

## CHALLENGES OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF SCHOOL HEADS

Ibrahim Halilu

Department of Educational Foundations

Federal College of Education (Technical) Bichi, Kano State

E-Mail: [ibrahimhalilu90@gmail.com](mailto:ibrahimhalilu90@gmail.com)

Phone No. 08034663398

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Muniratu Muhammad Waziri

Department of Educational Foundations

Federal College of Education (Technical) Bichi, Kano State

[muniratuwaziri@yahoo.com](mailto:muniratuwaziri@yahoo.com)

Phone No.08039138087

### Abstract

*This article, titled “Challenges of Out-of-School Children: The Role of School Heads”, examines the antecedence of out-of-school children in the phase of national and international perspectives. It examines the concept of school children; and concept of out-of-school children. The paper also identified the challenges associated with out-of-school children in Nigeria as: poverty; security threat; inadequate funding of education; inadequate infrastructures; poor quality of teaching; socio-cultural/religious factor; poor implementation of school feeding programme; lack of employment opportunities; and corruption. Thus, the role of school heads in tackling the issue of out-of-school children in Nigeria are also identified, which include: provision and allocation of adequate resources; effective supervision of instruction; capacity building for teachers; provision of effective counselling unit; improving school environment; promotion of school-community relations; proper implementation of school feeding programme; provision of School Security initiatives; and monitoring and evaluation. The article comes up with the following recommendations, among which are: government at all levels should make adequate provision of adequate teaching and learning materials to improve quality of teaching and learning especially, on skills development (life skills and employability skills) to enable retention and transition of learners in the school; there should be proper use of school-community relations policy and of public-private partnerships (PPPs) to assist children especially those from poor/disadvantaged family background to sponsor their schooling to realize their potentials as well; and government and private individuals should joint hands provide more skills acquisition centres to engage the out-of-school children and equip them with various training they may need to become selves-employed and productive in the society.*

**Keywords:** Out-of-School, Children, School Heads

### Introduction

Every child has a right to education; Education for All (EFA); and Inclusive Education are slogans and global declarations to show more concern and commitments in providing quality basic education for all children across the globe, without regard to any difference they may hold. Education is compulsory and a right of every Nigerian irrespective of gender, social status, religion, colour, ethnic background and any peculiar individual challenges (FNG, 2014). The United Nations General Assembly, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November, 1989 adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The convention empowers all children under the age of 18 with inalienable, indivisible rights regardless of their background or circumstances.

In spite of this, 1 in 3 children in Nigeria are Out-of-School. 10.2 million at the Primary level and 8.1 million at the Junior Secondary School (JSS) level. 12.4 million children never attended school and 5.9 million left school early. Nigeria's Out-of-School population accounts for 15% of the global total. Only 1 in 3 children aged 36-59 months have access to Early Child Care Development Education (ECCDE) programmes. Only 1 in 3 adolescents eligible for Senior Secondary School are attending. More than 50% of girls are not attending school in basic education level. 66% of all Out-of-School children are in the Northeast and Northwest; 5. 86% are from rural areas, and 65% are from the poorest quintile (UNICEF, 2022). UNICEF recently declared Nigeria the country with the world's highest number of Out-of-School children (OOSC) has constantly grown in Nigeria, raising from 10.5 million in 2013 to 18.3million in 2024, despite many efforts to address the situation (Chukwumeka, 2024). The number of out-of-school children is calculated by subtracting the number of primary school-age children enrolled in primary or secondary school from the total population of the official primary school-age children (UNESCO, 2024).

According to UNICEF report, (2024), over 600 million children worldwide are unable to attain proficiency level in reading and mathematics, even though, two-thirds of them are in school. For Out-of-School children, foundational skills in literacy and numeracy are further from grasp. Children are deprived of education for various reasons. Poverty remains one of the most obstinate barriers. Children living through economic fragility, political instability, conflict or natural disaster are more likely to be cut off from school. Even in schools, a lack of trained teachers, inadequate education materials and poor infrastructure make learning difficult for many students. Others come to class too hungry, ill or exhausted from work of household task to benefit from their lessons. Compounding these inequities is a digital device of growing concern: most of the world's school-aged children do not have internet connection in their houses, restricting their opportunities to further their learning and skills development.

