MULTIDIMENSIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL DISENGAGEMENT: PERCEPTIONS, MOTIVATIONS, AND RE-ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NORTHERN NIGERIA.

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Abstract

The study titled, Multidimensional Assessment of Educational Disengagement: Perceptions, Motivations, and Re-Engagement Strategies for Out-of-School Children in Northern Nigeria provided critical insights into the factors influencing educational disengagement and potential strategies for re-engagement. The study was guided by four objectives and four corresponding research questions. A descriptive survey research design was used for the study. The population comprised 60,000 Out-of-School Children. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 384 sample size using Cochran's formula. The instrument used for data collection was an open-ended questionnaire titled OOSC, which had four sections with 29 items on the perceptions, motivations and challenges of out-of-school children. Data was analysed using frequency, percentages and correlation statistics. The results of the study revealed that 70% of out-of-school children are motivated to return to school upon seeing others succeed through education, while 68% are interested in vocational or skills-based training programs, and 63% identified financial aid as a major motivating factor. Challenges to accessing education include financial difficulties (72%), safety concerns such as bullying (55%), and resource deficiencies in schools (52%), with 50% facing family responsibilities that prevent school attendance. Proposed strategies for re-engagement include financial incentives (72%), integrating vocational training into curricula (65%), flexible school schedules (64%), and improving school facilities (59%). The study therefore concluded that there is a need for a multifaceted approach involving financial support, curriculum reform, infrastructure development, and flexible learning options to address the barriers faced by out-of-school children and to foster their reintegration into formal education. The study recommended that Policymakers and stakeholders should develop targeted interventions by incorporating vocational and life-skills training into the curriculum to make education more appealing and relevant to children's future aspirations. State governments should be organising community sensitisation programs to educate parents and community leaders on the long-term benefits of education, which can help reduce cultural barriers. Government and Non- Non-Governmental Organisations should help address economic barriers through financial incentives, as it remains one of the most effective strategies for re-engagement.

Keywords: Perceptions, Motivations, Challenges, Out-of-School Children

Introduction

Education is universally recognised as a fundamental human right and an essential driver for individual and societal development. It plays a critical role in breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty, fostering economic growth, and promoting social equity (UNESCO, 2021). According to UNICEF (2022), an estimated 244 million children globally were out of school in 2021, with a significant proportion residing in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Figures from Statistics show that up to 20 million children and youth in Nigeria are currently out of school, with the majority found in the Northern part of Nigeria. (Nwoke et al., 2024)

Out-of-school children (OOSC) are defined as individuals within the official age range for a specific education level (e.g., primary, secondary) who are not enrolled in formal schooling. This includes children who have never enrolled, dropped out, or are temporarily absent due to systemic barriers. UNESCO calculates this by subtracting the number of enrolled students from the total population of school-aged children, using

administrative data or household surveys. Out-of-school children include the Never-Enrolled Children, who have never accessed formal education due to poverty, lack of infrastructure, or cultural barriers and /or Dropouts, those who enrolled but left school prematurely, often due to economic pressures, conflict, or poor learning outcomes. Out-of-school children face multi-faceted barriers to education, including socio-economic hardships, cultural norms, gender disparities, and systemic inefficiencies in the education system. These barriers contribute to their disengagement from formal schooling, perpetuating cycles of illiteracy, poverty, and social exclusion (World Bank, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this crisis, as prolonged school closures and economic disruptions led to increased dropout rates, particularly among vulnerable populations (Save the Children, 2021).

Perceptions refer to the way out-of-school children view education, its relevance, and its potential impacts on their lives. The value that children and their communities place on education significantly influences enrollment, attendance, and retention. Likewise, Children's perceptions are also shaped by their positive and negative experiences in school. Research indicates that many out-of-school children and their parents perceive formal education as irrelevant to their immediate needs and future aspirations, especially in contexts where economic survival takes precedence over schooling. For instance, children in low-income households often view education as a distant goal that does not align with the urgent need for financial contributions to their families (UNICEF, 2022). Similarly, the lack of vocational skills training in traditional education systems can lead children to see school as unhelpful in preparing them for real-life challenges (Save the Children, 2021).

