

Innovative Techniques for Promoting Literacy among Out-Of-School Children (OOSC) in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria has the largest population of Out-of-School children in the world; this is not far-fetched as Nigeria's population growth is not at par with its economic growth. With 70% youth population of a median age of 19, the Nigerian Government is therefore faced with the onerous task of investing in its human resource potential to favourably compete in today's globalized economy. In a bid to ensure that the underserved, un-reached and disadvantaged have access to quality education, a range of innovative strategies were suggested to promote literacy among out-of-school children and youths in Nigeria. Challenges militating against the implementation of various literacy programmes for the out-of-school children were also examined in the paper as well as probable solutions to ameliorating them.

Keywords: *Innovative techniques, Literacy, Out-of-School Children, Nigeria.*

Introduction

Education is considered a critical resource for lifelong learning and meaningful contributions to the society. In recognition of this, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) prioritizes education as a veritable tool for achievements of improved quality of life and standard of living of a group of people in any nation, and more so, the developmental advancements of such a nation. SDG4 typically projects an ideal that supports an inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all, thereby ensuring that every individual be it young or old has access to learning and development opportunities.

According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics data for the school year ending in 2018, it was reported that about 258 million children and youth are out of school. The total includes 59 million children of primary school age, 62 million of lower secondary school age and 138 million of upper secondary age. In the same vein, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) in its 2018 National Personnel Audit Report averred that 10.2 million children of school-going age are currently out of school. Despite the array of interventions and concerted efforts by the government through the various education agencies and international development partners to tackle the scourge of illiteracy and lack of access to basic education to children between the ages of 0-14years who account for 43% of the country's population, the results have been far less remarkable.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) further reports that one in every five of the world's out-of-school children is in Nigeria, Notwithstanding the fact that primary education is officially free and compulsory to all children of school-going age. It however buttressed that only 61 per cent of 6 - 11year-olds regularly attend primary school while 35.6 per cent of children aged three to five years receive early childhood education. However, getting "out-of-

school children” back into formal education poses a massive challenge. Gender, like geography and poverty, is an important factor in the pattern of educational marginalisation. States in North-East and North-West have female primary net attendance rates of 47.7 per cent and 47.3 per cent, respectively, meaning that more than half of the girls are not in school (UNICEF, 2021). Statistics showed that in North-East, 2.8 million children are in need of education in three conflict-affected states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa.

In addition, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) Data on senior secondary school enrolment in the 36 states and Federal Capital Territory (FCT) between 2016 and 2017 further highlights a decline in enrolment within the period. According to the NBS data, while total public senior secondary school enrolment was 3,563,748 in 2016, a total of 3,424,175 students enrolled in 2017, showing a decline of 3.91 per cent. Also, for private schools, while enrolment in 2016 was 911,561, about 899,172 students enrolled in 2017, indicating a decline of -1.36 per cent.

The growing Out-of-School-Children population in Nigeria is worrisome; the Covid-19 outbreak which resulted into school closures and several other challenges such as kidnapping, and displacement of people by insecurity has made the situation even worse. The issue of those disadvantaged as a result of the structure of the school system is also a major source of concern. The displacement and kidnapping of school children, especially in the north have significantly increased the problem of access to education, thereby reducing the impact and gains made by the government in its free education campaign.

Against this background, the paper discusses a range of viable strategies to addressing the menace of children illiteracy and promotion of literacy among out-of-school children in Nigeria.

Describing the Nigerian Out-of-School Children

The concept of out-of-school children implies that there is a group of children that should be in school but is not. This group is recognized both nationally and internationally as primary school-age children. With growing insurgency in Northern Nigeria and other socio-economic challenges, Nigeria faces the daunting task of expanding access to quality and equitable education for all. Although, education is free and mandatory for a one year early childhood learning experience and nine years of basic education, Nigeria has, over the past decade, recorded the highest out-of-school children (OOSC) number in the world. These statistics represent a major obstacle to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education for all.

So far, education policy reforms have remained inadequate in resolving the access problem in Nigeria. The causes are inherently multidimensional, and therefore require an equally multipronged approach. Adeniran and Castradori (2020) attempted a conceptual description of the Nigerian OOSC by grouping them into three subsets namely, children that have never attended school, children enrolled in Almajiri schools and lastly the dropouts.

