

FREE AND COMPULSORY BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAM AND OUT OF SCHOOL CHILDREN: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD IN KANO STATE, NIGERIA

¹ABDULKADIR SANI, PHD ²ZAINAB AHMAD HABIB

¹Department of Educational Foundations, Sa'adatu Rimi College of Education, Kumbotso Kano

²Gwale Local Education Authority, Kano State,

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore free and compulsory Basic Education Program and Out of School Children trends in Kano State; Issues, Challenges and the Way Forward. Literature on Universal Basic Education, objectives of UBE, out of school children, and the Kano State efforts of universalizing efficient and equitable access to quality basic education were synoptically reviewed. The paper viewed out of school children from broader perspectives which incorporates children who do not have access to education completely or have the access but never enrolled in schools; those who drop out without attaining the prescribed level of basic education; those who are not meeting the learning standard; and those who cannot transit to Upper Basic School or transit and drop out. It is based on this, the finding from the literature survey revealed that poor quality education, inadequate educational facilities, inadequate teaching staff /poor quality of teaching staff, insecurity, poor monitoring/evaluation and noncompliance with the Right of a child to Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education as contained in the UBE Act as the major challenges to universalization of efficient and equitable access to quality Basic Education. Even the children fortunate to be enrolled in school, the quality of education remains a serious concern. It is based on this, the paper concluded that despite the Kano State Government's efforts of universalizing efficient and equitable access to free and compulsory basic education to all school age children as contained in the UBE Act, the number of out of school children has been increasing to the extent that the State has the highest number of out of school children.

Key words: Universal basic education, out of school children, universal basic education act

Introduction

The aims and objectives of Universal Basic Education Program as introduced by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1999 is to provide efficient and equitable access to quality basic education to all citizens, irrespective of gender, social, physical or economic condition. It is in recognition of this fact that, the FRN (2014), stated that the primary goals of UBE Program are to universalize access to basic education, engender a conducive learning environment and eradicate illiteracy in Nigeria within the shortest possible time. Many declarations, treaties, charters, conventions and even constitutional provisions have always been emphasizing that, it is the obligation of every government to educate its people, because, it is their inalienable and fundamental human right to be provided with sound, qualitative and functional education. For instance, Article 26 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Right (United Nations, 1948), the European Convention on Human Rights, Protocol 1 (1952), the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the African Child (1990) etc., stressed on the right to education.

In Nigeria, the right to education is also enshrined in various legal frameworks, including the 1999 Constitution. Section 18(3) of the 1999 Constitution as amended. This constitution states that: Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy and to this end Government shall as and when practicable provide: free, compulsory and universal primary education; free secondary education; free university education; and free adult literacy program. Furthermore, successive Nigerian Governments at all levels have formulated policies and enacted laws for the purpose of providing basic education. Recently, the Kano State Government declared State of Emergency on Education. Despite all these declarations, legal frameworks and policies, the number of out of school children has been increasing as stated by Rufa'i (2019), that, there exists serious challenges to access to quality Basic Education to the extent that Nigeria is estimated to have the highest number of out of school children in the world. According to the World Bank, Nigeria in 2020 had more than 11 million out of school children between the age of 6 and 15.

The figure represents 1 in 12 of out of school children globally and 22% of all children in the age group in Nigeria. As of October, 2022, almost 2 years later, about 20 million children are out of school in Nigeria as reported by United Nations Educational, Scientific and cultural Organization (UNESCO) in its latest global data (Abdulsemiu, 2022). The figure is far reaching increase from more than 11 million children reported by World Bank in 2020. With reference to Kano State, nearly one million children are currently out of school (Musa, 2025). This is an indication that the objective of universalizing access to quality basic education to all Nigerian children is defeated. It is against this background, this paper sought to explore Free and Compulsory Basic Education Program and Out of School Children Trends in Kano State; Issues, Challenges and the Way Forward.