Motivations refer to the internal and external factors that drive out-of-school children to return to formal or non-formal education. Understanding these motivations is key to developing strategies that align with their aspirations and lived realities. For many out-of-school children, aspirations for a better future act as a powerful motivator. A study by the World Bank (2020) found that children who believe education will help them secure stable employment or improve their socio-economic status are more likely to re-engage with schooling. Family encouragement and community initiatives can play a significant role in motivating children to return to school. Supportive parents who value education and actively encourage their children to pursue learning are crucial in fostering motivation (Save the Children, 2021). Similarly, community-based programs that provide mentorship or peer support can inspire children to see the value of education. External incentives, such as scholarships, free school meals, or vocational training opportunities, can also motivate children to return to school. For example, UNESCO (2021)

Challenges refer to the barriers that prevent out-of-school children from accessing or returning to education. These challenges can be categorised into Socio-Economic, cultural, Systemic and Psychosocial. Socio-economic challenges are mainly Poverty; families living in poverty often cannot afford school fees, uniforms, or learning materials, forcing children to drop out or never enrol in the first place (UNICEF, 2022). In addition, child labour is prevalent in many low-income communities, where children are expected to contribute to household income rather than attend school (World Bank, 2020). Cultural norms and gender biases disproportionately affect girls, who are more likely to be excluded from education due to early marriages, domestic responsibilities, or safety concerns (Global Partnership for Education, 2021). Systemic issues, such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of qualified teachers, and overcrowded classrooms, also hinder access to education. Many schools lack basic facilities such as clean water, sanitation, or sufficient learning materials, making them unappealing or unsuitable for children (Abdulbaqi et al., 2019; Akorede et al., 2022). Psychosocial factors, such as trauma, low self-esteem, or fear of failure, can prevent children from re-engaging with education. For instance, children who have experienced bullying or discrimination in school settings may develop a negative association with formal education (World Bank, 2020).

This study explores the perceptions, motivations, and challenges faced by out-of-school children, as well as the roles of parents and educators in addressing these barriers. The focus is on understanding the reasons children disengage from education and developing strategies for their reintegration into formal or non-formal educational systems.

Statement of the Problem

Despite years of global advocacy and intervention, the persistent issue of out-of-school children remains a significant challenge to achieving universal education. According to UNESCO (2021), the majority of out-of-

school children are concentrated in marginalised communities, where poverty, gender inequality, and systemic inadequacies intersect to create insurmountable barriers to education. These children often lack access to basic literacy and numeracy skills, which limits their ability to engage in meaningful employment or contribute to societal development. The problem is further compounded by the limited understanding of how out-of-school children perceive education, what motivates them to return, and the specific challenges they face. UNICEF (2022) noted that while financial constraints and geographic inaccessibility are major barriers, other factors such as cultural norms, early marriages, child labour, and lack of safe learning environments may also play critical roles. For example, girls in many low-income countries are disproportionately affected, with societal expectations and safety concerns preventing them from attending school (Akorede et al., 2022; World Bank, 2021).

Parental and educator perspectives are also vital in understanding the problem. Many parents prioritise immediate income-generation activities over education for their children, seeing formal schooling as a distant or unattainable goal (Save the Children, 2021). Educators, on the other hand, often face challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, a lack of resources, and inadequate training, which hinder their ability to effectively address the needs of out-of-school children.

This research seeks to fill a critical gap by providing in-depth understanding on the perceptions, motivations, and challenges of out-of-school children, as well as the roles of parents and educators in overcoming barriers to education, all this are crucial in Understanding how out-of-school children view the value and accessibility of education, identifying what drives or discourages them by addressing the systemic and societal barriers they face.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the perceptions of out-of-school children regarding formal education.
2. To identify the motivations and aspirations of out-of-school children that can influence their re-engagement in education.
3. To examine the challenges faced by out-of-school youth that hinder their access to schooling.
4. To propose strategies for re-engaging out-of-school children into educational systems.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of out-of-school children regarding formal education?
2. What are the motivations and aspirations of out-of-school children to return to school?
3. What challenges do out-of-school children face in ensuring access to education?
4. What strategies can be implemented to re-engage out-of-school children into the educational system?

Hypothesis

There is no significant relationship between perceptions, motivations and challenges of out-of-school children and the likelihood of educational re-engagement.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design. According to Universal Basic Education Board (2020), Kaduna state had about 524,670 out-of-school children, with Zaria constituting 10% of the population of the state, which gives an estimated 60,000 out-of-school children in Zaria metropolis, aged 10-17years. A sample size of 384 participants was selected using Cochran's formula. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select the respondents in order to ensure diverse representation. Structured Questionnaires titled OOSSC were used to collect data on perceptions, motivations, and challenges. Data were analysed using frequency, percentages and correlation statistics.

