

Access and Success: The Role of Distance Education in Girl-Child Education in Nigeria

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Education in Nigeria is an instrument par excellence for affecting national development. In spite of the global efforts to broaden opportunities in many schools all over Nigeria, many are not responding adequately to the needs of their students. A large majority of the learners do not acquire even minimal levels of learning due to such factors as poverty, malnutrition and different multi-cultural contexts, and many children still relegated to environments that discourage learning. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes that States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind. However, in Nigeria, available indicators show that the girl-child is discriminated against from the earliest stages of life, from her childhood and into adulthood. The reasons for the discrepancy include: female genital mutilation, son preference, early marriage, violence against women, sexual exploitation and gender-based educational processes. In supporting girls' education, no developmental strategy is better than one that involves women as central players. It has immediate benefits for nutrition, health, savings and reinvestment at the family, community, and ultimately, country levels. Educating girls is a social development policy that works. It is a long-term investment that yields an exceptionally high return. Gaining access to learning and successful participation in education is becoming essential for all. As a result, most countries have set goals to increase the access to girl-child education for individuals that are under-represented. Among other principles, for equitable access and success in learning global development perspectives in Nigeria, what ODL (open and distance learning) can do in terms of success and access to learning development is the bone of contention for this paper as ODL are balancing inequalities between age groups and extending geographical access to education.

Keywords: access, success, distance education, girl-child, education, Nigeria

Introduction

In spite of the global efforts to broaden opportunities for all children, schools in many parts of the world are not responding adequately to the needs of their students. Despite of being in school, a large majority of learners do not acquire even minimal levels of learning and come out of school unprepared to integrate with the rapidly changing world. Factors, such as poverty and malnutrition negatively affect the psychosocial and cognitive development of the child. In addition, classes continue to be too large, there is a constant lack of educational materials, teachers are not appropriately trained, curricula are not well adapted to the different multicultural contexts, schools are poorly supervised and many children are still relegated to environments that discourage learning. All of these factors together have resulted in a negative impact on student performance and

learning achievement levels.

The EFA (education for all) movement launched more than a decade and a half ago in Jomtien has led to unprecedented mobilization of national leadership and the international community in support of basic education. The 1990s saw increased enrolment which has gained further momentum after the Dakar Declaration in 2000. Yet, tens of millions of children in the developing world—primarily girls, the poor and other marginalized groups—remain out of school. Hundreds of millions drop out before completing primary school and of those who do complete it, a large proportion fail to acquire desired levels of knowledge and skills. Many of those who remain in school continue to attain sub-minimal levels of basic learning competencies and have difficulties in integrating into a workplace that is increasingly defined by the demands and opportunities of a global knowledge society (UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), 2007).

As it has been aptly stated in the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (United Nation, 1995) in Beijing, the girl-child today is the woman of tomorrow. The skills, ideas and energy of the girl-child are vital for full attainment of the goals of equality, development and peace. For the girl-child to develop her full potential, she needs to be nurtured in an enabling environment, where her spiritual, intellectual and material needs for survival, protection and development are met and equal rights safeguarded. In the Nigerian case, especially the limited education women receive could be detrimental to social development needs of women and girls.

The challenge before educational planners and policy-makers is not only to provide school places, but also to guarantee that everyone attending school succeeds in learning—moving from access to success in life. How do we make this happen? What are the well-established principles that could guide further action in pursuing EFA goals so that education contributes to genuine success in life and not merely leads to a certificate of enrolment and attendance? What are the factors that seem to influence such progress in learning? How could distance education address this challenge of making quality education for girl-child a reality? These and more are the bases for this paper.

Concept of Access

It ensures that each student receives a high quality and individually designed education. Each student must be ensured a free appropriate public education. Each child's education must be determined on an individualized basis and designed to meet his/her particular needs in the least restrictive environment, and the rights of children and their families must be ensured and protected through procedural safeguards.

Concept of Success

Academic success is linked to the positive outcomes and values for children. People with high levels of education are more likely to be employed and to earn higher salaries. Academic success is important, because working individual will need higher levels of education to tackle the technologically demanding occupations of the future. Academically, successful students will have more employment opportunities than those with less education.