Universal Basic Education

The definition of Basic education previously known as Primary Education have been provided by many scholars and Policy Document. Basic Education, according to Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN 2014), is the type of education given at the foundational level of education. It comprises the early childhood and pre-primary education, primary education, the first three years of junior secondary education and basic functional literacy for out of school children, youth and adults. It is an organized multi-sectional, community-based education, which consists of the acquisition of skills of reasoning, writing and numerals, as well as functional knowledge and generative skills determined by the environment. Mgbodile (2010) described basic education as the education for sustainable life-long learning which provides basic skills for reading, writing and numeracy. He further explained that basic education comprises of a wide variety of formal and non-formal educational activities and program designed to enable learners acquire functional literacy. Universal Basic Education means that access to education is open to all, irrespective of gender, social, physical or economic condition. Access is not all, remaining in school for successful completion of quality basic education cycle is the ultimate goal (Sani, Maimota & Lawal, 2023).

According to Oboegbulem (2011), Universal Basic Education is the foundation for the sustainable lifelong learning. It comprises of wide variety of formal and non-formal educational activities and programs defined to enable learners acquire functional literacy. The concept UBE is the foundation for sustainable lifelong learning which aims at providing reading, writing and numeracy skills to every Nigerian child (Sani, Maimota & Lawal, 2023). The UBE, as provided by National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014) is an educational reform that provides free, compulsory and continues 9-year education in two levels of 6 years of Primary Education and 3 years of Junior Secondary Education for all school aged children. Redefining the Policy, the current National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014), explained that Basic Education is the

education given to children aged between 0-15 years. It is 10 years program which encompasses Early Child Care Development Education of 1 year and 9 years of formal schooling. Based on this provision, the duration of the program, is now 10 years, not 9 years as provided by the former National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004). In an attempt to shed more light on Universal Basic Education, Adewole (2017), posited that the concept has three main components-Universal, Basic and Education. Being 'Universal' connotes a program that is meant for all facets of the society whether rich, poor, physically fit, disabled, brilliant, dull, regular, dropouts and every other individual that is ready to acquire knowledge.

While 'Basic' relates to the base, take off point, fundamental, essential, spring board, bottom line and generally the starting point in the acquisition of knowledge. These indicate that the Universal Basic Education is the foundation upon which higher education is built. It is mandatory for all citizens to function effectively in the society. He further explained that "Education" entails the transmission of knowledge. In the UBE program, it is expected that knowledge be transmitted to learners in its simplistic form. Education is the medium by which learners are guided towards development of abilities, attitudes, skills and values that are useful to the individual and the society at large. Asodike (2014), stated that UBE Policy was structured to be basically compulsory to all children who will be provided with free uniforms, books and free lunch.

The Main Objectives of the UBE Program

The FRN (2014), stated that the primary goal of UBE Program is to universalize access to basic education, engender a conducive learning environment and eradicate illiteracy in Nigeria within the shortest possible time. The Universal Basic Education aims at achieving the following specific objectives:

1. Develop in the entire citizenry a strong consciousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotion.
2. Provide free, compulsory, universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school age group.
3. Reduce drastically, drop outrage from the formal school system through improved relevance and efficiency.
4. Cater for drop outs and out of school children/adolescent through various forms of complementary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education.
5. Ensure the acquisition of the appropriate levels of literacy, manipulative and life skills (as well as the ethical moral and civic values needed for laying the foundation for lifelong learning

Out of School Children

The concept of out of school children has always been difficult and a bit complex to define, that is why different sources of data and methodologies are employed to conceptualize it (UNESCO, 2015). UNICEF (2015), viewed the concept from two perspectives; presently out of school and at risk of being out of school. The Presently out of school Children refers to children who are in primary and lower school ages but are not enrolled in either primary or lower secondary schools for more than a year. This definition covers those who are in the range of age groups, but enrolled in pre-primary school or non-formal education. Those at risk of being out of school on the other hand refers to children and adolescents who attend school but do not receive high-quality education (Kit, 2012).