Results

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of out-of-school children regarding formal education?

Table 1: Perceptions of out-of-school children regarding formal education

S/N	ITEM	YES		NO		ARTIAL	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
1.	Education is important for achieving my future goals.	80	27	60	20	160	53
2.	Going to school will help me improve my quality of life	120	40	65	21.7	115	38
3.	I believe education is necessary for getting a good job in the future	193	64	80	26.7	113	38
4.	Learning new skills in school can make me more confident	217	72	30	10	53	18
5.	School education is not relevant to my daily life	118	39	67	22	48	16
6.	Education is something I enjoy and value	65	21	80	27	155	52
7.	I believe that education helps improve society as a whole	158	53	30	10	112	37

Table 1 shows results on the perceptions of out-of-school children regarding formal education. 53% of the respondents partially confirmed that education is important for achieving their future goals, 64% equally believed that education is necessary for getting a good job in the future, and 72% of the respondents revealed that Learning new skills in school can make them more confident. 52% partially affirmed that education is something they enjoy and value, and lastly 53% believe that education helps improve society as a whole. All the above responses were above the acceptable percentage of 50% which implies the majority of out-of-school youth do not have a negative perception towards formal education, but became out of school due to other extrinsic reasons.

Research Question Two: What are the motivations and aspirations of out-of-school children to return to school?

Table 2: Motivations and aspirations of out-of-school children to return to school

S/N	ITEM	YES		NO		PARTIAL	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
1.	I want to go back to school to gain knowledge and skills.	40	13	67	22	193	64
2.	My family encourages me to return to school.	70	23	56	19	174	58
3.	I feel motivated to return to school because I want to help my family financially in the future.	89	30	56	19	145	48
4.	I believe returning to school will help me fulfil my dreams and aspirations.	125	42	58	19	117	39
5.	I am interested in vocational or skills-based training programs offered by schools.	205	68	15	5	80	27
6.	I feel inspired to return to school after seeing others succeed through education.	210	70	38	13	52	17
7.	Scholarships or financial aid would motivate me to go back to school.	190	63	35	12	75	25

Table 2 revealed the motivations and aspirations of out-of-school children to return to school. 70% of the respondents feel inspired to return to school after seeing others succeed through education. 68% are interested in vocational or skills-based training programs offered by schools. 63% revealed that Scholarships or financial aid would motivate them to go back to school. 64% of the respondents partially want to go back to school to gain knowledge and skills. 58% revealed that their family partially encourages them to return to school. This implies that most of the respondents might go back to school if there are favourable conditions.

Research Question three: What challenges do out-of-school children face in ensuring access to education?

Table 3: Challenges out-of-school children face in ensuring access to education.

S/N	ITEM	YES		NO		PARTIAL	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
1.	Financial difficulties prevent me from attending school.	215	72	25	8.3	60	20
2.	I lack transportation to get to school.	98	33	108	36	94	31
3.	I had difficulty understanding the subjects or lessons when I was in school.	106	35	55	18	139	46
4.	I feel unsafe at school due to bullying or harassment.	57	19	78	26	165	55
5.	My family responsibilities (work, caregiving) keep me from attending school.	105	35	45	15	150	50
6.	Gender roles or expectations in my community discourage me from going to school.	75	25	105	35	120	40
7.	Schools in my area lack resources such as teachers, books, and facilities	120	40	25	8	155	52

Table 3 shows the responses of the respondents on the challenges out-of-school children face in ensuring access to education. 72% of the respondents revealed that Financial difficulties prevent them from attending school. 55% feel unsafe at school due to bullying or harassment, 52% revealed that Schools in their area lack resources such as books and facilities. 50% of the respondents affirmed that family responsibilities (e.g., work, caregiving) keep them from attending school. All the aforementioned challenges were above the acceptable percentage of 50% which implies that out-of-school children have so many challenges that hinder them from attending school.

Research Question Four: What strategies can be implemented to re-engage out-of-school children into the educational system?

Table 4: Mean responses of the strategies that can be implemented to re-engage out-of-school children into the educational system.

