

Making Access to Primary Education Sincerely for All in Nigeria



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ABSTRACT: Access oriented approach only favours parity in the education of boys and girls in Nigeria. It is a strategy that reflects social justice to ensure mass education of the citizenry. From the perspective of social inclusion, however, parity keeps the provisions of the education for all away from achieving an objective that sincerely includes all children in school. The social inclusion notion engenders a paradigm shift, expanding the frontiers of such a provision. Access in this sense is understood beyond the notion of mere pupil numbers to a strategy that provides opportunities for diverse children to enroll and attend school.

KEYWORDS: access, attendance, children, inclusion, primary education.

INTRODUCTION

Parity based access to education is a feeble provision for primary age children in Nigeria. Access involves creating favourable conditions and/or avenues to wrestle disadvantages and enable mass enrolment and attendance of all eligible children in schools to achieve primary education (Lewin, 2009; Chataikaa, Mckenzieb, Swarc & Lyner-Cleophasd, 2012). The perspectives shared by these authors define access in an extensive way, looking at it as to be an education for all strategy that is broad in context transcending enrolment. A critical examination of the policy has shown almost a similar pattern in access in Nigeria as that reported by Lewin and Chataikaa et al. Beyond gender, access, as it is being applied at the moment, is not expansive and holistic to accommodate children from all other backgrounds in regard to the places available and attendance in school. A broad-based access that includes all the backgrounds of children in school makes for a sincere and well-intentioned provision for their education. A society that is pursuing strategic and sustainable development takes the education of children very seriously. Juvenile education is a key factor to making that development goal sustainable. Provisioning education for all children indicates a desire to develop them to become functional members of the society.

Doing so implies that there is recognition of the vital position juvenile education occupies in national development agenda. Of all levels of education, primary education is the most essential. All other levels of education rely on it even though it continues to suffer neglect. Even the Federal Government of Nigeria (2008), as expressly stated in the National Policy on Education (NPE), acknowledges primary education as the aspect of education that determines the fate of other levels of education. An efficient approach for government to invest early in human capital development to mitigate cost on national economic capacity. Secondary education is nonetheless also important except that it builds on the foundation already laid by its predecessor. It is implicit. Primary education is a core undertaking in the process of developing an effective manpower. Enabling it for children is a measure that sustains a succession plan where the young can replace the old to effectively continue to man and manage the various institutions of government in the future.

INTERROGATING ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Looking at it from the standpoint of access, primary education is only on the margins of enabling a genuine education for all in Nigeria. Over the years the policy on primary education follows a path that predominantly favours access (Universal Basic Education Commission- UBEC, 2004; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation – UNESCO, 2012; Ewa, 2019). The focus on access, within the context of the education for all agenda, is a reference to the strict implementation of the enrolment process in schools. Ensuring access in this sense indicates a moral responsibility on the part of stakeholders to give every child a chance (Bruns, Mingat & Rakotomalala, 2003) to be placed in school. Ever since this objective has continued to dominate efforts in terms of the number of primary age children that receive places in school. Even with the adoption and implementation of parity in the number of boys and girls in primary enrolments the future of a significant number of children in Nigeria is still at stake.

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According to the National Audit Office (2010:6) 'access is a crucial first step into education'. It is a prerequisite for schooling for every child. Access emerged as a measure to redirect provisions going forward and accelerate progress. It comes as a lever to activate the process of ensuring mass education in the form of widening participation of more children in formal education. The hint is that perhaps what applies at present is not enough to serve the needs of children including those living in disadvantages across societies. One gender appeared to be overrepresented in school than the other. Across many low-income countries, including Nigeria, more boys than girls had places in school (World Bank, 2006). UNESCO (2004) estimated that 103 million 6- to 11-year-olds in developing countries, representing about one-fifth of the total were out of school in 2001.