No doubt, number of efforts have been made, nationally and internationally to address the menace of out-of-school children and yet, numerous challenges associated to that effect are still impeding to hinder these efforts in Nigeria in particular. These challenges include among many others: high-rate poverty, insecurity, poor quality of teaching, inadequate infrastructural facilities, poor school environment, corruption, socio-cultural and religious factors etc. Therefore, schools' administrators have significant roles to perform in addressing these challenges. For they are charged with the responsibility for the management of their respective schools.

### **Design of the Study**

In this article, a descriptive survey design was used. This is to allow the researchers to observe and describe practical situation or phenomena and collect information on what is in existence in respect of the identified problem under study.

### **Scope of the Study**

The scope of this study is aimed at assessing the role School Administrators play in curbing the challenges of out-of-school children in Nigeria.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study are more or less, the large number of schools in Nigeria, the number of out-of-school children in the country and the financial resource and time to employ in collecting adequate information.

### **Instrument of the Study**

The instruments used in this study are personal observations, interview, focus-groups and document or content tools to capture existing information and events on identified problem.

### **Who are School Children?**

School children are referred to as persons between the ages of six (6) and twenty (20) whose domiciles are with their parents within the state and who are otherwise qualified to attend the public schools of any school district in which they reside. School children also mean children who are eligible to be enrolled in a grade of kindergarten or above, but are less than fifteen (15) years old (UNICEF, 2024). A school child is a child aged from 6-7 to 18 years old who is studying in a general education institution (secondary school) (Mastrantonio, 2023). World Health Organization (WHO) defines school age children as individuals aged 6 to 12 years. This age group is crucial for physical, social, mental, and emotional development.

School children are those persons who are of compulsory age of schooling and they are enrolled in and fully attending schools of their grades or levels: Pre-Primary (Early Child Care); Primary; Junior Secondary; and Senior Secondary Schools.

### **Concept of Out-of-School Children**

Out-of-School children are children in the official primary school age range who are not enrolled in either primary or secondary school (UNESCO, 2014). According to United Nations, out-of-school children are kids who are yet to be enrolled in any formal education excluding pre-primary education. the age range for out-of-school children is 6-11 years. It is important to note that each of the children may have had varying degrees of education. Some of them may have attended school in the past (pre-primary education) but dropped out, some will attend school in the future and some will never go to school (Alawode, 2018). Out-of-School children are children who are of school age but are not engaged in learning whether in non-formal or in the formal education system (Melenya, 2020). Out-of-School children are children whom the government and the parents have failed to provide quality basic education for. It is a term referred to non-attendance of the school-age for some established factors (Jacob, Chinwuba & Ayoko, 2022). Out-of-School children are young children in the age group of 1-12 that are roaming the street without

access to functional educational system (Ojelade, Aiyedun & Aregebesola in Ogunode, Adanno & Ayoko, 2022).

Out-of-School children or official Out-of-School children are usually excluded from learning opportunities and are usually the most vulnerable group for underworld activities. The official Out-of-School children are easy to locate but the actual Out-of-School children are very hard to reach. Both types of Out-of-School children are usually from poor backgrounds and sometimes they have to help with domestic chores to support the family. While the government is generating home-grown data for purposes of policy formation, the school counsellors must target their interventions for every child to be in school to remain in school and to gain some knowledge and skills (Nwabahili in Garba, 2021).

Out-of-school children therefore, can be regarded as those individuals aged between 6 and 18 years old, that are not opportune to access formal school system. These groups of individuals may suffer from educational indifference or neglect due to socio-economic or cultural and religious factors. Some of them might have started schooling and dropped out before completion; and some might have stayed out of the completely.