S/N	ITEM	YES		NO		PARTIAL	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
1.	Offering free or subsidised education would motivate children to return to school.	150	50	60	20	90	30
2.	Providing vocational and skills-based programs would encourage children to re-enrol	195	65	24	8	81	27
3.	Flexible school schedules (e.g., evening classes) would help children with other responsibilities return to school.	193	64	30	10	77	26
4.	Awareness campaigns about the importance of education can help reduce stigma around school attendance.	58	19	158	53	84	28
5.	Community-based initiatives (e.g., peer mentoring or tutoring) would help children transition back to school.	115	38	43	14	142	47
6.	Financial incentives (e.g., stipends for families) would encourage school attendance.	215	72	34	11	51	17
7.	Improving school facilities and learning environments would make education more appealing.	176	59	23	8	101	34
8.	Providing psychosocial support (e.g., counselling) can help children overcome barriers to education.	125	42	67	22	108	36

Table four revealed the strategies that can be implemented to re-engage out-of-school children into the educational system. 72% agreed that Financial incentives (e.g., stipends for families) would encourage school attendance. 65% revealed that providing vocational and skills-based programs would encourage children to re-enrol. 64% shows that flexible school schedules (e.g evening classes) would help children with other responsibilities return to school. 59% revealed that improving school facilities and learning environments would make education more appealing. The above findings imply that there are several strategies that can be adopted that would help mitigate the problem of out-of-school children.

Discussion

The findings from Table 1 provide valuable insight into the perceptions of out-of-school children regarding formal education. Based on the data, it can be seen that the majority of respondents hold a generally positive view of education, despite their current out-of-school status. The result revealed that 53% of respondents partially confirmed that education is important for achieving their future goals. This indicates that more than half of the respondents recognise the long-term value of education in shaping their personal and professional aspirations. This finding aligns with the study of Yusuf et al. (2021), which highlighted that children from disadvantaged backgrounds often see education as a means of upward social mobility, even if they face barriers to accessing it. The result revealed that 53% of respondents partially confirmed that education is important for achieving their future goals. This indicates that more than half of the respondents recognise the long-term value of education in shaping their personal and professional aspirations. This finding aligns with the study of Yusuf et al. (2021), which highlighted that children from disadvantaged backgrounds often see education as a means of upward social mobility, even if they face barriers to accessing it. 64% of respondents believed that education is necessary for securing a good job in the future. This finding underscores the understanding among out-of-school children that formal education is closely tied to economic opportunities and improved livelihood. It resonates with the findings of Adebayo and Suleiman (2022), who argued that the perceived economic value of education is a strong motivational factor for children and their families, especially in low-income settings.

The result shows that 72% of respondents revealed that learning new skills in school can make them more confident. A study by Olajide and Musa (2020) emphasises the role of education in equipping children with life skills that transcend academic knowledge, enabling them to navigate challenges and seize opportunities. While only 52% of respondents partially affirmed that education is something they enjoy and value, this figure still surpasses the 50% benchmark, indicating a generally favourable perception. This finding is consistent with research by Ibrahim et al. (2021), which noted that negative schooling experiences, such as overcrowded classrooms or unengaging teaching methods, can reduce the intrinsic value children place on education. Lastly, 53% of respondents believe that education helps improve society as a whole, according to a report by UNESCO (2021). Such awareness is critical for sustaining educational re-engagement efforts, as it motivates individuals to prioritise education not only for personal gain but also for the good of their communities.

A significant finding from the results of Table 2 is that 70% of respondents feel inspired to return to school after seeing others succeed through education. This underscores the importance of role models and success stories in shaping the aspirations of children who are out of school. As noted by Adamu and Adesina (2021), the visibility of successful individuals within the community can create a ripple effect, encouraging others to pursue education as a pathway to success. Additionally, 68% of respondents expressed interest in vocational or skills-based training programs offered by schools. This suggests that a purely academic curriculum may not fully address the needs or interests of out-of-school children. According to Suleiman et al. (2022), skill acquisition programs embedded within schools have shown significant success in attracting out-of-school youth in Northern Nigeria. Financial barriers also play a critical role in educational disengagement. 63% of the respondents indicated that scholarships or financial aid would motivate them to return to school. This finding aligns with research by UNESCO (2021), which highlights that economic hardship is one of the most significant barriers to education in sub-Saharan Africa. Providing targeted financial support, such as scholarships or conditional cash transfers, has been shown to improve enrollment and retention rates, particularly among marginalised populations. The results revealed that 64% of respondents partially want to return to school to gain knowledge and skills. According to Ahmed and Musa (2023), providing a curriculum that emphasises both theoretical and practical knowledge can help sustain educational interest among students. 58% of respondents revealed that their families partially encourage them to return to school. Family attitudes towards education can significantly influence children's decisions to return to school. Research by Balogun and Ibrahim (2022) highlights that parental involvement and support can improve educational outcomes and reduce dropout rates. However, in cases where families are indifferent or constrained by financial challenges, external interventions may be necessary to bridge the gap.

