

CONSIDERING THE PLAUSIBILITY OF ATTAINING UNIVERSAL SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATION FOR THE GIRL CHILD IN NIGERIA THROUGH ODL

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ABSTRACT

The universal declaration of human rights recognized education as a human right. Despite this recognition, a large percentage of the human population still lack access to education. This is particularly true of the girl child from less privileged background. In Nigeria, statistics shows that the percentage of girl child enrollment in secondary school is 44.3% as against 55.7% for the boy child enrollment. This disparity has wide implications for child upbringing, gender equality, access to resources and human development. Opening up access to education for the girl child is fundamental to narrowing these gaps. This paper is premised on the assumption that ODL system can serve as veritable tool for expanding educational opportunities available to the girl child in Nigeria. While the paper explores avenues through which the ODL system could be incorporated into the secondary school education, it also discusses modalities for effective functioning of the ODL system in secondary education as well as the extent of the benefits and opportunities the ODL holds for the universal secondary education of the girl child in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

“If we educate a boy, we educate one person. If we educate a girl, we educate a family – and a whole nation.”

~~ African proverb

The above quote from the African proverb sums up the quintessence of education for the girl-child and indeed, for every educable person, and therefore solicits for priority attention to be focused on education of the girl-child. It is inferable from the quotation that any nation that seeks to erect an egalitarian society should concern itself with education of the girl-child as education is the bedrock of all facets of development. On the contrary, it is paradoxical to observe that girls' education on the African continent has suffered and continues to suffer prejudice. This has affected enrolment into primary and secondary education across the continent. The transition rate from primary to secondary school, in Sub-Saharan Africa, was 66 per cent boys against 57 per cent girls in 2005 (Shirley et al, 2009). This position has been confirmed by UNESCO (2009) which observed that in sub-Saharan Africa, gender disparity increases in secondary education. The UN *Beijing+10 Review and Appraisal* also found that in Sub-Saharan Africa, only one in five girls are enrolled in secondary school (Cf Shirley et al 2009). A country study of Nigeria conducted by UNESCO (2012) reveals that with about 10.5 million out-of-school children Nigeria is home to the largest number of out-of-school children in the world, accounting for one out of six of the global figure. The report also shows that women are the worst hit as more than 50% of rural women have less than a secondary schooling compared to around 25% of young women in urban areas.

It is against this backdrop that the paper tries to consider the plausibility of ameliorating the gender gap in secondary school enrolment in Nigeria through Open and Distance Learning System. While the paper benefits from descriptive method, it shall be essentially historical and analytical. The following questions therefore become imperative: Does the Nigerian girl-child in reality have a right to education? Why does the girl-child suffer disparity in the area of education? How could ODL be utilized to bridge the gaps? What opportunities and benefits there are in ODL for universal secondary education of the girl-child in Nigeria?

EDUCATION AS A HUMAN RIGHT

Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognize education as a human right. This Declaration comes with a huge negative implication that the denial of education to any person amounts to the denial of the personhood and humanity of the person. In this light, education becomes one of the indices that make us human persons in so far as we are different from mere beasts. The importance of education to both the individual and society is further highlighted by the fact that education is indispensable for the fulfillment of such other rights as civil, political, economic and social.

Several global pacts have adopted this human right status of education. They include the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1981) (Cf UNESCO-UNICEF, 2007). Each and every of these pacts establishes an entitlement to free, compulsory primary education for all children; an obligation to develop secondary education, supported by measures to make it open to all children, as well as unbiased access to higher education; and a responsibility to provide basic education for individuals who have not completed primary education. These treaties further affirm that the aim of education is, among others, to promote personal development and to strengthen respect for human rights and freedoms.

