Effective Parental and Community Engagement and Participation as a Key Driver of Successful Open Schooling Interventions in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

Nigeria's pursuit of improved educational access necessitates effective parental and community engagement towards enhancing the success of open schooling interventions and providing quality learning opportunities for out-of-school children and underserved groups. This paper explores how inclusive community-led approaches enhance the effectiveness of open schooling practices. It focuses on parental and community involvement, traditional leadership and provision of community-based learning structures to foster ownership, sustainability, and improved learning outcomes in open schooling. The paper draws from surveys, case studies and targeted Focus Group Discussions and highlights the role of parents and communities in supporting open schooling. It identifies collaborative partnerships with civil societies, religious groups and private sector actors within communities, as well as sensitization campaigns among the essential localized solutions for shifting societal perceptions about alternative education pathways and increasing access to non-formal education opportunities. The study recommends integrating open schooling into mainstream education strategies, providing financial and capacity-building support for grassroots stakeholders and leveraging data-driven mechanisms to track progress. It affirms that community-based, multi-stakeholder, context-responsive engagement are essential for ensuring long-term success of open schooling interventions in the grassroots and even at regional levels.

Key words: *Parental and Community Engagement, Participation, Education, Open Schooling*

1.0 Introduction

Open schooling provides flexible education especially for those unable to access regular conventional schooling. Its learner-centeredness makes it easily adapted to the unique needs of underserved populations. Open schooling stands out prominently as a key strategy in providing alternative learning platforms in Nigeria, noted for being home to over 10 million out-of-school children, the largest globally (UNESCO, 2023). Open schooling has become a veritable learning platform due to formal system's inability to fully cater for the needs of all learners and constraints associated with regular face-to-face classroom engagement, making it an acceptable medium for learning in Nigeria. While the flexibility of open schooling offers significant opportunities within the country's education space its success is closely linked to the active involvement of parents, communities and other grassroot stakeholders.

Nigeria's open schooling is primarily championed at the secondary, tertiary level and TVET with the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) as major players. Nonetheless, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) has recently made bold moves to institute open schooling in basic education. Notwithstanding successes recorded, the initiative faces daunting challenges that hinder its effectiveness including paucity of government resources for robust implementation and limited stakeholder participation, among others (NOUN, 2023). To this end, this study seeks to buttress the importance of increased parental and community engagement and participation as necessary inputs for expanding learning infrastructure, acceptance of the non-formal approach and sustainable non-state actors' partnership to ensure effectiveness and success of open schooling practices. It highlights good practices, barriers and recommendations for sustaining effective, intentional, inclusive, equitable, lifelong learning opportunities for underserved populations through the open schooling model.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Open Schooling in Nigeria

Open schooling in its broad sense involves non-formal, non-traditional, flexible learning approaches often delivered through distance education, radio, mobile platforms, or community learning centers (Commonwealth of Learning, 2022). Open schooling dates to the 19th century in response to social barriers and operational rigidities of formal systems (NIOS, 2020 p.9). COL maintains that Nigeria made its early debut in open schooling with the enrolment of its citizens as external students for the University of London matriculation examination in 1887, (COL, 2022). Further developments in Nigeria's open schooling space in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, saw the emergence of educational media broadcasts and the commencement of open distance learning programmes in tertiary institutions like Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, University of Lagos, among others (Jegede, 2016).

Due to dearth of access opportunities in conventional schools, the Nigerian government approved the establishment of the National Open University (NOUN) and further expansion of its capacity to accommodate more learners (NUC, 2022). Currently, private organisations have swelled the rank of open schooling providers targeting the working class, out-of-school children, girls from culturally sensitive communities where access to western education is curtailed, marginalized groups, internally displaced persons, nomads, people with disabilities and others with various socio-economic and cultural considerations that restrain access to formal education (MIVA, 2024).