The findings from Table 3 underscore the multifaceted challenges that out-of-school children in Zaria Metropolis, Kaduna State, face in accessing education. The result revealed that 72% of respondents identified

financial difficulties as a major barrier to attending school. This finding aligns with global and regional studies, such as UNESCO (2021), which emphasise that economic hardship remains the most significant barrier to education in sub-Saharan Africa. Many families in low-income communities struggle to afford tuition, uniforms, books, and other school-related expenses, making education inaccessible for children. In regions like Zaria, where poverty rates are high, targeted interventions such as scholarships, free school programs, or conditional cash transfers could alleviate this burden and increase school attendance (Ahmed & Yusuf, 2022). A sense of insecurity in schools, with 55% of respondents reporting feeling unsafe due to bullying or harassment. This indicates that the school environment itself can be a deterrent for children (Akorede et al., 2022). Studies by Balogun and Ibrahim (2022) highlight that bullying, harassment, and even gender-based violence in schools can lead to high dropout rates, particularly among vulnerable populations such as girls. The data also reveals that 52% of respondents identified the lack of resources, such as books and facilities in schools, as a barrier to education. This finding is consistent with the research of Suleiman et al. (2022), which notes that poorly equipped schools in Northern Nigeria fail to meet the basic needs of students, leading to disengagement. Infrastructure deficits, such as the absence of functional classrooms, libraries, or clean water, further discourage attendance. 50% of respondents indicated that family responsibilities, such as work or caregiving, prevent them from attending school. According to Adamu and Adesina (2021), the opportunity cost of sending children to school can be too high for families living in poverty, especially in rural or semi-urban areas. Flexible schooling options, such as evening classes, part-time learning, or community-based education programs, could help address this challenge by accommodating the unique circumstances of these children.

The findings from Table 4 highlight practical strategies that can be implemented to re-engage out-of-school children. 72% of respondents agreed that financial incentives, such as stipends for families, would encourage school attendance. This finding aligns with global research that emphasises the importance of addressing financial barriers to education. As UNESCO (2021) notes, conditional cash transfer programs and stipends can serve as powerful tools to incentivise school enrollment, particularly in low-income settings. Such financial support not only helps families meet the direct costs of education (e.g., tuition, uniforms, and books) but also offsets the opportunity cost of sending children to school instead of engaging in income-generating activities (Abdulbaqi et al., 2024; Ahmed & Yusuf, 2022).

65% of respondents believe that providing vocational and skills-based programs would encourage children to re-enrol in school. According to Suleiman et al. (2022), integrating vocational training into the formal education system can make schooling more relevant and attractive for out-of-school children. 64% of respondents believe flexible school schedules, such as evening classes, would help children with other responsibilities return to school. A study conducted by Ahmed and Musa (2023) emphasises that flexible educational models have been successful in reaching marginalised populations, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. Finally, 59% of respondents indicated that improving school facilities and learning environments would make education more appealing. Balogun and Ibrahim (2022) argue that investing in school infrastructure not only enhances the quality of education but also boosts student morale and retention rates. Upgrading facilities, providing adequate teaching resources, and ensuring access to clean water and sanitation can make schools more welcoming and engaging for students.

Conclusion

The findings of the study underscore the need for a multifaceted approach to re-engaging out-of-school children in Zaria Metropolis. Financial incentives, vocational training, flexible scheduling, and improved infrastructure are all critical components of an effective strategy. By implementing these measures, policymakers, educators, and stakeholders can create an inclusive education system that addresses the unique challenges faced by out-of-school children and supports their successful reintegration into formal education.

Reccomendations

1. Policymakers and stakeholders should develop targeted interventions by incorporating vocational and life-skills training into the curriculum to make education more appealing and relevant to children's future aspirations.

2. State governments should be organising community sensitisation programs to educate parents and community leaders on the long-term benefits of education, which can help reduce cultural barriers.

3. Government and Non-Governmental Organisations should help address economic barriers through financial incentives, as it remains one of the most effective strategies for re-engagement.

4. Policymakers and stakeholders should adopt a holistic approach tailored to the specific needs of this population to maximise the impact of re-engagement strategies.

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