# LITERACY PROJECT FOR GIRLS IN UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES: ITS EFFECT IN BUILDING POSITIVE PEACE

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# Abstract

Positive peace involves a sustainable cycle of peace that lasts from generation to generation. The concept of this type of peace seems impossible to achieve in many regions of the global South because of all it would seem to take to achieve it. Despite their innate ability to be key instruments of peace, many women in Nigeria have not been able to activate this ability as a result of low levels of illiteracy, causing them to be dependent on males, hence vulnerable to all forms of violence, and making them unable to contribute to their societies. Education is known to give people access to employment in formal organizations, and opportunities for career advancement. Education gives women the knowledge and confidence they need to make independent decisions that will be of benefit to them. Education also gives women the ability to become financial contributors in the home, and this prevents domestic violence arising from dependency. Regardless of one’s diligence, without education, there is a limit to where one can get to in one’s career. The purpose of this article is to analyze poor reading ability as a risk factor for illiteracy and poverty among women, as well as violence against women and girls. Purposive sampling technique was used to select 25 female students from five public primary schools in Sagamu town of Ogun state, Nigeria. A one-on-one in-depth interview was conducted with female students who were beneficiaries and their teachers before and after introducing the female students to phonemic awareness. Results showed an improvement in the girls’ academic performance and an unusual interest in reading. There was also an interest to complete their basic education and proceed to secondary school. Some recommendations gotten as feedbacks from the beneficiaries, their teachers and their parents included provision of reading areas furnished with easy-to-read books for the girls to practice their newly acquired reading skills and an urgent need to train teachers on how to use phonics to teach children how to read.

**CHAPTER ONE**

# Introduction and Background

Preschool is where pre-primary education takes place. In pre-primary education, children learn the foundation of literacy skills. Research has proven that girls who attended pre-primary education performed well academically and graduated from secondary school compared to girls who did not attend pre-primary education (Schweinhart, 2013). This claim was backed up by Stanovich (1986) when he revealed that children who develop reading skills at an early age get better at reading and have more cognitive development that their peers, for later academic success. Leahy and Fitzpatrick (2017) reported that reading is needed for academic success to happen and there is need for readers to be able to make sense of texts that they read (Lems, Miller & Soro, 2017). If students must remain in school and graduate, they must be able to study well. However, without the ability to read well and make sense of what they are reading, students cannot study, hence cannot have academic success (Kudo & Bazan, 2013). Reading makes up the foundation of all school learning (Cimmiyoti, 2013), and without it, students cannot independently access the knowledge that the school is trying to pass across. Reading entails forming words to assign meanings to texts.

Education for girls boosts their confidence and opens their minds up to exploring new heights. It brings about socialization and gives girls a sense of possibilities. It makes them dream big and envision possibilities. This gives them a push to further their education and climb career ladders, making them financially independent.

Unfortunately, despite this realization of making girls education a priority in many parts of

Nigeria, many girls still drop out of school as a result of consistent poor academic performance resulting from inability to read. According to a report by Hernandez (2011) in a longitudinal study, children who cannot read by the end of the third year of primary school are very likely to drop out of school. The report further showed that only 20 percent of Nigerian adults who have completed primary education can read. Reynolds and Temple (2007) confirmed that pre-primary education increased the likelihood to remain in school and complete one’s education and is also likely to reduce drop-out rates. Poor reading ability at the start of school brings about demotivation and low self-esteem which make learners disengage from reading (Snow et al, 1998), and eventually drop out due to frustration. Many girls will rather opt to become a man’s responsibility, as long as they get every day’s meal, than keep being frustrated at school. On the other hand, girls who read are more likely to enjoy schooling and pass examinations. Snow et al, 1998 proved this in a study that revealed that good early reading skills bring about constant practice and motivation to keep learning. According to Guthrie and Wigfield (1999), motivation acts as a link between reading and reading achievement. Hence, when a learner can read, she is motivated to keep reading and achieve success. This achievement keeps her in school.

 Girls who read are likely to further their education and become women who are assertive as a result of the confidence that their being literate gives them. For girls who may not further their education due to financial constraints, reading still gives them an upper edge over those who cannot read, as they can access opportunities through their ability to read. They are likely to get better paying jobs than girls who have no literacy skill regardless of their competence. A study conducted in India reported that educated women are more likely to take up employment in formal organizations, thus bringing about economic stability, and poverty alleviation (Acharya and Sanjaya, 2008). Female drop-outs are also very prone to early marriage. WHO reports that the longer girls stay in school, the less likely it is for them to get married early. Early marriage for girls leaves them vulnerable to maternal and child mortality, a lifetime of extreme poverty and domestic violence. All of these results will never bring about positive peace.