2.2 Parental, Community Engagement and Participation in Education

Generally, parental and community engagement as well as participation in education refer to the 'active involvement of parents and local communities in supporting and enriching the educational experiences of students' (Anoke et al., 2023). The concept of parental, community engagement and participation in education underscores the need for conscious interest, investments and collaboration between education service providers and community constituents including parents, families, corporate and civil entities in

the collective drive to ensure success in the learning process. In open schooling, parental, community engagement and participation entail community members' intentional contribution to successful open schooling initiatives in recognition of the fact that 'learning extends beyond the boundaries of the school and acknowledges the diverse resources and expertise available within the community to support student learning and development' (Borup et al., 2020; Udokwu et al., 2023, cited in Eden, 2024, pg375).

2.3 The Imperative of Parental, Community Engagement and Participation in Open Schooling

Eden, et al, (2024) admit that parents and community involvement in education cultivates a supportive environment conducive for learning thus reinforcing efforts that lead to success in learning. In both conventional and informal learning space, active parental and community involvement is known to positively affect learners' attitudes, academic performance, and retention in both formal and informal settings (Epstein, 2001). Parental and community engagement leading to active participation is quite noticeable in open schooling settings where non-state actors' commitment is among the key success factors. Extant literature highlights impressive parental and community contribution to open schooling including advocacy, resource mobilization, establishment of local learning hubs, provision of educational facilities, monitoring study schedules and creating a conducive learning environment, among others. Ossom (2024) posits that the out-of-school phenomenon, which open schooling is expected to address, primarily a function of the mindset, priorities and practices of both parents and communities as global evidence shows that community-led initiatives are effective in providing alternative or complementary alternatives that could ensure improved access and even re-enrollment in school. This aligns with IIEP's quest for the acknowledgement of community roles in increasing access and participation in education offered to marginalized groups (IIEP, 2004, pg.79).

3.0 Problem Statement

Despite notable positive outcomes associated with parental and community participation in open schooling, service providers ignore or pay little attention to engaging and sustaining parental and community interest in open schooling. While acknowledging that parental and community participation play critical roles in enhancing learner motivation, providing local support and bridging socio-cultural barriers to education, this key success factor is not often given priority consideration in Nigeria's open schooling process.

4.0 Theoretical Framework

Three theories provide the basis for this study; Epstein's Framework of Parental Involvement (2001), Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) and the Social Capital Theory, (Coleman, 1988). Appraised within the context of this study, Epstein's framework of parental involvement highlights the key dimensions of engagement which are fundamental aspects of parents and community involvement in open schooling including, parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaboration. The influence posed on learners' development because of interactions between home, community and school is aptly demonstrated by Bronfenbrenner's Theory while the concept of social capital supports the idea that social networks involving parents and other community members have enormous potentials for educational access and could be harnessed for Nigeria's successful open schooling interventions.

4.1 Methodology

4.1.1 Study Design

The study adopted a survey method, randomly sampling stakeholders in Nigeria's 36 States and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) from whom responses on parental and community engagement and participation in open schooling were received. The survey assessed respondents' understanding of the concept of open schooling and the role of parents and community in fostering educational success through the model. Additionally, the study reviewed few case studies of open schooling models

implemented in Nigeria to validate respondents' perceptions of parents and community inputs to effective open schooling programme, thus demonstrating the linkage between study results and practice.

4.1.2 Sampling

238 respondents were sampled through a random sampling technique using a survey instrument administered in a structured process, collated and analyzed to establish the parental and community engagement practices and potentials in promoting effective open schooling programme implementation.

While 52% of the respondents were male, 48% were female, signifying an equitable sampling for inclusive feedback on the subject. 68% of the samples were located in urban centers while 32% were from rural areas. Respondents were aged 0 – 24 (0.4%), 25 – 40 (15.5%), 41 – 60 (81.1%) and 60 and above (2.9%). Since majority of respondents were within the active age of participation in open schooling implementation, they were well placed to provide reliable information on parental/community engagement and participation in the process.

4.1.3 Data Collection Instruments

Two data collection instruments were used for the study: a structured questionnaire for stakeholders; parents, community members, traditional rulers, open schooling facilitators and beneficiaries, system managers, policy makers, and a complementary Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide for engagements with selected parents, community leaders, open schooling facilitators and community learner support groups. These instruments obtained information on respondents' understanding of the concept of open schooling and the role of parents and communities in fostering educational success through the open schooling model and in various contexts.

