

The Cultural Problems of Educating the Homeless Children

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Abstract: *Faced with the mounting social embarrassment caused by the homeless children abandoned at the mercy of their Mallams in the ubiquitous qu'ranic schools in the major northern cities of Nigeria, President Jonathan on 10th of April, 2012, inaugurated what one might call 'operation rescue the Almajirai School.' In inaugurating the school the president thought that the time had come when the nation should build on the moral foundations of the traditional school system to provide the almajirai with the conventional knowledge and skills that would enable them to fully realize their creative and productive potentials. But that noble thought was bedeviled by the hydra-headed cultural problems arising from political, economic, social and religious detractors. The paper examined these together with some other teething problems embedded in the body of the paper which ultimately exposed the education of the homelesas a herculean task to handle.*

I. Prologue

Homelessness is a crushing experience to human families. It upsets practically every facet of family life, harming in the process the physical and emotional health of family members. It meddles "with children's education and development, and frequently resulting in the separation of family members" (NCH Fact Sheet #7, p 1). This essay discusses the cultural problem of educating the homeless children. It will open with the exploration of the causes or history of homelessness. It will further discuss the political, economic, manpower, ecological structures of homeless education, the limitations as cultural problems militating against homeless education and then draws the conclusion.

II. The Causes

The causes of the ever increasing homelessness nowadays are hydra-headed. First among them is noted by Wright (1999:2) as the "deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill people." Americans had believed since 1960s that institutions were too impersonal and restrictive for treating the mentally ill persons. Consequently, community mental health centers were preferred to be more therapeutic. But as Wight (1999:3) further argues, the intention did not happen because according to him "community mental health center services were inadequate." Other major causes of homelessness are: poverty, almajirism, immigration, drug abuse, and inability of some families to support dependent adult members. Others are natural causes like drought, flood, fire etc. Furthermore, since the affordable housing became a thing of the past for the low-income earners, many families have been living in cars or makeshift homes (Wright, 1999:3). He further maintains that since 1981 Americans have faced the ugly trend of major cutbacks in federal funding for low-income earners. Coupled with these are the activities of the rent control agencies that have made the private sector unenthusiastic over building affordable housing (Wright, 1999:5).

Thompson (1997:31) suggests rightly that poverty is another major contributing factor to homelessness. He defines the nature of poverty here under discussion as when "people are not able to meet their own basic needs." When people are "hungry and malnourished; drinking unsanitary water; having no access to even basic health care such as immunizations against childhood diseases; living in crowded, unsafe, inadequate or no shelter; having no shoes or shirt to wear; being illiterate." The cause of this debilitating poverty is attributed to unemployment, low wage and wage discrimination. According to the 1986 US Bishop's Pastoral Letter, many women are employed but remain poor because their wages are too low." The Pastoral Letter contended that as many as "sixty percent of all women work in only ten occupations, and most new jobs for women are in areas with low pay and limited chances of advancement." The June 1999, article published by the National Coalition for the Homeless echoes the same opinion when it insists that "extreme poverty is growing more common for children, especially those in female-headed and working families" (p. 8). Moreover, Oduyoye (1995), notes further that the missionaries arrived in Africa with the mentality that women should learn the so called 'feminized professions;' hence they introduced their wives only to those poor trades that nonetheless, made them good women and housewives. She itemized those duties as knitting, crocheting, and embroidering. Other trades were sewing and training the apprentices to perpetuate that style of poor life. Oduyoye (1986:123), further explained that African patriarchal economic worldview placed the women and what they produce in such a poor view that all cash crops produced by women are so poorly sold that women would forever remain poor. She named cassava, cocoyam and pots often produced by women as the cheapest in the market. This means that

the earnings of the women are always structured within the very poor territory and therefore not enabling them to have enough pecuniary muscle to cater for their families. Though things are a little bit changing now with the new facelift giving to cassava cropping in this present administration; yet the real situation on ground is that many families are still very poor and therefore within the range of 'homelessness.'

