

# Investigating Challenges and Effects of Students' Low Enrolment on the Sustainability of Primary School Education in Eastern Nigeria: The Need for a Paradigm Shift

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## Abstract

The enrolment into primary schools in Nigeria has been low for several years now. The aim of this study is to examine the challenges and the effects of students' low enrolment on sustainable primary school education in Eastern Nigeria. A structured questionnaire was used to gather primary data from one thousand and eight hundred teacher respondents of public primary schools in the region. The descriptive survey research design is employed. The gathered data were analysed using statistical mean. The results show that the socio-economic challenges of primary school students' low enrolment include poverty, hunger, epidemics, parents' inability to pay school fees, buy exercise books and other learning materials, the illness of a family member, early marriage and pregnancy, home services, gendered worldviews against sending female children to school, rituals, and culturally-insensitive education programmes. The effects of students' low enrolment on primary school education include reduced efficiency in the school system, waste of human and material resources, thriving barriers to the child's meaningful future, increased social vices, inadequate development of the individual's potentialities, and barriers to employment and income. The study submits that primary school students' low enrolment can be improved through the introduction of free transportation to school, free stipend for primary school children, practical school feeding programmes, free education, scholarships, and sustained effective monitoring and evaluation systems. It charges stakeholders and school management officials to be proactive and decisive on tackling the identified challenges by imbibing the aforementioned and other pragmatic measures.

**Keywords:** Low Enrolment, Challenges, Effects, Primary Education, Paradigm Shift.

## Introduction

Globally, education is a ladder to meaningful development in various spheres of life. This means that for a nation to be developed and prosperous, its citizens must be well educated. Being well educated requires attaining formal education at an appreciable level. Having largely educated citizens averts the resultant effects of illiteracy. Despite the importance of education, millions of school age children across the globe are not enrolled in school (Carr-Hill, 2015). The low enrolment has adverse effects on the children not enrolled, families, the school system and society at large. Many school age children are out of school or are unable to complete basic education.

The Education for All (EFA) has the primary goal of addressing the issues affecting enrolment and retention of school age children in schools. EFA is an initiative aimed at bringing educational benefits as well as promoting inclusive education among children of school ages. The objectives are yet to be achieved significantly in many countries, including Nigeria. Despite efforts by international organisations, considerable numbers of children of school age in South-Eastern Nigeria still roam the streets during school hours. Most of all, these children roaming about the streets are largely within

the primary education level. Therefore, against the foregoing backdrop, this study rises to examine the challenges to and the effects of low enrolment on the primary education system in South-Eastern Nigeria. The study seeks to draw empirical evidence from some schools and parts of the South-Eastern Nigeria.

## Statement of the Problem

The increasing rates of children roaming the streets raise worries over the effects of the ugly development. With children under 15 years of age accounting for about 45% of the country's population, the burden on education and other sectors has become overwhelming. Despite the benefits of education and the national need for flexibility and new opportunities to learn, there has been a decline in pupils' enrolment figure, and children are out there not attending school. Many children do not attend school because their labour is needed to either help at home or to bring additional income into the family.

Also, many families cannot afford the associated costs of sending their children to schools, such as uniforms and textbooks. For others, the distance to the nearest school is a major hindrance. Another cause of low enrolment, especially in the South-East, is cultural bias. Most parents do not send their children, especially girls, to school and prefer to send them for house help rather than formal schools. It is against the foregoing backdrop that this study seeks to examine challenges and effects students' low enrolment on sustainable primary school education in eastern Nigeria, calling on stakeholders and educational managers to make a paradigm shift.

## Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to investigate challenges and effects of students' low enrolment on the sustainability of primary school education in South-Eastern Nigeria, calling for a paradigm shift. Specifically, the study intends to find out the:

1. Socio-economic challenges of students' low enrolment to the sustainability of primary school education in South-Eastern, Nigeria.
2. Cultural challenges of students' low enrolment to the sustainability of primary school education in South-Eastern, Nigeria.
3. Effects of students' low enrolment on primary school education in South-Eastern, Nigeria.
4. Ways of improving students' low enrolment into primary schools in South-Eastern, Nigeria.

## Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. What are the socio-economic challenges of students' low enrolment to the sustainability of primary school education in South-Eastern, Nigeria?
2. Cultural challenges of students' low enrolment to the sustainability of primary school education in South-Eastern, Nigeria?
3. What are the effects of students' low enrolment on primary school education in South-Eastern, Nigeria?
4. What are the ways of improving students' low enrolment into primary schools in South-Eastern, Nigeria?

**Conceptual Spadework**

Primary education is universally regarded as the first and the most important level of education, not only to the individual but also to the entire human race. It is the bedrock of the entire educational system, because it produces an extensive educational preparation for all other levels of education and all spheres of life in general. The foregoing points reflect Okeke's (2017) description of primary education as the little mustard seed sown by the Christian mission in Nigeria, watered, sprouted and nurtured in discordant socio- economic milieu into gigantic national educational system. The National Policy on Education (2014) refers to this level of education as the key to the success or failure of the whole system of education. This statement is true because of the primary education is the base and the beginning of education within the four walls of the school system, where pupils are trained in order to lay the foundation for a greater tomorrow. Primary education is the education given in an institution to children that are usually between the ages of 6-11 years and above.

The term school enrolment is used to denote the proportion of pupils in school attendance to the aggregate number of official school age population. Poor enrolment in South-eastern Nigeria is a major educational challenge and it needs urgent attention. Economic hardship, politics and parents are dominant factors considered by many scholars in explaining the issues confronting this level of education as well as the other levels of education. Parents are in the dilemma of sending or retaining their children in schools due to poor social-economic status among others (Namukwaya & Kibirige, 2014).

**Related Studies**

The study done by Igberaharha and Onyesom (2021) relates to the present study in that the former engages with strategies for increasing enrolment into business education NCE programme in Nigeria. The study shows that media publicity, inter-agency collaboration, simplification of admission, and resolving the inherent challenges of colleges of education confronting teachers and students are viable strategies for increasing enrolment into the colleges of education. Although their study focuses on colleges of education rather than secondary schools, the strategies are capable of increasing enrolment into secondary schools too.

Similarly, Chen (2018) examines the quality of higher education admission management and shows that enrolment into higher institutions has been decreasing alarmingly. To increase the enrolment and attain quality assurance in the admission system, Chen (2018) notes, the following are required and have to be put in place: lead scoring, time series control, continuous improvement, quality assurance and management tracking, marketing, and advertisement. Despite being a research on tertiary institutions, the study relates to the present one in a way. Its suggested measures can also increase enrolment into secondary schools.

Akresh (2018) shows that parental beliefs and expectations about the value of education are what strongly influence or determine the enrolment of children into public secondary schools. Parents' perceptions on the relevance of schooling to real life survival needs also influence their decisions on enrolment and retention in schools. The major socio-economic factors affecting children enrolment in primary school are poverty, hunger, sickness, diseases and backwardness at the grass-root (village communities), where large populations of children live in developing countries like Nigeria. Similarly, Kassahun (2011) identifies family income, assets, size, and structure and parental education as influential factors to school enrolment, attainment and dropout.

Kassahun also discloses that household poverty is a major factor keeping many children out of school because poor households often cannot afford to send their children to school or are forced to

withdraw their children out of school at early ages. Socio-cultural factors are the large-scale forces within cultures and societies that affect the thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Such factors include attitudes, child rearing practices, cultural identity, ethnic identity, widowhood practices, farming structure, religious beliefs, religious practices, rituals, taboos, ethnic values, patriarchal practices, and discrimination, among others. Most rural communities in Nigeria have one or two socio-cultural values that possess negative underpinnings to female child primary school enrolment. The irreparable loss that will afflict any nation that experiences a decline in the number of its enrolment in schools are numerous and devastating.

