

UNDERSERVED, YET UNDETERRED: Exploring Perspectives of Out- Of-School Boys in Northern Nigeria.

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Abstract

During the Coronavirus Pandemic, schools across the world were forced to close down spurring them to embrace innovative means of delivering lessons to students. This resulted in an increase in the already alarming number of out-of-school children in Nigeria. Although insurgency is largely reported as the primary reason for the number of out-of-school children in the Northern part of Nigeria, there are new suggestions that several other factors that are primary contributors to this educational problem. The aim of the study, therefore, is to expose some of the hidden barriers that impede the enrollment and completion of male children in schools in Northern Nigeria. It also seeks to understand the factors responsible for the receptiveness of ACE Radio School - an alternative form of education introduced in selected states in Northern Nigeria in 2020 in response to the pandemic. For this study, qualitative data was used, employing purposive sampling as a method for selecting the participants. The responses were collected using a remote data collection tool over a three month period and were subsequently analysed thematically. A total of 35 respondents were sampled and these respondents were adolescent boys in Northern Nigeria, between ages 10 and 18 who were out-of-school and were also listeners of the ACE Radio School lessons. Findings from this study revealed seven major reasons for the number of out-of-school boys in Northern Nigeria while citing other less prominent, but note-worthy reasons. Also, the experiences the boys had with ACE Radio school affirms that this remote method of teaching, using both the radio and mother tongue, made ACE Radio School a good alternative for delivering high quality educational content to out-of-school boys, and girls alike, in Northern Nigeria.

Keywords: Alternative Education, Out-of-school Boys, School Enrollment, Northern Nigeria, School.

1.0. INTRODUCTION

All around the world, every child has a right to education; quality, safe and accessible education. As a matter of fact, the SDG Goal 4 is one of the most crucial for any child. It is therefore not a surprise that a lot of possibilities hinge on the attainment of that goal; breaking free from the chains of poverty, decent work in future, access to opportunities, etc. However, the possibilities of attaining good, safe and quality education has continuously been a mirage; a wild, unattainable dream, for many children around the world. Despite the tremendous effort being put in place, there is still a lot of work to be done (UNSD, 2019)¹.

A report from the Nigerian Tribune (Nigerian Tribune, 2022)² showed that according to the UN data, out of all 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries, 53% cannot read and understand a simple sentence or perform basic numeracy tasks. The numbers are worse in Sub-Saharan Africa, as 87% of children do not have basic literacy by age 10. In Nigeria, the record is terrifyingly disturbing with results being one of the lowest globally – with 70 percent of children not achieving basic foundational skills (Nigerian Tribune, 2022). The stark realities evident in the Nigerian education sector leave a sour taste in the mouth. These realities differ across geopolitical zones, states and gender. Furthermore, the paltry allocations in the federal and state education budgets also aggravate the

existing challenge as it buttresses the fact that education is grossly underfunded; an indication that the level of priority given to education in Nigeria is low (Ojeleye, 2020)³.

In Northern Nigeria, there is a notion that girls are less likely to be enrolled in schools than the boys (Nmadu et al., 2010)⁴. One of the primary reasons is because girls are married off at an early age and thus, are seen as not continuing the family legacy instead; they would be members of their husband's family legacy. This therefore presupposes that the boys are largely being enrolled in formal schools to attain basic primary and secondary education (Nmadu et al., 2010). However, there are suggestions that unlike what we are made to believe, even the boys are set up for an educational disadvantage - a reality that is not often addressed in popular media. Though insurgency in the northern part of Nigeria, particularly in the North-East, is reported as one of the key reasons why children are not getting educated (Hassan et al, 2018)⁵, there seems to be other underlying factors that are responsible for the number of out-of-school boys.

Over the years, the increasing number of out-of-school children in Northern Nigeria has been a cause of concern for both individuals and institutions. This widening educational divide (Amorighoye, 2020)⁶ poses a huge challenge considering that the inability of children to access quality education puts them at a disadvantage when compared to their peers in other regions in the country and across the world (Furuholt and Kristiansen, 2007⁷; United Nations, 2020⁸; Obiageri et al, 2021⁹). Considering that tons of evidence suggest that oftentimes, girls were the first to be left behind, the perspectives of out-of-school girls were surveyed in a previous research. It was pertinent, therefore, that the perspectives of out-of-school boys; a demographic that is often less represented, were equally surveyed to understand their own realities as well as compare if they shared similar perspectives with their female counterparts. Also, considering the evidence of high receptiveness of the ACE Radio School (an alternative form of education introduced in selected states in Northern States in 2020) (Shaibu, 2020)¹⁰, it was important to ascertain the factors responsible for its wide acceptance by out-of-school boys in the region.