This group as further expatiated by Kit incorporates adolescents in the 5th and 6th grades who are stamped as failures and who feel uncomfortable in lower secondary school due to their compiled failures. Among those children and adolescents at risk, are those who are more than two years older than their grade level, who are considered to be at serious risk; and those who are one year over age considered as at moderate risk. The National Bureau of Statistics NBS (2017), defined the out-of-school children as the number of children of primary school age who are not attending school and those attending preschool. In an attempt to conceptualize out-of-school children Sani, Maimota & Lawal, (2023), viewed the concept from broader perspective. According to Lewin out of school children include;

- a. Children who do not have access to pre-primary schools,
- b. Children who have never attended schools,
- c. Children who drop out without completing primary education,
- d. Children who attend school irregularly or with little learning,
- e. Children who cannot transit to secondary school,
- f. Children who drop out from secondary schools,
- g. Children who attend irregularly, or who do not meet learning standards.

It could be discerned from the above conceptual clarification that, out of school children can be described as the children who do not have access to education completely or have the access but never enroll in schools; those who drop out without attaining the prescribed level of basic education; those who are not meeting the learning standard; and those who cannot transit to Upper Basic School or transit and drop out from the Upper Basic School.

Kano State Government Efforts on Free and Compulsory Basic Education and the Issues of Out of School Children Trends

The federal government of Nigeria provided for the compulsory, free, universal basic education as stated in Part 1, Section 2(1) of the Compulsory, Free, Universal Basic Education Act, 2004 stipulates the obligations of government that: Every Government in Nigeria shall provide Free, Compulsory and Universal Basic Education for every child of primary and junior secondary school age. In response to this policy statement, the Kano State Government initiated many strategies aimed at providing efficient and equitable access to quality education. In addition, incentive programs such as non-payment of school fees, free uniforms and books, school feeding and integration of *Tsangaya/Makarantun Allo* (Qur'an schools) into UBE Program were introduced. Despite these initiatives and incentives, the number of out of school children has been increasing. Infact, the State has the highest number of out of school children in the country and the entire West African region. The number of school age children who are out of school as reported by Kano State Ministry of Planning and Budget (MPB, 2020), stood at 1,496,736. The trend was compounded due to lack of alternative pathways to access to functional literacy and numeracy for children who missed out initial enrollment in primary education.

Multiple data sources from the National Bureau of Statistics and other international bodies, like UNICEF, showed that the number of out-of-school children in Kano State, grew from 990,000 reported in 2018 to 1.89 million children in 2022 (Ogunyale, 2024). Scholars, educational managers and practitioners as well as educational stakeholders have extensively examined the factors responsible for low access, enrolment, retention and completion rates as well as the out

of school trend in Nigeria (Kano State inclusive). These factors as identified by UNICEF (2018), include socio-cultural factors that affect willingness and ability of parents and the society, based on their perception of the importance and value of education, to enroll their children in school, and sustain their support until the children successfully complete their education.

Some of these socio-cultural factors as further highlighted by UNICEF consist of early marriage, child being too young to attend school, wrong perception of Western education, large family size, and peer pressure. Economic factors which are concern with the socio-economic needs of the children and their families are other factors contributing to low access, enrolment, retention and completion rates. These economic factors are; poverty, residence or location, child labor, pursuit for material wealth by youth, and limited employment opportunities for school leavers (Oyekan, Ayorinde & Adenuga 2023). Other factors include inadequate teachers, security challenges, inadequate school infrastructure, weak or no protection for vulnerable children, and lack of government commitment (Ogunode & Adanna, 2022).