4.1.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (descriptive statistics and correlation analysis). Qualitative data were coded and analyzed thematically.

5.0 Results

5.1 Understanding the Concept of Open Schooling

Over 90% of respondents view open schooling as a flexible learning process supported by digital infrastructure and complementing the formal education system. Respondents understand that open schooling provides alternative education opportunities and is suitable for all categories of learners, especially those unable to access formal education, including out-of-school children, girls facing socio- cultural barriers to education like early marriage, adults seeking literacy, people with disabilities and employees whose job schedules interfere with regular learning schedules.

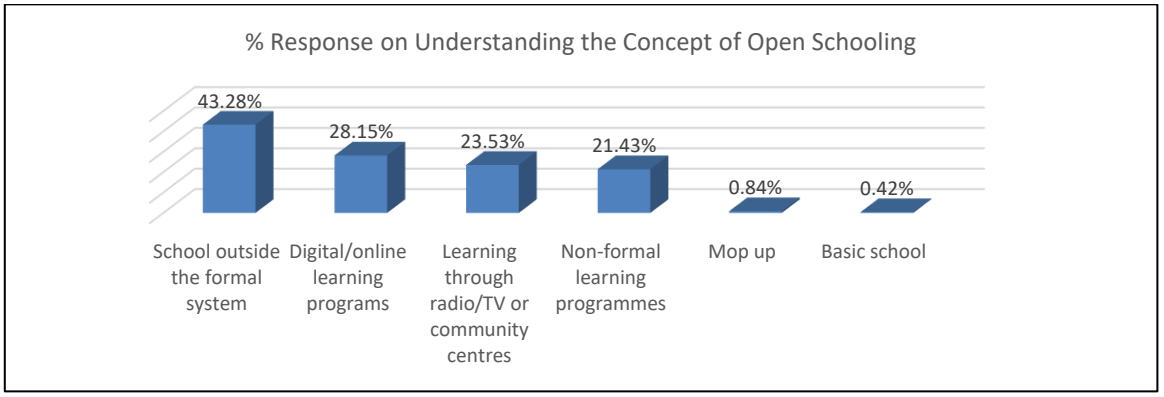

Figure 1: Understanding the concept of open schooling

5.2 Importance of Parental and Community Participation in Open Schooling

98% of respondents acknowledged the importance of parental and community participation in open schooling. The FGDs unanimously affirmed that parents' support and encouragement in the process of enrolment and retention in alternative learning approaches ensures popular acceptance and effective operations. Respondents maintain that success and effectiveness in open schooling become sustainable only when the community supports and leads efforts in mobilizing for programme implementation and eventual ownership.

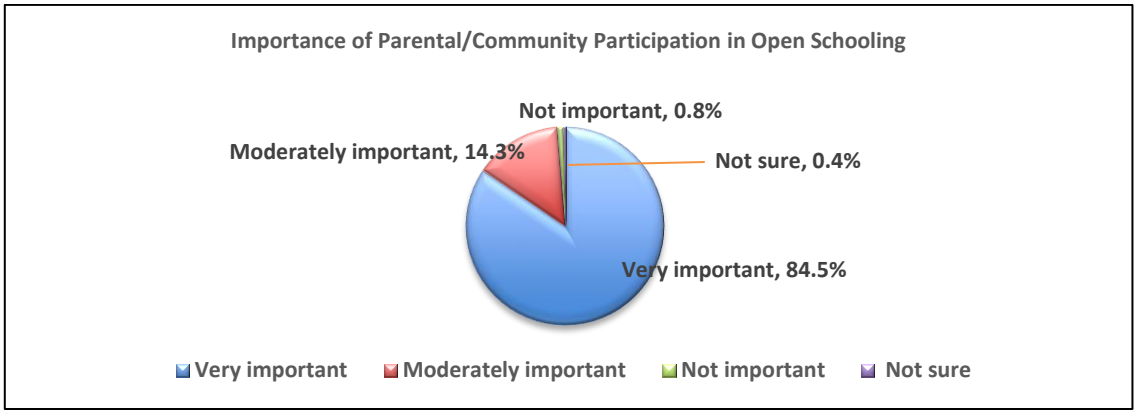

Figure 2: Importance of importance of parental/community participation in open schooling

This response underscores the importance of parents/community input implementing indigenous approaches that could accelerate open schooling that aligns with the specific needs of each community of learners.