A girl who can read becomes a mother who will encourage her children’s education, be intentional about the health of her family and will most likely earn some income and increase her income. Every home will have more than one source of income, hence reduced poverty levels and better national economy.

# Problem Statement

There is a positive correlation between poor literacy skills and school drop-out rates.

(Hernandez, 2011). Based on various socio-economic and cultural factors, girls are more likely than boys to drop out of school (Ali Yassin, 2020). A study in Nigeria reported that poor reading ability is a factor influencing poor academic performance of primary school pupils. With the socio-economic and cultural factors affecting the high drop-out rates of girls, there is therefore a higher chance of a girl who continually fails at school as a result of inability to read and comprehend exam questions to drop out. When a girl drops out of school, she becomes dependent on those who will provide for her since she does not have what it takes to meet her needs. Her dependency would make her vulnerable to abuse from her provider. She is not likely to speak up, say no to, or walk out of abusive situations. Even when she gets lucky to take up a trade, she will miss out on so many opportunities that will have improved her state of living and that of her unborn children because of her inability to read or lack of required qualifications. Majority of the students attending state public schools in Ogun state, Nigeria have reading difficulties. Many of them cannot read, hence the major cause of examination malpractice and high school drop-out rates. Examination malpractice within the classroom is a social vice that produces young people who eventually become a menace to the society.

# Goals and Objectives

The general objective of the social change initiative was to provide and build literacy skills in girls living in low-income and underserved communities in Ogun state through the use of phonics.

The specific objectives of the social change initiative were;

* To provide and build phonemic awareness in the beneficiaries.
* To build the reading confidence of beneficiaries and give them a sense of independent reading ability.
* To incite reading interest in the beneficiaries.
* To invoke an interest of the beneficiaries in further studies

The main goal of the social change initiative was to teach girls living in low-income and underserved communities in Ogun state how to read independently within three months, in order to increase school retention among female students and reduce extreme poverty among women.

This goal was achieved by targeting public primary schools where such girls could be found.

Other goals that stem from the main goal are;

* Developing communities of healthy homes as a result of the presence of educated mothers. A mother is a child’s first teacher, caregiver and influencer. Hence, the foundation of what a child will eventually be later in life is dependent on the mother’s input (Mushtaq et al, 2016). With literacy, mothers can work together with teachers to improve learning experiences of their children, this will help give children good future prospects, making them better citizens of the nation as backgrounds determine what type of citizen a person will be (Duncan et al, 2010).
* Developing a generation of women who understand their rights. When girls get education, they stand higher chances of having peaceful matrimonial homes because of the enlightenment that education gives them about their rights
* Reducing all forms of violence against women. Women who are uneducated are more prone to domestic violence than women who are educated ( Coutinho et al, 2015). Also, with education comes the requirement for gainful employment, hence income. When women contribute to the family income, they are less likely to be victims of domestic violence (Naved, 2018; Pickover et al., 2017). Wife beaters are generally bullies, and since bullies prey on the weakness of their victims, some studies have argued that wives get beaten up due to powerlessness arising from their housewife status (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1990). Therefore, educating girls will bring more peaceful coexistence in the home as a result of lower rates of domestic violence.

# Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

**Challenge 1**: The head teachers of the selected schools were not going to give me access to the girls until I took permission from the state ministry of education. The permission was taking so long to get approved. I was running out of time and I needed to act fast.

**Mitigation Strategy**: I decided to use my influence as a Rotary Peace Fellow and a former teaching fellow of Teach For Nigeria. With the Rotary International customized cards that the

Makerere Peace Centre gave me, I approached the Education Secretary of the state and explained my mission. I was eventually granted permission to go ahead with the project, and offered one of the participating schools as venue for the project.

**Challenge 2**: Teaching anyone to read requires certain resources like phonics materials, audiovisuals and assisting teachers. The venue for the project was a public school and had no appropriate facilities that 21st century schools have. There was no electricity and projector or interactive boards to use to project the audio-visual materials I had gotten for them.

