ASSESSING THE ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN ADDRESSING EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES AMONG OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NIGERIA

[1]Sagiru Bala Musa Ph.D. & [2]Mamuda Adamu Baba
[1,2]College Library
Federal College of Education (Technical) Bichi
PMB 3473 Kano
sagirub@yahoo.com

Abstract
The problem of Out-of-School children is assuming an alarming dimension in Nigeria as millions of children are excluded from formal school due to social-economical, geographical, and cultural factors. Public libraries, as places that exist to provide free and equitable access to information and learning resources, have the potential to be important contributors toward addressing the educational challenges that vulnerable young people face. This paper investigates the services, programmes and facilities that public libraries are offering to out-of-school children in Nigeria. It examines how public libraries can act as non-formal education spaces providing capacity for inform and learn, digital literacies and support for academic work. The research pointed out several key issues behind Nigeria's educational challenges, including gender inequality, economic factors, children out of school, regional imbalances, lack of funding, and certain government policies. For the kids who aren't in school, the main hurdles are poverty, economic barriers, social and cultural expectations, issues related to conflict and safety, gender inequality, and poor educational facilities. The study also showcases some successful interventions and best practices from libraries that have introduced creative programs to reach out to out-of-school children. Our findings suggest that while public libraries in Nigeria aren't fully leveraged to address the educational crisis, they could be vital for reducing educational gaps if policymakers take the right steps, use resources wisely, and launch community outreach efforts. The research underscores the need for increased funding for staff training and library infrastructure, along with ideas for enhancing the future role of public libraries through closer collaboration with government agencies, NGOs, and businesses. Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of reevaluating how public libraries can contribute in countries like Nigeria, working alongside various stakeholders to support all students in achieving sustainable education goals, no matter their enrolment status.

Keywords: Public Library, Challenges, Out-of-School, Children**.**

Introduction
According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015), education is widely acknowledged as a fundamental human right and a major factor in social and economic progress. Because so many children in Nigeria do not attend school, a sizable fraction of the child population is still denied this privilege. Nigeria has one of the highest rates of out-of-school children in the world, with an estimated 10.5 million children not in formal education (UNICEF, 2021). This frightening figure emphasizes the critical need for alternate solutions to address these children's educational issues, many of whom are ignored due to socioeconomic, cultural, or local constraints. Public libraries are in a unique position

to assist in bridging this gap since they are knowledge institutions created to offer free and fair access to educational resources.

Public libraries have developed into community learning hubs that promote lifelong learning and informal education, especially for marginalized people, in many regions of the world, moving beyond their original functions of book lending and information distribution (IFLA, 2018). However, there is still much to learn about how public libraries in Nigeria might help meet the educational requirements of children who are not enrolled in school. Children who are not enrolled in formal education, known as out-of-school children, are especially susceptible to the long-term effects of educational deprivation, such as diminished employment chances, elevated poverty, and social marginalization (UNESCO, 2017).

Public libraries possess the capacity to provide non-formal learning environments that can alleviate these difficulties due to their varied collections, educational initiatives, and digital services. For kids who have little or no access to formal education, they offer reading materials, internet resources, and literacy programs. These can be very helpful resources. Public libraries in Nigeria have a lot of promise, but they also have a lot of obstacles that prevent them from meeting the requirements of children who are not in school. According to Oladele and Oyekanmi (2019), these difficulties include insufficient money, subpar infrastructure, a lack of technology resources, and a lack of outreach initiatives for underserved populations. These problems are made worse by the dearth of qualified library employees who can offer children in need of academic support specialized assistance. While libraries in more developed nations have adopted new technologies and collaborative community projects to enhance education, Nigerian public libraries lag in this area due to systematic inefficiencies (Ogbonnaya, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to evaluate how public libraries can help Nigerian children who are not in school with their educational needs. This study aims to determine the benefits and drawbacks of using public libraries as centers for education by looking at the services, materials, and programs that are currently offered there. Moreover, the research offers recommendations for policy interventions, resource allocation, and cooperative efforts with government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as future directions for enhancing library services to better meet the needs of children who are not in school.

Background of Educational Challenges in Nigeria

Nigeria, the most populous nation in Africa, has serious problems in the field of education. Nigeria still faces significant educational obstacles even though it is a signatory to multiple international declarations on the subject, including the UNESCO Education for All (EFA) project and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. Disparities in access to high-quality education, high dropout rates, and the rising number of children who are not attending school are the main characteristics of these difficulties.