5.3 The Nature of Parental and Community Engagement and Involvement in Open Schooling

The nature of parental engagement and participation in open schooling were highlighted to include mobilizing for enrollment, monitoring learners progress, serving as advocates for improved retention and completion of the learning cycle, among others. The FGDs emphasized that parental roles identified in the course of the study further ensured that the impact and outcomes accruing to the open schooling process are reinforced in ways that promote increased participation and sustained interest in the process.

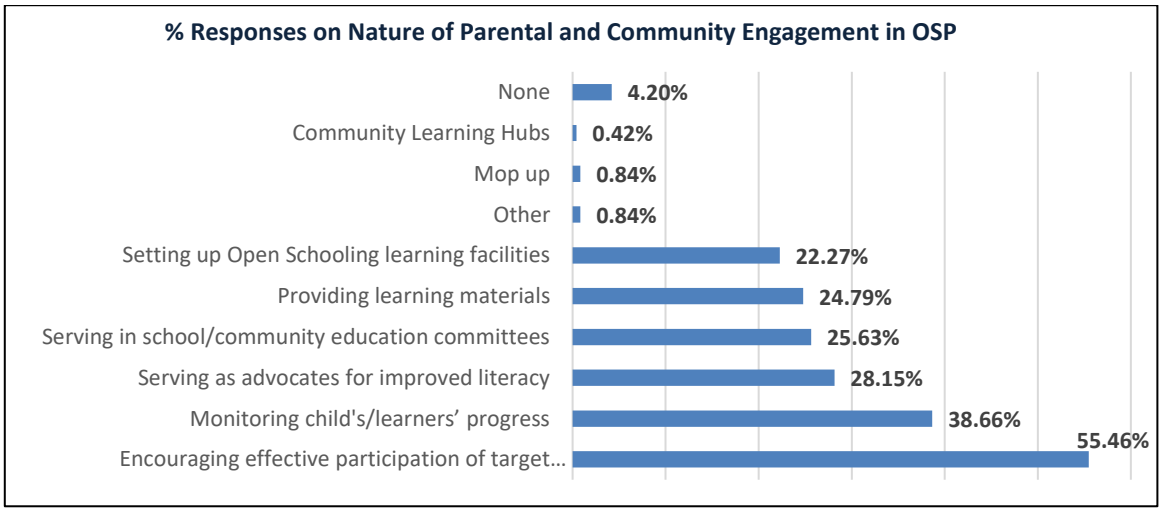

Figure 3: Nature of parental/community engagement in open schooling

Monitoring and evaluation, provision of essential instructional materials and follow up of learners demonstrate that parents' participation in open schooling is key to achieving learning success.

5.4 Barriers to Parental and Community Participation in Open Schooling

Despite making significant contributions to open schooling, over 51% of respondents indicated that parents and communities encounter significant barriers that hinder their maximum contribution to the success of open schooling interventions. Poverty, arising from low-income of parents and community members, low level of parental literacy, erroneous cultural beliefs and lack of awareness of open schooling opportunities are identified among key factors that limit commitment towards effective open schooling initiatives.

