

Rising Rate of Out of School Children in Nigeria: An Index of a Failed Educational System

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Abstract

This paper seeks to classify out-of-school children (dropouts, never entered, etc.) and analyse the underlying causes that explain the phenomenon. It also seeks to enumerate factors responsible for the rising rate of out of school children in Nigeria, its implication and why the federal and state government's educational policies are not yielding the desired results. It also provides recommendation on way forward by suggesting that the state and federal government should abolish school fees throughout Nigeria, investment in teacher training and retraining, provide infrastructure, teaching and learning facilities in schools and also enforce the compulsory section of UBE Act especially in the northern part of the country where there is noticeable apathy towards western education.

Key words: education, dropout, never-attended, policies

Introduction

Education plays a vital role in human development both at individuals and societal levels. Over 250 million children between the ages of 6–17 are not in school globally in 2018, with 19% of children from Sub-Saharan Africa classified as out of school (UIS, 2019). The out-of-school children (OOSC) problem has far-reaching consequences for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4oneducation), and requires special policy attention. It paves the way to a successful and productive future as well as provides the potential for an individual's intellectual growth and productivity in the society. The term out of school children describes all dropouts and children that never attended school. It also refers to primary and lower-secondary school-aged children (6–14years old) who have not yet entered school, children who will never enter school, and those who have entered but already dropped out (Marshalla *et al.*,2020).

It is crystal clear that education is critical to human development both at individuals and societal levels. It paves the way to a successful and productive future as well as provides the potential for an individual's intellectual growth and productivity in the society. Education also contributes to the wider socio-economic and cultural development of the society. Nevertheless, if the percentage of out of school children is high, it becomes problem to the society and by and large affects the economy of such society. The right of all Nigerians to education has also featured in successive constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigerian. The Nigerian Government is obliged under Section 18 of the 1999 Constitution to strive to eradicate illiteracy. This commitment was reiterated with the re-enactment of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) act which was subsequently reformulated into a policy of compulsory nine years of basic education in forms of six years of primary and three years of junior secondary. Hence, basic education is a fundamental right for every child in Nigeria. The Nigeria educational policy identifies education as an important pillar for human development.

Education is essential for inclusive growth: with more education, those at the lower end of income distribution are provided a pathway to move out of poverty. Benefits are not limited to individuals with their improved earning potentials. Nigeria is also propelled in a more sustained path of economic performance with a more educated and productive workforce.

In recognition of the significance of education in sustainable development, the global community, including the Nigeria, committed to Education for All (EFA) targets and the Millennium Development Goals that include providing universal primary education (UPE), eliminating gender disparities in education, along with other lofty aims to improve the living standards and welfare of everyone, especially of marginalized sectors in society. In order to establish further commitment to providing basic education to every Nigerian child, government joined the rest of the world at the world education forum (Dakar, 2000) to pledge to achieve education for all before year 2015. Since then Governments, development partners and the private sector have been working together to reach the Education For All (EFA) goals. Despite government efforts, the number of out- of -school children (OOSC) continues to rise at an alarming rate. The issue of out-of-school children (OOSC) has been a global concern. The recent UNESCO declaration of 10.5 million out-of-school children in Nigeria has been a great concern to the Nigerian government especially the Northern region who have been identified as having low enrolment and retention of school aged children (ESSPIN, 2014). This figure is more than the population of republic of Togo, Liberia and only about 1.5 million shorts of the population of republic of Benin. That is not only preposterous but alarmingly petrifying. This is more so when it is realised that children under 15 years of age constitute about 45 per cent of the country's population and out- of- school kids are not being engaged in any valuable venture. They are street kids, allowed to waste away their lives and make a mess of the potentialities of the nation.

The 10.5 million children out of school in a few years translate to 10.5 million Nigerian who will grow up with no form of marketable skills. It means 10.5 million youths without any prospect of any worthwhile employment. It means 10.5 million potential bomb throwers, armed robbers, kidnappers, bandits, terrorists, pipeline vandals, drug traffickers, human traffickers and prostitutes. It means 10.5 million Nigerians who will be a pain in the neck of the compatriots and a bulwark to their country's development. In recent times, Governments at all levels have embarked on rigorous advocacies and mobilization of communities to increase enrolment and retention; but such efforts still did not yield the desired targets. In Nigeria today, there is growing demand for information on OOS children especially at lower levels because of its alarming rate. The need to produce a single, accurate figure on OOS children in Nigeria is an important component for education planning. Such information is not available at LGA for planning and possible intervention. Different policies are needed in order to provide access to those excluded from the school system, to ensure that children start school in time, or to ensure that they complete a full cycle basic education. From a policy and program intervention perspective, while it is important to examine characteristics and conditions of children not in school, it is also equally important to describe children in school who face risks of not completing their schooling, and/or not learning. The interventions for each set of excluded children may not necessarily be the same. Indeed, rigorous efforts must be put in place to improve the way OOS children are counted and also to provide a more detailed picture of these