Addressing these problems requires an understanding of the underlying reasons of Nigeria's educational crisis. Here they are:

1. **Out-of-School Children in Nigeria:** The large number of out-of-school children in Nigeria is one of the most concerning signs of the country's educational challenges. According to UNICEF (2021), Nigeria has one of the world's highest out-of-school populations, with around 10.5 million children aged 5 to 14 not attending school. Most of these kids are from northern Nigeria, where low

enrolment rates are mostly caused by sociocultural traditions, insurgencies, and economic problems.

Children's exclusion from formal education is made worse by elements including early marriage, child labour, and religious beliefs, especially in rural areas (UNICEF, 2021). Not just students in elementary and intermediate schools lack access to education. Significant obstacles face the postsecondary education sector as well. A high proportion of qualified students are denied entry to universities or vocational schools because of inadequate facilities, low funding, and other reasons (Ogbonnaya, 2020). As a result, Nigeria has an increasingly educated workforce deficit, hampering its economic development and global competitiveness.

2. **Regional Disparities and Socio-economic Factors:** Nigeria's extreme regional divide between its north and south is a major factor in the country's educational problems. Compared to the northern areas, which are characterized by poverty, insecurity, and cultural hurdles, the southern states especially Lagos and Ogun have greater enrolment rates and superior educational facilities (FME, 2018). The problem has been exacerbated by the closure of numerous educational institutions in the north due to the insurgency spearheaded by the terrorist group Boko Haram, which specifically targets schools (UNESCO, 2017).

   Another significant contributing factor to Nigeria's educational issues is socioeconomic concerns. Many families find it difficult to pay for the expenses of education, including uniforms, textbooks, and transportation, due to widespread poverty. Since over 40% of Nigerians are impoverished, many households find it challenging to place a high priority on education (NBS, 2020). Since they must labour to support their families, children from low-income homes are more likely to drop out of school or never attend. This is especially common in rural regions, where kids spend more time doing housework and agricultural labour than in school (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2015).

3. **Gender Inequality in Education:** One of the main causes of Nigeria's educational shortcomings is gender disparity. The education of females is impeded by cultural and religious conventions in many parts of Nigeria, especially in the rural and northern areas. Due to early marriage, childrearing, and the belief that education is useless, girls are prohibited from attending formal education (UNESCO, 2017). As a result, girls account for a disproportionate proportion of youth who are not in school, and many of them never return. Females have significantly less access to education than males, with a gender gap in school enrolment of up to 30% in many northern Nigerian states, according to UNICEF (2021).

   Inadequate legislation and poor execution have impeded efforts to reduce gender disparity in education. Even though there have been programs like the Safe Schools Initiative to increase females' access to school, their popularity has prevented them from having a major influence (NBS, 2020). Girls are discouraged from attending and completing their education by a number of factors, including long commutes, a lack of female teachers, and inadequate sanitary facilities in schools (FME, 2018).

4. **Quality of Education and Infrastructure Deficiencies:** The quality of education in Nigeria contributes significantly to the educational issue. Many public schools lack essential infrastructure, such as classrooms, libraries, and sanitation facilities. Teachers are frequently under qualified or unskilled, and student-to-teacher ratios are concerningly high, with some classrooms seating up to 100 children (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2015). As per the Federal Ministry of Education (FME,

2018), hardly 64% of Nigerian primary school teachers possess the bare minimal qualification needed to instruct.

Furthermore, a lot of public schools still use outdated curricula that does not adapt to the changing demands of the job market in the twenty-first century. Because of this, even kids who finish school frequently lack the abilities and information required to succeed in the global economy. Dropout rates are made worse by poor education since students lose interest in their studies and don't think they would be worthwhile (Ogbonnaya, 2020).

5. **Inadequate Funding and Government Policy Implementation:** The Nigerian government's allotment of funds for education has continuously failed to meet global standards. It is recommended by UNESCO (2015) that nations set aside a minimum of 15% to 20% of their yearly budget on education. But traditionally, the education sector has received less than 10% of Nigeria's budget (NBS, 2020). The overall reduction in the quality of education has been exacerbated by the persistent underfunding, which has resulted in inadequate facilities, a shortage of instructional materials, and low teacher wages.

    Furthermore, bureaucracy, political witlessness, and corruption frequently result in the poor implementation of government initiatives intended to solve educational difficulties (Oladele & Oyekanmi, 2019). Even while programs like the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program are intended to give kids free and obligatory education up until junior secondary school, their execution has been uneven nationwide, especially in areas that are underprivileged (UNESCO, 2017).