The provision of the conditions to attain these rights rests mainly on national governments. Accordingly, since 1976, Nigeria has shown serious commitment to these global pacts and the evolving understanding of education as a human right with its establishment of the Universal Primary Education (1976) and Universal Basic Education (1999) programmes. These national educational programmes aimed to provide unfettered access to education eliminating such barriers to education as gender, poverty, culture, and so on. In this light, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) states that its number one objective is “the provision of free, Universal Basic Education for every Nigerian Child of School-going age; reducing drastically the incidence of drop-out from the formal school system (Federal Ministry of Education, 2004). Commendable as Nigeria’s attempts at instituting free and universal basic education to its citizenry are, the country still falls short in imbibing the norm which considers education as a human right. Instructively, the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria excluded education among the fundamental rights of citizens. Instead, the constitution places the initiative for the provision of free and basic education on the hands of political leaders who determine when to invest on free education for the citizenry depending on resource availability.

GENDER DISPARITY IN SECONDARY SCHOOL ENROLMENT IN NIGERIA

Nigeria’s National Policy on Education (1977), rightly understands learning as a lifelong phenomenon necessary for the attainment of all aspects of individual and national developments. Thus, the Universal Primary Education (UPE), inaugurated in the same year was envisioned to serve as veritable foundation for the citizens’ engagement with lifelong learning. Despite what some scholars (cf Dare, Onekata and Auwal, 2000) regard as the failure of the programme, its success areas were not adequately explored. For instance, the increment in primary school enrolment due to the UPE programme was a success area that was mismanaged and so could not translate to increment in secondary school enrolment. The 6-3-3-4 system of education introduced in 1986 as well as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) which took off in 1999 can be seen as programmes conceived as remedial to the shortcomings of the UPE, especially to close the gap between primary school enrolment and secondary school enrolment. The UBE Act was quite radical in its approach as it expanded the years of free, compulsory and basic education to also include junior secondary education. A proper analysis of the first objective of the UBE programme showed that the formulators of the programme had hoped that it would be able to arouse the quest for lifelong learning in the entire Nigerian citizenry.

Despite the hope expressed in the objectives of the UBE and the targets which the UBE programme set for itself, current data shows that “30% of pupils drop out of primary school and only 54% transit to Junior Secondary Schools” (UNICEF, 2005). In both situations, the girl child is the worst hit. A Central Bank of Nigeria’s (2000) comparative presentation of students’ enrolment in Nigerian secondary schools reveals preponderance of boys’ enrolment. According to the CBN’s report, total enrolment of boys and girls into

secondary schools in 1999 was 6.095 million but increased to 6.4million in 2000. The enrolment of girls in secondary schools in 1999 was about 2.743million. This increased to about 2.944million in 2000. Lewis and Lockheed (2007) corroborate this as they hold that in Nigeria, girls are 12 percent less likely to attend school than boys. This apparently shows that there is a gender dimension to educational achievements and development in Nigeria.

This disparity is linked to a number of factors which include religion (especially in the North where formal schools are considered by most parents as incapable of ensuring male and female segregation as demanded by Islam), child labour, economic hardship, pregnancy and early marriage (UNICEF 2005). Gender disparity has implications in many areas of human endeavour: gender relation, attainment of MDGs, family, child health, general workforce, and democracy (Cf Bhat et al 2011). On another level, such disparity mirrors the general inequalities that exist in society (UNESCO 2004).

ODL AND THE EDUCATION OF THE GIRL-CHILD IN NIGERIA

In the midst of the above, how to ensure equal educational opportunity for children of all genders remains one of the major challenges of Nigeria's education system. The question is about how to lure the drop out girl child back to school, how to convince the girl child labourer that labour and education are not mutually exclusive options, and ensure the poor girl child that education holds the key out of her condition. A number of measures have been suggested and implemented, yet the challenge persists. The failure of a number of suggested educational systems in Nigeria are linked to teacher incompetency, overcrowded classrooms, and narrow curriculum (Dare, Onekata and Auwal, 2000). Consequently, a workable system should, *ab initio*, be modeled to be able to cater for all the structures responsible for failure of earlier models.

It is surprising that despite the success of open schools in other countries, especially India, in providing education to children who cannot and who do not go to school, Nigeria is yet to see the need to adopt open school as panacea to unequal educational opportunity in Nigeria which affects the girl child more. A study of India's about 1.5 million primary and secondary school students whose educational needs are being catered for by the open school have similar experiences as those Nigerians who lack access to secondary education. For instance, many of them are school dropouts, have socioeconomic disadvantaged backgrounds. A number of them are older than the traditional primary and secondary school students and, therefore, find it difficult to discipline themselves to study regularly and purposefully (Mitra 2009). Also, Thyssen (2009, p.159) lists other characteristics of children targeted by open schools to include, the "needy", "pretuberculous" children and youth, who were sometimes also described in equally vague terms as "anaemic, weakly, scrofulous", or simply "nervous".

