write Ngbaka is taught using a basic reading primer. Halfway through the primer, the students begin to read a health book, and so begin to apply their knowledge to everyday life, while also continuing with the primer.

Stage 2

(1995). *Notes on Literacy*, 21(4).

Page 7.

The students gain more fluency in reading Ngbaka by using a folk story book and two booklets of Bible stories; also, they continue to read and discuss the health book. They begin to learn to read Lingala, the trade language, using the United Bible Societies' Easy Reader series. The teacher's book for this stage has further writing exercises and arithmetic lessons.

Stage 3

The students complete simple Bible studies using a workbook and the Ngbaka New Testament. This stage also includes an agricultural book to read and discuss which covers animal husbandry and growing crops like beans and soya. There is further reading in Lingala and in a beginning book in French which teaches oral French for the few situations where the students might actually need to use the language. The teacher's book contains more writing exercises and more arithmetic, including such items as the recording of family income and keeping the church accounts.

Stage 4

Students use a more detailed Bible workbook with study outlines on various topics. They complete a workbook on geography which starts its study with the village and finishes with the world. There is more Lingala reading. The students study a book teaching simple French grammar using a story in each chapter as the starting point. They also complete an arithmetic workbook, covering practical topics such as learning to calculate the price of items to make a certain profit and basic arithmetic rules such as the multiplication tables.

Stage 5

This stage includes a Bible study book on Ephesians. There is a history book in which there is a large section on the history of the Ngbaka people and world history from an Ngbaka perspective. There also is a more advanced French book and an arithmetic book which is mainly concerned with weights and measurements. There is also more Lingala reading.

Stage 6

There is a Bible study book on Revelation and a book teaching political systems found in the world. (This political systems book is to replace an outdated civics book.) There is a French book covering the remaining points found in the usual Zairian school curriculum and an arithmetic book teaching a variety of practical applications to everyday life. In addition, there is a creative writing book to encourage the students to become authors in Ngbaka.

5. Teacher training

Teacher training takes place in the church regions. Each stage has a separate training course: Stages 1 through 3 last for three days each, Stages 4 and 5 last four days, and Stage 6 has a five-day training (1995). *Notes on Literacy*, 21(4).

course. The courses are held in churches in each region. Responsibility for providing food for the participants is shared. The literacy program provides the cost of one goat; the rest of the food for the participants is provided by the church. The teachers come with money from their literacy committees (or in the case of the first class, from their church) in order to buy the specific books for that stage. They are given chalk and registration sheets. The training for Stage 1 seeks to teach the Golden Rule of teaching above all else: "Never tell a student what he can work out for himself." At the end of the course there is a test which the prospective teacher must pass in order to be authorized to teach that stage in his church. In the early days of the program, up to 20 percent of the teacher trainees failed the first time they attended a course, now about 10 percent of the trainees fail. Those who fail are given the position of teachers' assistants. In the case of Stages 4 through 6, a teacher may be authorized to teach certain subjects and not others. Each region has about six training courses a year. The literacy supervisors are trained to run teacher training courses. They work in teams of two. Stage 6 requires the participation of at least three supervisors.

6. The development projects

The development projects were initially started for three reasons:

- To provide a way to put new agricultural methods taught in the agricultural book into practice
- To help improve the general standard of living in the villages
- To provide some benefit for the teachers who felt they should receive some reward for teaching the classes

The original suggestion for development projects came from Christian Aid. In addition to the local village projects, an attempt was made from 1988 to 1990 to help the full-time supervisors set up regional development projects that would ultimately generate money for their salaries. The initial regional projects involved breeding pigs and was a complete failure. The local village development projects were functioning in about a third of the villages with varying degrees of success. At that time they were told they should have a development project but not much help was given with setting it up.

By 1991, with the disintegration of the economy of the country, it became obvious that the local area needed help in development quite apart from any benefits to the literacy project. At this point, help was sought from TEAR Fund UK who by then had Zaire categorized as in need of emergency relief. Their advice was to buy tools for the village projects and sewing machines for some of the regions, and they gave funds for these projects. The American missions in the area were also becoming concerned about the physical needs of the local people. A group of missionaries had been involved in development for some time, and when they returned to the area in 1991, it was possible to work out a coherent development strategy.