2.1. Migration

Another major cause of homelessness is migration. Goldenberg and Goldenberg (1998, 289) cited Abe-Kim & Takeuchi, as saying that "more than ten million people migrated to the United States in the past twenty years, fully one-fourth of the gain in overall US population during that time period." They maintain that 1980s alone welcomed about eight million immigrants into the United States; adding that a total number of 8.8 million immigrants arrived in US shores that period alone. Among these people were the Africans, Asians, the Middle Easterners, Latin Americans and others. Majority of these immigrants are Hispanics from Mexico (Macias et al. 2000:238). Citing the 1997 National Research Council, Macias et al. (2000), estimated that between 1,000,000 and 1,100,000 of Mexican legal and illegal immigrants enter US every year. They insisted that by 2050 the population of Hispanic immigrants would hit 85 million. Many of these immigrants are undocumented and therefore will never search for formal employment. They often rely on underpaid menial jobs for survival. But what creates massive homelessness amongst these people is their large number, un-documentation and language barrier. When these people arrive into the country they move in with their extended families, creating a rowdy crowded household conditions. The extended family members help the documented new arrivals to navigate through the employment bottlenecks, "dealing with the language, cultural differences, child care and supervision (Macias et al.,2000, 239). Though they receive assistance and emotional support from the extended families, they create what McKinney Act of 1987 groups as "homelessness." The children of both the host and guest families suffer the homelessness. This is because the rooms are so crowded that the children have no place to do for instance, their homework, as we shall see later. And the fears of deportation manifest in the parents of undocumented immigrants affect adversely the progress of the children in the school.

Moreover, 'Almajirism' is another factor contributing to homelessness. Almajirai are the children of poor parentage who were sent to qur'anic school and abandoned at the mercy of their mallams. Their squeal number often overwhelms the mallams who normally send them begging for their upkeep. This type of education later metamorphosed into almajiri system of education which originated since 11th century AD long before the 1914 amalgamation of Nigeria (Alechenu, 2012). When the idea was muted and promoted by the leading lights of Islam, it was for the purpose of spreading Islamic knowledge and learning. According to Alechenu (2012), the system was boosted by the involvement of Borno rulers in qur'anic literacy. He added that the Sokoto Caliphate which was founded 700 years later through an Islamic revolution anchored on teachings of the Holy Qur'an also enhanced the running of similar qur'anic literacy. The almajiri system of education was later promoted and expanded by the Dan-Fodio revolution. At its inception, the school started with as few as 100 pupils but now it accounts for about 9.5 million out of Nigeria's estimated 10 million children who are not in the school (Alechenu, 2012).

As the number of pupils bulged through the intervening years feeding and place of sleep began to create an insurmountable nightmare for the mallams. Coupled with this is the high level of illiteracy together with the current growing harsh economic realities which are certainly forcing the rural poor parents to abandon their wards to the mallams in the Qur'anic schools. As a result, the system creates a crowd and rowdy situation where learning becomes very difficult. Though the mallams would have all the intentions to couch these pupils, yet they cannot because of squealing number. Hence, the almajirai neither get the qur'anic education properly nor enough skill to live meaningful life, hence many of them become homeless children who are easy tools in the hand of maleficent persons rending havoc all over Nigeria.

2.2 The political structure: Government policy of every nation sets the tune of various educating strata in their domain. In United States of America, for example, the government relied on the McKinney Assistance Act of 1987 to set the pact for educating the homeless children. The 1987 Act which was amended in 1990 and 1994 respectively, defines a homeless person as one who: (1) lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, or (2) lives in (a) a shelter, (b) an institution (other than a prison or other institutionalized facility), or (c) a place not ordinarily used as a sleeping accommodation for human beings (Stronge, 2000: 67).

People under this description are provided with unfettered access to public education as follows: (1) Homelessness alone should not be sufficient reason to separate students from the mainstream school environment [sec721 (3)]. (2) State and local educational agencies must 'adopt policies and practices to ensure that homeless children and youth are not isolated or stigmatized' [sec711 (g) (h)]. (3) Homeless children must get the same access to education that children with established residences receive: "Each state education agency shall ensure that each child of a homeless individual and each homeless youth has equal access to the same free

appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as provided to other children and youth” [721 (1) (Rafferty, 2000:109).