### **Challenges Associated with Out-of-School Children in Nigeria**

- 1. Poverty:** Poverty is hunger, poverty is lack of shelter, poverty is being sick and not able to see a doctor, poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read, poverty is not having job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time (World Bank, 2020). Today, in Nigeria, majority of people are living in poverty and even below poverty line and, the number is increasing in a rapid rate, especially with the current high cost of living in the country. It is against this background therefore, most children of poor families could not access opportunities for schooling in Nigeria, on the bases of school fees and other costs of education. They usually prepare to stay at home and engage in child labour instead. Poverty is the biggest barrier to school access, exacerbated by school fees and other costs of education. At least 43% of children are forced into child labour (UNICEF, 2022).
- 2. Security Threat:** Presently, in Nigeria, security threats are among of the most disturbing issues in schools' system. School children are being attacked by kidnappers, bandits and terrorists. Thus, bullying, sexual abuse or harassment are also challenging issues that disturb both children and their parents and, certainly cause high drop-out rate, especially, in local communities and other towns close to bandits' locations. This is certainly sure due to ineffective school security initiatives in most schools in Nigeria. Garba, (2021), stated that, security challenges in the past fifteen years or so, is yet another casual factor for out of school children. The onslaught of the insurgents, for example, on especially schools, has necessitated school children to stay at home. School structures are not safe; where they seem to be safe, the environment is not as at any moment the unimaginable and unfortunate may strike. Insecurity in Nigeria's northwest region has significantly impacted school enrolment and attendance, exacerbating the education sector's challenges. According to UNICEF, (2022), attacks on schools and abduction of school children together with unsafe basic infrastructure and facilities (e.g., classrooms, furniture, fencing, wash) keep children out of school.
- 3. Inadequate Funding of Education:** Funding education in Nigeria is another challenging issue for out-of-school children. The education sector is now experiencing

dilapidation, as a result of regular failures to release funds, confused misplacement of priorities and persistent strikes by teachers from primary to university levels. While the government claims to have spent billions of Naira on educational sector, there is very little or no evidence for this and there is still prevalence of dilapidated structures at all levels (Suleiman & Abdullahi, 2015). Government at all levels seem to demonstrate their concern for education only in annual budgetary allocations. Attention to education should not only be demonstrated through budgetary allocations alone, but through meaningful timely releases (Garba, 2021). In Nigeria, chronic underfunding of education and inefficient use of available resources perpetuates the Out-of-School phenomenon (UNICEF, 2022).

4. **Inadequate Infrastructures:** Unavailability of infrastructural facilities in schools seem to cause crowd especially, in classes where the available ones cannot accommodate the number of school-aged children. This, certainly, cause more children to stay at home and, those already enrolled in the school will find it difficult to continue because, the facilities cannot accommodate them. The quality of school infrastructure has a significant effect on school attendance and drop-out rates. Students are less likely to attend schools in need of structural repair, schools that use temporary structures, and school have understaffed janitorial services (Branham, 2004).
5. **Poor Quality of Teaching:** Public schools in Nigeria have degenerated beyond limits in terms of physical structures, infrastructure, and the commitment or quality of teachers as well as the concern of authorities in ensuring standard and achievement of objectives. Thus, conditions for teaching and learning in public schools have completely deteriorated or even collapsed beyond redemption. The greatest tragedy is that government efforts in education are not enough in meeting the needs and aspirations of Nigerians. In other words, performance indicators at all levels of the Nigerian educational system have dwindled (Abbas, 2020). Insufficient supply of trained teachers, inefficient teacher recruitment and deployment, and weak regulatory mechanisms lead to overcrowded classrooms and poor-quality teaching and learning outcomes contribute to drop out from the education system in Nigeria (UNICEF, 2022).
6. **Socio-Cultural/Religious Factor:** In Nigeria and of course, most African countries, cultural and religious values have great influence in controlling the life of people. They serve as guiding principles in people's life, especially local communities. And, any idea or motive that seems to contravene these values will be seen considered as disgust. Most local people in kick against any move, idea or innovation that contravenes their cultural or religious values. Social and gender norms that place a low value on education contribute to girls, *Almajiri* children and others, not attending school or dropping out (UNICEF, 2022).
7. **Poor Implementation of School Feeding Programme:** The emergence of school feeding programme in Nigerian Public Primary Schools brings hope, confidence and encouragement to both parents and children for assistance to provide meal for the children during school's hours, especially, the poor economic background families. But this programme seems to grapple with number of obstacles such as provision of non-delicious and tasty meal to the pupils, unhealthy/unhygienic food, inadequate and non-regular supply of the meal, disregarding of the menu among others. In this regard,

personal observations, interviews and consultations revealed that, the problem is linked to connivance with the contractors and the School Heads.

