

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AS A STRATEGY FOR WIDENING GIRLS' ACCESS TO SECONDARY EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN SOUTH-SOUTH NIGERIA

BY

**Amaewhule, Eliphaletphebe Chinyere:
Department of Educational Management,
Faculty of Education, Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria**

Abstract

This paper investigated inclusive education as a strategy for widening girls' access to secondary education with implications for gender equality in South-South Nigeria. Three research questions and three hypotheses were answered and tested in the study. Design adopted for the study was descriptive survey while the population of the study was 7,662 respondents comprising 286 principals and 7376 teachers while 380 respondents consisting of 13 principals and 367 teachers were sampled for the study using stratified random sampling technique. Instrument used for data gathering was a 15-item questionnaire titled "Inclusive Education for Gender Equality Questionnaire" (IEGEQ) which was face and content validated by two experts in Measurement and Evaluation at Rivers State University. Cronbach alpha was used for determining the reliability of the questionnaire with an index of 0.90. There were 380 copies of questionnaire administered out of which 355 copies representing 93.4% were retrieved. Research questions raised were answered using mean and standard deviation while the hypotheses were tested using z-test at 0.05 level of significance. The result of the study showed that financial cost, attitude of educational stakeholders and lack of gender friendly resources are factors limiting girl child education. It was also revealed that achieving gender equality will require stakeholders' participation, shared educational vision among others. It was recommended that government need to put in place punitive measures that will criminalise failing to educate the girl child.

Keywords: *Girls, Secondary education, Gender equality, Nigeria*

Introduction

The need for education as a social service required for achieving sustainable growth and development as well as raising of informed citizens who are reasonable and responsible has informed the introduction of several educational programmes and policies needed to set the nation on the path of progress. Some of the efforts that have been made by the government is the introduction of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) in 1999 which was targeted as increasing enrollment rate while reducing the number of out of school children. Despite these efforts, a large number of children still remain out of school. Abubakar (2023) pointed out that around the world, compared to boys and men, fewer girls and women have access to education while out of 100 million children, 60 million were girls who did not have access to primary and secondary education. Similarly, of the 90 million illiterate adults, two thirds were female. Similarly, in Nigeria, more females than males are out of school from the total of over 10 million out of school children. Similarly, in the South-South region, Oshie et al., (2017) gave account of the state of education in Calabar in 2017 and pointed out that in the Northern Senatorial District of Cross River state Nigeria 70% of women and girls were marginalized, uneducated and relegated to the background due to poverty, traditional norms, ignorance and so on. This development calls for a more inclusive strategy to close the widening gap of out of school children which is against the girl child.

Attaining educational inclusion has been a major discourse among educational stakeholders for several years given the disparities that exists in terms of access to education across different levels. Secondary education particularly is essential for the advancement of any society (Amaewhule, Obikoya & Okeowhor, 2020) and as such no child should be left out so as to equip every child with some level of knowledge to be a responsible member of the society. Hornby (2015) pointed out that inclusive education is one which the mainstream

school is organized and developed to assist in educating as many children as possible through the provision of necessary resources for implementing effective education that meets the need of those who have to be educated. Inclusive education is essential to bridge the divide between those who are in and outside the school environment as well as ensuring that those in the school system are not deprived the privilege of meaningful learning. The high rate of out of school girls in Nigeria and particularly in the South-South requires a change of strategy through the introduction of inclusive educational approaches that will help ensure a balance in access and benefits from formal education as well as allowing the girl child like the boy child to maximize their abilities.

There is no doubt that there are several factors that have resulted to the widening number of out of school girls especially at the basic and secondary levels of education. Similarly, factors responsible for this gap differ from one region to another. However, among the common determinants is the cost of education which is often expensive for parents to pay. Researchers have pointed out that most times, if parents can't afford the cost of education, they would rather send the boy child to school than the girl child (Rodriguez, 2019). This is based on the assertion that the cost of sending the girl child to school may be more expensive when the cost of transportation, health care and other sanitary needs are factored into the fees that are charged. This makes parents especially in the low-income class to send the boy child to school than the girl child. Similarly, other factors such as the problem of discrimination, early marriage, also affect girls access to education at all levels.

