

THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, faces an ongoing education crisis, with approximately 10.5 million children aged 5 to 14 out of school (UNICEF, 2017). This issue is most acute in the northern regions, where factors such as poverty, cultural traditions, gender inequality, conflict, and lack of infrastructure disproportionately affect children's access to education (Alawode, 2018). This article examines the psychological and developmental consequences of being out of school, drawing on educational psychology to explore the cognitive, emotional, and social implications for these children (Alawode, 2018). It highlights the importance of early cognitive development and the mental health challenges faced by marginalized children, including trauma, anxiety, and low self-esteem. The article also suggests actionable strategies to address these issues, such as enhancing access to mental health services, reducing poverty through conditional cash transfers, promoting gender equality in education, and strengthening school infrastructure. By employing educational psychology frameworks, these strategies aim to foster the holistic development of out-of-school children, ensuring their intellectual, emotional, and social growth (Alawode, 2018). The article concludes by stressing the need for community engagement and coordinated efforts to create an inclusive education system that supports every child's potential.

Keywords: Out-of-school children, Nigeria, educational crisis, educational psychology, cognitive development, emotional support, poverty

Introduction

Nigeria, as the most populous country in Africa, faces numerous socio-economic challenges, with education being a critical area of concern. Among these challenges is the alarming number of out-of-school children, particularly in the northern regions. According to UNICEF (2017), approximately 10.5 million children aged 5 to 14 are not enrolled in school. This issue not only affects the future of these children but also hampers Nigeria's socio-economic development (Alawode, 2018).

Educational psychology offers insights into the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children, especially those facing obstacles to learning (Bayagbon, 2018). This article explores the challenges faced by out-of-school children in Nigeria, focusing on the psychological impact of this crisis, and proposes actionable strategies to address these issues from an educational psychology perspective.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of out-of-school children in Nigeria has been the subject of various studies (Bayagbon, 2018). Factors such as poverty, cultural traditions, gender inequality, conflict, and lack of infrastructure have been identified as key contributors to the problem (UNESCO, 2020). In the northern regions, where child labor and early marriage are more prevalent, girls are disproportionately affected, further widening the educational gap.

Research in educational psychology emphasizes the importance of early cognitive development, mental health, and emotional stability for effective learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Children who are deprived of formal education miss out on crucial developmental stages, which can lead to long-term deficits in intellectual growth and emotional well-being. Studies also show that marginalized children often experience trauma, anxiety, and low self-esteem due to their inability to access education (Bandura, 1986).

Challenges Facing Out-of-School Children in Nigeria

Poverty: Poverty is one of the primary barriers to education in Nigeria (Ishaku & Oraka, 2019). Many families cannot afford the cost of schooling, and children are often required to work to support their families. In some rural areas, children walk long distances to school, which further discourages attendance (Ishaku & Oraka, 2019).

Cultural and Religious Beliefs: Cultural practices and beliefs, especially in northern Nigeria, significantly influence school attendance, particularly for girls (National Commission for Nomadic Education, 2019). Early marriage and child labor are seen as more critical than formal education in some communities (National Commission for Nomadic Education, 2019).

Conflict and Insecurity: The Boko Haram insurgency in the northeastern region of Nigeria has led to the closure of many schools and the displacement of thousands of children (Ngene et al., 2018). Conflict zones are often unsafe, making it difficult for children to attend school regularly (Ngene et al., 2018).

Gender Disparities: Girls, especially in northern Nigeria, face multiple barriers to education (Bridge International Academies, 2017). Gender inequality, early marriage, and household responsibilities prevent many girls from attending school, resulting in a significant gender gap in education (Bridge International Academies, 2017).

Psychological Impact: Children who are out of school for extended periods often face psychological challenges, including low self-esteem, feelings of hopelessness, and a lack of motivation (Nuffic, 2009). The absence of structured learning environments exacerbates these issues, leading to emotional and developmental delays (Nuffic, 2009).

Economic Challenges: Poverty is a significant barrier to education in Nigeria, particularly in rural areas (Olaniyan et al., 2018). Many families cannot afford school fees, uniforms, or learning materials, forcing children to work or stay at home. Additionally, poor infrastructure in economically disadvantaged regions means fewer schools and inadequate facilities, further limiting access (Olaniyan et al., 2018). Economic hardship also disproportionately affects girls, as families often prioritize boys' education when resources are limited. Without addressing poverty and providing financial support, millions of

children remain trapped in a cycle of deprivation and lack of education, hindering the country's long-term development (Olaniyan et al., 2018).

Educational Psychology and its Role

Educational psychology can provide the framework for understanding how children learn and what hinders their development when deprived of educational opportunities (PROBE Team, 1999). Through psychological assessments and interventions, professionals can address the mental health needs of out-of-school children, enabling them to overcome cognitive and emotional barriers to learning (PROBE Team, 1999). Cognitive Development: Out-of-school children miss critical periods for cognitive development. Programs that focus on basic literacy and numeracy skills are essential to helping them catch up (PROBE Team, 1999). Emotional Support: Many out-of-school children experience trauma or emotional distress. Psychological interventions, including counseling and peer support, are necessary to help these children cope (PROBE Team, 1999).

Motivation and Self-Efficacy: Educational psychologists can help develop programs that boost children's self-esteem and motivation to learn, particularly for those who feel left behind (PROBE Team, 1999).

Way Forward: Addressing the Challenges

Improving Access to Mental Health Support: Providing access to psychological services is crucial in helping children overcome trauma and mental health challenges associated with being out of school. Establishing community-based mental health centers in underserved areas can provide immediate support (Alawode, 2018).

Reducing Poverty: The Nigerian government and international organizations should invest in poverty alleviation programs. Conditional cash transfer schemes that provide financial support to families who send their children to school can reduce dropout rates (Alawode, 2018).

Promoting Gender Equality

Special emphasis should be placed on empowering girls through education. Initiatives like "Safe Schools for Girls" can create safe learning environments and promote gender equality in education.

Strengthening School Infrastructure: Many schools in rural and conflict-affected areas are in poor condition. Investing in infrastructure, including building more schools, providing learning materials, and ensuring safe school environments, will improve access to education (Alawode, 2018).

Community Engagement: Community leaders and religious figures should be involved in advocating for education. Their support is essential in shifting cultural perspectives that prevent children, especially girls, from attending school (Alawode, 2018).

Conclusion

Nigeria's education crisis, particularly the issue of out-of-school children, presents a significant challenge to the nation's development. The psychological impact on these children is profound, affecting their cognitive, emotional, and social growth. By addressing

the educational and psychological challenges through comprehensive strategies such as improving mental health support, reducing poverty, promoting gender equality, and strengthening school infrastructure, Nigeria can make significant strides toward ensuring that all children have access to quality education and can develop to their full potential. Educational psychology provides the tools to understand these challenges and develop interventions that meet the unique needs of out-of-school children. Through coordinated efforts, it is possible to create an inclusive education system that supports the holistic development of every child in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Expand Access to Mental Health Services: Establish community-based counseling and psychological support centers to address the emotional and cognitive needs of out-of-school children.

Implement Conditional Cash Transfers: Offer financial incentives to families in poverty to encourage school attendance, reducing economic barriers to education.

Promote Gender Equality in Education: Launch targeted campaigns and programs that empower girls to attend and stay in school, especially in regions where cultural barriers prevail.

Improve School Infrastructure: Invest in building and maintaining schools, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas, ensuring safe and conducive learning environments.

Engage Community Leaders: Collaborate with local leaders, religious figures, and parents to raise awareness about the importance of education and overcome cultural resistance.

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