**Mitigation Strategy**: I made use of my laptop and got a loud speaker. They were just 25 girls, so they could all see the laptop screen. As a school administrator of a private preschool, I made use of the teaching resources and visual materials from the school for the project as the public school did not have any of these materials.

**Challenge 3:** As much as it seemed I had it all under control, there was still a need to re-inforce what the girls were learning at the reading classes in their various classrooms while at school. There was a need for sustainability or continuity in their formal classrooms. Their teachers needed to be available and carried along in the phonemic awareness so that they can continue in the classrooms. However, the teachers were not interested in doing the after-school hours activity. They all claimed they would be tired after school hours and would not be able to join the reading classes.

**Mitigation Strategy:** I had the contacts of some teaching fellows of Teach For Nigeria. So I reached out to them and I got three fellows from three of the participating schools. They not only jumped on the project to assist me as volunteers, but also took the knowledge they gained in the process back to the classrooms to train the classroom teachers.

**CHAPTER TWO**

# Literature Review

Nigeria being a third world country where illiteracy rate is prevalent would require literacy education for peace building. Women’s literacy is known to bring about sustainable development and the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Koffi Anan concluded that in general, literacy is a pre-requisite for peace. Literacy programs also bring about reading success in children. With illiteracy comes poverty and with poverty comes poor reading ability (Watts, 2022) as a result of limited academic opportunities and hence low or no access to quality education (Dickerson & Popli, 2016; Cooper & Stewart, 2021).

Girls are usually on the receiving end and their education always suffers whenever there are financial constraints in the home. In Malawi for instance, Kadzamira and Rose (2003) reported that in the absence of school fees, girls in the home would usually be made to drop out of school and Glick and Sahn (2000) reported that an income change in Guinea homes has a significant impact on girls’ education while it does not affect the education of the boys in any way. Again, a study in China by Brown and Park (2002) affirmed that lack of school fees affects girls the more. The study revealed that 47 percent of girls drop out of school due to school fees as compared to

33 percent of boys. In many cases, child labour affects girls’ education more than it affects boys (Kane, 2004), as they would either have to miss classes regularly or drop out of school entirely. Another study linked education access to child labour affecting girls the most, revealing that girls take on tedious domestic work that keep them away from school most of the time. The study also reported that rural girls suffer this fate than urban girls (Andvig et al, 1999; Blunch & Verner,

2001; Gondwe, 2016; Colclough et al, 2000; Ersado, 2005). This study has been backed up by research that reports that illiteracy in females is very high compared to males, and more especially in rural areas. In Iraq for example, almost 50 percent of women between the ages of

15 and 24 are illiterate (UNESCO, 2011). In Nigeria, according to statistica (2018), as shown in Figure 1, more than 60 percent of females in the rural areas as compared to 40 percent of illiterate men.



## Figure 1: Chart showing literacy rate by area and by gender

Women are supposed to be the first teachers of the children who will make up the society. They are the ones who determine the healthy and strong foundations that children need to achieve academic success in their early years. A study by Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) proved that children from poor homes are not as healthy as children from financially comfortable homes, and low attendance caused by poor health inhibits reading success for such children. Hence, where there are illiterate mothers, unhealthy children with poor reading abilities will abound. These children will grow up uneducated and the poverty cycle will continue.

Pregnancy is another factor that keeps access to education away from girls as a result of gender based violence. (Shahidul and Karim, 2015). The fact that girls are asked to leave school when the pregnancy begins to show does not help matters. Many girls opt for motherhood where domestic demands, gender inequalities in the classroom or reading difficulties make academic performance poor.

 Another instance where girls bear the brunt of poor access to education can be seen in a study by Brock and Cammish (1997). The study indicated that female children usually drop out to take care of younger siblings. Lastly, cultural practices that favour the boys over the girls, giving girls little or no incentives or reason to want to stay in school is a huge challenge facing girls education. Many families do not think education of the girl will bring value to them because of her future marriage into another family, hence, they pay no attention to girls education and would rather invest in boys education where it seems there is economic prospects (Boyle et al 2002)

Despite all of these challenges faced by girls from low income communities, a girl who has been able to learn how to read and write will not have problems in the future taking on opportunities that may require literacy skills. Unfortunately, it is these low income communities that lack standard pre-primary education under which the acquisition of literacy skills by school children falls (Kabore and Pilon n.d).