The choice of school placement for the homeless was further facilitated by the Congress in this way: Homeless children may attend (a) their “school of origin” through the end of the current school year, or if the child becomes homeless between academic years, for the following academic year, or (b) transfer into “any school that non-homeless students who live in the attendance area in which the child or youth is actually living are eligible to attend.” School of origin is defined as the school they had been attending when permanently housed or the school in which the child or youth was last enrolled, regardless of where the family is temporarily staying [722(g)(3)(A)](Rafferty, 2000:109).

The choice regarding school placement must be made “in the child’s or youth’s best interest” [722(g)(3) (A)]. The importance of the involvement of the parents in the education of their children is recognized by the Congress when it instructed that local education authorities “shall comply, to the extent feasible, with the request made by the parent or guardian regarding school selection” [722(3) (B)]. State education authorities must have procedures in place to resolve disputes regarding placement determinations [722(g)(1)(A)] (Rafferty pp. 108-109). With this then, the US government’s open policy on educating the homeless became apparent. Nonetheless, the Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 fettered some homeless people’s access to education when it limits international students to private schools and such students in grades 9 through 12 to only one year schooling in US, with prepaid tuition (Lee 1997, as cited in Mickelson, p. 240).

Moreover, in what looks like a new policy in Nigerian education, President Goodluck Jonathan recently inaugurated a N240m special boarding school at Gaji area of Sokoto State to arrest the aggravating situation of the almajiri plight. Drawing from the defunct educational trust fund (now Tertiary Education Trust Fund), the president decided to erect the edifice. The President’s decision was in response to the amelioration of the embarrassing exponential growth of the almajiri population in many cities of the north. With the avid interest on the development of functional youths and the betterment of the situation of the almajirai in particular, the president embarked on the project with the hope of turning Nigerian children into assets of future development. Since “knowledge is the pedestal on which a nation’s social cohesion and economic development depends,” President Jonathan decided to provide the almajiri pupils with conventional modern skills to enable them contribute meaningfully to the society. However, this government’s noble goal of providing access to quality education is not without its challenges. Since the sheer number of the almajiris coupled with the snail speed with which the structures are going around the nation, many almajirai and indeed many indigent children are yet to be registered, aggravating the nightmare of homelessness in the process.

Besides, the editorial of Punch April 23, 2012 faulted the President’s project on two grounds: one; that he dabbled into almajirai project which is solely centered on religion. He argues correctly that since Nigeria is multi religious, it is a gross mistake to be funding one single faith at the detriment of others. In his words “by committing federal resources to Quranic schools, the President has taken a dangerous step that could entangle the government in a messy constitutional, political and bureaucratic quagmire.” By this act the government is not only marginalizing other faith communities, but also contravening the 1999 Constitution which states that “The Government of the Federation or a State shall not adopt any religion as a State Religion.” It could actually be argued to be a serious oversight if the Federal Government is blinded by her zeal to provide functional education to almajirai citizens that would enable them attain their potentials. For in a country like Nigeria where multiethnic, multilingual and multi-religious is the structural formulation of the polity, no well-intentioned Nigerian will pretend that he/she is unaware of these formulations. This is even more worrisome when some State Governments have snatched mission initiated and funded schools without even compensating them: under the guise of ‘taking good care of them,’ whereas it was to punish the proprietors of those schools for daring to establish schools with religious underpinnings. The editorial further blamed the federal government for dabbling directly into the primary school education, which is solely reserved for States and Local Governments. In this way the FG is usurping the power of States and Local Governments, thereby rendering them insignificant and redundant. Hence, it is not difficult to see why the almajirai project may be tackling the homelessness of the Nigerian almajirai but definitely opens a kind of Pandora’s Box in the process.

2.3 Economic Structure: One of the greatest crippling experiences of homelessness is wherewithal to make money to sustain oneself. However, the homeless in general and particularly the children invariably depend heavily on the Governments, Churches, and various world organizations to obtain their sustenance as it can be noticed above.