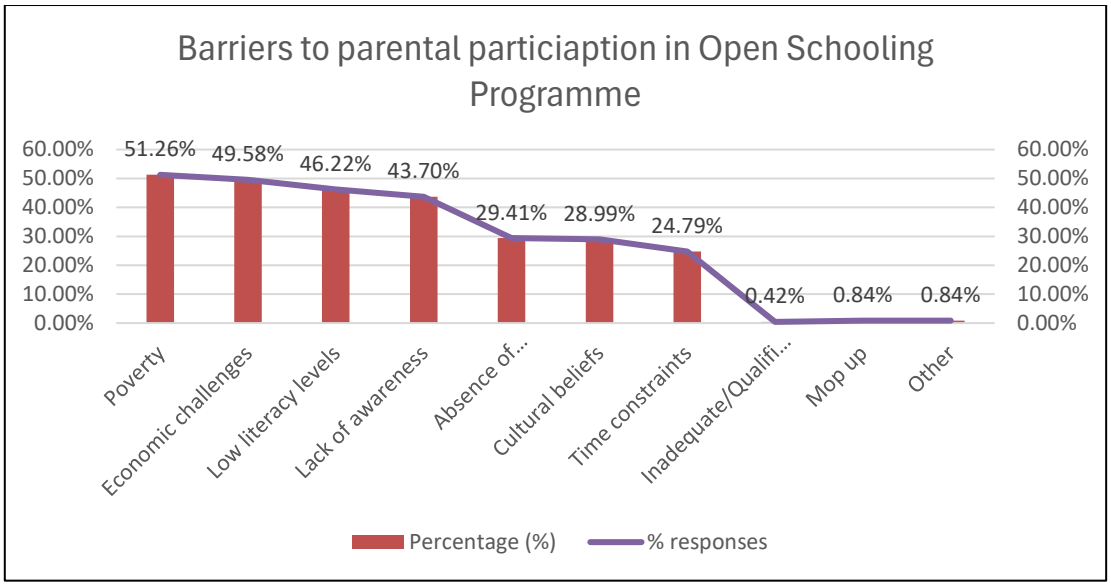

Figure 4: Barriers to parental involvement in open schooling programme

5.5 Importance of Parental and Community Engagement and Participation in Open Schooling

Findings from the study revealed an interesting dimension to community perception and participation in open schooling. A larger number of respondents (84%), indicated that parental and community were important while 34% showed moderate level and no involvement (2%) of all responses received.

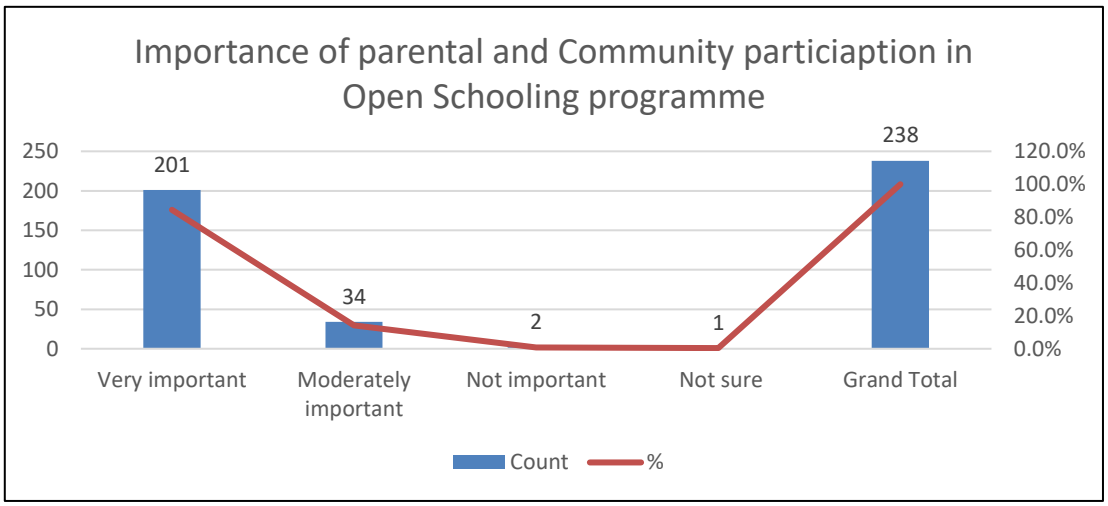

Figure 5: Importance of parental and community participation in open schooling programme

5.6 Role of Community Leaders in Supporting Open Schooling

60% of respondents indicated that community leaders play significant roles in supporting and ensuring effective implementation and alignment of open schooling activities with other educational goals. Such

roles include advocacy and support to institutionalize community participation and ownership of open schooling facilities and processes. Responses received during the FGDs also maintain that community leaders, especially traditional rulers and opinion leaders, are key influencers of community perspectives, priorities and commitment to open schooling processes.