children. The stark reality is that if nothing is done about this, the number of OOSC will continue to rise and there may come a time when there would be more Nigerian children out of school than there are in school.

Classification of out of school children in Nigeria

The number of out of children in Nigeria can be classified using the three dimension of exclusion model. It takes into consideration the fact that not all OOSC are completely excluded from education. According to the model, what makes the difference is the degree of exposure to school. Such dimensions are:

- a. Children that have attended school in the past but dropped out
- b. Those who have hitherto never entered school, may be late entrants or they may never enter school
- c. Children who are at the risk of dropping out who though currently in school are excluded within education , as they are marginalized as a result of practices or attitudes within school, the household, and society, in general.

Identification of Problems

According to UNESCO, out of school children refers to children in the official primary school age range who are not enrolled in either primary or secondary schools. With this definition it means that four (4) years out of the ten years of the “free and compulsory” education is unaccounted. Hence the definition is not broad enough to cover the whole of the compulsory education provision of the Nigerian education system. Likewise, if the definition is localised and contextualised by the Nigerian government, then most of the data been brandished by the Nigerian government and other reputable organisations will be subjected to questioning.

Reports by UNESCO shows that 40 per cent of Nigerian children in the north aged between six (6) and eleven (11), especially girls, do not attend any primary school. In the south east, the number of boys shunning school is also alarmingly on the increase. Dropout rate in primary schools across the country is put at 30 per cent, while only 54% transit to junior secondary schools. According Nwoko (2015), Nigeria has the highest population of out of school children (OOSC) in the world. The estimated primary school aged population is 30 million, including 14.5 million girls (34% of which are out of school) and 15.1 million boys (29% of which are out of school). Most OOSC live in rural areas and come from poor households (Nwoko,2015).

In a survey report carried out by Jigawa State government on out of school children (OOSC), many factors were identified as reasons for out of School Children. Such factors include financial problem, lack of interest in parents, distance. Hearing and visual impairment, mental health issues, marriage, physically challenged, migration, children have to work at home, language barrier, cultural issues, loss of one or both parents, child lacks interest in schooling, apprenticeship, insurgency, among others (Jigawa, 2014).

This position is related to the study carried out in North West region of Nigeria by Shehu (2018) whose findings suggest that children’s age and gender, parental level of

education, wealth quintile, teacher performance and availability of schools, within close proximity are the main determinants of primary school non-attendance in North West Nigeria. The findings also indicate that parental education and wealth affects how children and state factors influence primary school non-attendance in North West Nigeria.

The 2010 Nigeria Education Data Survey (NEDS) stated that the main reasons parents and guardians gave for their primary-aged children having never attended school were the distance to school, child labour needs at home, and the monetary costs. Other common factors were the perception that the child was too young or immature to attend school, and the poor quality of schools.

Out-of-school factors contributing to non-enrolment, absenteeism and/or dropout from schools include: illness or hunger; the need to do paid/unpaid work (including caring for siblings and sick relatives); an inability to pay school costs and fees; lack of uniforms or other materials; and parental attitudes.

In-school factors contributing to non-enrolment, absenteeism and/or dropout from schools are related to quality and generally revolve around: poor infrastructure and facilities; lack of space or overcrowding; teacher absenteeism; pupil avoidance of harassment, bullying or corporal punishment; an inability to understand the medium of instruction (MOI); and the poor quality of teaching and learning taking place. In the face of these challenges, many questions are still begging for answers as it continues to agitate the mind of policy maker and all well-meaning Nigerians (ESSPIN, 2014).