This research, therefore, seeks to achieve three key objectives; To determine the factors responsible for the non-enrolment of out-of-school boys into schools in Northern Nigeria; To verify whether or not insecurity was the principal cause of poor enrolment of boys in schools in Northern Nigeria; and, To ascertain the factors responsible for the acceptance and effectiveness of radio as an alternative form of education for out-of-school boys in Northern Nigeria.

2.0. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was used to answer the objectives for this study. Semi- structured interviews were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding as well as explore other possible issues. Given the pandemic, the interviews were conducted remotely via a qualitative data collection tool named Fatima. This tool was used to schedule interviews, call participants and record responses; interviews were subsequently stored on a secure server. Participants were selected to participate in this study; purposive sampling was employed. Inclusion criteria were 35 boys who were out of school before or while the ACE Radio school was implemented, and listened at home or in the listening groups to the radio broadcast.

Data was collected between February 2022 and May 2022. The length of the interviews varied among participants based on individual differences. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim by research assistants. Thematic analysis was then used to code for and analyse the transcribed content. The codes represented keywords which captured the content in the text; codes were organised and categorised to form themes. Data was interpreted based on the themes that emerged from the applied codes and recurring themes were highlighted as well as similarities and differences in the data. Prior to collecting data, informed consent was obtained from parents of each participant, and since many of the children were younger than 18, assent was also obtained. Participation in the interviews was completely voluntary and participants were informed to withdraw participation at any time they needed to do so.

3.0. RESULTS

3.1a. Demographics of Respondents.

All the respondents were between the ages of 10 and 18 years across three different states in Northern Nigeria; Sokoto (North West), Adamawa and Borno (North East). 27 (77%) of the respondents were boys who had dropped out of school while 8 (23%) had never attended formal school.

Age Group	Number of Respondents
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10 - 12	6
13 - 15	23
16 - 18	6

State	Number of Respondents
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Adamawa	13
Borno	6
Sokoto	16

3.1b. Reasons for Dropping Out of School

The respondents shared reasons they, alongside other boys either dropped out of school or never attended school. They revealed seven major reasons responsible for their dropping out of school or never attending school. These include; Lack of Funds, Hidden Fees, Death of Parents, Work, Distance, Insecurity, and School closure.

1. Lack of funds: Finance plays a vital role in children's access to quality education. Once children and their families have little or no access to funds, the chances of a child enrolling in or completing school significantly reduces. 78% of the respondents who had dropped out of school stated that lack of funds forced them to leave school, thus making it the single most recurring reason for being out-of-school. Lack of funds can be evident in the inability of the parents to purchase school uniforms, socks, sandals, school bags, stationery (textbooks, notebooks, pen, pencils, erasers, etc.), fees for tuition, extra classes, exam fees (like WAEC, NECO, GCE fees), etc for their children. This causes the children to be sent out of school leading them to eventually drop out if they are still unable to pay their fees over time.

2. Hidden Fees: Even though Basic Education ought to be free, schools still insert some hidden fees, which in turn, deter parents from enrolling their children or letting them complete school. These fees are more often than not, PTA (Parents-Teachers Association) fees, which are to be paid yearly else children would not be allowed into the school. These fees gradually become overwhelming for the parents or guardians who oversee the education of these boys. Consequently, the boys drop out of school since the financial strength of their families cannot match the monetary demands attending school incurs.

3. Death of Parents: For some of the respondents, losing either (especially the breadwinner) or of both of their parents automatically brings their education to a halt. This is because whichever relative is left may not have the funds or be gainfully employed to bear the financial costs of such education. More so, some of the children were required to fill the shoes of their deceased parents, particularly in ensuring the continuity of their trade. In addition to this, the relatives who now take up custody of these children may not value education as much as the parents did. In all of this, when the breadwinner of a home dies, it further exacerbates the poor financial situation of the family and subsequently forces the children to drop out of school.

4. Work: For some children, the opportunity cost of attending school is being able to support their parents or guardians in their trade. For such families, it is more profitable to enlist the help of their male children in their work as opposed to sending them to school since funding their education is a challenge. In fact, to them, sending their children to school reduces their disposable income while sending them to work adds to the family income. These boys are sent off to work in the farms, markets, swamps, countryside or businesses of their parents as a means to generate income. Hence, it becomes impossible for them to continue with their education.