A significant portion of the out-of-school children are likely females. In consequence, access which in this case is viewed from the angle of equality in education leans onto the distributive perspective of social justice. One emphasis of this theory is parity and fairness in the distribution of social services (Hyttén and Bettez, 2011). Social justice in education highlights the importance of ensuring that there is a balance in the number of boys and girls who receive places in primary schools to get primary education. Given this position, the understanding of social justice in education is 'gender based access', concentrating on bolstering the place of females in schools. In referring to the backgrounds of children in terms of the benefits available in educational opportunities for them, other identifiers are also salient, in addition to being male and female. Access opportunities for children within the frame of education for all (EFA) often ignores, or rather marginally covers other demographics such as the language, tribe, religion, special education needs etc of children in school enrolments and attendance. Gender based access as it is the focus in international (UNESCO, 2004) and national policy on education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2008) plays down on the importance of making education widely accessible for all eligible children in Nigeria. When the placement of children in school becomes lumped and attached to just male and female, exclusion and marginalisation of the background of other children within particular groups is made possible.

As such it became more necessary to upscale commitments towards increasing the number of children in schools. Before 1990, or even 2000 access was not a critical priority in children's education in primary schools (World Bank, 2006). Up until the close of the 20th century countries and partner agencies often focused on internal efficiency measures in schools such as dropout and repetition rates. Even at that having reliable data on these assessment criteria was problematic. Often times the measures and outcomes are presented as estimates. Estimates do not give the exact picture of the issue. Rather they are helpful only to provide a clue about the situation of things on ground. This might be due to enrolment dynamics in different geographic locations. The need to expand enrolment became pertinent in realisation of the crucial role juvenile education performs in facilitating social mobility. Studies have proven that there is huge return on investment in primary education. For example, World Bank (2002b) and Glewwe (2002) found that the knowledge and skills children gain from primary education make a difference in economic mobility. Before now other research findings have indicated positive benefits of primary education in national economic growth (Hanushek and Kimko, 2000) and development. The inquiry conducted by Coulombe, Tremblay & Marchand (2004) on a similar issue corroborates these findings.

Since basic education is a right for all children, including those residing in hard-to-reach locations, the children deserve more in education than having to equalise access for boys and girls in schools. Although access is being introduced as a procedure approach to expand education opportunities for children in school challenges still remain. It has yet to fully meet its enrolment objectives, or it overlooks other enrolment objectives. As stated earlier, access is following a unidirectional trajectory which is parity between boys and girls in school admissions. Such a pursuit is narrow and also falls short of the requirement of equality in the education of children. The number of boys who are attending school tend to dwindle as the the focus on girls rises (Humphreys and Crawford, 2014). Apart from the differences in gender, boys and girls do not all have a homogenous background. Drawing the lines of equity in access along the path of a 'gender based parity' process weakens the commitment to achieving a broad-based equality in practice. Any such undertakings create a fragile way of implementing access when other markers of the identities of boys and girls such as religion, tribe and location are being ignored. Gender based access shifts attention away from a broad enrolment process. Access that is measured by gender highlights between group – boys and girls – enrolment; not within group enrolment variables as shown in the current practice. Within group access procedure for example involves a situation whereby within male children across different social backgrounds e.g. migrants, language, religion, tribe, location etc are equally represented in school admissions. A similar consideration will apply for the females too. It is a thorough process and drives efforts on access a step further.

Tackling parity in enrolment alone tends to keep juvenile education away from achieving its full purposes in regard to its human development endeavour. This plays down on the value of the other critical aspects of providing whole education for the child. As part of educational support services as documented in the NPE, a key resolve of the Federal Government of Nigeria (2008:38) to implement the policy on primary education is to 'enhance access to learning. Here access means enabling all children,

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not just to enter school, but to also engage in classroom lessons so that they can benefit from learning. In practice nonetheless the attention on parity in enrolment dominates the efforts committed to learning. It goes beyond saying that primary education, as the foundation builder, is not limited to access. As conditions are being provided to encourage the child to be present in school what next? Except to raise pupil population, school enrolments in themselves do not stem the losses in learning and achievement among pupils. Many families make decisions to enroll their children in school not just for the sake of it. The expectation is that the children will have the opportunity to engage with school activities and achieve from learning in the long term. Failure to learn paints a gloomy future for a child and imposes a huge cost on national development. Children develop relevant skills from learning and can complete their education and have better prospects (Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development - OECD, 2012).