. They are

- i. Despite the obvious advantages education confers on the educated, why is the idea of enrolling their children in schools still repugnant to some parents?
- ii. Why is it that in spite of the Universal Basic Education programme of the government, school enrolment appears to be on a downward slide?
- iii. If education is free up to the junior secondary class three, as always brandished by the federal and state governments, why are parents withdrawing their children from schools?
- iv. Why is it that while the enrolment figure in primary and secondary school is nose diving, the number of children engaged in child labour is on the rise? A survey of any Nigeria street will reveal a daily increase in the number of young children taking to street trading, hawking “pure water” , kola nuts, sweets and biscuits or serving as motor boys and food sellers’ maids.
- v. Why it that parents is more comfortable giving their teenage daughters in marriage than giving them education?
- vi. Are the schools meeting the expectation of the parents and pupils?

Factors responsible for rising rate of out of school children in Nigeria and Characteristics of out-of-school children in Nigeria.

There are a number of individual and family characteristics that may help explain why children are not in school or that make it harder for children to access basic education. In all, the barriers and bottlenecks are rooted in the socio-cultural environment, family socio-economic status, quality of education offered by school, safe school environmental considerations, political dimensions of education, economic values placed on education by parents and their children, school governance and funding of education. These barriers, according to UNICEF (2012) can be viewed under broad themes: socio-cultural demand side barriers and bottlenecks, economic demand side barriers and bottlenecks, supply side barriers and bottlenecks, political, governance, capacity and financing barriers and bottlenecks.

Such factors are identified below:

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Based on their socio-cultural environment and value system, most families may disregard education or oppose it outrightly, even when education is free. According to The Punch 2018, culture has become a counterpoise to education with some parents erroneously believing that the girl-child must be married off early. According to the findings from the survey conducted by UBEC/UNICEF other parts of Nigeria are struggling to catch up with the rest of the world through children education, but the North is wobbling and being drawn back by wrong perceptions of what constitutes education and its true value in human and national development.

i) Too young to attend school: Parental perception of the right age at which their children should enrol in school is an important factor contributing to non-enrolment of children in basic education. This perception is quite critical in pre-primary and primary schooling in which over-aged children often enrol. The idea that the child is too young to enrol in school often leads to failure to enrol despite the child's age. 74.0% of the OOSC belongs to the category of the 'Expected to never enter', 21.0% belongs to 'Expected to enter late by age 17', while only 5.1% belong to the dropout category (NEDS, 2010 in UNICEF 2012).

ii) Early Marriage: The report of a study commissioned by UNICEF A' Field Office, involving 10 states in the south-south, south east and Benue state (Okeke et al ,2008) also revealed that early marriage is an important factor of children not enrolling in school or dropping out from school in several other states outside the northern geopolitical zones. During the interviews the most frequently cited cause of girls dropping out of school was due to marriage and/or pregnancy, especially in the Muslim regions and in rural areas in general. Interestingly, participants used the terms "(forced marriage) and" (early marriage). The former suggests concerns about the nature of the practice and the degree of consent from the girl, while the latter term suggests some concerns about the timing. For girls who want to combine schooling with raising a family there are structural barriers and stigmatization to overcome: most schools refuse to allow pregnant teenage girls to continue their schooling arguing that they constitute a bad example for the rest of the students.

iii) Western education is considered as anti- Islamic: One problem is religious institution reluctance to join the public system and aversion to educational "modernization. There are still communities in which 'Western' education is perceived as anti-Islamic, and therefore rejected.

Many parents prefer Quranic education for their children. According to CASSAD (2005), Mallams, the instructors in Quranic schools, teach the children to shun Western education. In many parts of the northern geopolitical zones, prejudices against Western education, especially for the girl-child is strong. There is always the believe that the girl child will turn harlot or rebellious to the husband.

iv) Large Family size: Many Nigerian families are large with many school-aged children to be catered for by the parents. Many parents at the traditional level of wisdom beget many children who they believe would serve as farm hands. (Okeke *et al*, 2008, CASSAD, 2005).

v) Peer Pressure: children are likely to toe the same part with their peers. Peer pressure is one of the important factors strongly influencing the dropping out of children from basic education, (Njoku 2001, 2007, CASSAD). Children tend to drop out from school if their peers or friends start dropping out.