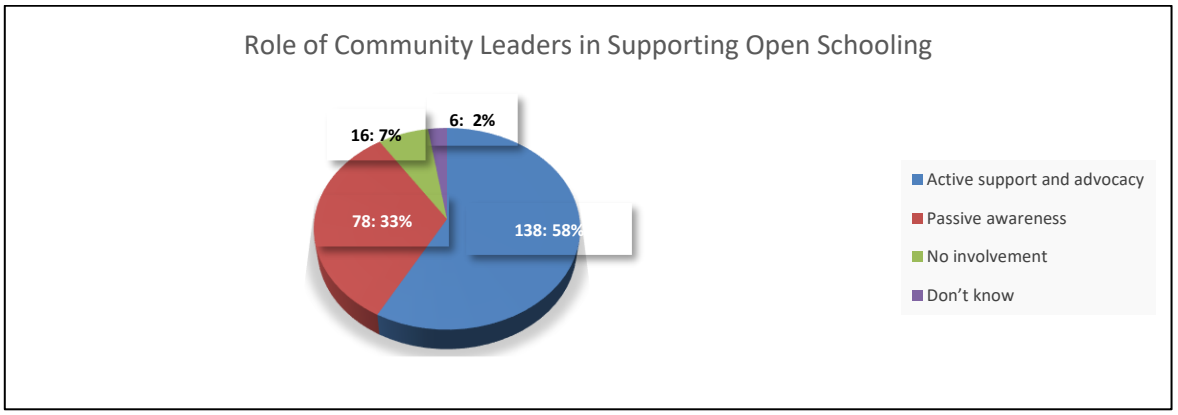

Figure 6: Role of community leaders in supporting open schooling

5.7 Community Structures that Support Open Schooling Programmes

The study identified key open schooling support structures put in place by communities to include Center Based Management Committees (CBMCs) constituted at community level, provision of learning centers/hubs, procurement of remote learning electronics facilities, support for setting up of radio/television programmes and participation of Civil Society, Faith Based and Non-Governmental Organisations in the drive to ensure inclusive and sustained alternative learning opportunities.

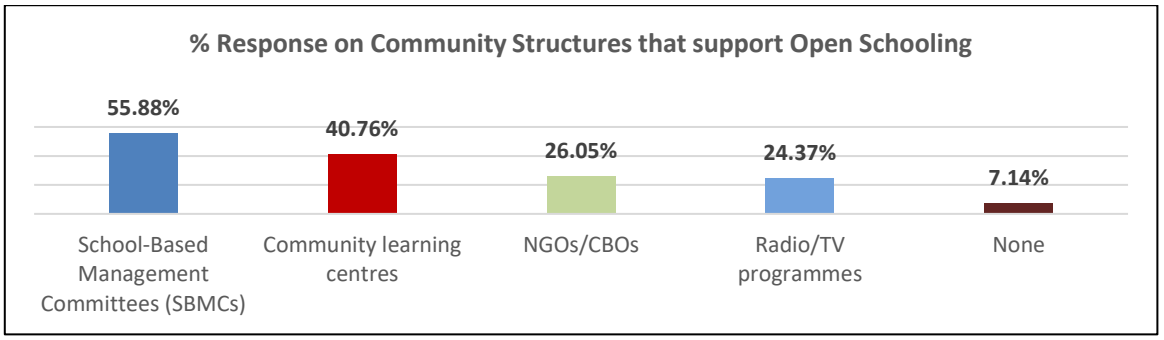

Figure 7: Community structures that support open schooling

5.8 Sources of Funding for Open Schooling

Respondents indicated that 45% of funds used for open schooling emanate from government, with the following as co-funders; NGOs (29%), community contribution (27%), parents and guardians (26%) and international donors (18%). Learning infrastructure, instructional materials, payment of teachers' salaries and provision of digital and online learning support facilities being the major cost envelopes.

