



PARENTAL RE-ORIENTING AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN: A DESCRIPTIVE SURVEY IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss re-orienting families for a stronger future to reduce the menace of out-of-school children. Nigeria has the largest number of out-of-school children in the world. It is estimated that one in every five out-of-school children around the globe is in Nigeria. Even though basic education is legally free and compulsory in the country, about 18.3 million children aged 5 to 14 years are out of school. About 50 percent of these children live in the northern region, known to be severely affected by insurgency. Education is a fundamental human right, a critical driver for economic advancement and a powerful tool for poverty reduction. Hence, no child of school age should be denied access to quality and equitable education, and an opportunity to acquire skills that guarantee future employability and long-term earning. The paper identified causes of out-of-school children in Nigeria to include; poor funding of education, corruption, banditry, kidnapping, poor implementation of the Child Rights Act, insecurity problems, lack of political will to address the challenges, high rate of poverty, and high fertility rate. Through a comprehensive review of literature, policy analysis, and empirical evidence, this paper provides insights into the implications and potential strategies for the Out of School Children. By parents working together with stakeholders, every child in Nigeria will have access to quality education and a brighter future, securing a more prosperous and stable future for our Nation. One of the long-term goals of this paper is to provide a lasting solution to the problem of out-of-school children, reversing the alarming trend of out-of-school children in Nigeria and unlock a brighter future for generations to come.

Keywords: Re-orientation, Families, Stronger future, Menace, Out-of-School Children.

Introduction

Nigeria is grappling with a worsening education crisis as the number of out-of-school children has skyrocketed to 18.3 million in 2024, according to a recent report by UNICEF, (2018). This alarming figure, which reflects a significant increase from previous years, places Nigeria at the top of the global ranking for out-of-school children. The situation raises serious concerns about the country's future, particularly in terms of economic development, youth empowerment, and national security. The education deficit has far-reaching implications that, if not urgently addressed, could lead to an entire generation missing out on opportunities for personal and professional growth. The statistics paint a grim picture of the state of education in the country. Currently, only 63 percent of primary school-age children attend school regularly, indicating that nearly four in ten children do not receive consistent education at the foundational level. While approximately 84 percent of children transition from primary to junior secondary school, millions remain trapped outside the formal education system. This disparity underscores the need for targeted policies and interventions that will encourage school attendance and retention across all levels of education (Adeyemo, 2025).

The out-of-school children are a major educational problem facing Nigeria and other developing countries. To address these out-of-school children in Nigeria, the federal government and state governments have adopted different measures and strategies in the past and present. Some of the measures include the establishment of a commission to handle and manage programmes on out-of-school children. There have been many interventions and collaborations from international institutions. To address the issue that is partly affecting education in Nigeria, it has been noted that "governments at all levels should guarantee adequate funding and the creation of municipal and city policing for the Safe School Initiative Programme" (Ogunode et al., 2024).

It is estimated that one in every five out-of-school children around the globe is in Nigeria. Even though basic education is legally free and compulsory in the country, about 10.5 million to 18.3 million children aged 5 to 14 years are out of school. About 50 per cent of these children live in the northern region, known to be severely affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. In addition, only 61 per cent of children between the ages of 6 to 11 years attend primary school regularly (Oyekan et al., 2023). The effect of insurgency on education is the reason why scholars have argued that the inability of the governance system or structure to perform its roles is also hurting the educational system (Ogunode et al., 2024; Ayeni & Nwaorgu, 2018).

Despite ongoing efforts by the Nigerian government and various non-governmental organizations to improve access to basic education, children in Northern parts of Nigeria, continue to face significant barriers. Socioeconomic factors such as poverty and lack of infrastructure, coupled with entrenched cultural practices, impede the ability of children, particularly girls, to access and complete basic education. Poverty forces many families to prioritize immediate survival over long-term educational investments, leading to high dropout rates and poor school attendance. The absence of adequate educational infrastructure, such as well-equipped schools and trained teachers, further compounds the issue, making it difficult for children to receive quality education (Olanrewaju & Abubakar, 2021). Cultural norms that favor early marriage, child labor, and the education of boys over girls also contribute to the low enrolment and retention rates in schools (Ibrahim & Garba, 2020).