Economic barriers

i) Poverty of the Family: Parental level of wealth or family's socio-economic status is a critical factor in demand for education, especially in countries such as Nigeria where though basic education is free, but sometimes encumbered by hidden costs. Children from poor families constitute most of the observed proportions of the un-enrolled and dropouts at all levels of basic education in Nigeria, (CASSAD, 2005, SITAN, 2007, Okeke, Nzewi & Njoku, 2008). . Children of poor families, with mothers that have little or no education are more likely to be OOSC. Boys are also at more at risk of nonparticipation in school (about 7 times more likely) than girls. Among primary aged children, younger children are more likely to be OOSC, while among secondary aged children; the older ones are less likely to be in school (Albert, Ramos, Francis & Almeda, 2012)

ii) Proximity to school: Location or residence is an important factor in the incidence of OOSC. A 2011 survey by UNESCO found that nearly half of all students have to walk (or commute) more than 15min to school, with sizeable proportions walking more than 30min (UNESCO, 2013). For young children who are just beginning school these distances is a potential barrier and can be exacerbated by natural barriers like crossing rivers. A number of parents expressed a preference to wait to enrol their children until they are considered mature enough to face the challenges posed by the journey to school. "Usually they leave the other villages with bicycles and become very tired because they have to go and return every week day. There are others that usually leave their communities and have to cross the river.

iii) Child Labour: Child labour (CL) is one of the manifestations of/response to symptoms of poverty. Children have a right to basic education but occasionally, they engage in some form of work activity. For children in school, involvement in some labour activity makes them more prone to dropping out of school. Child labour can thus be viewed as an obstacle to Education for All (EFA) goals.

v) Low Parental Literacy Status: The level of education acquired by parents play a vital role in determining the education of their children. Low parental literacy status is an important barrier to children's education. Due to ignorance and illiteracy, some parents do not place the

education of their children in the appropriate place in their scale of priorities of responsibilities. (CASSAD, 2005).

Supply Side Barriers

i) Poor Implementation of Pre-primary articulation Policy to public Primary Schools:

Many public primary schools especially in rural communities are yet to implement the policy on articulation of pre-primary sections to themselves, SITAN (2010), thereby making pre-primary schools inaccessible to majority of under-5 children.

ii) Shortage of Teachers and Caregivers at all levels of Basic Education Schools: There is acute shortage of trained caregivers and qualified teachers as well as the mainstream sections of primary schools in many states of Nigeria. Many primary schools in most states in Nigeria do not have enough teachers (SAGEN 1 & 2, E-2005, and School Census E-2008).

iii) Safety/Security of the children: The safety and security of children is paramount to parents. Parents usually do not tolerate any uncertainties about the security of their children, and in most cases would not hesitate to withdraw their children from school due to real or imagined security threats, especially when the girl child is involved. (Njoku, 2007). This phenomenon is prevailing in the Northern part of the country.

iv) Sexual Harassment: Sexual harassment is a major concern of parents about their daughters who are in school. Parents seriously frown at sexual harassment of school girls, and they do not hesitate to withdraw their daughters from school if such harassment happens in the school. Also, fear of sexual molestation of young girls in school by male teachers or school mates forces some parents to withdraw their daughters from school, (Njoku, 2007).

v) Perceived Irrelevance of School Curriculum: the curriculum used by many schools in Nigeria is not in tandem with the current realities. Therefore, many parents and their children are dissatisfied and have very negative perception of what the school has to offer the children in terms of knowledge and requisite skills for survival, (Okeke et al, 2008, CASSAD 2005).

Political, Governance, Capacity and Financing

The capacity of government to implement educational policies may be limited due to inadequate resources available for all the projects and programmes which government has to carry out for the people. Therefore, the policy decisions of government and their implementation can contribute towards getting every eligible child into school or forcing them out of school, to become out-of-school children. These are:

i) Low Level of Political Will: The UBE Act of 2004 is not being properly implemented in Nigeria. The compulsory component of the UBE law is not enforced due to lack of political will to do so on the part of government. If the three tiers of government in Nigeria decide to implement UBE based on its acclaimed compulsory nature, there would not be out-of-school children.

ii) Politicization of Basic Education: Politics is generally believed to be a very important consideration in appointing to posts of responsibility in the education sector, right from federal through the states, to local government levels. This has a negative effect on executive capacity.

iv) Poor Financing of Education: Nigeria's basic education is poorly funded by the various tiers of government. Key informants from the Ministry of Education and its parastatals are of the view that basic education is well funded but that most of the budget is spent on overheads. Consequently, funds hardly get to the school level, and the impacts are not felt.