The first category includes children of school-going age that have never been in school. These children have never attended any formal education programme within the four-walls of the school in their lives. Studies show that Nomadic populations represent the bulk of this category and contributing about 5.2million of OOSC. Cultural and economic factors well beyond the

scope of education policy are attributed as the critical drivers for poor enrolment of the nomadic populations. For example, the permanent migration characterizing these populations make conventional school infrastructure unsuitable for their livelihood pattern. More so, nomadic children enter the labour force at an early age due to the types of skills their economic activities (herding/fishing) require. This itinerant lifestyle makes the opportunity cost of schooling high among this group vis-à-vis the perceived benefits, “justifying” the lack of attractiveness of formal education.

The second group of OOSC in Nigeria is captured by the children enrolled in Almajiri schools, currently numbering 4-5million pupils. Historically, the Almajiri system was developed to train the children and youth (5-22-year-olds) in Qur’anic literacy in Northern Nigeria. As enunciated in Southern Voice’s SVSS report, the Almajiri system has failed to integrate with the formal education system. It does not even provide basic numeracy and literacy skills. The situation is so dire that Almajiri pupils are officially categorised as out-of-school children.

The Almajiri school functions almost like a boarding school. They allow people send their children to school at no burden, these children are sent to school at a very early age until they transition into adulthood, at no financial costs to the family. Parents benefit from shifting their monetary burden to the teacher while satisfying cultural pressures for large families. The teachers in the Almajiri system, in turn, benefit by deploying children to “work” (often a euphemism for begging). The real losers are the children. They are not usually made to acquire essential skills to improve their livelihood.

The third and last type of OOSC is the dropout. The causes of dropouts are manifold. But The Nigerian Education Survey (2015) data identified monetary costs, including school development levies, textbooks and examination fees to be the most prominent. Ironically, such costs are all supposedly covered by the government under the free education policy. This challenge highlights the limited fiscal space. It leads to inadequate funding of education, forcing school administrators to transfer the shortfall in financing onto parents.

Strategies for Promoting Literacy among Out-of School Children in Nigeria

Despite the contention on the data on Out-of-School children, the fact remains that Nigeria has a huge population of children that are not in school or any form of formal education. Realizing the role that education plays in moulding the future of children for meaningful and successful adulthood, it becomes imperative to address the scourge of children illiteracy. In view of this, the paper discusses innovative approaches to remedying the scourge of out-of-school children, these solutions include strategies adopted by notable education agencies in Nigeria, international development partners and other countries with similar issues. Some of the solutions include: Open Schooling, Basic Education Service Delivery for All (BESDA), Introduction of Accelerated Curriculum, Multi-grade System and Mobile Schooling, Radio/TV Literacy, Mobile Technology among others.

Open Schooling Programme

Open schooling is an initiative of the Universal Basic Education Commission in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to remedy the scourge of Out-of-School Children (OOSC) in Nigeria. The Open Schooling Initiative is a strategy aimed at providing basic

education opportunities to children especially educationally marginalized groups who for various socio-economic reasons are unable to enroll into existing conventional educational programmes. The UBEC/COL Open Schooling Intervention focuses on three (3) categories of learners, namely; those who have never been in school, those who dropped out of school due to one reason or the other and those who are in school but not learning. The Open Schooling initiative specifically targets enhanced access to quality education for disadvantaged groups such as women, migrant folks, out-of-school children and school dropouts. It further seeks to complement the efforts of formal education in the attainment of 100% transition rate from primary to junior secondary levels as well as providing second chance educational opportunities to drop-outs of upper primary and junior secondary school.

The Open Schooling initiative is a flexible education system that allows learners to learn where they are and when they want, away from conventional schools and teachers. It provides further opportunities that can adequately meet the growing learning needs of children and youths by providing functional vocational education that utilizes the Open Schooling Techniques. The programme has no age restriction and adopts several teaching methods but with emphasis on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as a tool for learning. The OSP is currently being piloted in 6 of the 10 northern states with a combined OOSC population of 8 million according to UNICEF. The beneficiaries include Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Kano, Adamawa and Niger.

Introduction of Accelerated Curriculum

The humongous population of Out-of-School children is alarming, as a response to addressing this menace, the Federal Government of Nigeria has developed a curriculum aimed at accelerating the education of the over 10 million out-of-school children in the country. The curriculum tagged Accelerated Basic Education Programme (ABEP) was developed by the Federal Government in collaboration with the European Union PLAN International and other development partners. The programme was designed to provide equivalent, certified competencies for basic education through effective teaching and learning approaches that match the recipients' cognitive maturity. ABEP is divided into three levels consisting of three stages each. The curriculum is adaptable to the existing school system and needs of the target group. It is a deliberate strategy by the government and the international community to provide a long-term solution to the menace of out-of-school children in Nigeria.