As an all inclusive system, ODL does not discriminate against people on account of their colour, ability, needs, predicaments, economic and social backgrounds. The attraction which ODL would offers to those categories of Nigerian students who for one reason or the other feel excluded from traditional secondary schools is hinged on a number of factors which include: personal management of their study time, availability of free open educational resources always available on the internet without cost to the student, personal decision on whether to interact or not to interact with other students, a level of anonymity for those previously hindered by fear and shame (young mothers and wives, pregnant students, disabled students, children of beggars, vagabonds and so on), pride and confidence gained due to knowledge that a specific system of education was designed to cater for people with specific needs like themselves, the fellow feeling generated by learning with peers with similar background and experiences.

PLAUSIBILITY OF ODL AS AN OPTION FOR ACHIEVING UNIVERSAL SECONDARY SCHOOLING FOR THE GIRL CHILD IN NIGERIA

The question at this juncture is the plausibility or workability of ODL as an alternative secondary school model in Nigeria. The paper argues that certain conditions, already existing in Nigeria, means that open secondary school can thrive in Nigeria and can be explored in the education of the girl child. This position is hinged on the following: existence of ODL higher institutions in Nigeria, the existence in Nigeria of technological tools that facilitate learning in other places, and the presence of a population to be catered for.

The existence of two ODL specific higher institutions, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and the Nigerian Teachers Institute (NTI), means that Nigeria already has experience in organizing distance learning. The existence and the success so far achieved by these two institutions can be explored in the establishment and management of open secondary schools. Indeed, these two institutions, with full government support, and following the example of Utah State University (U.S.A) in opening and sustaining Open High School Utah (Wiley 2009) can play direct roles in establishing, running and maintaining open secondary school in Nigeria. The experiences of these two institutions will be of great help as they would come handy in outsourcing and management of certain types of staff, maintaining distant study centres, development, adaptation and distribution of educational resources. Besides application of the experiences they have already gathered in the management of ODL at the tertiary level, these two institutions also have the capacity to adapt and share best practices with successful institutions that have undertaken ODL at the secondary school level.

Secondly, the existence of a number of technological devices like computers and phones, for instance, in Nigeria means that the tools for undertaking ODL are readily available in Nigeria. Also, bearing in mind that at the beginning of their secondary school education, many Nigerian students still lack the capacity to comprehend the meaning of those texts which they read without the assistance of a teacher, one may raise objection on the workability of ODL as an educational option in Nigeria. This objection can be made in the light that ODL emphasizes high self-dependence and collaboration with peers, while less emphasis is paid on contact with teachers. Thus, as an education model that proposes to help students, especially disadvantaged students to reach their potentials, countering the limitation that the objection above raises can be seen as the first step in establishing the workability of ODL at the secondary school level in Nigeria. Open secondary schools can overcome this challenge by matching literally contents with their pictorial, auditory and visual equivalents to aid understanding.

Thirdly, the presence of staggering number of Nigerian citizens of secondary school education age who, for one reasons or the other, lack access to traditional education means that there is already a ready-made set of students whose educational needs are to be catered for by open secondary education. And since statistics show that there is preponderance of girl children who fall under this category, it is expected that the girl child will benefit more.

CONCLUSION

Education is a human right. This means that the provision of accessible universal education to the citizenry has become one of the obligations of nations and individuals. A number of countries have adopted this understanding of education as human right as part of their national constitutions. Nigeria is yet to toe that line but has shown strong commitment in providing free and universal education to its citizenry. Despite Nigeria's effort, a large number of citizens still lack primary and secondary education. Statistics show that girls fall under this category of citizens than boys. This paper has discussed the plausibility of adopting ODL as a means of countering incidences of drop out, low enrolment of girl child in secondary school education in Nigeria.

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