Role of Public Libraries in Supporting Out-Of-School Children in Nigeria

The value of public libraries as institutions within the education system has long been recognized. They serve as gateways to learning and offer equal access to information to individuals of all ages and socio-economic status. Public libraries are no longer just storehouses of the world´s core collections and information, they offer meeting spaces and events that help to educate and foster literacy, the growth of knowledge and the friction of democracy that we need more than ever, as the society stresses lifelong learning, digital literacy and the widening skill gap.

In third world countries, such as Nigeria where education for all citizens often takes the back stage in formal system of education, the importance of public libraries in education cannot be overstressed. Among these roles are

1. **Access to Information and Learning Resources:** The fact that public libraries offer free access to enormous informational and instructional resource collections is among their greatest contributions to education. Libraries provide a wide range of learning materials, including books, journals, digital resources, and multimedia. For those who do not have the resources to buy educational materials or use the internet at home, this access is especially essential (IFLA, 2018). Public libraries contribute to the democratization of education and the closing of the knowledge gap between the rich and the poor by providing free access to these resources.

    Libraries are essential for students and lifelong learners because they are frequently the only places in many communities to find books and dependable internet access. Public libraries are essential in bridging the gap left by underfunded schools in developing nations like Nigeria, where there is frequently a dearth of educational infrastructure. Ogbonnaya (2020) asserts that public libraries offer an alternate supply of textbooks, reference materials, and study areas, while many Nigerian schools lack suitable learning materials. Libraries help teachers and students

engage in both formal education and self-directed learning by giving them access to current instructional materials.

2. **Support for Lifelong Learning:** In today's world of rapid change, public libraries play a critical role in fostering lifelong learning, an idea that has gained significant traction. Education is now a lifelong process that happens throughout an individual's lifetime rather than being restricted to a classroom or a specific period in life. Because they provide materials and activities for students of all ages, public libraries are essential in promoting this philosophy (American Library Association, 2020). With the use of online courses, workshops, and community learning initiatives, they offer chances for adult education, career training, and personal growth. Public libraries in Nigeria and other areas of the world are being reimagined as learning centers where people may acquire new skills, increase their literacy, and obtain information relevant to careers (IFLA, 2018). Libraries frequently provide services like digital literacy courses, resume-building workshops, and employment opportunity information. These are especially helpful for people who are looking to improve their abilities or are not in school. Libraries assist people in adjusting to a fast-changing economy and advance the growth of the country by encouraging lifelong learning.

3. **Promotion of Literacy and Early Childhood Education:** Public libraries play a vital role in promoting literacy, particularly in early childhood education. Libraries often serve as the first point of contact for young children and their families in the education system, offering programs such as story hours, reading clubs, and literacy workshops that help children develop foundational reading and writing skills (UNESCO, 2017). These programs are essential in fostering a love of reading from an early age, which has long-term benefits for children's academic success and cognitive development. According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2018), public libraries worldwide have been instrumental in supporting literacy initiatives by collaborating with schools and community organizations.

   In Nigeria, where many children struggle with literacy due to inadequate educational infrastructure, public libraries have the potential to offer early literacy interventions that can positively impact children's long-term educational outcomes (Ogbonnaya, 2020). By providing a literacy-rich environment and access to diverse reading materials, libraries help bridge the gap between home and school, fostering a culture of reading that extends beyond formal education.

4. **Bridging the Digital Divide:** As the world becomes more reliant on digital technologies for education and work, public libraries play a critical role in bridging the digital divide. The digital divide refers to the gap between individuals who have access to digital technologies, such as computers and the internet, and those who do not. In countries like Nigeria, where access to technology is often limited, public libraries are invaluable in providing free internet access, digital devices, and training in digital literacy skills (Oladele & Oyekanmi, 2019).

   Libraries offer digital literacy programs that teach basic computer skills, internet navigation, and the use of various digital tools, which are essential for success in today's information-driven world. These programs are particularly beneficial for underserved populations, such as low-income individuals, rural communities, and out-of-school children, who may otherwise be left behind in the digital age. By providing access to technology and digital education, libraries ensure that

individuals can participate in the knowledge economy and take advantage of online educational resources.

5. **Public Libraries as Community Learning Hubs:** In many communities, public libraries have evolved into learning hubs that not only provide access to educational resources but also foster a sense of community and collaboration. Libraries serve as spaces where individuals can engage in collaborative learning, participate in community workshops, and exchange knowledge with others (American Library Association, 2020). This community-based approach to education is particularly effective in promoting informal learning, social inclusion, and civic engagement.