This persistent crisis not only undermines Nigeria's national development goals but also violates the fundamental right to education. The phenomenon of OOSC in Northern Nigeria is deeply rooted in a complex array of historical, cultural, socio-economic, and political factors. The region faces a combination of poverty, insecurity, religious conservatism, and inadequate educational infrastructure—issues that collectively hinder school attendance. The situation is compounded by the disruption of educational systems due to armed conflicts and the prevalence of traditional educational practices, such as the Almajiri system, which often operates outside formal education structures. Addressing the issue of OOSC requires a nuanced understanding of these interconnected challenges from multiple stakeholder perspectives. By identifying the underlying causes and examining the roles of parents, communities, local governments, and educational authorities, this study aims to inform the design of inclusive and sustainable educational interventions that address the unique needs of the region and contribute to improving school attendance.

Concept of Out-of-School Children

According to the United Nations, (2023), out-of-school children refer to children who are yet to be enrolled in any formal education, excluding pre-primary education. The age range for out-of-school children is 6-11 years. Out-of-school children are school-age children who are supposed to be in schools but are not in schools due to parental and governmental failures to provide accessible quality education for them. Out-of-school children are young children in the age group of 1 to 12 who are roaming the street without access to a functional educational system (Ojelade et al., 2019). Several factors contribute to this growing crisis, with economic hardship being a major driver. Many families, particularly in rural and low-income communities, cannot afford the basic costs associated with schooling, such as tuition fees, uniforms, and learning materials. As a result, children are often forced into labor to support their households, sacrificing their education for immediate financial survival. Out-of-school children are the children whom the government and the parents have failed to provide quality basic education for. The term "out-of-school children" is a non-attendance of the school of school-age children for some established factors (Ogunode et al., 2024). The prevalence of out-of-school children makes one think of the leadership failure in Nigeria. Thus, it has been noted that leaders can either enhance national development or retard development (Asaju & Ayeni, 2020). The attitude of political leadership in Nigeria is the causal variable of the type of education the country is having.

Out-of-school children (OOSC) are defined as children aged 5–17 who are not enrolled in formal education institutions. In Nigeria, the issue of OOSC is a critical challenge, with an alarming 18.3 million children, accounting for approximately 15% of the global total, not attending school, one of the highest rates worldwide. Of these, an estimated 7.6 million are girls, with the majority concentrated in the northern states. For instance, Kano State alone has approximately 989,234 children out of school (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2023).

In the Nigerian context, out of school children are prevalent in both rural and urban settings, but rural areas, and isolated or deprived areas in general, consistently show higher numbers of out-of-school children (World

Bank, 2019). These children are spread across the country in varying proportions. This situation is of concern to the Federal Government of Nigeria as noted in the Nigeria Education Ministerial Plan (2018-2022) which outlines several strategies targeted at bringing children back to school. In spite of these strategies.

Causes of the High Number of Out-of-School Children

A range of factors contributes to Nigeria's high out-of-school children (OOSC) population, especially in the northern region. According to UNICEF (2023), socioeconomic deprivation and widespread insecurity, particularly insurgency and banditry in Borno, Yobe, Katsina, Adamawa, Kebbi, and Zamfara States, remain primary barriers to school attendance. Parents are often reluctant to invest in education due to fears for their children's safety (Olanrewaju et al., 2021; Uba & Ibrahim, 2022). Cultural practices, including early marriage and the relegation of girls to domestic roles, lead to disproportionately high dropout rates among girls (Akinyele, 2021). Systemic challenges as corruption, weak policy implementation, and poor data use in education planning, further exacerbate the issue (Mustapha, 2020; Okonkwo, 2022). Many children engage in street trading, farming, or household labor to support family income, deprioritizing education (UNESCO, 2022). Inadequate school infrastructure, teacher shortages, and lack of learning materials particularly affect rural and conflict-impacted areas (UBEC, 2020; Adeoye & Olaniyan, 2019). Deeply rooted patriarchal norms and widespread adult illiteracy discourage formal education, especially when perceived as incompatible with local traditions (Aliyu & Abubakar, 2018). Natural disasters like the 2022 floods in Jigawa, which destroyed over 115 schools and affected more than 92,000 children, further disrupt learning (Mustapha, 2020).