The gender approach is just an initial step to access. Even at that it is limited in scope and practice. A multirole strategy takes access forward further and expands it. It is an alternative that is multipurpose and expansionist. Further expansion of access is likely to address the inequities in the ways primary education is made to become more accessible for all children. Other researchers also align with this position. Okeke (2008), for instance, corroborates that access has to provide free and unlimited, unhindered and unfettered opportunities at each level of education to obtain knowledge, skills, and abilities available at that level needed to optimally participate and contribute to development in the society. Nwogu (2015) in his work, *barriers to equality of access to educational opportunity in Nigeria: a philosophical perspective*, takes a similar line of thought. The initiators of the concept of access to education probably did not take these factors into consideration. Arguably the thinking among them could be that gendered parity is a method that is potent enough to foster equal rights in education and to raise mass literacy. After all we have just male and female in the human race. By that it is believed the right of children to education within the school system is assured. Such a pronouncement of access is nonetheless infirm.

MOVING FROM PARITY BASED ACCESS TO INCLUSION BASED ACCESS IN NIGERIA

What exists currently is parity in access to education of children in primary schools. A stronger commitment to widen access is possible and doable especially if primary education is given top priority in terms of financing. A brief assessment would provide an insight in relation to the monetary allocation often earmarked to primary education. National budgetary allocations are made annually to this subsector of the educational system of Nigeria. It is just that the attention which stakeholders provide is negligible to the extent that very meagre funds are allotted to this area. UNESCO proposes that from 15 per cent to 26 per cent of the annual national budget be given to education as a whole (Olugbenga and Yakubu, 2021). This recommendation is in realisation of the fact that education is the most impactful sector in every society. Primary education is very crucial to stimulating that impact. In practice, however, the Nigerian government allocates just a little above 6.7 percent of the overall budget to education. (Primary) schools receive far less than that disbursement in the actual implementation of the budget. Primary education does not fare well when government demonstrates such level of disregard for it. When a building foundation is poorly laid, either cracks or outright collapse is certain to occur to the elevations of the building. A consequence of poor funding of primary education in Nigeria is that schools will not have adequate carrying capacity for access. Carrying capacity in this sense refers to having enough staffing, infrastructure, remuneration of teachers, and equipping schools to be able to respond positively to the needs of a diverse pupil population (Ewa and Ewa, 2019) within local communities.

The out of school population in Nigeria are boys and girls from different social backgrounds in the country. Some children are not in school because the school policy and culture of practice there are such that cannot meet the educational needs of, for instance, a Fulani child, a Christian child, a *Boki* speaking child, overaged pupil, a pregnant pupil, an orphan, a child with impairments etc. The existing policies and cultures in and outside the school are not able to address the vulnerabilities of children. Children's interests, parent's permission, homes chores, teacher attitudes and distance to school are some issues that determine the way primary age children attend and complete school in Nigeria (Aliero, 2020). Similar issues take place too in Pakistan as documented at different times by Stromquist (2014), Vayachuta, Ratana-Ubol & Soopanyo (2016) and Yousaf, Shehzadi & Bibi (2021). It is obvious that the socio-economic, geographical and psychological environments within the school and beyond the walls of the school are factors responsible for the extent to which a child can access primary education in Nigeria, even in other climes. Singly or in combination, these issues have consequences on how children enroll and attend school. Many children lose access due to dissatisfaction at school. Child centred policies and practices, on the other hand, have positive motivation to children's enrolment and attendance in school.

A pathway to reinforce education for all, especially in developing countries like Nigeria, is to reposition access for it to become inclusive. At the moment, it is still a 'survival of the fittest' kind of approach. Only children who are resilient survive the tough conditions surrounding their education in local community schools. Others are left behind. It is disadvantages that can cause primary age children to be excluded in education. When such disadvantages become persistent the implication is that the access

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opportunity is constrained to move the education for all policy beyond the periphery involving just ensuring equilibrium in the number of boys and girls that get places in schools at a given time. Further from the gender based parity role it is ascribed with, access, in a more inclusive interpretation, has a social inclusion character (World Bank, 2013; Robo, 2014; Ewa and Ewa, 2019) creating possibilities for equal enrolment, attendance, an even achievement for all children in primary education. The social inclusion viewpoint acknowledges that within the parity strategy there are children who experience disadvantages so that even when they are present their presence is not being recognised and valued in school. Primary age children who stay on the sidelines of their education constitute a population that is powerless, non-dominant and unsupported.