Challenges to the Effective Realization of UBE Program in Kano State

Many factors have been identified as challenges to the effective realization of UBE Program in Kano State. The essence of education at any level is to help individuals develop their potentialities in life. This can only be achieved if such individuals have access to good quality education. Good quality education is that education that is relevant and adapted to the need of the society. Very unfortunately, many Students of Basic Education Schools do not meet learning standards, as the World Bank reported that Nigeria is experiencing learning poverty in which 70% of 10-year-old cannot understand a simple sentence or perform basic numeracy tasks (Sani, Maimota & Lawal, 2023). This is a serious challenge, because the aim of providing reading, writing and numeracy skills to every Nigerian child as contained in the policy is not achieved, leading to the increase in the number of children who are at risk of being out of school.

Another challenge to the effective realization of UBE Program in Kano State is poor motivation of teachers. For the effective realization of UBE aim of providing basic skills for reading, writing and numeracy, teachers need to be motivated. But teachers are not adequately motivated. According to Margaret and Abigail (2019), UBE teachers are not adequately empowered as they seem not to keep in pace with technological changes and operate under very pathetic conditions such as; inadequate salaries, overcrowded classrooms, lack of promotion and increment, obsolete materials for teaching/learning and others. There is no doubt that the morale of our teachers is generally low. The teaching profession and teachers themselves are generally relegated to the background in terms of their salaries, condition of service and welfare by government and other owners of schools, and this goes a long way to affect their productivity (Sani, Ibrahim & Baffa, 2019). This will seriously affect the universalization of efficient and equitable access to quality Basic Education in the State.

Inadequate school facilities is another challenge to the effective realization of UBE Program in Kano State. School facilities play a significant role in effective teaching and learning, because the quality of education delivered by teachers and the academic achievement of students in any school is dependent on several factors of which school facilities are paramount. The availability and adequacy of facilities is necessary for the implementation of UBE Program (Asodike, 2014). The inadequacy of infrastructures will affect the quality of basic education and the subsequent realization of UBE Program. For quality teaching and learning, the class size must be small for effective students/teacher interaction. Unfortunately, class rooms in Nigerian Basic Schools are overcrowded. The teacher-student ratio in the UBE Policy is put

at 1:40. Obviously this is not obtainable in most UBE schools (Sani, Ibrahim & Baffa, 2019). Kano State Ministry for Planning and Budget (2021), reported that, many schools in Kano State, still face the challenges of inadequate infrastructure such as usable classrooms and toilets, desks and chairs, among others.

The pupil-usable classroom ratio was 1:108 in primary schools, and 1:58 in junior secondary schools. Also, 53% of primary schools have no source of water and on the average, 282 pupils share a toilet in primary schools (MoPB, 2021). Inadequate educational facilities will seriously affect the leaning of the children, because, even the children fortunate to be enrolled in school, the quality of education remains a serious concern. Therefore, mere enrolment is not the main goal, but attaining the prescribed learning out come as aptly pointed by Obanya (2009), that access is not all, remaining in school for successful completion of quality basic education cycle is the ultimate goal.

Inadequate teaching staff /poor quality of teaching staff is another challenge to the effective realization of UBE Program in Kano State. Most of the Basic Schools are understaffed. Apart from shortages of teachers, many unqualified teachers are employed to teach because it is the only profession that everybody can be engaged regardless of his suitability. Professionally trained and academically qualified teachers are the hub of any educational system, because they determine the quality of education by transmitting educational policies into practice and action. Without adequate number of inspiring, well-informed teachers, fully prepared to meet their responsibilities in our basic schools, we cannot have quality education. Good teachers are needed for good education which in turn is indispensable for social change, social transformation and national development (Sani, Maimota & Lawal, 2023). Despite the importance of qualified teachers in the attainment of Universal Basic Education, schools in Kano State are short of teachers who could adequately handle teaching and learning activities. Poor monitoring/evaluation is another challenge to the effective realization of UBE Program in Kano State. For the UBE Program to be successful, there must be monitoring and evaluation. The purpose of monitoring/evaluation of any program is to find answers to such questions as: What did the program set out to achieve? Has the program been implemented as planned? What steps/factors in the program have either helped or hindered the achievement of the objective? What next should be done to keep the program on track? It is only through effective monitoring/evaluation, that one can analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of an educational program and such monitoring/evaluation is often not done. Some of the challenges that hinder effective supervision and monitoring of the UBE and subsequently lead to the proliferation of out of school in Kano State include: Inadequate qualified monitoring officers, inadequate office accommodation, inadequate funds, transport, equipment and time factor (Sani, Maimota & Lawal, 2023).