8. **Lack of Employment Opportunities:** Chances of gaining employment in Nigeria are drastically reducing in unmeasurable rate. Neither the public nor the private establishments can adequately accommodate schools' graduates at whatever level. Vacancies are opportunities only reserved for favoured ones and for who can give before he/she takes. This issue makes especially, children of poor family backgrounds stay-out and, or drop-out of the school. Because they loss hope and trust for their future price.
9. **Corruption:** Corruption is the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. It erodes trust, weakens democracy, hampers economic development and further exacerbates inequality, poverty, social division and the environmental crisis (Transparency International, 2024). Corruption is practiced in almost all institutions in Nigeria. It creates rooms for economic inequality as only few individuals that occupy positions of authority can gain at the expense of the majority population. And so, this act causes people who cannot afford, feel being marginalized or segregated, especially, when it comes to admission, only those who can give, can gain particularly into special public schools. It is an issue of give-and-take.

#### **Role of School Heads in Tackling the Challenges of Out-of-School Children**

1. **Provision and Allocation of Adequate Resources:** School Heads are responsible to ensure human and material resources are provided and allocated adequately in their respective schools. This will enable smooth and successful running of the schools. It can enhance the quality and standard of the school and improves teachers and students' performance. Thus, provision and allocation of resources ensures division of labour, sense of belonging and participation, team work, collective responsibility and staff retention as well.
2. **Effective Supervision of Instruction:** Effective instructional supervision by the school heads contributes to the improvement of individual teacher's instructional performance in the classroom. It enhances the quality and standards of the school which promotes enrollment rate and retention of pupils in school. Goldsmith, (n.d) posited that role of Head teacher in supervision of instruction involves: evaluating the standards of teaching and learning in the school, and ensuring that proper standards of professional performance are established and maintained.
3. **Capacity Building for Teachers:** School Heads are expected to support their teaching staff in building their capacities. This will increase and develop in them new ideas, knowledge, and skills to improving their professional growth and competencies. School Heads should allow teachers to build their professional capacities through induction or, refresher course, workshops, seminars, conferences, on-the-job training, or in-service training. That will improve teachers' retention and reduce rate of out-of-school children. Role of School Heads in capacity building involves: leading, motivating, supporting, challenging and developing staff at all levels in order to secure and sustain continuous improvement and staff well-being and to be committed to professional development (Goldsmith, n.d)

4. **Provision of Effective Counselling Unit:** Heads of Schools are to provide a functional counselling centre/unit in their respective schools for intervention in children's courses of events. This will certainly help the school counsellor(s) to employ the available counselling resources to entice school children to remain in school. Morrissey in Garba (2021) stated that, the main focus of school counselling is to make learning interesting and purposeful so as to be able to retain children in school. Counsellors must therefore provide all stakeholders with support to strengthen all programmes for the improvement of access to and retention in school. This will undoubtedly reduce the number and magnitude of out-of-school children.
5. **Improving School Environment:** Making school environment conducive for teaching and learning is a collective responsibility of all staff working in the school. Thus, School Heads have a sole responsibility to make school favourable to the children. School Heads should provide a safe, secure and inclusive environment for learning. Similarly, they should ensure quality education and positive learning for children. It is believed that, children learn more from caring and motivated teachers with families and community members helping all children, boys and girls become the best they can in a safe and nurturing environment.
6. **Promotion of School-Community Relations:** School Heads are responsible for enhancing School-Community Relationship. It is deemed necessary for School Heads to engage Parents-Teachers Associations (PTA) and School-Based Management Committee (SBMC) into school affairs as stakeholders; being parents and school-host. School Administrators play vital roles in managing School-Community relations, by promoting the spirit of understanding and cooperation between the school and community members which earns the school respect and confidence of the community in the services of the school. This will entice the parents to send their children to school and also the children will be encouraged to remain in school thereby, reducing the rate of out-of-school children in the community.
7. **Proper Implementation of School Feeding Programme:** The Federal Government school feeding programme is to provide one meal per school day to all primary school pupils in Nigeria with the objectives of improving the health of school age children, increase their enrolment, retention and completion rate in the primary (Falade, Otemuyiwa, Oluwasola, Oladipo & Adewusi, 2012). School administrators are responsible for ensuring proper implementation of the school feeding programme in their respective schools. They should ensure adequate supplies of the meal as designed in the daily feeding menu of their schools. This will improve the pupils' enrolment and retention rates in school thereby, reducing the rate of out-of-school children to the minimal.
8. **Provision of School Security Initiatives:** Provision of school safety and security committee by the school heads is mandatory as provided by Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) in Geneva, 2015. The National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools document provided that, the School Safety and security Committee which should comprise representatives of teachers, prefects/learners Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA), Community members and so on, are to be responsible for taking on the safety agenda at the community and school level. The School Safety and security committee should be provided with uniform guidelines for operation (FME, 2021).