Bridging the access gap between the boy and girl child require specific inclusive education strategies across all schools. Emphasis has also been placed on the need to make the girl child more responsible in the process of acquiring formal education through mentoring and provision of quotas for the girl child that needs to be filled by them. On the other hand, Lawal and Isah, (2022) added that in order to achieve inclusive education in schools in Nigeria, attention needs to be paid to making the learning environment conducive for the girl child, providing enough equipment and training teachers on how to handle issues of discrimination and deprivation especially those that are against the education of the girl child. However, identified challenges to achieving equity in the education of the boy and girl child must be identified and dealt with. Hull as cited in Odebiyi (2016), pointed out the issue of lack of qualified teachers, inadequate support services for the girl child, inadequate materials, inadequate personnel and training programmes, lack of funding as well as absence of enabling legislation. All of these factors pose a threat to achieving equity in the education of the girl child through the introduction of inclusive education strategies.

Achieving equitable education across all levels of education both in the South-South and across the entire nation is essential for the sake of the social and economic benefits that it provides. These benefits include the increase in the number of skilled manpower, achieving law and order among others. Adding to this reasons, Bursuc (2013) stated that such equitable education prepares girls and boys equally to be productive and empowered citizens. Similarly, the idea behind gender equality is to ensure that boys and girls maximize their potentials and contribute equally to the advancement of the nation. This will however require the cooperation of all relevant educational stakeholders.

Several empirical studies have been carried out to examine how to improve on the educational opportunities of the girl child. Suleman et al., (2015) conducted a study on exploring factors affecting girls' education at secondary level at Karak District of Pakistan. Two research questions were formulated to guide the study. The population of the study consisted of all female secondary school administrators, teachers, and students in Karak District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan. Thirty girls' secondary schools in Karak District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa of Pakistan were chosen for the study. The sample size was made up of 30 school administrators, 120 teachers, and 480 students who were chosen at random. A questionnaire with a 0.82 Cronbach's Alpha reliability index was used to collect the study's data. Chi-square and percentage were used to analyze the data that was gathered. It was discovered that poor attendance by teachers, unfeasible school structures, parents with low incomes, a lack of basic amenities, early marriage, a lack of parental involvement, unfavorable attitudes toward girls' education, and illiteracy among students were all factors that hindered the education of the girl child.

Abubakar (2023) on the other hand investigated the factors influencing girl-child education in Yobe State, Nigeria. Five research questions were formulated to guide the study. The population of the study consisted of all the female principals, teachers, and secondary school students employed by and enrolled in eight chosen Local Governments in Yobe State, while eight principals, 66 teachers, and 476 students were chosen as samples using a straightforward random sampling technique. Data were gathered using a self-developed semi-structured questionnaire. Chi-square and percentages were used to analyze the data. The lack of parental attention, early marriage, poor financial standing of the parents, a lack of basic facilities, tardiness of teachers, impossibility of school buildings, lack of competent teachers, a lack of basic facilities for teachers, and illiteracy of the parents were among the factors that were found to have an impact on girls' education.

Ileri et al., (2020) investigated policy strategies for effective implementation of inclusive education in Kenya. The sample comprised 151 respondents. The information was gathered using questionnaires to get the opinions of 100 teachers who work with students with disabilities, interviews with 11 students with disabilities about their personal experiences with physical barriers, and five focus groups with students who are not disabled but are enrolled in the same class as students with disabilities. The hypotheses were put to the test using ANOVA and the t-test. Similar to this, linear regression was used to verify that the variables' linear relationships existed. The study found that despite numerous difficulties, school strategies were not based on removing physical obstacles that prevented the implementation of inclusive education. Due to this, students with disabilities must make accommodations in order to receive the necessary education or risk dropping out. The study therefore came to the conclusion that ineffective educational practices contributed to a lack of overcoming physical barriers and this negatively impacted the implementation of inclusive education in schools.