5.9 Case Studies of Identified Effective Parental/Community Engagement in Open Schooling

To validate responses from the survey, the study reviewed few case studies referenced during the FGDs which demonstrate that parental/community participation adds value to the effectiveness of open schooling interventions and expanding educational access for learners. The study noted that successes recorded in these open schooling case studies are significantly supported by parental and community participation thus leading to ownership and effectiveness.

5.9.1 ACE'S Community-driven Open Schooling Radio Programme

ACE Charity foundation instituted the ACE radio broadcast targeting learners during the Covid-19

pandemic. The programme, deploying indigenous languages, covers 6 States in Northern Nigeria and demonstrates that community led initiatives create inclusive practices through open schooling, tailored to the needs of locals and harnessing indigenous resources. Anchored on effective community inputs, engagement of community leaders, parents and educators, the radio school was recognized in 2023 'as one of the top 100 innovative educational organizations globally and among the top 3 in Africa by the Hundred Organization', (ACE, 2024), highlighting its effectiveness and scalability. Over 70,000 learners have been impacted by this initiative in Borno, Kano, Kaduna, Sokoto, Bauchi, FCT and Kwara State.

5.9.2 **Walk-in Open Learning Centers by Oando Foundation**

Walk-in Centers (WICs) set up by Oando Foundation for short term literacy and numeracy activities offer pre-formal education activities which are moderated by community efforts particularly through operational support as well as monitoring. WICs deploy play and drama to prompt learning within a 2 – 10-week period prior to enrolment in formal education, especially for out-of-school children. WICs are established in close proximity to schools adopted by Oando Foundation, (Oando, 2021). Community engagement and participation ensures programme effectiveness, success and sustainability.

5.9.3 **Community Aid Connect's Digital (Radio) Literacy Programme**

Programme implementation monitoring by local councils and leaders is the trademark of community engagement and participation in Community Aid Connect's radio programme. This open schooling initiative is implemented by Text Foundation in collaboration with the National Commission for Mass Literacy and State Agency for Mass Education (SAMEs), in 177 Local Government Areas (LGAs) in 7 States in North-Western Nigeria including Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Jigawa, Sokoto, and Zamfara. By integrating complementary community-driven monitoring, the programme ensures that foundational literacy and numeracy is provided in over 700 learning centers. The community dialogue sessions held in each of the 7 focus States has culminated in the establishment of a viable network of local actors and community members whose commitment has ensured the enrolment of not less than 30,203 learners in the literacy programme, (Community Aid, 2025).

5.7.4 **Slum2School Virtual Learning Classroom**

The Slum2School initiative, founded on volunteerism, engages community resources in operating what is said to be 'Africa's first virtual classroom', providing access to education for children in slums, marginalized and underserved communities. The success recorded by slum2school in 554 communities is driven by intense advocacy, youth, parents and community engagement. Slum2school's operations focus on advocating and mobilizing communities 'to find the best sustainable solution to provide education for children and young people' (Slum2school, 2025). In close partnership with communities, the initiative provides learning centres while designing and implementing impact-oriented programmes like scholarships, teachers, school and community support in line with the needs of the host communities. Through this initiative 675,592 leaners, 133 schools and 554 communities have been impacted.

The aforementioned case studies highlight the enormous contributions of parents and communities to the effectiveness of open schooling operations and point to the need to accord grassroot stakeholders greater recognition and increased opportunity to play more significant roles in instituting enduring alternative learning platforms and processes especially in underserved communities. The cited initiatives' emphasis on local advocacy, mobilization of community resources, setting up community leadership-driven monitoring processes and sustainable support, among others, aptly demonstrate the enormous inputs that parents and communities bring to the open schooling space and assures that the approach will continue to thrive if open schooling stakeholders recognize and effectively deploy parents and community inputs in enhancing educational access and quality in Nigeria.