This effort will promote a safe and inclusive school environment and certainly prevents security threats in schools and the community at large.

**9. Awareness campaign:** School Heads at their respective school domiciles can organize public awareness campaigns in collaborations with relevant stakeholders in the community, such as Parents-Teachers Association (PTA), School-Based Management Committee (SBMC) and community leaders to enlighten general public especially, parents on their role to enroll and retain their children in schools, as their children's right to education. In the words of Garba (2021), nobody is doing anybody a favour by providing free education. It is a constitutional right. National Policy on Education (2014) stated that, education is compulsory and a right of every Nigerian irrespective of gender, social status, religion, colour, ethnic background and any peculiar individual challenges. This is amply telling us that whatever it is, the issue of education is of great concern in the life of individual persons in the society. Thus, it should never be compromised for a society to witness socio-economic development.

**10. Monitoring and Evaluation:** Monitoring and evaluation provides the School's Heads with insightful information that will allow them to examine and analyze teachers' performances in classroom instructions, learners' progress as well as their efficiency and effectiveness in managing the general affairs of the school. Thus, it will allow the School's Heads to track the rate of out-of-school children in their schools, and to engage parents to strategize on back-to-school campaigns through Parents-Teachers' Associations (PTA) and School-Based Management Committee (SBMC).

### **Conclusion**

Conclusively, this article made the following major findings, that: School Heads have a role to play to curbing the challenges of out-of-school children by making adequate provision and proper allocation of teaching and learning resources to ensure effective instructional delivery in their respective schools.

Head of Schools can provide capacity building for teachers and employ the use of effective supervision of instruction to improving the quality of teaching and learning, so as to retain children in schools.

School Heads to improve school environment by making it a child-friendly. This to provide nurturing and enabling environment for children to feel at home and realize their potentials. School Heads are to ensure proper implementation of the school feeding programme in their respective schools, as regards to supplies and services of the food. This will improve the pupils' enrolment and retention and reduce the rate of out-of-school children to the minimal.

Head of Schools are to provide school security initiatives to ensure the security and lives and properties in their respective schools. This will certainly make children feel safe and secure in teaching and learning environment. Thus, this will enhance enrollment and retention rates and, reduce the chances of drop-outs or stay-outs in the community.

Therefore, despite the multiple challenges that necessitate children out-of-school, the school heads must do their rightful functions to address these challenges, so as the objectives of education in Nigeria will be achieved.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the discussions in the content of this article, the following recommendations are made:

- i. School Heads should employ the of use efficient and effective administrative and managerial functions to provide enabling environment for children to remain and learn in school.
- ii. There should be proper use of school counselling unit to remain children in school. The main focus of school counselling in this regard should be to make learning interesting and purposeful so as to be able to retain children in school. Counsellors must therefore provide all stakeholders with support to strength in all programmes for the improvement of access to and retention in school. This will undoubtedly reduce the number and magnitude of out-of-school children (Morrissey in Garba, 2021).
- iii. Government at all levels should make adequate provision of teaching and learning materials to improve quality of teaching and learning especially, on skills development (life skills and employability skills) to enable retention and transition of learners in the school.
- iv. There should be proper use of school-community relations policy and of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) to assist children especially those from poor/disadvantaged family background to sponsor their schooling to realize their potentials as well.
- v. Government and private individuals should joint hands provide more skills acquisition centres to engage the out-of-school children and equip them with various training they may need to become selves-employed and productive in the society.

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