# Methods and Design

The plan was to select girls from five different schools, who had zero knowledge of how to read and gather them together at a venue for an hour everyday (Mondays to Thursdays). Twenty five girls in upper primary classes from five public schools were selected using purposive sampling technique. The girls had zero reading ability were selected and their teachers and head teachers helped to select them. A one-on-one in-depth interview was conducted with female students who were beneficiaries and their teachers before and after introducing the female students to phonemic awareness. Four teaching fellows were also involved. Asides the fact that they taught the girls in their various schools, they also worked hand in hand with the classroom teachers of the girls. A baseline test was conducted on the girls to assess their previous reading knowledge, and it was discovered that some girls could not even recognize the letters of the alphabet, while the others had no prior reading ability. Hence, the beneficiaries were split into two groups. Group A was made up of the girls who could not recognize the letters of the alphabet, and Group B was made up of the girls who could recognize all the letters but did not know their phonic sounds, hence could not blend sounds together to form words.

**CHAPTER THREE**

# Activities and Interventions

**Community Entry**: When I met with some reluctance from the ministry of education, I decided to visit the education secretary with my Rotary fellowship identity. At first, she was receptive when she saw my business card, but she got hesitant when she learnt that the girls will have to attend the reading classes after school hours. According to her, something bad may happen to them on their way to the venue where the reading classes would be taking place. She wanted me to change my plans. So, rather than use the venue that I planned originally, she wanted me to be visiting the 5 selected schools during their 30 minutes break for the reading classes. However, I knew that if I did this, the project would not be effective because I would have to be rotating the schools (One school per day). If I did that, the girls would not be able to learn all they were supposed to learn within the planned three months. It would just be once a week instead of one hour each day for effectiveness.

So, I came up with a plan to provide a vehicle to be picking them up from their various schools after school hours every day to the venue and then dropping them back at their schools an hour later. I also made arrangements for snack feeding every day for the girls since they would have been at school all day and would have been hungry after school is over. The education secretary was impressed and she gave her consent.

Next, I went back to the selected schools to visit all the head teachers and to explain all that the project entailed. They were open to it as it would also boost their status if most of their learners were genuinely doing well academically. I requested for their help in selecting five girls whose reading abilities were below 20 percent. Many of the girls wanted to participate, but we eventually had to select just five in each school. Next, I met with some teaching fellows in the selected schools and four of them came onboard. They helped me to distribute parent consent forms to the girls to take home to their parents to fill and submit. They also helped me get down the phone numbers of the selected girls’ parents. Fifty phone numbers (both parents of 25 girls) in all were reached and they all gave their consents, expressing appreciation in our interest in helping their children be better in their academics and showing their willingness in cooperating with us.

**Fundraising Activity:** After successfully convincing the education secretary to give a go-ahead by developing the transportation and feeding ideas, there was need to raise funds for these logistics. So, I looked out for Rotary clubs around me that could help. Fortunately, the Rotary Club of Sagamu Metropolitan was interested in the project as they were also working towards implementing a Basic Education and Adult Literacy project being one of Rotary’s focus areas. They donated a sum for the transportation logistics and then some other individual donations came in as well after I had made a call for donors on social media. Altogether, I raised 150,000 Naira to implement the project. All other funds came from my pocket.

**Implementation:** The major partners were Rotary Club of Sagamu Metropolitan and Teach a Child a Language (TACAL). TACAL is an organization based in Nigeria that targets children for language literacy. They worked with us to polish the girls’ use of English and teach them how to communicate well in English. On the weekend before the literacy classes started, TACAL trained the four teaching fellows and three other volunteers who registered interest in being of help with the project.

Every day, for three months, the girls were picked up at their various schools and brought to the venue of the literacy classes which was a building within one of the beneficiary schools. The classes held on Mondays to Thursday for an hour. Group A beneficiaries were taught the letters of the alphabet and Group B were taught the phonic sounds of each letter. Resources used to make the classes interesting and easy to grasp were audio-visual resources. Gamification of lessons was done as well and colourful worksheets were used. All these were done to make the classes interesting enough for the girls to continue attending.

# Key Findings and Impact

On the first day of the literacy classes, a baseline test was conducted to assess the previous knowledge of the girls. It was discovered that some of the girls could not recognize most of the letters of the alphabet. These girls were classified as Group A, while the remaining were classified as Group B.