The accelerated curriculum covers English Language, Mathematics, Nigerian history and values, basic science technology, and one Nigerian language. The programme was designed to provide a catch-up educational programme suitable for the educational needs of Out-of-school-children and in the process mainstream them to formal school programme or provide them with alternative career path through enrolment into vocational training centres, after completing basic education.

Adoption of Multi-grade System Especially Rural Areas

The Multigrade system is one of the means of resolving the scourge of children and youth illiteracy as proposed by The World Education Conferences held in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, the Education For All (EFA) goals of 2000 and Dakar Framework of Action (2001).

Adepoju, (2009) quoting Wolff & Gracia (2000) and Cohen (2002) refer to multigrade class as 'a class where two or more different grade levels learn in one classroom with one teacher'. This

often happens when pupil enrolments are low, but can also be done to improve children's learning. As in every class, each child in a multigrade class is different and will learn and develop at different levels. A multigrade classroom is also a natural learning environment just like life in the village. In villages, children belong to a variety of groups that consist of children of different ages. Within families, friendship, church and other groups, younger and older children play, discover, learn and work together.

The use of multi-grade teaching methods provides a flexible way to meet the needs, interest and the levels of the development of each child. A child's development is assessed across a few years focusing on the social, emotional and gross motor, cognitive and intellectual development.

The Universal Basic Education Commission, in its quest for promoting inclusive access to basic education to the out-of-school children in the rural areas has adopted the multigrade approach to ensure that basic education reach the underserved. This approach has been adopted by UBEC in collaboration with international development partners to support the educational needs of children with little or no access to basic education. Evidence of these partnerships abounds in the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) programmes, Better Education Services Delivery (BESDA), Integrated Tsangaya and Qur'anic Education (IQTE) programme among others.

Mobile School

Mobile school is a unique education system designed to meet the peculiar education needs of students wherever they are. Mobile School Initiatives abound in many developed and developing countries of the world. The concept of mobile schooling cut across flexible approaches aimed at educating children and youths in cluster groups in local communities, forests (for pastoralists), Mobile Learning points in movable trucks and makeshift learning facilities.

The mobile school initiative in Kenya aims to increase access to education for children over 7 years old through the provision of culturally and religiously appropriate basic education to children who would otherwise find it difficult to access formal education. Structures are temporary and materials portable so they can be easily transported by camel as communities travel in search of water and pasture (Stillo, 2021).

In India, the Chalta Phirta School (CFS) or the mobile learning centre (MLC) aims at taking the education to the underserved. Considering the targets set under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the CFS has turned out to be an innovative mechanism to disseminate primary education to children in marginalized communities. This initiative was conceived from the Cluster Resource Centre model, under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. "Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is a programme for Universal Elementary Education. This programme is also an attempt to provide an opportunity for improving human capabilities of all children through provision of community-owned quality education in a mission mode. It is a response to the demand for quality basic education all over the country (Debahuti & Shikha 2015).

The StreetwiZe Mobile School which is an initiative of a Belgian Social Enterprise is an extendable six-metre-long, two-sided blackboard on wheels. It comes with more than 300 educational panels ranging from literacy to street business, to health and hygiene. It allows local organisations worldwide to unlock and discover the talents of street-connected children in their own environment. The educational panels are easily attached to the mobile blackboard with

plastic screws before being taken to the streets for non-formal educational sessions, through which street educators interact creatively with street-connected children and youth. The Mobile School currently has a continuously growing network of 48 partners in 25 countries across Latin America, Europe, Africa and Asia. These local partner organisations take their mobile schools to fixed intervention areas multiple times a week to meet street-connected children in their own environment.

Mass Media Literacy

The mass media play significant role in the promotion of literacy education in any society. The broadcast media have immense potentials for improving both formal and informal education. From its earliest application in Nigeria, public broadcasting was conceived as a critical tool of education in both formal school settings and the informal sector of general use. Evidence abound that the earliest broadcasts incorporated school work and civic education with the aim to mobilize public opinion in support of the colonial governments and their policies (Santas, 2016). Communication is essential in achieving the goals of education. The use of the mass media in educating and creating awareness in the society cannot be undermined. One basic function of the mass media to the society is the provision of education on varieties of issues that concern the public. It is in recognition of this all important responsibility that the Federal Government (2004) has approved as a matter of policy in the national policy on education that the mass media shall form a feature of the educational support service system. In order to achieve this, the government made it compulsory that all states broadcast stations must work in conjunction with ministries of education and other allied agencies to ensure that the public are kept informed or educated on government policies and programmes. There are a range of Federal Government, International Agencies and state sponsored mass literacy programmes on radio and TV to include the underserved and difficult to reach children who are out of school.