Vaizey (2011) demonstrates that the phenomenon of low enrolment has had devastating effect on national economy. He holds that economically, the decline in low enrolment has reduced the efficiency of the school system, and thereby increased the economic wastage of human and materials resources at the primary school level. Also, teachers and equipment are underutilised, which creates educational outlays. As an institution of the state saddled with the responsibility of providing safety of lives and property as well as guaranteeing and upholding the fundamental human right as enshrined in the 1999 constitution, the government has a crucial major role to play in promoting school enrolment and ensuring the retention of such enrolled numbers of pupils and students. Thus, education ought to be given priority, with a minimum annual budgetary allocation of 26% to enable schools meet their financial needs (Mana, 2015).

Rufai (2014) identifies some strategies for improving student low enrolment in primary school, which include adequate planning to prevent failure, provision of physical facilities and maintenance of such, teaching of entrepreneurial and technical skills, effective monitoring and evaluation, constant supply of teaching materials and equipment, and appropriate welfare package for staff, among others. A programme like school feeding attracts children to school and makes them stay in the school continuously. Food programmes increase children's nutritional value and health status, raise school enrolment, improve attendance, increase attention span, and solve community health problems.

Adolphus' (2016) study on factors affecting enrolment and the attainment of senior secondary school physics students in Rivers State also relates to the present study. The study proves that teachers' qualifications, resource availability and utilisation, and adopted teaching strategies influence Physics students' enrolment and attainment. According to the study, ineffective teaching and learning are the prime factors (Adolphus, 2016). Although Adolphus' (2016) study focuses on Physics students alone, its findings apply to other secondary school subjects. The present study is concerned with enrolment into secondary school as a whole, not into Physics subject or any particular subject alone. Low enrolment into Nigerian tertiary institutions is examined by Ademola et al. (2014). The study identifies cognitive, evaluative and affective orientation, affiliation, affinity, teaching facilities in place, space and issues of quality of tutors and teaching as the factors influencing the enrolment of students into tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The factors undoubtedly apply to the case of secondary schools in Nigeria under study. Ajadi (2010) found that rigid admission processes of public universities and their inability to live up to expectations affect enrolment into them, because some of the prospective students rather get enrolled into private universities. That finding is factual and applies to public secondary schools in Nigeria, including those in the area of this study.

### Methodology

The study employs the descriptive survey research design. This involves obtaining information from a group of people studied through random sampling representative from the entire group. The area

of the study is South-East, Nigeria. The South-East is made up of five Igbo speaking states: Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, Imo and Abia. There are total of 5857 public primary schools in South- East, Nigeria and a total of 36,945 teachers in the public primary schools in the region. The sample size for the study comprises of One Thousand, Eight Hundred (1,800) teachers from public primary schools in south east, Nigeria.

The instrument for data collection was a self-structured questionnaire. Content and face validity methods were employed by the researchers. Two experts from Primary Education Department and Measurement & Evaluation checked the research instrument to ensure the adequacy of the items. The researchers adopted a test re-test method of reliability. The two sets of responses were correlated using Pearson Product Moment (PPM) correlation co-efficient. The results obtained from the two variables are 0.99, which show a very high relationship indicating that the instrument was reliable enough for the study. The researcher distributed a total of one thousand, eight hundred (1,800) questionnaires to the respondents in their various schools with the help of three (3) research assistants. The questionnaires were analysed using statistical mean.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

Data collected were presented in the tables below:

#### Research Question 1

What are the socio-economic challenges of students' low enrolment to the sustainability of primary school education in South-Eastern, Nigeria?

**Table 1:** Mean Rating on the Socio-Economic Challenges of Students' Low Enrolment on Primary School Education in South-Eastern, Nigeria **N: 1800**

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	$\sum fx$	$\bar{x}$	Decision
1	Poverty	600	920	200	80	5640	3.13	Agreed
2	Hunger	720	800	180	100	5740	3.19	Agreed
3	Sickness	740	820	160	80	5820	3.23	Agreed
4	Broken homes	80	200	400	1120	2840	1.58	Disagreed
5	Inability of parents to pay school fees	740	820	160	80	5820	3.23	Agreed
6	Inability of parents to buy exercise books and other writing materials	500	700	400	200	5100	2.83	Agreed
7	Illness of the family member	600	820	200	180	5440	3.02	Agreed

From table 1 above, items 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7 with mean scores of 3.13, 3.19, 3.23, 3.23, 2.83 and 3.02 respectively were above the decision rule of 2.50 and were agreed whereas item 4 with mean score of 1.58 were disagreed because it is below the decision rule of 2.50. This implies that, except for item 4, all other items on the table are the socio-economic challenges of students' low enrolment on primary school education in south-eastern, Nigeria.