A socially inclusive (Robo, 2014) education approach is one in which all members of the target population are recognised, respected, feel valued (Ewa and Ewa, 2019) and there is a support system to cater for exigencies. Social inclusion pushes the boundaries of access wider to encompass children's attendance. For without attendance, the effort for children to be present in school is useless. Having all children attend (regularly) is a signal that the environment in school is significantly supportive of their education. It implies that issues that deprive them from learning are in check or minimal. A holistic education programme is inclusive. It does not only prepare the children for school, more importantly, it provides chances for them to succeed once they are there (Robo, 2014). Inclusion is an affirmation of the social inclusion theory to broaden narrow views concerning parity in education. Access, within the ambit of social inclusion, is in pursuit of inclusion and inclusion liberates access from whatever hindrances to enable education that is sincerely for all.

Whereas inclusion illuminates parity in education and presents a genuine understanding of 'education for all', it is a paradigm style that is given various conceptual connotations. For instance, Garuba (2003), Ajuwon (2008), Olofintoye (2010) and Olaleye, Ogundele, Deji, Ajayi, Olaleye & Adeyanju (2012) conceive the concept as the process of enrolling learners with impairments in the mainstream classroom. For these authors, access of children with impairments to a general school is regarded as inclusion. In other words, inclusion in this case is a step to enabling the presence of only children with disabilities in general school settings. Also commenting about this misconception, Ainscow, Booth, Dyson, Farrell, Frankham, Gallannaugh, Howes & Smith (2006) pointed that some parents think that inclusion involves making their children to attend the same schools in which their peers with bad behaviours are also learning. These are anti-inclusion ideas that attribute the faults to learning on the child. Probably, it is reasons or definitions such as this that access to school is restricted to parity. Agents of parity based access believe that children are to be fitted into an unchanged school cultures and practices (Ewa and Ewa, 2019). However, the social inclusion doctrine requires the school to be changed to be able to welcome all children and enable them learn. Such changes have to reflect in school policy, practices, teachers' attitudes, teacher education, children's attitudes and school buildings to facilitate enrolment and attendance of all of them. This is a shift from the existing order to an inclusion based access in Nigeria. It is a movement that that can enhance the capacity of the school to respond to the differing demographics of primary age children available and the social contexts of the school environment.

Inclusion based access is a change that is belated. Inclusion is the philosophy that underpins access to education in conception from inception. It is just that the initiators seemingly stopped short of naming it as such. May be its introduction was to be a gradual process or a first step towards an education that includes all in terms of pupil enrolment and attendance in schools. An inclusive framework on access ensures that, aside from parity, other backgrounds of children are being taken into account in school placements and that they are not only placed there but all of them are learning. Following such a process towards inclusion suggests a cautious exercise. In contrast, however, caution is becoming risky to the education of some children because it is rather slowing down commitments and actions of stakeholders to move provisions forward towards guaranteeing the kind of access to education that includes all children in primary education in the country.

CONCLUSION

Access is adopted in education policy as a mass literacy strategy in primary schools in Nigeria. It is a concept whose specific purpose is to ensure the equalisation of educational opportunities in schools for boys and girls. Apparently, it is a distributive justice approach to upscale the number of girls in primary schools compared to boys. Access, in this perspective, highlights gender based parity in education and ignores other backgrounds of children, and more importantly, the need for all of them to learn in school. Boys and girls belong to a diverse background and these issues have implications for access and attendance in school. The emphasis of the policy is that an equal amount of primary age children from both genders are to receive places in school. But, many of those who are present in school are not learning. Access portends inclusion. It is, however, not genuinely inclusive. An inclusion based access is expansionist in scope and that would reflect in policy and practice. Having such a broad and multirole arrangement helps to extend the boundaries of parity and guarantees that all children across backgrounds are not just given places, but are also attending school.

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