The present situation is that tools (such as spades, axes, machetes, and hoes) are being provided for nearly every village where there is an existing development project. Each village chooses its own development project and, according to the choice, various kinds of help are given. For example, if a village prepares a pond for fish, then the American mission will arrange delivery of young fish if there is no other fish pond

in their immediate area. The Ngbaka literacy budget pays for the transport, and the Protestant mission development budget pays for the fish. One thousand fruit trees that bear protein rich fruit and grow fast were donated by the mission and transported by the Ngbaka literacy program to all the regions. Now two and a half years later some of the regions have seedlings started from these trees for further distribution. Other projects at present are the breeding of animals (goats, chickens, guinea pigs, and cats), the growing of crops (soya, beans, corn, peanuts, and melon seeds), and various cottage industries. Some examples of the cottage industries include the making of soap, bamboo furniture, and chalkboards, and the pressing of palm nuts for oil. It was found that breeding pigs and rabbits did not work, because rabbits appear to be vulnerable to local diseases and pigs have caused too many problems escaping from enclosures and destroying local crops.

For some years, there has been a small amount of development money available from the program budget for each region, and in 1993 for the first time, each supervisor was able to choose how he wanted to use \$100 of development money in his region. The regions have different needs, and their choices were quite different. Some regions wanted as many hand tools as possible, while others wanted money to set up oil presses or soap-making equipment. Still others wanted brick molds or wheelbarrows. A basic need of the area is to replace imported goods, which are now difficult to obtain, with local equivalents. The village committee, in consultation with the literacy supervisor, decides what development project to start. The supervisor learns about new development possibilities at the quarterly meeting and spreads this information around his region, mainly during the teacher training courses.

Each region has a field for development use, and the proceeds from this field are used to help sick literacy teachers get medical treatment. Central oil presses are used in the same way. Six regions have sewing machines, and the proceeds of these machines are also used for medical treatment.

In June 1994, the 18 supervisors were taught better ways of building mud block houses, a better method of making soap that does not involve imported caustic soda, and a better cooking method that conserves firewood. They then went on to teach these methods to classes in their regions. There are plans for locally grown cotton to be made into cloth, for other leguminous plants to be introduced, and for reviving a traditional way of making salt. The overall aim is to help the Ngbaka people to be as self sufficient as possible, a significant goal in a country where hyperinflation and demonetization is a fact of life.

7. Monitoring and evaluation

Every three months when the supervisors come into the center they account for the following items:

The money obtained from book sales

The administrative assistant checks their inventory of books against the money they have brought in. Only after that check is made are they able to give an order for new stock.

Their time

The coordinator of the program studies the daily diary of each supervisor and gives them help and advice as needed.

The progress of the classes

The supervisors have a record sheet for each village. Each time they visit classes in a village, they mark this on the village sheet, giving such information as the number of students and lesson taught. These sheets are studied at the quarterly meeting to see how the classes are progressing and to sort out any problems with the supervisors.

Statistics

Every three months, each supervisor fills in a statistics sheet for his region. This sheet asks for information such as new classes started, new participants according to age and sex, and teacher training courses held.

8. Future plans

By the end of 1995, there will be 22 literacy supervisors, that is, one for each church region and two for some particularly large regions. Two of these supervisors are members of the Catholic church; the rest are from the two Protestant denominations.

By the end of 1995, almost all villages should have at least a Stage 1 class. The “bulge” in Protestant churches should be moving up into classes in Stages 2 and 3 by then. It has been noted that in the Protestant churches there has already been an increase in slower students beginning Stage 1. This seems to be due to that fact that the quicker, more enthusiastic adults joined the classes as soon as they were available. (As the classes have been available to Catholics for a much shorter time, this is not yet a problem in their churches.) To help deal with this situation, an alphabet prereading book is being produced. This will be tried out in a controlled test to see if it helps the students in Stage 1.