    Public libraries are often at the forefront of efforts to address educational inequalities, particularly in marginalized communities. In Nigeria, where out-of-school children represent a significant challenge, public libraries have the potential to serve as safe spaces for children who are unable to attend formal school due to socio-economic or cultural barriers. Libraries can offer tailored programs, such as tutoring, literacy classes, and extracurricular activities, that cater to the specific needs of these children, providing them with an alternative learning environment that supports their educational development (Ogbonnaya, 2020).

Challenges Faced by Out-Of-School Children in Nigeria

Out-of-school children represent a significant challenge to Nigeria's educational landscape. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Nigeria has one of the highest populations of out-of-school children in the world, with approximately 10.5 million children aged 5 to 14 not enrolled in formal education (UNICEF, 2021). These children face numerous obstacles that impede their ability to access and benefit from education, which has long-term consequences for their personal development and the country's socio-economic growth.

The challenges faced by out-of-school children in Nigeria are multifaceted, encompassing socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that must be addressed comprehensively to ensure that all children have the opportunity to learn.

1. **Poverty and Economic Barriers:** Poverty is one of the most significant challenges faced by out-of-school children in Nigeria. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reported that over 40% of Nigerians live below the poverty line, which makes it difficult for many families to afford the costs associated with education, such as school fees, uniforms, textbooks, and transportation (NBS, 2020). For many families, sending children to school may not be a priority when there are immediate needs such as food and shelter that must be met. Consequently, many children are forced to engage in child labour to support their families financially, leaving little or no time for formal education (FME, 2018). The economic barriers to education disproportionately affect children from rural areas, where poverty rates are higher, and access to educational resources is limited. Families in these regions may prioritize survival over education, and the lack of nearby schools further discourages school attendance (UNESCO, 2017). As a result, children from low-income households are more likely to drop out of school or never attend, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and educational deprivation.

2. **Cultural and Social Norms:** Cultural and social norms also play a significant role in limiting access to education, particularly for girls. In many parts of northern Nigeria, traditional practices such as early marriage and gender-based discrimination hinder the education of girls (UNICEF, 2021). Families may view

education for girls as unnecessary or a waste of resources, especially when there are expectations for girls to marry early and assume domestic responsibilities.

As a result, many girls are withdrawn from school at a young age or never enrolled, leaving them without the basic skills needed for personal development and economic independence (UNESCO, 2017). The intersection of poverty and cultural beliefs creates an environment in which out-of-school children, particularly girls, are denied their right to education. Moreover, boys may also be affected by cultural expectations that prioritize their participation in economic activities over education. In some regions, boys are expected to contribute to family income through farming, herding, or trading, leading to high dropout rates among male students as well (Oladele & Oyekanmi, 2019).

3. **Insecurity and Conflict:** Insecurity and conflict are major challenges that contribute to the growing number of out-of-school children in Nigeria. The insurgency led by Boko Haram, particularly in the northeastern part of the country, has had a devastating impact on the education system. Boko Haram, whose name translates to "Western education is forbidden," has actively targeted schools, teachers, and students, resulting in the destruction of educational infrastructure and the displacement of thousands of children (UNICEF, 2021). As schools are attacked, many are forced to close, and parents are often reluctant to send their children to school due to safety concerns.

   According to UNESCO (2017), the on-going conflict in the northeast has displaced more than 2.3 million people, with children being among the most affected. Many of these children have lost access to education, either because they have been displaced to regions without adequate schooling facilities or because of the trauma caused by the violence they have witnessed or experienced. The instability in the region has disrupted not only education but also other social services, making it difficult for children to receive the support they need to return to school. Additionally, the lack of stable governance and consistent policy implementation in conflict zones has further compounded the educational crisis (FME, 2018).

4. **Gender Disparities:** Gender disparities are another major challenge faced by out-of-school children, particularly girls. Cultural norms, economic pressures, and security concerns disproportionately affect girls' access to education in Nigeria. In northern Nigeria, girls are often the most affected by school closures and cultural practices that discourage female education. Early marriage and childbearing are significant contributors to high dropout rates among girls, as they are expected to assume adult responsibilities at a young age (UNICEF, 2021). UNESCO (2017) reports that in many rural and conflict-affected areas, girls are far less likely to attend school compared to boys, and when they do, they are more likely to drop out early.

   The lack of female teachers, inadequate sanitary facilities, and concerns about the safety of girls traveling long distances to school further discourage girls from continuing their education (UNICEF, 2021). As a result, many girls are left without the necessary skills to improve their future prospects, perpetuating gender inequalities and limiting their economic and social mobility.