5. Distance: For some respondents, distance was a barrier. The problem posed by distance is two fold. On one hand, it will be more expensive for parents to transport the child to and from school considering that poor funds were already a problem. On the other hand, it was more risky letting a child walk a long distance to school, indicating that some had no schools in their immediate communities.

6. Insecurity: 7% of the respondents attributed their dropping out of school to insecurity. Northern Nigeria has been battling insurgency – Kidnapping, Boko Haram, Bandits, Unknown Gunmen, Herdsmen, etc. which has claimed the lives of innocent people over the years. Some families fear that since their communities are unsafe, the schools in question are also not safe. As such, they rather their children drop out of school so they (the parents) can keep an eye on the safety of their children and any development within their community.

7. School Closure: 4% of the respondents stated that the closure of schools (possibly due to the coronavirus pandemic) forced them to drop out of school. Because the pandemic stretched the closure of schools, when schools eventually resumed, they could not re-integrate into the school system.

Some other reasons that were equally mentioned for dropping out or never attending school include; lack of parental consent to attend school, cultural beliefs, Islamic school, boys' lack of interest in school, duration of classes, uncondusive nature of schools in their locality, hunger, stubbornness, distraction, playfulness, and illiteracy of parents.

3.2. EXPERIENCE OF BOYS WITH ACE RADIO SCHOOL.

3.2a Experience with ACE Radio School

The respondents generally had positive experiences with the ACE Radio School. The feedback received shows three key experiences; that they enjoyed the lessons, they found it very interesting and they learnt new things.

3.2b. Expectations of Boys Before Starting ACE Radio School

80% (28) of the respondents expected that the ACE Radio School would help them in three predominant ways: gain new knowledge; be sent to formal schools to further their education or be helped to transition into formal schools; and, get support for themselves or their parents, especially financially. Also, some expected that they would progress via their interaction with ACE Radio School. In addition to the help they anticipated, some of the boys expected that it would be 'tales by moonlight' or that a party would be organised as an incentive. Furthermore, few of the respondents hoped it would reduce idleness and farm work or other types of work they were engaged in. However, 6% of the respondents said they had no expectations before the commencement of the ACE Radio School. Regarding whether the ACE Radio School met their expectations, 50% of the respondents answered in the affirmative. These were primarily those who expected to gain knowledge and be educated. However, 50% of respondents said their expectations of ACE Radio School were not met, mostly because they were not sent to school or given financial support.

3.2c. Motivation For Listening to ACE Radio School Lessons

The respondents recounted a variety of reasons that served as their motivation to continue listening to the ACE Radio School episodes. The majority (63%) said that gaining knowledge which would help them grow and furthering their education motivated them to continue listening. For some, listening to the ACE Radio School lessons was a more profitable use of time than sitting at home. Additionally, the improvements observed by some (9%) of the listeners inspired them to diligently listen to the program. On top of that, some of the respondents (9%) said they enjoyed the ACE Radio Radio School lessons and that in turn, prompted them to continue listening. About 6% of the respondents said the support and encouragement of their parents motivated them to continue listening to the radio episodes. However, some others were motivated by the lack of help or of parents/guardians to cater for them and their educational needs. More so, the need to help their younger ones galvanised some of the respondents into continuously listening to the episodes while some others were motivated by incentives like candy and biscuits.

3.2d. Benefits of ACE Radio School

Most of the respondents said that they benefited from ACE Radio School. For the majority, they enjoyed the school, gained knowledge and learned new things, particularly in literacy, numeracy and science. Some said some of the beneficial things they learnt included: alphabets, capitalization, sounds, parts of speech, punctuations, time, singular and plural, anatomy of the human body, arithmetic, calculations, pollution. Some learnt how to read to an extent and how to greet. Some said they also learnt how to read and how to greet. For some others, they learnt things they would have learnt if they otherwise continued in formal schools. Additionally, the respondents said the teachings aided better understanding and that every time they listened, it was a refresher. It equally improved their English and helped them write things they could not write prior. Furthermore, it was beneficial because the teaching style differs from formal school. Lastly, the respondents saw the program as beneficial because they got writing materials and are now able to teach their siblings. It also helped them make good use of their time and get rid of idleness. Notwithstanding these benefits, few respondents had no idea what they benefitted while another said he would have learned something if he attended the lessons consistently.