In the United States, the Department of Education is the organ through which the Government reaches out to the masses on education matters. In the case of homeless, the Department gives money to the State Education Authorities who then dispenses to schools with the concern of the homeless children. In order to obtain the required money from the Department of Education, the State Education Authorities must establish the

Office of the Coordinator of Education to Homeless Children. It is then the duty of the coordinators to estimate and report (1) the number of homeless children (2) document the problems they experience gaining access to schools/preschools (3) progress made in addressing access barriers, and (4) the success of the state's Education for Homeless children. This exercise facilitates the school enrollment, attendance and success [722(f)(2)]. Again it is the duty of the coordinators to develop and execute the state plan that explains how the State Education Authorities will provide for the education of homeless children. Citing the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, Rafferty(2000) lists the obligation of the State as follows: State plans must contain provisions designed (a) to authorize personnel to make school placement determinations in the best interests of each homeless child; (b) to provide procedures for the prompt resolutions of disputes; (c) to develop programs for school personnel; (d) to ensure participation in both before and after school programs; (e) to address problems of access to, and placement of, children in schools, including transportation issues and enrollment delays, and (f) to demonstrate that state and local education agencies have developed policies to remove barriers to the enrollment and retention of homeless children and youth and not isolated or stigmatized [722(e)].

While the supervision of the program is the obvious duty of the Education Department, it took the persuasion of the advocates for homeless children to execute it. National Coalition for the Homeless had in 1989 filed lawsuit in the federal court that coerced the Department to implement their avowed duty. This boils down to the fact that though from 1987 the Act was signed into law, the Education Department dragged their feet in its implementation. Meanwhile, a lot of homeless children suffered untold hardship waiting for the Department to act. As a matter of fact Rafferty (2000) records that the funds were not made "available to states in timely manner until 1991, when a law mandated that ED award funds within 120 days." Even some delays continued up till 1995. However, in recent years there is dramatic improvement (p.111).

While the African Governments contribute immensely for the education of homeless children, the major contribution is from the churches and foreign organizations. For instance the bulk of educating over 100,000 homeless children in Kenya are borne by the Kenya Government, African Refugee Education Program Foundation, National Refugee Secretariat, and the Churches. However, more helps are coming from foreign organizations like Deutsche Gesellochaft fur Technishe Zusammenarbeit, Lutheran World Federation, Caritas International, UNESCO, (more on education), UNFPA, (reproductive health) and UNEP (on environmental activities). Personnel volunteers' together with many local workers provide unimaginable services in spite of logistical bottlenecks and human errors (The 2000 Global Appeal, p.69).Citing Abdulqadir, Alechenu (2012), explained that at its inception the Almajirai School was heavily supported by the state, communities, parents, zakkah, waqf; and indeed supplemented by teachers and pupils through farming.

2.4 The Manpower Structure: One of the most crippling banes of the homeless children is manpower. A lot of children are homeless due to the loss of their parents either to AIDS, family dysfunctionality, poverty or natural disaster as enumerated above. But at this moment in time the bulk of the homeless children are certainly from the Boko Haram insurgency. Homeless children with their parents are often the minority: the larger number is without their parents. Thus from the beginning homeless children face the uphill task of navigating the bitter world without familiar family members—that alone creates an untold insecurity in the psyche of the children. However, as we have said earlier, a lot of care givers and volunteers are rallied to the aid of these children. Catholic Church for instance is known for employing her nuns and volunteers to educate these children. In Kenya for instance one German Catholic priest devoted his apostolate to the teaching of the homeless. Now he has a lot of them with aids from the social workers employed by the Government and volunteers from the foreign aid workers. These workers work round the clock to make ends meet. They teach these children everything ranging from first alphabet to defecation, to catechism. Kakuma refugee camps in Kenya adds vocational training to cater for the unaccompanied minors who fled war turn Sudan, Somalia, Burundi and Ethiopia. Because these children are living in crowded refugee camps and makeshift homes, they could not study at home. Nor could they get adult help because the adult community staying with these children are either so occupied with what to eat or that they have never been to school at all and therefore could not give any academic help at all. Consequently, the teachers have to do overtime in order to enable the children cover both the day's class work and homework. Because of this, meals are provided at least twice daily to shore up the feeble children. Newman and Beck observed the same situation with the undocumented immigrants in US. According to them not only that the children suffer from crowded environment but that neither Yolanda nor her husband could help their child Jeffrey because none of them could speak English (p. 140). The result of this is that homeless children perform poorer than their peers in housed homes, in spite of the fact that teacher work overtime with them. The fact of the matter is that children are so overworked that they learn very little. This was the experience of Newman and Beck who tried by all means to help Jeffrey to learn only to discover that "he seemed to have only a vague notion of the meaning of the word Europe." And "other two sentences in the report referenced illustration that we in the original source from which the note were copied, but which would not be present in Jeffrey's report." Though they insisted in correcting the anomaly, yet, Jeffrey had only vague