Concept of Distance Education

Distance education is the process of providing instruction between a teacher and students when they are

separated by physical distance. In some cases, a class may have several groups of students located at different places. A variety of technologies are used to deliver courses and programs to students in distance education programs, including videotape, interactive video, the Internet, CD-ROM (compact disc read only memory), audiotape and correspondence. Many distance education courses use a combination of delivery modes. Students typically communicate with instructors by telephone, fax, mail and e-mail. Some instructors also travel to meet with students in person.

Concept of Education

Education is the process through which individuals are made functional members of their society (Ocho, 2005). It is a process through which the young acquires knowledge and realizes his/her potentialities and uses them for self-actualization, to be useful to himself/herself and others. It is a means of preserving, transmitting and improving the culture of the society. In every society, education connotes acquisition of something good and worthwhile.

The Girl-Child

The girl-child is a biological female offspring from birth to 18 years of age.

This is the age before one becomes young adult. This period covers the crèche, nursery or early childhood (0-5 years), primary (6-12 years) and secondary school (12-18 years). During this period, the young child is totally under the care of the adult who may be her parents or guardians and older siblings. It is made up of infancy, childhood, early and late adolescence stages of development. During this period, the girl-child is malleable, builds and develops her personality and character. She is very dependent on the significant others, those on whom she models her behaviors, through observation, repetition and imitation. Her physical, mental, social, spiritual and emotional developments start and progress to get to the peak at the young adult stage (Offorma, 2009).

Crucial Issues in Girl-Child Education

Access simply means the right to education. It is also the opportunity provided for the girl-child to be educated. Access deals with the availability, convenience and ability to be educated. It is true that many governments make provision for the education of their citizens, but the provisions most of the time do not take cognizance of the peculiarities of the girl-child. In that case, the girl-child may not have access to education, which is a fundamental human right.

According to World Bank (2003), more than 350 million people, over half Africa's population, live below the poverty line of one dollar a day. This implies that poverty, too, excludes children, including the girl-child from school. In some part of Nigeria, girls are some times abducted for marriage when they are no more than eight years. In West Africa, they are recruited from poor rural families to work as domestic servants in coastal cities or even neighboring countries. In Nigeria, it is very difficult to find a house help today. This is because there is awareness of the values of education, and so parents do not give out their children any more as house helps. In South Africa, a recent report by Human Rights Watch warns that sexual violence and abuse are hampering girls' access to education. In Afghanistan, they have simply been barred from school under the Taleban regime. Most of the factors that militate against the girl-child access to education are socio-cultural.

The right to education, which is a fundamental human right, is frequently denied to girls in some Africa countries. The United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, stated that in Africa, when families have to

make a choice, either a girl or a boy child due to limited resources of educating, it is always the boy that is chosen to attend school. In Africa, many girls are prevented from getting the education entitled to them, because families often send their daughters out to work at a young age, so that they can get the additional income they may need to exist beyond subsistence level and finance the education of sons.

In Kenya, girl-child education is elusive. Mwangi (2004) wrote that a combination of poverty, disease and backward cultural practices continued to deny the girl-child's right to receive education. Even with the introduction of free primary education, access to education is still remaining a wide dream to many Kenyan children. Despite of the introduction of free primary education in the country which accounted for an increase in enrolment, a sizeable number of children, especially girls, still find themselves out of school owing to a number of reasons. These reasons are: demands for their labor in the homes, such as assisting in looking after their young siblings, child marriage, doing house chores, death of mother and looking after the sick member of the family.

Some of the girls are given to marriage against their wish and when they refuse, they are threatened with death. The children are given to marriage at a tender age in quest of dowry from the husbands.

Some parents justify the denial of girls of their rights to education to prevent them from bringing shame to the family through early pregnancy. Yet, others believe that women who are at the same level of education as the men are a disgrace to the community, because more often than not, they will not get married and if they do, it will be to a foreigner. For such parents, early marriage is the best way to prevent this and at the same time preserve traditions.

Factors Influencing Learning

Quality is at the heart of education and what takes place in classrooms and other learning environments is fundamentally important to the future well-being of children, young people and adults. A quality education is one that satisfies basic learning needs and enriches the lives of learners and their overall experience of living.