Implication of Out of School Children on Nigerian Education

Out of School children is one of negatives education indicators. It is one of the parameters used to measure development in Education. The implication of out of school children on education has the short-term effect and long term effect on education and the society in general. It becomes difficult for educational planners to have a comprehensive plan since the statistics of the out of school children varies from State to State and may not be readily available.

As a result of children out of school, the huge resources both human and non-human lay waste. Also, existing school infrastructure in some communities appears to be grossly inadequate both in quantity and quality this could become bottleneck contributing to out of school children. The provision of school buildings/classroom has not kept pace with the increase in enrolment. Conflicts — particularly Fulani herdsmen terrorism — in certain states and economic recession have reversed the little gains made in educating children. The North-Central is the worst hit in this respect. In Benue, the Executive Secretary of the state's Teaching Service Board, Wilfred Uji, stated that the incessant herdsmen attacks there had disrupted the school calendar and prevented "300,000 children from going to school." (Punch, 2018). These out of school children serve as ready tools in the hands of terrorist organisation as they are easily misled through false indoctrination. The role of conflict is particularly true of Northern Nigeria which is in the throes of terrorism by the Boko Haram sect. In the North since the insurgency began in 2009, millions of pupils have been driven out of school leading to the upsurge of the Almajiri syndrome. Suicide bombers have attacked schools and set classrooms ablaze because, according to them, "western education is prohibited

Challenges on Policy Implementation

The absence of reliable and realistic data has continued to affect the implementation of education policies in Nigeria. A combination of factors has made the achievement of the EFA impossible. Years of neglect have led to decay in public education. Lack of drive and official greed by the Universal Basic Education Commission and Ministries of Education at the Federal and State level have ensured that more children of school age are kept out of school. Particularly, poor implementation of school enrolment policy to widen access by the state's Education Boards (SUBEBs) accounts for the failure to meet the target. The EFA agenda rests on a belief that public policy can radically transform education systems, given adequate political will and resources." In addition, the global aid to basic education has been noted to be steadily decreasing due to the expansion of the international agenda in education; thus, aid to education today is more focused on secondary and tertiary education and is shifting away from basic education. This new drift can literally create a gap in the flow of early training. Recent global data reports that two reasons account for the declining rate of school completion. One is the difficulty of the sub-Saharan countries to keep up with the increasing demand for

education due to its rapid population growth. There exist complementarities between aid for primary and secondary education. When primary education fails to obtain sufficient financial support, and simultaneously supports secondary and higher education primary enrolment decreases. This could be due to a negative effect that discourages children to complete primary schooling after losing prospects to continue at secondary level later.

Suggestions

- i. The state and federal government should abolish school fees throughout Nigeria
- ii. The state and federal government should recruit enough teacher
- iii. The state and federal government should provide infrastructure, teaching and learning facilities in schools
- iv. The state and federal government should come out with economic policies to revamp and enhance the socio-economic situation of Nigerians.
- v. Federal and state government should investment in teacher training and retraining. In addition, revise the recruitment process of teachers that will ensure only qualified and committed personnel are recruited to teach.
- vi. Federal Governments should also enforce the compulsory section of UBE Act especially in the northern part of the country where there is noticeable apathy towards western education.
- vii. At the local government level, intensive advocacy programme such as Enrolment Drive Campaign should be mounted through community and religious leaders respectively. Efforts should therefore be made at local level to sensitize the populace on the importance of education.
- viii., programmes such as Back to School, Street to Skills, Girls Education Programme (GEP) and Almajiri Education should be sustained various level of government if we want to make any headway among the comity of nations

Conclusion

Government policies aimed at sending out of school children back to school will not succeed, if the governments and other relevant agencies do not have the political will to implement or enforce educational policies. In the same vain, government should create the necessary enabling environment that can draw children back to school such as: Good infrastructure, sporting facilities, School feeding, Conditional cash grants, free books etc. The school curriculum should be designed in such a way that it will recognise potentials and be able to harness them properly. A functional curriculum is expected to reflect the current realities and ensures that the education system that children pass through prepare them for future living.

Finally, the failure of educational policies in Nigeria is the failure of leadership due to negligence and inconsistent policies. Government should therefore, increase its sense of commitment on educational issues and policy making through adequate financing, effective

monitoring, follow up and evaluation activities. Hence, any policy or programme designed for out-of-school children should include conscious and deliberate efforts at re-orientation of their attitude and inculcation of societal values.

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