In a related manner, Guthridge et al., (2022) carried out a study on promoting gender equality using a systematic review of interventions. After screening and using 7,832 citations found through PsycINFO, ProQuest, Scopus searches, reference lists, and professional recommendations, seventy-eight papers reporting qualitative (n=36), quantitative (n=23), and multi-methods (n=19) research projects met the eligibility criteria for the review. Results were compiled narratively. The most frequently reported change (n=39) was improved gender inclusion, particularly for media and educational interventions. 50 percent of the interventions that tracked social change in gender equality had negative results. The majority of gender mainstreaming interventions only partially improved outcomes, raising concerns about their practical effectiveness. 28 interventions used education and awareness-raising techniques, most of which had only marginally positive effects. The overall research quality ranged from low to moderate, and the major conclusions cast doubt on the effectiveness of past interventions.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to investigate inclusive education as a strategy for widening girls' access to secondary education

with implications for gender equality in South-South Nigeria. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify the factors limiting girls' access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria
2. Describe the inclusive education strategies for widening girls access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria
3. Determine the strategies for achieving gender equality in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. What are the factors limiting girls' access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria?
2. What are the inclusive education strategies for widening girls access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria?
3. What are the strategies for achieving gender equality in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the factors limiting girls' access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria
2. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the inclusive education strategies for widening girls access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria
3. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the strategies for achieving gender equality in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria

Methodology

The design adopted for the study was descriptive survey design as emphasis was on investigating an ongoing phenomenon. The population of the study was 7,662 respondents comprising 286 principals and 7376 teachers out of which 380 respondents consisting of 13 principals and 367 teachers were sampled for the study using stratified random sampling technique. The population of the study was determined through the selection of public senior secondary schools in the State Capital of three randomly States in South-South Nigeria (Rivers, Bayelsa and Akwa Ibom State) as well as the secondary schools in one randomly selected rural local government area in these States. The instrument used for data collection was a 15-item questionnaire named "Inclusive Education for Gender Equality Questionnaire" (IEGEQ). The questionnaire was structured to be responded to on a four-point modified Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) with weighted values of 4, 3, 2 and 1. These weights were aggregated and divided by 4 to arrive at a criterion mean score of 2.50 used for decision making. The questionnaire was face and content validated by two experts in Measurement and Evaluation at Rivers State University. Cronbach alpha was used for determining the reliability of the questionnaire with an index of 0.90. Out of the 380 questionnaires administered, 355 copies (13 principals and 342 teachers) representing 93.4% were retrieved. The research questions raised were answered using mean and standard deviation while the hypotheses were tested using z-test at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Answer to Research Questions

Research Question One: What are the factors limiting girls' access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria?

Table 1

Mean and standard deviation scores on the factors limiting girls' access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria

N	Items	Principals n=13		Teachers n=342		
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Decision
				\bar{X}_1	\bar{X}_2	
1	The financial cost of educating the girl child is enormous	2.85	0.77	2.87	0.81	2.86 Agreed
2	There are cases of stigmatization against the girl child	2.40	0.99	2.41	0.93	2.41 Disagreed
3	Early marriage can lead to girls dropping out of school	2.45	0.97	2.45	0.91	2.45 Disagreed
4	Inadequacy of gender friendly learning resources	2.80	0.79	2.90	0.79	2.85 Agreed
5	Attitude of various educational stakeholders towards girl child education	2.82	0.78	2.94	0.77	2.88 Agreed
Grand Mean and Standard Deviation		2.66	0.86	2.71	0.84	2.69 Agreed

Table 1 shows that the principals responded to items 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 with mean scores of 2.85, 2.40, 2.45, 2.80 and 2.82 while the teachers responded to the same set of items with mean scores of 2.87, 2.41, 2.45, 2.90 and 2.94. In the table above, all of the items with mean values above 2.50 were agreed while the rest mean scores below 2.50 were disagreed. Basically, the respondents agreed that financial cost, inadequacy of

gender friendly learning resources and attitude of educational stakeholders were factors limiting girls' access to education while early marriage and stigmatization were not. This was supported by the grand mean scores of 2.66 and 2.71 from the principals and teachers as well as the mean set score of 2.69 which indicated that averagely, the respondents agreed on the items listed as the factors limiting girls' access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria.

Research Question Two: What are the inclusive education strategies for widening girls access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria?