Insecurity is another factor contributing to the trends of out of school children. Insecurity manifested in insurgency, terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, and communal conflicts that disrupt educational activities and endanger learners and teachers (Babalola & Ofoegbu, 2021). Safe school initiative was launched in 2014 as a response to the abduction of Chibok girls (Alex, 2016). The initiative was an attempt to address the spike of kidnapping in Nigeria. One of the main measures in the initiative was building fence around schools. After Chibok girls episode, authorities in Kano, Zamfara and Katsina States in North West; Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States in the North East and Niger State in the North Central, have at different times ordered for the closure of schools because of insecurity. All these states have a relatively high rate of out of school children (Alex, 2016). Though, Kano State is relatively secured the number of people migrating from insecurity affected States to Kano triggered the number of out of school children.

Noncompliance with the Right of a child to Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education as contained in the Act is another challenge to UBE Program driving the trend of out of school children in Kano State. The Act categorically stated the responsibilities of the parents. Part 1, Section 2(2) of the Compulsory, Free, Universal Basic Education Act, 2004, has it that:

Every parent shall ensure that his child or ward attends and completes:

- a. Primary school; and
- b. Junior secondary school education by endeavoring to send the child to primary and junior secondary schools.

The Act also stipulated punitive measures aimed at keeping them in check to comply. There have been a provision for prosecuting and fining parents who refuse to enroll their children in school. According to Part 1, Section 4 of the same Act: A parent who contravenes section 2(2) of this Act commits an offence and is liable:

- a. On first conviction, to be reprimanded;
- b. On second conviction, to a fine of N2, 000.00 or imprisonment for a term of 1 month or to both; and
- c. On subsequent conviction, to a fine of N5,000.00 or imprisonment for a term of 2 months or to both.

The stakeholders and the regulatory agencies who are responsible for ensuring the compliance may not have really done their part of ensuring that the parents comply with the Act. This is because, there was no case found on prosecuting, fining or imprisoning the violators of Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act (CFUBEA, 2004.)

Way Forward to the Challenges of Out of School Children in Kano State

Addressing the challenges of out of school children in Kano State needs a multifaceted strategy. Below are some of the strategies to consider:

1. **Collection and Generation of Accurate and Reliable Data:** For the realization of UBE Program's aims and objective of providing efficient and equitable access to quality education in the State, accurate and reliable data need to be collected. The government should identify and register all out of school children to determine the exact number and locations for evidence-based planning and budgeting for Basic Education.
2. **Capacity building and Empowerment of Teachers:** The demand of the changing world requires the UBE teachers keep pace with fast technological changes. For this to be achieved effectively, the teachers need to be trained and retrained regularly so that the content, method and instructional materials may not turn obsolesces. Moreover, teachers' welfare should be a priority towards effective realization of UBE Program.
3. **Enlightenment and Sensitization:** Parents should be made to understand the significance of enrolling their children in school and the legal implications of not sending their children to school
4. **Adequate Provision, effective Utilization and Regular Maintenance of School Facilities:** There should be adequate provision and effective utilization of school facilities, while worn out facilities/structures should be fixed or replaced in order to avoid inadequacies in terms of infrastructural provisions.

Conclusion

It could be concluded from the above, that, despite the Kano State Government's efforts of universalizing efficient and equitable access to Free and Compulsory Basic Education to all school age children as contained in the UBE Act, the number of out of school children has been increasing to the extent that the State has the highest number of out of school children.

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