Findings reveal that poverty is the leading cause of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Northern Nigeria. Many families cannot afford basic education costs, pushing children into street hawking or farm labor. This aligns with Akpan and Iwu (2020) and UNICEF (2023), who stresses that financial hardship, undermines school attendance. Suggested solutions include school feeding and conditional cash transfers. Insecurity, driven by Boko Haram and banditry, has displaced families and closed schools. Respondents cited fear of attacks as a deterrent, particularly for girls. This is consistent with Save the Children (2022) and UNESCO (2023), which advocate for safer learning environments. Other contributing factors include poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, and weak policy implementation. Parents expressed frustration with broken promises under initiatives like UBE and NHGSFP, reflecting Adamu *et al.* (2024)'s findings on governance challenges.

Re-Orienting Out-Of-School Children

Re-orienting out-of-school children involves a multi-faceted approach that includes bringing them back into the formal education system and instilling positive values to shape their future and that of society. Key strategies include improving school safety, providing financial and material support to families, and changing cultural attitudes towards the importance of schooling, as well as modernizing the curriculum to include vocational and future-oriented skills. Community engagement and using local communication channels can also help raise awareness and encourage enrollment.

Improve school safety: Address security concerns to build parent confidence in sending their children to school. This includes reinforcing security infrastructure to prevent issues like kidnappings.

Support families: Provide financial and material assistance to cover costs beyond tuition, such as for food or uniforms, and support parents to reduce their burden and encourage enrollment.

Cultural and social engagement: Educate the community, through methods like community mapping and public awareness campaigns in places of worship, on the importance of education. Encourage community-based organizations and parents to work together to reinforce positive values and educational goals.

Modernize and re-orient the curriculum: Update the curriculum to include modern, in-demand skills, especially in STEM fields, to prepare students for future jobs. Integrate vocational and craft skills to cater to diverse talents and improve employability.

Consider legislative measures: Explore policies like legislation that discourages parents or guardians who do not enroll their children in school.

Address irregular attendance: Recognize that some children are "out-of-school" due to irregular attendance, not just ever having attended, and develop strategies to tackle this through school and household support.

Use local communication: Utilize local and indigenous communication media to effectively reach communities and raise awareness about the value of education.

Current Implications

Dropping out of school negatively affects students' self-esteem, health, and ability to acquire life skills (Ogunode et al., 2024). Dropouts are more prone to risky behaviors, such as substance abuse, early pregnancy, and criminal activity, and are more likely to rely on public assistance (Akorede et al., 2022). Northern states lag behind national educational averages. For instance, Kano reports just 9.6% reading proficiency and 11.2% numeracy, while Jigawa records only 2% and less than 1%, compared to national averages of 26% and 25%, respectively (FME, 2022). Long-term effects include labour shortages in key sectors and increased reliance on humanitarian support (Akorede et al., 2023).

The ways forward of Out-of-School Children in Nigeria

In order to find a lasting solution to the challenges of out-of-school children in Nigeria, across the Federal, State and Local Government levels, efforts have been made to address the challenges of Out of School Children in the country. Recently, intervention attention has mainly focused on the conflict ravaged northeast where the basic education system has suffered a major disruption. A blend of interventions both by state and non-state actors is necessary to effectively fix the challenges.

The ways forward for out-of-school children in Nigeria include a multi-pronged approach involving increased government funding and infrastructure improvements, leveraging technology for e-learning, implementing social safety nets, and strengthening collaboration between government, communities, and NGOs. Strategies include creating more schools, improving existing ones, providing school feeding programs, using technology like laptops and e-learning resources, enforcing laws against child marriage, and supporting NGOs that help street children.

Conclusion

Children of today are the leaders of tomorrow, which the government should look into raising education by funding towards building schools, sending the teachers to schools, acquiring more training for the teaching to be more attractive and meaningful. Education is a room for growth and development in Nigeria. A child being a product of a family therefore represents the values, morals and ethics of that family. The level of development a child manifests in later life reflects to the type of home background, experiences, exposure and training, a child gets in early years. Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it." Re-orienting out-of-school children involves a multi-faceted approach that includes bringing them back into the formal education system and instilling positive values to shape their future and that of society.

Recommendations

Government should build more Basic schools across the country and funding for basic education should be increased. The government should provide social security packages for the rural dwellers. This will help in increasing school enrolments of school going age children. The burden of cost of education should be reduced by eliminating school fees, providing cash transfers, and shifting sociocultural norms and beliefs that prevent school enrolment.

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