Table 2

Mean and standard deviation scores on the inclusive education strategies for widening girls access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria

S/No	Items	Principals n=13		Teachers n=342		Mean Set X $\bar{}$	Decision
		Mean X $\bar{}$ ₁	SD	Mean X $\bar{}$ ₂	SD		
6	Making the girl child more responsible by providing them educational quota	2.87	0.76	2.90	0.80	2.89	Agreed
7	Providing free education for the girl child to higher education level	2.85	0.77	2.96	0.78	2.91	Agreed
8	Provision of access to a wide range of gender friendly learning resources	2.90	0.74	2.98	0.77	2.94	Agreed
9	Carrying out regular media sensitization	2.92	0.73	2.85	0.82	2.89	Agreed
10	Providing social support for girl child education	2.84	0.77	2.88	0.81	2.86	Agreed
Grand Mean and Standard Deviation		2.88	0.75	2.91	0.80	2.90	Agreed

Table 2 showed that the responses of the principals were 2.87, 2.85, 2.90, 2.92 and 2.84 to items 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 while the teachers responded to the same set of items with mean scores of 2.90, 2.96, 2.98, 2.85 and 2.88. All of the items had mean scores above the criterion mean score of 2.50 used for decision making and this implied that all the items were agreed. However, item 8 had the highest mean set score implying that access to learning resource was the major strategy for inclusive education that will grant the girl child access to education. The grand mean score of 2.88 from the principals and 2.91 from the teachers as well as the average mean set score of 2.90 all indicated that the respondents averagely agreed on the items listed as the inclusive education strategies for widening girls access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria.

Research Question Three: What are the strategies for achieving gender equality in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria?

Table 3

Mean and standard deviation scores on the strategies for achieving gender equality in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria

S/No	Items	Principal n=13		Teachers n=342		Mean Set X $\bar{}$	Decision
		Mean X $\bar{}$ ₁	SD	Mean X $\bar{}$ ₂	SD		
11	Increased participation of other stakeholders	2.92	0.73	2.88	0.81	2.90	Agreed
12	Develop shared educational vision	2.90	0.74	2.99	0.76	2.95	Agreed
13	Adequate gender resources	2.86	0.76	2.87	0.81	2.87	Agreed
14	Engage gender experts in schools	2.88	0.75	2.97	0.77	2.93	Agreed

15	Gender equality should be a policy issue	2.91	0.73	3.01	0.74	2.96	Agreed
Grand Mean and Standard Deviation		2.89	0.74	2.94	0.78	2.92	Agreed

Table 3 showed that the responses of the principals to items 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 were 2.92, 2.90, 2.86, 2.88 and 2.91 while the responses of the teachers to these items were 2.88, 2.99, 2.87, 2.97 and 3.01. The principals and teachers all agreed to the items listed since the mean score of their responses were above the criterion mean score of 2.50 used for making decision. The grand mean score of 2.89 and 2.94 from the principals and teachers as well as the average mean set score of 2.92 all showed that the respondents averagely agreed on the items as the strategies for achieving gender equality in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the factors limiting girls' access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria

Table 4

Summary of z-test analysis on the difference in the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the factors limiting girls' access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria

Variable	n	Mean	SD	df	z-cal.	z-crit.	Level of Significance	Decision
Principals	13	2.66	0.86	353	0.21	1.96	0.05	Not Rejected
Teachers	342	2.71	0.84					

Table 4 indicated that the value of z-cal. was 0.21 while the value of z-crit. was 1.96 and since the value of z-cal. was less than the value of z-crit. of 1.96, the null hypothesis was not rejected indicating that there was no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the factors limiting girls' access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the inclusive education strategies for widening girls access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria

Table 5

Summary of z-test analysis on the difference in the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the inclusive education strategies for widening girls access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria

Variable	n	Mean	SD	df	z-cal.	z-crit.	Level of Significance	Decision
Principals	13	2.88	0.75	353	0.14	1.96	0.05	Not Rejected
Teachers	342	2.91	0.80					

Table 5 revealed that the value of z-cal. was 0.14 while the value of z-crit. was 1.96 and since the value of z-cal. was less than the value of z-crit. of 1.96, the null hypothesis was not rejected implying that there was no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the inclusive education strategies for widening girls access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria.

