

**FUNCTIONAL LITERACY FOR EMPOWERMENT:
PERSPECTIVES AND ISSUES**

THE PROCEEDINGS OF A ROUND TABLE

SUPPORTED BY

FORUM FOR AFRICAN WOMEN EDUCATIONALISTS, KENYA

In Collaboration with

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE ACADEMY OF NIGERIA, ABUJA

EDITED BY

L. ABEKE ADESANYA, PH.D.

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LITERACY AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION AMONG ADOLESCENT HAWKERS

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Introduction

To many people, literacy appears to be an issue among adults or adult learners, but little do they realise that many of the adolescents in schools and out of schools are also infested with the virus called illiteracy, whereas the very first objective of primary education as stipulated in the National Education Policy is literacy in the 3Rs. It is very sad to report here that in spite of the persistent efforts made by the Federal Government to educate all by the year 2000, through the Universal Primary Education (UPE), 1976, 6-3-3-4, Mass Literacy Campaigns, Universal Basic Education (UBE) and other, Obemear (1995) has described the education sector of the nation as an unprofitable industry. Also in a recent study by Folaranmi (1998) it was found out that majority of students in the public secondary schools in Oyo State cannot read and write English Language proficiently which happens to be the *lingua franca* in Nigeria. As a matter of fact, Sullivan and Howe (1999) corroborates this finding with staggering statistics that between 15% and 30% of all school children have significant problems of learning to read and most of them come from low-income families.

Be that as it may, many of these young people in spite of their predicament in the school, are also saddled with the responsibility of augmenting their parents income through hawking of wares and goods after school hours. Some go to market places and busy streets, others just hawk around the nook and crannies in their neighbourhood while some sit at particular spots to sell their goods. Hawking is a common problem all over the world as Carlisle (1999) observes that transport corporations in London are using the courts to rid the stations of illegal hawkers. These children engage in the business of hawking because they are poor and they need to make ends meet. Sullivan Howe (1999) asserts that children living in poverty who have reading problems are at high risk for school failure, dropping out of school early and for low literacy and

chronic unemployment in adulthood. This cycle that begins with reading problems in childhood, virtually guarantees that most of these children will live close to or in poverty when they reach adulthood, as in time with their own children. Because of the enormous social and economic consequences of this cycle of poverty and low literacy, it is clearly in the interest of the nation to prevent and reduce reading problems among adolescent hawkers as their population increases daily in our cities.

Objectives of the Study

This study has four objectives:

- (a) to examine what children and adolescent hawkers believe about their literacy level in the 3rs; and determine how their belief can help them in their academic performance at school;
- (b) to determine the role played by their parents in influencing the children/adolescent hawkers beliefs about education;
- (c) to examine what their parents believe about their children's performance at school through the literacy environments created at home;
- (d) to develop intervention programmes aimed at increasing the adolescent hawkers interest in school work, so as to promote their literacy level and alleviate future poverty.

Significance of Study

The importance of achieving these objectives are as follows: The result will be a set of specifications that can be used to design interventions with a sound scientific base and therefore, a high probability of success, the social and economic benefits of such interventions for children and adolescent hawkers in Oyo and Ogun States and for the country as a whole would be immense.

Explanation of Basic Concepts

The following terms are defined as used in the study: poverty, literacy and hawking.

Poverty: There is no general consensus on any meaningful definition of poverty in literature. But the views expressed by these authors satisfy the meaning of poverty in this study. Schubert (1994) using the report in the Development policy of the Federal German Government explains poverty to be a serious social problem that contributes to the inability of individuals to meet their basic needs. The Longmans dictionary of Contemporary English defines poverty as the state of being poor; Hence, being poor, unable to meet this basic needs and inability to lead a decent life all depict the meaning of poverty intended by these authors of this study. In the U.S., 15% of the population had incomes below the poverty line while in Nigeria, masses of people most especially women and children live below the poverty line.

Literacy: Literacy is the ability of an individual to read and write in the 3Rs i.e. reading, writing and arithmetic. The National Literacy Act in the U.S. defines literacy as "an individual's ability to read, write and speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop ones knowledge and potential. In fact, it is interesting to mention here that the very first objectives of primary education in the National Policy on Education is the inculcation of permanent literacy and numeracy and the ability to communicate effectively. But what exists in the real situation of adolescent hawkers is the contrary, having passed through the primary system. There is a linkage between literacy and poverty according to the National Institute for Literacy in United States. Forty-three per cent of people with the lowest literacy skills live in poverty. Seventeen per cent receive food stamps, and seventy per cent have neither permanent nor part time employment.