6.0 **Discussion**

Findings from the study affirmed that grassroots actors, especially parents and communities can play critical roles in fostering effective practices and communities of learning through the open schooling

model. The engagement and participation of non-state actors which often prioritize local resourcing for infrastructural provisions, integration of indigenous knowledge and skills, inclusivity, partnership with other stakeholders and mobilization of potential beneficiaries into the open schooling space, are known to encourage effectiveness, sustainability and long-term impact.

Parental and community participation, particularly in areas where socio-cultural practices inhibit access to education, serves as a first line of advocacy for priority attention to education and provides motivation for increased enlistment of community members.

As evidenced by the responses, community engagement and participation lead to improved services especially if community stakeholders are given ample opportunity to handle and take ownership of essential processes in the initiative. This finding aligns with those of previous studies including that of Rose (2003), cited in Ahmad & Said, (2013) which maintain among others that community participation in educational activities in developing countries improves access and ensures sustainability. The study affirms that continuous commitment of parents and community leaders is pivotal to the effectiveness and institutionalization of open schooling practices. As observed by Russel (2009, pg.36), learning institutions develop better infrastructure, teachers are often present, and the education provided is of greater relevance through the process of enhanced community participation.

Findings from the study support the assertion by UBEC (2022) that grassroot structures like the Center Based Management Committees (CBMCs) can leverage community resources and competencies in enhancing the effectiveness of open schooling initiatives within the context of Nigeria's education space.

Importantly, by making substantial financial contributions, parents and communities readily complement government and other funding sources for open schooling.

These findings affirm the significance of parental and community engagement and participation in open schooling processes and its potential for improved learning outcomes. Nonetheless, the study identifies notable gaps, drawing attention to the need for improved stakeholder collaborating in ensuring improved mechanisms and resources for effective open schooling practices. Through such efforts non-state actors' engagement and participation will become more effective, providing opportunity for addressing challenges like inadequate infrastructure and negative socio-cultural norms, etc., that hinder participation. Nonetheless, the study acknowledged parental and communal roles in mobilizing resources, mediating hinderances and facilitating effective open schooling practices in various domains.

7.0 **Recommendations**

Arising from the above, the study recommends deliberate parental and community engagement as well as participation in planning and implementing open schooling activities focusing on:

i. Targeted Advocacy: To under-served communities towards highlighting the viability of open schooling as a suitable alternative to formal regular learning.
ii. Sustainable support: Setting up mechanisms for continuous multi-facetted support for open schooling targeting infrastructure, teaching, digital integration and skill acquisition, especially in rural areas.
iii. Policy reform to integrate community roles: Integrating parental and community roles into open schooling policy.
iv. Instituting an open schooling fund within national and sub-national education financing structure.
v. Integrated capacity building opportunities for open schooling practitioners: Inclusion of non-state actors, NGOs, parents' organizations, CBMCs, and local agencies in government sponsored capacity building
vi. Improving community-based partnerships for open schooling: Encouraging inter and intra communal partnership towards instituting effective open schooling practices.
vii. Deepening data-driven decision making processes and digital penetration in open schooling: Encouraging increased deployment of data-driven strategies to monitor and track community participation, ownership as well as use of digital infrastructure for open schooling.
viii. Identifying and harnessing community potentials in open schooling: Ensuring that parents and

communities identify their indigenous potentials and competitive advantages and deploy same in supporting open schooling.

7.0 Conclusion

This paper emphasizes that inclusive, parental and community-led support for open schooling initiatives are vital for expanding access to education especially targeting out-of-school and marginalized children in Nigeria. The results from the study and evidence from case studies like that of ACE Foundation and Slum2school, etc., demonstrate that strong parental involvement, local leadership and partnerships with public and private actors can significantly enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of open schooling. In view of the need to complement regular education programmes, the need arises for a shift in open schooling proprietors', stakeholders and public perception of the role of parents and community towards ensuring their deliberate integration into open schooling planning and implementation. Improved advocacy, embedding community inputs and resources into national open schooling plans, targeted digital integration, improving local partnerships, among others, are among the recommendations for ensuring long-term impact in this regard. With sustainable parents as well as community engagement and participation, open schooling practices can thrive and serve as a critical response to the need to bridge educational gaps and address the out-of-school challenge in Nigeria.

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