### Research Question 2

Cultural challenges of students' low enrolment to the sustainability of primary school education in South-Eastern, Nigeria?

**Table 2:** Mean Rating on the Cultural Challenges of Students' Low Enrolment on Primary School Education in South-Eastern, Nigeria **N: 1800**

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	$\sum fx$	$\bar{x}$	Decision
8	Culturally-insensitive education programmes	620	900	180	100	5640	3.13	Agreed
9	Home services	820	700	200	80	5860	3.26	Agreed
10	Patriarchal practices	800	720	190	90	5830	3.23	Agreed
11	Circumcision practice	100	400	800	500	3700	2.06	Disagreed
12	Rituals	800	620	280	100	5720	3.18	Agreed
13	Gender blind programmes	600	920	200	80	5640	3.13	Agreed
14	Early marriage and pregnancy	720	800	180	100	5740	3.19	Agreed

Table 2 presented above, indicated that items 8, 9, 10, 12, 13 and 14 with mean scores of 3.13, 3.26, 3.23, 3.18, 3.13 and 3.19 were above the decision rule of 2.50 and were agreed, whereas item 11 with mean score of 2.06 were disagreed because it is below the decision rule of 2.50. This implies that except for item 11, all other items on the table are the cultural challenges of students' low enrolment on primary school education in South-Eastern, Nigeria.

### Research Question 3

What are the effects of students' low enrolment on primary school education in South-Eastern, Nigeria?

**Table 3:** Mean Rating on the Effects of Students' Low Enrolment on Primary School Education in South-Eastern, Nigeria **N: 1800**

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	$\sum fx$	$\bar{x}$	Decision
15	The efficiency of the school system will be reduced	790	730	230	50	5860	3.26	Agreed
16	Lead to economic wastage of human and materials resources in the school	620	800	300	80	5560	3.09	Agreed
17	Increase in crime wave	800	700	200	100	5800	3.22	Agreed
18	Inadequate development of the individual's potentialities in the society	500	600	600	100	5100	2.83	Agreed
19	Children face considerable barriers to employment and	700	600	300	200	5400	3.00	Agreed

	earning potential later in life							
20	Threatening children ability to shape a better future for themselves and their societies	820	700	200	80	5860	3.26	Agreed

From table 3 above, items 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20 with mean scores of 3.26, 3.09, 3.22, 2.83, 3.00 and 3.26 were above the decision rule of 2.50 and were agreed. This implies that all the items on the table are the effects of students' low enrolment on primary school education in South-Eastern, Nigeria.

#### Research Question 4

What are the ways of improving students' low enrolment into primary schools in South-Eastern, Nigeria?

**Table 4:** Mean Rating on the Ways of Improving Students' Low Enrolment on Primary School Education in South-Eastern, Nigeria **N: 1800**

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	$\Sigma fx$	$\bar{x}$	Decision
21	The government should introduce a complementary policy of free transportation to school	600	500	300	400	4900	2.72	Agreed
22	School feeding programmes can help in increasing enrolment and attendance of pupils.	720	800	180	100	5740	3.19	Agreed
23	Government should introduce a complementary policy of free stipend for primary school children	700	900	140	60	5840	3.24	Agreed
24	Good monitoring and evaluation system should be put in place to ensure that the policies are being adequately implemented	900	650	180	70	5980	3.32	Agreed
25	Free education and scholarships which be given to children in primary school	500	600	600	100	5100	2.83	Agreed
26	Government should renovate school environment to motivate and attract children to come to school	700	600	300	200	5400	3.00	Agreed

From table 4 above, items 21, 22, 23, 24, 25 and 26 with mean scores of 2.72, 3.19, 3.24, 3.32, 2.83 and 3.00 were above the decision rule of 2.50 and were agreed. This implies that all the items on the table are the ways of improving students' low enrolment on primary school education in South-Eastern, Nigeria.