Evidence over the past decade has shown that efforts to expand enrolment must be accompanied by attempts to enhance educational quality, if children are to be attracted to school, stay there and achieve meaningful learning outcomes. Scarce resources have frequently been used for expanding systems with insufficient attention to quality improvement in areas, such as teacher training and materials development. Recent assessments of learning achievement in some countries have shown that a sizeable percentage of children are acquiring only a fraction of the knowledge and skills that they are expected to master. What students are meant to learn has often not been clearly defined, well taught or accurately assessed.

The critical role of early childhood care and development with particular focus on nutrition and nutrition education, early childhood care and development including proper nutrition helps in guaranteeing learning capacity of the children in school and beyond.

In-school factors—conditions, contents, methods and processes, what methods and support systems would assist teachers to teach better and children to learn better? The focus should be on:

- (1) The study technology;
- (2) Differentiation and active learning;
- (3) Creating learning friendly environments for reading acquisition;
- (4) Ideal conditions in terms of teacher-pupil ratios;
- (5) Multi-grade teaching;

- (6) Linking learning with policy-making;
- (7) Education development projects at various levels;
- (8) Conducting large-scale assessment of learning outcomes;
- (9) Empowering communities for improved education outcomes;
- (10) An evaluation of projects and programmes of education funded by the World Bank;
- (11) The need for paying increased attention to quality and learning in education for all;
- (12) Emphasizing the need to view learning within a broader social and economic context;
- (13) Re-defining learning based on the emerging knowledge society.

How Learning Can Be Enhanced

Learner-centered teaching and use of interactive materials and processes empower each child to take responsibility for his/her learning and become an autonomous but active partner in the learning process. Enhancing learning through such an approach has to be viewed from a rights-based perspective and not merely from an instrumentalist angle.

There is a need to enhance attention to bi-directional activities that link the school with home and community. Such linkages are essentially bound by the common interest of developing the children. It is necessary to emphasize and establish the centrality of human-human interaction in education.

In the current framework of school functioning, with an overload of curricular activities, there should be space provided for children's creativity. Schoolwork has become so much a routine for the children that the only time they are creative is during breaks and when they are outside the classroom.

There is a need to strengthen pedagogic practices that promote confidence, not fear of failure among learners and teachers. Attention has to be paid to introducing counseling services in schools.

In organizing school programmes and in order to enhance learning and reduce dropouts, one should explore what kind of teaching and learning methods that have proved to be most effective in terms of student learning and through different strategies.

There is a need to address the issue of active learning, integrated curricula and other suggested approaches in teacher training and ensure that teacher-training institutions respond to developments in theory and practice by improving their training programmes and strategies.

How classroom teaching is carried out is critical for enhancing learning. Teachers have to be trained in differentiation—to recognize different levels and different learning problems, the fast learner and at the same time not neglect those who are behind?

Assessment practices need greater attention. How can we assist learning, if we use the same methods of assessment? Holistic and continuous forms of assessment have to be promoted.

The language used in teaching is of central importance for enhancing learning. It is necessary to bridge home and school experiences by using the children's mother tongue(s) as the medium of learning and teaching in the school. This helps children to develop necessary tools and literacy skills in order to move forward and acquire another language.

Adequate attention should be given to improving teaching and learning through supervision and monitoring in diverse educational conditions. This is an area that needs concerted attention, if schools are to deliver and learning outcomes are to be enhanced.

Enhancing learning requires inter-sectoral collaboration among all partners at all levels—UNESCO, other

United Nations agencies, government organizations, NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and others.

Role of Distance Education in Creating Access and Success Towards the Girl-Child Education

As in every other walk of modern life, the answer to the challenge of education for development will include the use of information and communication technologies. A range of technological devices is now widely available and relatively cheap (e.g., CD-ROM and various Internet services). They are accepted and often available for domestic use as well as in the workplace. Governments are concerned that educational institutions become connected to the emerging networks that curricula include the knowledge of and acquaintance with new technologies and that the girl-child are prepared and trained to use these new resources.

To the girl-child, ODL (open and distance learning) means more freedom of access, and thereby, a wider range of opportunities for learning and qualification. The barriers that may be overcome by distance learning include not only geographical distance, but also other confining circumstances, such as personal constraints, cultural and social barriers and lack of educational infrastructure. For the girl-child, it is often a cheaper alternative to pursuing a course through conventional methods. Since many of these girl-child cannot afford to leave their home, due to religious background. Distance education may mean a more learner-centered approach, allowing greater flexibility and choice of content as well as more personal organization of the learning programme.