3.2e. Differences Between ACE Radio School and Formal Schools

Most of the respondents admitted that there were differences between the ACE Radio School and conventional formal schools. Largely, the respondents explained that, in contrast to formal schools, ACE Radio School afforded them free and easy access to good quality education. This was evident in the virtual mode of content delivery (radio) which was cost-free and easily accessible, language of instruction (their mother tongue, Hausa), quality of teachers used, quality of learning resources aired, conducive atmosphere for receiving lessons, absence of corporal punishments, and adequate focus on ensuring students' comprehension. Some respondents also cited the absence of school uniforms in the ACE Radio School as a key difference in the two schools. However, for some students, the differences highlighted were the number of subjects taught, lack of textbooks for reference, lack of physical interaction with the teachers, and the inability to catch up with missed radio lessons. These differences equally made for some challenges to the respondents as they had hoped the Radio School could teach more than the three subjects. Also, some believed having physical interactions with their teachers would bring them up to speed with parts of the lessons they had difficulty with or any other parts of the class they had missed. 6% said there was no difference between the two schools. 12% of the respondents said they had no idea what differences existed. This was understandable as some of the respondents had no prior formal education and thus may not have a basis for comparison.

3.2f. Parental Support to Listen to ACE Radio School Episodes

97% of the respondents said that they got support from their parents or guardians. Most of their parents gave them permission and encouraged them to regularly attend the classes (Listening Groups) and/or listen to the ACE Radio School lessons. They explained that their parents thought the lessons to be beneficial and thus, encouraged punctual attendance and continuous listenership. For some, their parents could not afford to pay school fees, so the ACE Radio School was an opportunity for them to get educated. Some added that their parents relieved them of any duties they were engaged in once it was time for the Radio School lessons. More so, some parents supported their children by providing them with the radios sets needed to listen to the classes. However, 3% of the respondents cited being unaware of the parental support given by parents.

3.2g. Challenges Faced with Listening to ACE Radio School Episodes

From the responses, the majority of respondents (69%) encountered no challenges listening to the ACE Radio School while 6% had no idea whether or not they encountered challenges. However, some of the boys shared some challenges they and other boys faced with listening to or attending the ACE Radio School lessons. According to them, some of the boys do not see the benefit of the lessons they receive, some were proud while others were either playful or lazy. Some other reasons cited were the lack of time and quest for money. Some of the respondents had to help their parents at home, engage in domestic chores or be engaged in some form of work to earn an income. Some other respondent said hunger was responsible for poor attendance, due to inability to feed oneself before attending the Radio School. In response to the challenges their female colleagues faced with listening, they mostly said the girls did not have the time as they were often held up at home doing domestic chores, or doing other works like hawking or farming. Therefore, when they attended, many times, they were in a haste to go back home. Also, the girls didn't want to be in the company of others.

3.3. RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE BOYS EDUCATION

The responses of the boys had shown that there was an evident need for more boys to be enrolled and retained in school. With a better understanding of what methods will work best in their immediate environments, the respondents recommended some steps that will help improve boys' education. These included six major things;

- a. **Support:** Providing financial and material support for boys has been considered as the most important step towards improving access to education for boys. The majority of the respondents have suggested that if the payment of school fees and purchase of school materials like books, bags, uniforms, etc. were sorted, more boys will attend school. Therefore, they believe that providing sponsorship, government funding, and enrolling boys in schools is a sure way to boost their access to education. Furthermore, they are confident that if their parents are supported financially, it will be instrumental in sending them to school.
- b. **Building Nearby Schools:** To mitigate the barrier caused by distance, the boys proposed that schools be built close by, preferably in their communities. That way, it mitigates the risk associated with crossing major roads and also being attacked by terrorists on their way to school.
- c. **Competition:** It was recommended that competitions be organised to spur interest in education. By so-doing, boys are eager to win prizes. Consequently, this motivates them to go to school. It equally encourages their parents to enrol them in school. Some pointed out that more boys are disposed to play football than attend school because of the competitive nature of the sport.
- d. **Incentives:** The respondents also suggested that incentives be introduced to encourage attendance at school. These incentives such as food, gifts, prizes for outstanding students, stationery and resources create a zeal for school as there was something to look forward to.
- e. **Sensitization:** Respondents believe that creating awareness on the importance of education was also an important strategy to deploy. They maintain that parents and children alike need to understand the many benefits associated with getting an education. By seeing how beneficial it is to them, they will be eager to enrol their children in school and the children will be willing to complete their education when enrolled.
- f. **Role Models:** The boys believe it is important to have other boys who serve as role models to them because this inspires them to follow the path of their role models. They are convinced that when boys see their peers who have completed school and eventually become beneficial in the society, other boys will be motivated to go to school as well.