understanding of what they were saying (p.138). Hence Maeroff (1998) observes, “the grinding poverty in which these children live and the deprivations it produces will continue to block their scholastic achievement, regardless of the quality of their education.”

2.5 The ecological structure. One of the fallouts of the systems theory is its attention to the progress of the relationship between human person and his/her environment. This is necessary as it depicts how humans develop within the materials around them. Durka (1986) in her work “Family Systems: A New Perspective For Youth Ministry,” defined this situation as an attention “to the progressive mutual accommodation between human persons and the changing environments in which they live. She maintains that this process affected by relations obtaining within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal in which the settings are embedded” (p. 81). This becomes necessary here as it monitors the progress a homeless child makes in his/her environment. It also monitors how the environment impacts on the child. The two environments that a homeless child dwells in this case are (1) the crowded homes; or places not ordinarily used as a sleeping accommodation for human beings. Such places are gutters, under the bridge, sidewalks, and makeshift camps. (2) The school.

Apparently, living places for the homeless children are never conducive for educational growth. This reveals why so many of them never do well in schools. Again, the idea of migrating from one place to another, offers nothing but uncertainty and intangible educational progress. Newman and Beck (2000) recorded that Jeffrey “attended at least eight schools during his elementary years, including four during 6th grade.” This affected him so badly that his father Jefferson was unable to secure any “meaningful academic records for him and his siblings” (p.141). Not only that, these children had no libraries, no books, no study tables, no chairs or stools in their camps, indeed, they had nothing to aid their home study. The only positive help in this situation is the type recorded by Macias et al. (2000) in the case of documented and undocumented homeless students. According to them extended family members assisted in obtaining services for their parents, navigating the cultural differences and language barriers. They also provided emotional support, childcare and supervision as well as help to disintegrate fears of deportation. Children from these families benefit in the sense that the warmth of the extended family though too warm at times because of its rowdiness brings a sort of joy to them. This fact that these families assuage their parents’ fears also puts some smile on the face of the children and therefore encourages studies no matter how little. In this way the environment treat them better than their peers who have no extended family to live with.

However, that little smile is overshadowed by the prevailing illness amongst the homeless children. The editorial of America, November 13, 1999 scores the illness very high in its analysis of American homeless children’s situation. The magazine says that poor health afflicts the homeless children twice the rate of their housed peers. It puts the percentage of chronic illness as high as 40 with Asthma as the most rampant. In effect this potentially leads to a high rate of absenteeism since Asthma has such a debilitating effect on the children as to keep them in the hospitals most of the time. The high rate of illness among the US homeless children for instance, is blamed on the substandard housing before they even become completely homeless. The magazine also reports the high rate of ulcers amongst the parents of these homeless children due to stress arising from battering. It puts an unbelievable percentage of women being physically or sexually abused at 92. The parents, who are mainly single women, are also crippled by the abuse of drugs and alcohol. This kind of environment affects the children emotionally and even stunts their physical growth. Added to this is that many of them may be staying in such interior places that may not give them easy access to school bus. The possibility of many of them not attending school at all is unarguably very high. Though the magazine puts the rate at one fifth but judging from the assessed environment, it is possible that greater number than one-fifth absenteeism is recorded on any given day. It is even worse in the third world countries where the situation is aggravated by destitution and stark ignorance (Alechenu, 2012). Such an environment is unarguably the worst for raising scholars.