There is a need to train an Ngbaka national in book production. At present the main need is for someone who can edit books, but later, if the country improves at all economically, Ngbakas need to be able to independently produce books locally. A writers workshop was held early in 1994, and there are many potential writers. It is hoped that a monthly newspaper will be started. The individual serving as graphics artist and production manager is producing a prereader that has pictures drawn by local artists. A new hymnbook has recently been produced, and cassettes are being made to teach the new songs (they also include Scripture readings). It is hoped that listening centers will be set up under the auspices of “Hosanna.”

At the beginning of 1994, a pilot Ngbaka reading and writing program was begun in the first year of the primary school in five pilot schools. In September 1994, 12 more schools were added and the program extended to Stage 2 for the original schools. SIL is providing technical assistance to the program. Funding is being sought for an extension of this technical assistance to the first three classes in all the 200 Ngbaka primary schools. If this actually gets going on a wide scale, it will help to reinforce the importance of literacy at the village level.

9. Conclusion

(1995). *Notes on Literacy*, 21(4).

Page 11.

The number of adult students presently enrolled in literacy classes (33,000 at the beginning of 1995) is probably one of the largest numbers found in an SIL-related project. The reasons for this follow.

9.1. Size of the population

There are over a million speakers of Ngbaka. The actual percentage of people attending classes is in fact very small.

9.2. Local motivation

The Ngbaka people as a whole have a real thirst for education and knowledge of new things that will improve their lifestyle. There is little resistance to change as such.

9.3. The state of Zaire

The present situation within the country has left a void in terms of education, literature, and general progress that the Ngbaka literacy program is seen by many people to fill.

9.4. The flexibility and simplicity of the program

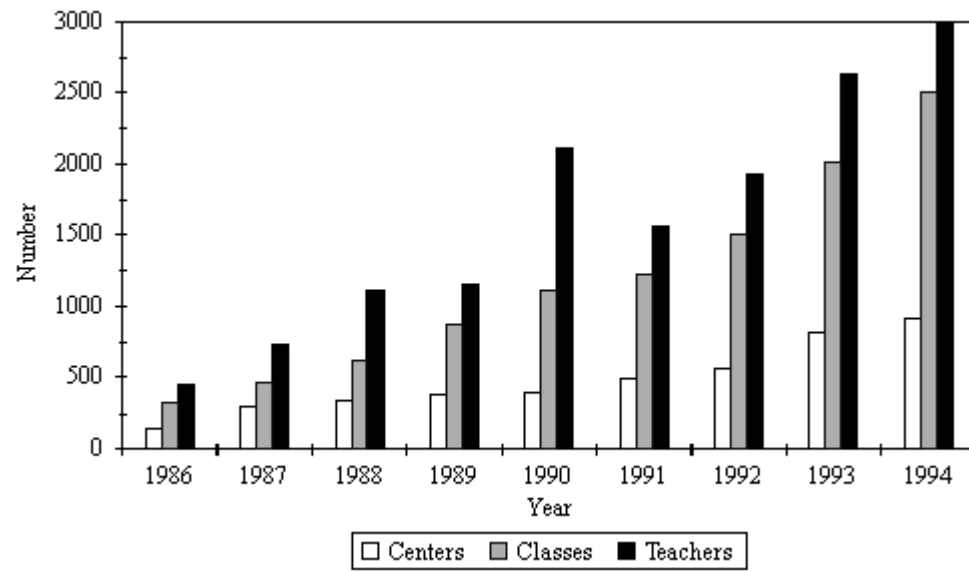
All concerned with the program from the earliest days have tried to let local needs and demands shape the program. In addition, right from the beginning, the simplest possible teaching methods have been chosen so that a local literate can learn enough in three days to begin teaching a class.

9.5. Outside funding

There is no way that the program could have developed to its present size without outside funding for most things, such as subsidizing the cost of the books used in the program.

There is now a big question mark over the future of the program. It would be quite possible that another 200,000 Ngbakas would seek to join the classes in the next five years. A situation could arise, where almost every Ngbaka village has most of its adult population in classes or serving as teachers. However, this would require major funding and a building up of the local infrastructure, perhaps on the lines of a nongovernmental organization. Are we, as members of SIL, willing to contemplate a situation where programs initiated by us provide basic education for an entire population? These are questions that we need to consider as we confront the situation in Zaire.

Appendix



Ngbaka Literacy