

INTEGRATING HEALTH EDUCATION LITERACY INTO FUNCTIONAL EDUCATION: A PATHWAY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND NATIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract

Health education literacy as the capacity to access, understand, evaluate, and apply health information is an essential pillar of functional education, sustainable development, and national security. A health-literate population can prevent disease, practice good hygiene, and make informed lifestyle choices, thereby reducing healthcare costs and enhancing productivity. Integrating health literacy into formal and non-formal education frameworks strengthens public health systems, promotes equity, and builds social resilience. Yet, challenges such as inadequate curricula, poor resource allocation, misinformation, and teacher unpreparedness persist, especially in developing contexts. This paper advocates for the institutional integration of health education literacy into Nigeria's educational system as a strategic tool for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and enhancing national security. It recommends policy reforms focusing on curriculum redesign, teacher training, and community-based implementation, supported by digital and multilingual innovations. Building a health-literate society will enhance both individual well-being and collective national resilience.

Keywords: Health Education Literacy, Functional Education, Sustainable Development, National Security, Nigeria

Introduction

Education is the foundation of national progress, but its transformative power depends on how well it equips learners with practical life skills. Functional education is an education that imparts knowledge and competencies applicable to daily life, it must therefore include health education literacy to promote informed health choices and social responsibility.

Health literacy, according to the Institute of Medicine (2004), refers to the degree to which individuals can obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. In Nigeria, limited health literacy contributes to high disease prevalence, low preventive care uptake, and poor health outcomes. Integrating health education literacy into functional education offers a sustainable route to improving population health and national stability.

Conceptualizing Health Education Literacy

Health education literacy transcends mere knowledge acquisition it emphasizes comprehension, critical thinking, and behavioral change. Nutbeam's (2000) framework identifies three levels:

- Functional literacy: Basic skills in reading and writing health information.
- Interactive literacy: Cognitive and social skills that enable active participation in health discussions.
- Critical literacy: Advanced skills for analyzing health information and influencing policies.

A comprehensive understanding of these levels positions health literacy as a transformative social determinant of health and development.

Health Education Literacy, Sustainable Development, and Security

Health education literacy directly supports the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). A population capable of interpreting and applying health information contributes to disease prevention, reduces healthcare costs, and enhances workforce productivity (WHO, 2021).

Moreover, health literacy promotes social stability and resilience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, nations with higher levels of public health literacy managed information better, mitigated panic, and sustained public trust in health institutions (Abiodun et al., 2021). Thus, health education literacy should be recognized as a strategic resource for national security and development.

The Nigerian Context

Nigeria faces numerous health challenges, including infectious diseases, malnutrition, poor sanitation, and non-communicable diseases (NCDs). These problems are exacerbated by low health literacy and inconsistent health education policies (Ogunleye, 2019).

Although Nigeria's National Policy on Education (2013) promotes functional education, health education has not been fully integrated into its practical framework. Public schools often lack trained teachers, learning materials, and instructional time devoted to health topics (Okoli & Eze, 2020). Consequently, the majority of young Nigerians graduate without adequate knowledge of disease prevention or healthy living practices.

Integrating health literacy within Nigeria's education system would:

- Improve preventive health behavior.
- Strengthen community based disease control.
- Enhance citizens' resilience to misinformation.
- Support economic growth through reduced illness-related productivity losses.

Challenges to Integration

Despite its importance, several challenges hinder the integration of health education literacy into functional education in Nigeria:

1. Policy Fragmentation: Health and education sectors often operate independently, leading to poor policy alignment.
2. Inadequate Teacher Training: Most teachers lack exposure to health education pedagogy.

3. Resource Constraints: Funding for health education programs is minimal and inconsistent.
4. Socio-Cultural Barriers: Cultural beliefs and religious sensitivities sometimes limit discussions about sexual or reproductive health.
5. Digital Divide: Limited access to technology in rural areas reduces opportunities for digital health learning (UNESCO, 2022).

Policy and Implementation Strategies

To address these challenges, Nigeria must adopt an integrated, multi-sectoral approach:

1. Curriculum Reform: Embed health literacy modules into all levels of education, emphasizing nutrition, environmental health, reproductive health, and mental well-being.
2. Teacher Professional Development: Pre-service and in-service training should equip teachers with both content knowledge and participatory methods for teaching health literacy.
3. Community and Media Engagement: Collaboration with traditional leaders, media organizations, and NGOs will promote community ownership and counter misinformation.
4. Digital and Multilingual Innovation: Utilizing local languages and mobile-based platforms can enhance accessibility, especially for rural learners (Adeleye & Ofili, 2010).
5. Monitoring and Evaluation Framework: Establish measurable indicators to track progress in school-based health literacy programs and their impact on national development outcomes.

Linking Health Literacy to National Security

Health literacy underpins national security through multiple pathways:

- Crisis Preparedness: A health-literate population responds more effectively to pandemics and emergencies.
- Economic Productivity: Healthy citizens contribute consistently to the labor force.
- Social Stability: Health-informed citizens are less vulnerable to fear-driven misinformation and social unrest.

Therefore, health literacy is both a preventive health tool and a security strategy, vital for sustaining national resilience.

Conclusion

Integrating health education literacy into functional education is essential for achieving sustainable development and ensuring national security in Nigeria. A health-literate society is one that is informed, productive, and resilient against health and security threats. Achieving this vision requires harmonized policies, teacher training, digital inclusion, and community participation. By embedding health literacy within the fabric of functional education, Nigeria can secure both the well-being of its people and the stability of its nation.

Suggestions

Based on the discussion, the following suggestions and recommendations are proposed to strengthen the integration of health education literacy into functional education for sustainable development and national security in Nigeria:

1. Curriculum Integration and Reform: The Federal Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, should embed health education literacy into all levels of the national curriculum from basic to tertiary education. Topics such as personal hygiene, nutrition, reproductive health, environmental sanitation, and mental health should be taught as practical life skills rather than abstract theories.
2. Teacher Training and Professional Development: Colleges of Education and Faculties of Education should include health literacy pedagogy in their training programmes. In-

service workshops and continuous professional development (CPD) sessions should be organized for teachers to enhance their competence in delivering health-related content effectively.

3. Policy Harmonization and Intersectoral Collaboration: A unified policy framework should be developed to ensure synergy between the education, health, and information sectors. This will help coordinate health literacy initiatives and avoid duplication of efforts. National agencies such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA) and the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) should work together to mainstream health literacy in national programs.
4. Community Participation and Cultural Adaptation: Health education initiatives should reflect local realities and languages. Traditional leaders, community-based organizations, and faith institutions should be engaged as partners in promoting culturally acceptable health literacy messages.
5. Digital and Media-Based Health Literacy: Government and NGOs should leverage digital platforms mobile apps, social media, radio, and television to disseminate accurate health information. Educational technology tools can bridge the urban-rural divide and ensure equitable access to health knowledge.
6. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Research: Continuous assessment mechanisms should be established to monitor the effectiveness of health literacy programs within schools. Further research should explore the relationship between health literacy, academic achievement, and national development outcomes in Nigeria.
7. Sustainable Funding and Political Commitment: Adequate budgetary allocations must be made to support school health programs, teacher training, and public health campaigns. Government commitment at all levels is critical to institutionalizing health education literacy as a national development priority.
8. Promotion of Health-Literate Environments: Schools, workplaces, and community centers should be transformed into health-promoting environments through clean facilities, access to safe water, proper waste management, and availability of health information materials.

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