Hawking: Hawking is generally used to refer to a chaotic market practice with no defined official location for sale of items by individuals or groups. In a strict sense, a hawker can be an individual who uses a beast of burden or other simple means of transport to carry wares as distinct from a peddler who carries her wares bodily. bodily. In this paper, however, hawking means carrying wares around by hand in trays on the

head for sale by adolescents especially girls. In effect all persons who hawk either in the market place or in the neighbourhood of where they live who are between the age bracket of 11 - 17 years constitute the target for this work.

There are the professional child hawkers. These are full-time hawkers who have no opportunity to be educated in formal school. Whereas the part-time child hawkers are those who attend formal schools and only hawk after school hours or during holidays to supplement the family's income.

The unknown burden of the girl-child: The girl as we are all aware has some hopes and aspirations about her future career and marriage. But more often than not certain unknown and unexpected burden hinder her from accomplishing her dreams. Some items of the burden as illustrated in a diagram are people, pregnancy, poverty, illiteracy and diseases. Others include activities they engage in to fend for themselves which expose them to a lot of hazards like hawking working as maids in shops and canteens and other related activities. The situation these girls face is remediable. Social worker, adult educators and community development officers as change agents are hereby urged to design programmes that would enable them cope with the burden.

Havoc of Hawking

There is no gainsaying the fact that hawking exposes the adolescent to a lot of dangers. The very first one is the danger of illiteracy which drifts them into a lifelong economic dependency. In a situation where there is little or no time to rest or sleep as a result of hawking wares about, the adolescent lacks concentration and participation in class, they therefore end up with poor grades. They lose the opportunity to further their education in tertiary institutions and are already in a developmental trajectory to low income in adulthood.

The influence of hawking on delinquent behaviour of children cannot be over emphasized. Hawking and street trading no doubt exposes the adolescents to gangsterism, smoking, drug abuse, premarital sex, pilfering, truancy and a host of other vices all of which could help a child lay a foundation for adult criminality. Hawking also exposes our young people to physical injuries, diseases, and death. They constitute a menace on the high ways as they try to sell their goods at all costs. Perhaps that is

why Carlisle (1999) reported that illegal hawkers endanger the lives of legitimate commuters with their activities. Sometimes, "hit and run" drivers hit them and injuries sustained from such accidents result into death. Kidnappers and ritual killers also have the young people as their targets, hawkers are more vulnerable to such attacks than other groups of children. A lot of cases involving kidnapping and ritual killing of youngsters are not reported, because their families usually accept the situation when they do not know the whereabouts of their wards.

Strategies

- We must appreciate the enormity of the problems ourselves. We must be prepared to forego whatever individual benefits we reap from the practice and be committed to actively eradicating it.
- This calls for sensitization and education of other women who may not be as privileged as we are and mobilising both rural and urban women alike to appreciate the ills of hawking; how it erodes educational and developmental opportunities of the girl-child and condemns her to low educational status which perpetuates poverty.
- Ready avenues of sensitization and mobilization could come through women's organizations or NGOs.
- Radio jingles may well do the trick if they carry the message that child hawkers must not lose time that should be profitably spent in the classroom; or be devoted to mathematics, sciences or computer studies. Sensitization at this level is very important. Times have changed, the traditional setting is giving way to new pressures and the girl-child should be brought up and educated to cope in the new world. The motivation should be properly spelt out so that the traditionalist can understand and appreciate the need to realign obsolete values in the face of challenges of today. We are on the threshold of the next millenium; no girl should be caught in the time warp.

We on our part are happy to report that the "I.I.E.P." the girl project which is an acronym of these four words - inform, enlighten, educate and prepare the girl is working hard in the secondary schools to develop skills in girls which will

enable them cope with the demands of the unknown burden. The "I.I.E.P." the girl project is an exciting 2 hour programme designed for the secondary school students but targeted at girls. At the end of the programme, different groups of girls with varying problems ranging from teenage pregnancy, school failure, maltreatment, child abuse and others usually emerge whom we work with for solutions to their problem.

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