Though at times it seems too tiresome because of the long hours of hard work, the school environment seems to be much better if handled well. As a matter of fact the only education a homeless student will ever boast of is the one acquired in the school. Macias et al. (2000) again recorded how the school provided hospitable environment to undocumented single parent Isabel Mercado and her children. When the school learned of the precarious situation of this family living in a car, they did not only appoint a veteran social worker Ms. Gomez to assist them but that the entire school staff rallied around them providing both extra lessons in the school and meals to the children. According to them “each of the children was paired up with a ‘buddy’ whom they knew would be a good friend and help them feel comfortable and not out of place within the school. Fees for field trips and other school activities were waived for them, or were paid by Ms. ‘Gomez’s office.” The school aided them in everything including toiletries, bilingual classes until they became proficient in English. The school even ended up employing Ms Mercado as an assistant (p. 243). Such helps are rare but it is actually the type the church and people of Kenya offer through her nuns and the clergy as well as concerned philanthropists and volunteers. Concerned members of the community who doubled at times as guards,

procurators, carpenters, plumbers, drivers, nannies, and host of other menial workers provide quick services to the schools. They also help to bring peaceful surrounding to the students as many of them double as guards. The services of these people collaborate with that of the teaching staff to provide a conducive environment for the homeless students. This is to say that the cooperation of the teaching and non-teaching staff as well as the local community is necessary for the structural situation of the school for the homeless children. But one thing true though is that homeless condition is never attractive for education.

III. The Limitations Of Educating The Homeless Children

The greatest weakness of educating the homeless children is ability to know their number. The constant influx of immigrants in both major and inner cities makes it impossible to know the number of the homeless children for education. Again, incessant wars all over the world create incessant refugees, multiplying the number of homeless children every day. Furthermore, in my judgment, it is only when jobs are created so that every able-bodied person will have a good job; when salaries are improved to the degree of giving every citizen a living wage; when families stop battering themselves; when housing comes down to affordable price even to low income earner; when rampant divorce stops and when people stop abusing drugs and alcohol that the number of the homeless children will be known. "The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty placed the number of homeless on any given day at approximately 760,000 with 1.2-2 million in the homeless ranks in the course of a year" (cited in James Stronge). Above all the National Coalition for Homeless warns that there is no easy way of ascertaining the number of the homeless people, explaining that homelessness is not a permanent condition but an ugly experience for some people over a time (1998a: 1, cited in James Stronge). This boils down to the fact that the number of the homeless children will ever remain difficult to ascertain. The lack of the accurate number of the homeless children creates managerial nightmare of the government and the authorities concerned with the school administration.

Another crucial constraint to the homeless education is that due to their unsettledness and uncertainty the products of these schools are always poorer than their peers schooling from comfortable homes. Again, because of the ever-increasing number of the homeless children, the schools are always short in manpower supply in spite of the good will of the voluntary agencies, the churches and the governments of the world. I am afraid these limitations will ever remain with school for the homeless children as long as homelessness continues.

IV. Conclusion

The foregoing has analyzed the possibilities of educating the homeless children and discovered the arduous task inherent in it. The work discovered the willingness of the governments, churches, voluntary organizations and indeed the entire world body to help; yet homeless education leaves much to be desired. While it remains true that where the services are well handled, the homeless children are invariably the beneficiaries yet the benefits never put them in the same par with their housed peers. Volunteers and various menial job workers of the site for the homeless school also benefit in terms of teaching and organizational employment. Some governments gain in terms of economy and employment. Kenya government for instance gains a lot hard currency because of the influx of international bodies visiting the homeless refugees. A lot of foreign currencies are spent in the government hotels and establishments such as airport duty to the delight of the government. But in spite of its momentary gains no one desires homelessness not to talk of educating the homeless children because the hassles as we have seen always outweigh the gains. Hence, the noble ideas of the Goodluck administration to educate and empower the homeless almajirai in Nigeria is summed up as "a mirage" (Kabara et al 2014).

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