For the employed women, ODL offers the possibility of organizing learning and professional development in the workplace itself, which is often more flexible and saves costs of travel, subsistence, etc.. The use of distance learning often puts both the firm and employees in a position of co-investment in the pursuit of common goals. With sufficient numbers of the girl-child being trained, ODL is usually cost-effective.

Distance education can expand the limited number of places available, reach a wider student audience, meet the needs of the girl-child who are unable to attend on-campus classes, provide continuing professional development to graduates, be used to meet the demand for lifelong learning, involve outside experts who would otherwise be unavailable and improve access to education for women who have been treated as second class citizens as far as development is concerned.

Saint (2000) also argued that distance education increases access especially to four groups. Secondary school leavers are unable to obtain a place at a college or university, and students who are geographically isolated women with domestic responsibilities and the economically disadvantaged.

Distance education can increase girl-child points of access to education. Learners tend to access distance teaching in four sites, namely, the home, the workplace, dedicated study centers, and like their counterparts in the conventional systems, traditional classrooms.

Many states in the Northern part of Nigeria need to establish distance education to compensate for the past deprivation of the educational imbalance between the North and the South and meet the demands of the present and future. This goes on to indicate that in real numbers, the participation in basic education by people of the appropriate age group is declining.

Conclusions

There is an adage that says “educate a man, you educate an individual, but educate a woman, you educate a

nation". The above summarizes the essence of education to the girl-child and indeed, to every educable human being, and so calls for special attention to be focused on education of the girl-child. No nation can afford to toy with the education of her citizens, especially, the child who will be the father or mother of tomorrow, because education is the bedrock of all facets of development.

The use of distance education and open learning methodologies will address a number of capacity-building issues. These include: the extension of literacy and numeracy skills among millions of adults through the use of radio, television and telematics, helping rural women to develop entrepreneurial skills, assisting agricultural extension workers to improve their capacity to educate farm workers, training of legislators in legislative drafting, increasing the speed of in-service training of un- or under- trained teachers and delivering continuous professional development programmes for health workers, managers and administrators (Macdonald, 2001).

Recommendations

Based on the above mentioned, the author gave some recommendations as follows:

(1) Focused studies are needed on issues that influence learning in different language media and environments. Particular attention has to be paid to mother-tongue literacy in bilingual and multilingual contexts and its interface with teaching-learning processes in organized school settings;

(2) Early stimulation of children through such activities as creative play, music and physical activity, nutrition and nutrition education, and stimulation and relaxation of the brain are means of enhancing learning in children. Schooling, which generally begins when the child is six or seven years' old, may be too late;

(3) Integrating technology into school processes is essential, both as content and as a means of enhancing learning. Making ICT a component process of learning and an integral component of the learning environment is important. This is also socially and economically desirable in order to overcome the fast emerging digital divide;

(4) Increased evidence is emerging on the critical value of early childhood care and education in terms of its impact on learning capability. However, the sector has not received adequate attention within the framework of public schooling. Poor nutrition and stunted growth are major factors hindering the learning capacity of children;

(5) It is essential to explore ways and means of ensuring enhanced learning by children living in poverty-ridden conditions. However, this may not be enough—It is also necessary to reflect upon what kind of education will help poverty reduction and what kind of education is relevant to the needs of the poor, exploring both curricular issues and issues of classroom transaction;

(6) The teacher is the central figure that can make learning happen—It is necessary to invest more on teacher professional development. It is not desirable to adopt cost-saving measures on this front, as it would have a cascading impact over a long period and particular care has to be taken to ensure that teachers enter the profession with adequate academic credentials and professional training. It is useful to launch a comprehensive study on the impact of teacher qualifications, different categories of teachers, establishment of performance standards for teachers and other aspects of classroom learning;

(7) Issues of financing have to be addressed at both macro level and micro (school) level. More resources are needed to create conditions for effective learning. Equally relevant in this context is who is

empowered to use finances school governing boards, community members, administrators, or local government authorities;

(8) There is a need for studies on designing techniques and processes of learner evaluation relevant to varying school and classroom contexts, such as multi-grade or multi-age settings, large-size classes.

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