Some other recommendations given by the boys were to ensure that teachers were doing what they were expected to do. Additionally, some believe that enforcing a more stringent approach, like whipping or flogging the boys, will make them go to school. Lastly, some respondents are of the opinion that attending/listening to the ACE Radio School lessons as well as encouraging their peers to do the same will greatly boost their interest in acquiring formal education.

4.0. DISCUSSION

The responses received from respondents made it clear that, contrary to what mainstream media portrays (Ngige et al., 2016)¹¹, the humanitarian crisis, i.e. insurgency, in the Northern part of Nigeria, was not the principal barrier to accessing education for boys. Without a doubt, insurgency plays a role in reducing the number of children who enrol and attend school (Muhammed and Mohammed, 2019)¹². However, this research has shown that other problems (Muhammed and Mohammed, 2019) like lack of funds and death of parents play even more direct roles in reducing the number of boys who enrol in school.

When families have little or no means of livelihood, education becomes a luxury they cannot afford. This is coupled with the fact that even supposedly free education incurs some additional or hidden costs like purchase of school bags, books, uniforms, examination fees, transportation, feeding, etc (Lawal, 2021)¹³. Also, when there is no one to take up the financial burden or responsibility for their education, these boys are unable to enrol in school. This is evident in the number out of school boys who are orphans or those whose families have lost their breadwinners. Furthermore, to stay remotely afloat, these boys need to undertake some form of work - farm work, market or petty trade, to provide income for their families. Some others need to help their parents or guardians with work which makes it more challenging to attend school or keep up with school work. Again, many good schools are far from the communities where these boys live. So, the distance together with the risks of commuting along major roads without adult supervision, discourages parents and their boys from enrolling or continuing with school.

ACE Radio School brought some form of respite to these children and by extension, their families, rekindling their hope about getting a good quality education that is uniquely tailored to their needs and levels of understanding. For some, it boosted their confidence among their peers who went to school. This method of learning differed from conventional formal schools as it was clear that ACE Radio School encouraged the children to take ownership of their learning. This was in contrast with the formal schools where another individual could take notes for the students. Also, with formal schools, the fact that the students had to copy notes written on the board in real time interfered with their concentration and comprehension in class. The repetitive nature of the ACE Radio School classes afforded the children a unique opportunity to learn concepts for themselves and eventually write them down. Very importantly, through ACE Radio School, boys were afforded free, quality and accessible education in a language they could easily understand, Hausa, and with a tool that was readily at their disposal, radio. High quality educational content was made available by recruiting seasoned teachers and translators who utilised the national education curriculum and broke down topics using the simplest possible form, so that the children could easily understand. Lastly, the ACE Radio School was devoid of corporal punishment often meted out by formal school teachers and thus gave the children peace of mind.

Regardless of these benefits, for some respondents, the differences highlighted equally posed challenges. These were the limited number of subjects taught in the ACE Radio School, the lack of textbooks for reference, the lack of physical interaction with the teachers, and the inability to catch up with missed radio lessons. Other challenges that were attributed to interfere with boys listening to or attending ACE Radio School lessons include the need to work due to lack of funds, quest for money, lack of time, domestic chores, playfulness, non-realization of the benefits of the ACE Radio School, laziness, pride, and hunger.

In response to the challenges their female counterparts faced with listening to the radio lessons, they mostly said the girls were often held up at home doing domestic chores, hawking or farming. Therefore, when the girls attended the Listening Group sessions, many times, they were in a haste to go back home.

Considering the number of benefits recounted by respondents, it is therefore not surprising that most of them enjoyed the support of their parents or guardians to listen to the radio episodes or attend the Listening Group sessions. Their parents provided them with the needed permission and encouragement while also relieving them of their chores. Therefore, the recommendations provided by the boys to improve boy/male education are very practical ways to cut down the number of out-of-school boys to the barest minimum.

6.0. CONCLUSION

While the rate of out of school children remains a cause of concern, it is now clear that, irrespective of the genders, the experiences of out of school children in Northern Nigeria are largely similar. Since the key factors responsible for the high number of out-of-school

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boys (and girls) have been clearly identified, it is pertinent that the aforementioned recommendations should be put in place by the government, well meaning institutions and individuals who are determined to see that no child is left behind in the achievement of universal basic education for every Nigerian child. This is equally important because an educated populace contributes to national development.

From this study, ACE Radio School has demonstrated that alternative and remote forms of education have the capacity to influence society, equip out-of-school boys and girls, and most importantly, bridge the knowledge gap between the educated and uneducated children in Northern Nigeria. Therefore, greater sensitization should be carried out so that this alternative method of education can be adopted on a wider scale as a primary way to give out-of-school children some leverage and ease their reintegration into formal school systems.

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