At the end of every week, the girls were assessed to record their progress which was captured on video. Six weeks into the project, girls in Group A could recognize the letters and the girls in Group B had phonemic awareness, could read sentences containing CVC words and attempt comprehension questions. By the eight week, girls in Group B had started to read books independently, but under supervision, and the girls in Group A were reading two-letter words. During the project, the girls showed enthusiasm for the reading classes as their improvement was evident. By the end of the second term examinations, the academic reports of 12 of the girls showed a sharp contrast between first term and second term examinations.

Lastly, a one-on-one discussion with the teachers of some of the girls revealed that the parents hardly raised eyebrows about their daughters’ academic performances and hardly ever complained about their inability to read.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

# General Conclusion

One of the reasons so many children in primary school cannot read is because of the inability of teachers to teach phonemic awareness skills (Mohammed and Amponsah, 2018).

Based on the social change initiative that was done as a form of intervention to provide girls in low income communities with reading skills, there is an obvious evidence that the use of phonics is very effective in the process of learning how to read. The study confirmed that reading ability of a student greatly contributes to the student’s academic outcomes. Academic excellence is a function of ability to read, comprehend and analyze examination questions. Girls are likely to get scholarships when they perform very well academically. The scholarships in turn make them achieve academic success (Ganem & Manasse, 2011) and give them the motivation, inspiration and the opportunity to further their education (Amanullah, 2013).

The study by Snow et al (1998) which revealed a positive correlation between reading ability and motivation for success confirmed the result of this social change initiative. The girls showed interest in continually attending the 3-month long reading classes when they realized that in the first two weeks, they could already say the phonic sounds of each letter and blend them together to form words. This in turn motivated them to continue practicing their reading skill. By the end of the intervention, there was an obvious improvement in their academics as reported by their teachers.

Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) claim that reading competence happens as readers continually read. This suggests that the beneficiaries of the intervention project should be exposed to more books to help them practice their reading skills and get better at it.

# Recommendations

1. The government should make arrangements to strictly recruit early year’s teachers in the preprimary sections of public schools.
2. More attention should be paid to the pre-primary sector.

Libraries should be built and furnished in public primary schools to incite reading interest in children and perfect their reading skills

# Sustainability Plan

During the implementation stage of the social change initiative, I involved four teaching fellows of Teach For Nigeria who were posted to the classrooms of the beneficiaries to reduce education inequalities by teaching STEM subjects including English. These teaching fellows were did not also have phonemic awareness until they volunteered to work with me on the literacy project. By the third week, they already knew what phonics sounds were and how to teach literacy using phonics. The project gave them a teaching-practice experience which they took back to their various classrooms and started to use for their other students. One of them shared a video with me of how she uses the phonics to continue with our beneficiaries in the classroom. As a result of her reinforcement, the girls got better at their reading in no time.

The classroom teachers have also learned from watching the teaching fellows teach phonics in class. The fellows and the teachers have access to preschool reading materials which I made available to them. So, this way, learning can continue within the four walls of the formal classroom even when I am gone.

At the end of the literacy project, the girls were given colourful story books to practice with. Practice makes perfect. With consistent practice of their reading skills, they will get a good grasp of reading. Also, part of the sustainability plan is the use of a mobile library where our major partner, Sun Books, an initiative of the World Literacy Foundation, comes in. Rather than build libraries that would be locked up by the head teachers, hence rendered useless, we will be visiting the schools with colourful story books three days a week, and during their recess, we would have a reading activity with the girls. This will help build up their reading ability. The colours as well as the stories that they look forward to following will stimulate their reading interests, gradually improving their reading ability.

There is also a plan for the private elementary school I work as a school administrator to sponsor one of the girls who can read and analyze comprehension passages well to complete her education there. This way, she can have a chance at a more quality education that will be provided by the private school, and prepare her for scholarship opportunities to further her education. This awareness of a scholarship has provided some motivation for the girls to strive towards sharpening their reading skills.

Lastly, I have just gotten selected by the United States Consulate for the Carrington Fellowship. I was selected based on this project which I included in my application. I talked about the impact I made during my Rotary Peace Fellowship and how I intend to continue the project for sustainability purpose. As a Carrington Fellow, I will be getting the support of the U.S Consulate in getting grants to purchase at least 200 colourful story books for beginners and intermediary readers to include in the mobile library.

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