#### Discussion of Findings

Research question one reveals that the socio-economic challenges of students' low enrolment on primary school education include poverty, hunger, sickness, inability of parents to pay school fees,

buy exercise books and other writing materials, and illness of the family member. This finding is in line with the view of Fabunmi (2015), who opines that the socio-economic factors effecting student low enrolment in primary schools are poverty, hunger, sickness, diseases and backwardness at the grass-root, where large populations of children live in developing countries like Nigeria. Furthermore, the finding also tallies with the study done by Kassahun (2011), which identifies family income, assets, size, and structure as well as parental education as influential factors to school enrolment, attainment and dropout.

Research question two reveals that cultural challenges of students' low enrolment on primary school education include culturally-insensitive education programmes, home services, patriarchal practices, rituals, and early marriage and pregnancy, among others. This is in line with the view of the finding of the study done by Mamman (2013), which reveals that socio-cultural values such as early marriage and pregnancy, circumcision practices, patriarchal practices, social roles/occupation have direct implications on girl child enrolment and retention in primary school. Besides, Mamman's (2013) study adds that such factors like attitudes, child rearing practices, cultural identity, ethnic identity, widowhood practices, farming structure, religious beliefs, religious practices, rituals, taboos, ethnic values, patriarchal practices and discrimination are cultural challenges that lead to low enrolment of pupils in primary school.

Research question three reveals that effects of students' low enrolment on primary school education include reduction in school system efficiency, economic wastage of human and materials resources, increase in crime wave, inadequate development of the individual's potentialities, barriers to employment and earning potentials later in life and threatening children ability to shape a better future. This is in line with the finding of Vaizey's (2011) study, which shows that low enrolment has had devastating effect on national economy, and low enrolment has reduced the efficiency of the school system, thereby increasing the economic wastage of human and materials resources at the primary school level. Besides, teachers and equipment are underutilised thereby creating educational outlays.

Research question four reveals that ways of improving students' low enrolment on primary school education include introduction of complementary policy of free transportation to school, introduction of school feeding programmes, complementary policy of free stipend for primary school children, good monitoring and evaluation system, free education and scholarships and renovation of school environment. This is in line with the view of Rufai (2014) who identified some strategies for improving student low enrolment in primary school to include adequate planning to prevent failure, provision of physical facilities and maintenance of such, teaching of marketable skills, effective monitoring and evaluation, constant supply of teaching materials and equipment, and appropriate welfare package for staff among others. In addition, programmes like school feeding indeed increases children's nutritional status, raise school enrolment, improve attendance, increase attention span and are solve community health problems.

### Conclusions

Following the findings, the study concludes that the socio-economic challenges of students' low enrolment into primary school education include poverty, hunger, sickness inability of parents to pay school fees, buy exercise books and other writing materials and illness of the family member. In addition, the cultural challenges include culturally-insensitive education programmes, home services, patriarchal practices, rituals, gender blind programmes, and early marriage and pregnancy. Furthermore, the effects of students' low enrolment on primary school education include reduction



in school system efficiency, economic wastage of human and material resources, increase in crime wave, inadequate development of the individual's potentialities, barriers to employment and earning potentials later in life, and threatening children ability to shape a better future. Finally, the ways of improving students' low enrolment into primary school education include the introduction of complementary policy of free transportation to school, introduction of school feeding programmes, complementary policy of free stipend for primary school children, good monitoring and evaluation system, free education and scholarships.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of the study:

- ❖ Government should provide free and compulsory primary education to all child of school age in order to mitigate socio-economic challenges affecting low enrolment in primary school.
- ❖ Government should practically introduce free feeding programme in all primary school in order to attract children to come to school.
- ❖ Church and other NGOs should provide free school uniform and materials for primary school children.
- ❖ Stakeholders and school managements should make concerted effort towards getting every child of school age into school to give them education necessary for their effective participation in the society.
- ❖ Intensification of sensitisation programmes via vigorous advocacy by the government and NGOs towards compulsory free education programme in primary school level.

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