In view of the above, the Mass Media can be harnessed positively to create educational programmes that respond adequately to meet the educational needs of the un-reached and marginalized children in the society, especially those in rural areas, and nomadic youths that are usually in transit.

Mobile Technologies

Advancements in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have continually become a boost to the improvement of formal and non-formal education. The growing ubiquity of mobile technologies such as mobile phones, smart phones, tablet devices and other new technologies have further inspired new approaches to learning and disseminating information. With the growing adoption of mobile telephony and internet penetration across Africa, mobile technologies can be greatly harnessed to reach the out-of-school children in rural areas and underserved communities. Mobile technology can be exploited to incentivize learning for the OOSC and further stimulate their interest and commitment to learning and development opportunities. Mobile technology combines multimedia features to appeal to the senses of sights, sounds and other visual effects to make learning fun, interesting and permanent for learners.

Challenges Associated with Promoting Literacy among Out of School Children

Despite several initiatives aimed at expanding access to quality education for Out-of-School children and youths in Nigeria, several factors have been reported as major impediments militating against the achievement of desired outcomes. These challenges include among others:

1. Inadequate funding: the budgetary allocation to education remains inadequate, most especially basic and non-formal education. Nigeria's budgetary allocation to education is still below the 15-20% recommendation by the High-Level Group under EFA;
2. Inconsistent Policy direction: The menace of out-of-school children has been accorded little priority by successive administrations; hence there is lack of synergy of purpose and inconsistent policy direction;
3. Lack of Family Planning: lack of mass awareness on family planning leading to increase in population is a major source of concern. As many parents continue to procreate without adequate plans of providing them with basic education and healthcare, thereby outsourcing such responsibility to the government;
4. Insurgency and growing spate of banditry in Northern Nigeria: in the past two years, the kidnapping of school children have become a common place, forcing schools in vulnerable communities to shut down, thereby, keeping children of school-going age out of school longer than usual. With the kidnapping experience, many parents are afraid to take their children back to school for fear of being kidnapped or killed;
5. The formal education structure and programmes are not tailored to meet the needs of out of school children. The OOSC require a specialized educational system that meet their social, economic and cultural needs;
6. Poverty is a major problem: the inability of parents to care for their wards result to a total neglect of their basic responsibilities of which education is an important part;
7. Lack of political will by state governors to address the scourge of illiteracy and out-of-school children

Recommendations

Based on the following, the study therefore proposes suggestions to ameliorate identified challenges:

1. The federal government of Nigeria should increase budgetary allocation to education for concerned agencies to be able to perform effectively their functions of promoting access to quality education and literacy opportunities to out-of-school children and youths;
2. Agencies in non-formal education should think out of the box to reaching the marginalized and un-reached children;
3. There should be a well-articulated and coordinated mass literacy campaign for children of school-going age. Formal and Informal channels of communication should be deployed to enhance access to quality education for all;
4. There should be synergy between all agencies of formal and non-formal education for desired outcomes to be achieved.
5. Efforts should be made by government to improve the security of children in public schools. The Safe School Policy of the Federal Government should be fully operationalized to ensure safety of students, teachers and learning facilities.
6. Efforts should be made to resettle teachers and students affected by insurgency and provided the needed psychosocial support for quick recovery;
7. Government at all levels must consider basic education as a right and necessity for the Nigerian child regardless of dominant
8. Comprehensive poverty alleviation programs reducing the pressure on families to monetise with children will also be necessary.

9. Labour market policies aimed at providing employment opportunities outside of small-scale, labour-intensive subsistence farming, be it through diversification, must also be considered. Such policies would reduce the economic productivity of having young children. It would make families less inclined to see them as a form of financial investment, thus reducing the perceived opportunity cost of education.

Conclusion

The education of the Out-of-School children requires urgent attention as must be considered a matter of national priority. Children left to roam the streets begging can be easily lured into a range of anti-social activities thereby making them a menace to the society. For Nigeria to achieve its Education 2030 target, there is clearly a need for deliberate and well-coordinated campaign to massively include the over 10 million out-of-school children in a functional educational process that prepares them for meaningful livelihood.

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