5. **Inadequate Educational Infrastructure and Resources:** Inadequate educational infrastructure and resources are key challenges that contribute to the out-of-school crisis in Nigeria. Many schools, particularly in rural and underserved areas, lack basic infrastructure such as classrooms, desks, and teaching materials. According to the Federal Ministry of Education (FME, 2018), overcrowded classrooms, poor

sanitary facilities, and insufficient numbers of qualified teachers are common issues in Nigerian schools. These conditions create an environment that is not conducive to learning, which discourages school attendance and leads to high dropout rates.

The lack of trained teachers is another significant barrier to providing quality education in Nigeria. According to Oladele and Oyekanmi (2019), many teachers in rural areas are either unqualified or under qualified, which affects the quality of education delivered to students. In addition, the curriculum in many schools is out dated and does not meet the needs of modern learners. The lack of appropriate learning materials, including textbooks and digital resources, further exacerbates the problem, leaving students ill-prepared for the demands of the 21st century (Ogbonnaya, 2020).

Conclusion

Public libraries hold immense potential in addressing the educational challenges faced by out- of-school children in Nigeria. As inclusive institutions providing free access to educational resources, libraries can bridge the gap for marginalized populations, especially in regions where formal education systems struggle. By offering access to books, digital resources, literacy programs, and skill development initiatives, public libraries serve as critical support systems for children who are unable to attend school due to economic barriers, cultural norms, insecurity, and gender disparities. This research highlights that public libraries, when adequately funded and integrated into national education strategies, can play a transformative role in ensuring that no child is left behind in their educational journey. Libraries can help reduce educational inequities by reaching out to vulnerable children, including those in conflict-affected regions, girls facing cultural barriers, and children in rural areas with limited school access. For public libraries to be effective, it is essential to improve infrastructure, expand their services to underserved communities, and promote partnerships between libraries, schools, and local organizations. Addressing the educational needs of out-of-school children requires a multifaceted approach, where public libraries act as pivotal community hubs. Through their resources and programs, libraries not only support academic learning but also contribute to lifelong learning and personal development. By strengthening public libraries and leveraging their role in education, Nigeria can make significant strides toward reducing the number of out-of-school children and fostering a more equitable and educated society.

Recommendations

1. **Expanding Access to Public Libraries in Underserved Areas:** Many rural and underprivileged populations in Nigeria do not have access to public libraries. More libraries in these places, particularly in communities with a large number of out-of-school children, can provide vital educational support. Mobile libraries can also be used to reach remote locations, delivering books, digital resources, and educational programs directly to children who are unable to attend school.
2. **Collaboration with Schools and Educational Authorities:** To promote alternate learning initiatives, libraries ought to collaborate closely with local administrations, educational authorities, and schools. Libraries may help kids who are at risk of dropping out of school or who have already left by collaborating with schools to provide extra learning resources, tutoring, and after-school programs.

By working together with educational institutions, libraries may guarantee that their materials complement school curricula and promote lifelong learning.

3. **Developing Targeted Literacy Programs:** To meet the unique requirements of children who are not enrolled in school, public libraries should create specialized literacy and remedial education programs. Instruction in digital literacy, life skills and career training workshops, and basic reading and numeracy classes are a few examples of these programs. For kids who might be reluctant to go back to traditional classroom settings, providing adaptable, kid-friendly learning environments could boost engagement.

4. **Community Outreach and Awareness Campaigns:** In addition to providing support to families and communities on how to access educational opportunities for out-of-school children, libraries can actively engage in community outreach to raise awareness about the value of education and the resources available at public libraries. Public campaigns that encourage parents to value education, particularly for girls and children from marginalized groups, can help shift cultural attitudes that contribute to educational exclusion.

5. **Providing Safe Learning Spaces:** Particularly in areas afflicted by war, public libraries ought to provide inclusive, secure learning environments for kids unable to attend private schools. Libraries can provide a safe space for education and socializing in communities where children are afraid to attend school due to violence and insecurity. Libraries may promote a good learning environment by designing kid-friendly areas with age-appropriate literature, educational resources, and leisure activities.

6. **Advocacy and Policy Support:** Libraries must be included in national education policies and development plans aiming at reducing the number of children who are not attending school. Advocating for more funding and policy support for public libraries is critical to ensuring they have the resources they require to enhance their services. Governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations should recognize libraries as critical partners in closing education gaps and give them with the resources they need to thrive.

7. **Inclusive Programming for Marginalized Groups:** Public libraries should create programs that explicitly meet the needs of underprivileged groups, such as girls, children with impairments, and children from war areas. Programs tailored to these vulnerable groups' needs can help decrease educational hurdles.

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