Hypothesis Three: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the strategies for achieving gender equality in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria

Table 6

Summary of z-test analysis on the difference in the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the strategies for achieving gender equality in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria

Variable	n	Mean	SD	df	z-cal.	z-crit.	Level of Significance	Decision
Principals	13	2.89	0.74	353	0.24	1.96	0.05	Not Rejected
Teachers	342	2.94	0.78					

Table 6 pointed that the value of z-cal. was 0.24 while the value of z-crit. was 1.96 and since the value of z-cal. was less than the value of z-crit. of 1.96, the null hypothesis was not rejected suggesting that there was no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the strategies for achieving gender equality in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The data collected and analyzed from the principals and teachers showed that averagely, the respondents agreed on the items listed as the factors limiting girls' access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria. It was revealed that there was no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the factors limiting girls' access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria. The finding of the study revealed that the respondents agreed that the financial cost of education, inadequacy of gender friendly learning resources as well as the attitude of other stakeholders were factors that contributed to the out of school children phenomenon. This finding agrees with the outcome of the study by Suleman et al., (2015) which discovered that poor attendance by teachers, unfeasible school structures, parents with low incomes, a lack of basic amenities, early marriage, a lack of parental involvement, unfavorable attitudes toward girls' education, and illiteracy among students were all factors that hindered the education of the girl child. This implies that the cost of sending the girl child to school may be too high for some of the parents to bear and this makes it easy for more boy child to be sent to school than the girl child. The inadequacy of learning materials that supports girl child education also limit the prospect of the girl child going to school.

Similarly, the respondents agreed that the attitude of relevant educational stakeholders also limit the educational probability of the girl child. This means that the belief system or attitude of stakeholders such as parents, government and other school personnel equally limit the prospects of the girl child attending school. However, the principals and teachers disagreed that stigmatization and early marriage are factors that limit the girls' child access to secondary education. This means that the girl child is not stigmatized and that early marriage is not a factor limiting access to secondary education for the girl child. In terms of the inclusive education strategies required for widening girls access to secondary education, the study indicated that the respondents averagely agreed on the items listed as the inclusive education strategies for widening girls access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria and that there was no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the inclusive education strategies for widening girls access to secondary education in South-South Nigeria. Similarly, study carried out by Guthridge et al., (2022) indicated that most girl child intervention programmes only have low to moderate effects and hence the need for more robust interventions. The respondents were of the opinion that girls need to be made more responsible by allocating education quota to them which they need to fill as an indication of their commitment to being educated. This outcome aligns with the result of the study by Ireri et al., (2020) which indicated that identified barriers to inclusive education especially for the girl child needs to be removed for any progress to be made. The principals and teachers equally agreed that providing free education to the girl child to higher education level, access to gender friendly resources, regular media sensitization as well as providing social support for the girl child will help widen girls' access to secondary education.

It was revealed in the study that the respondents averagely agreed on the items as the strategies for achieving gender equality in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria. The study also showed that there was no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers on the strategies for achieving

gender equality in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria. The principals and teachers agreed that other stakeholders need to be involved in the agitation for girl child education. This means that more stakeholders must show commitment to the education of the girl child. It was also pointed out that there must be shared educational vision between the boy and girl child while access to gender resources, engagement of gender experts in schools and making the issue of girl child education a policy issue was also agreed by the respondents as essential in achieving gender quality in the schools. This outcome aligns with the result of the study by Abubakar (2023) which indicated that provision of resources has impact on girl child education and as such this needs to be given adequate attention.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that the principals and teachers did not differ in their opinion that there are factors limiting girls access to education and that this can be addressed through the introduction of relevant inclusive education strategies. This means that if the number of girls denied access to formal education must be reduced, efforts must be made at the implementation of relevant inclusive education programmes and this will contribute to gender quality in and outside the school environment.

Recommendations

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

1. The government needs to make laws that will provide punitive measures for failing to educate the girls child at all levels of education and location. This will compel parents and guidance to ensure that the girl child has access to quality education especially at the basic level.
2. The government needs to provide incentives for the education of the girl child such as scholarship, social support and provision of health kits that will enable them attend school and compete with their male counterparts in terms of enrollment, completion and employment after school.
3. Teachers should be trained on how to handle gender issues in the classroom such as mentoring of the girl child and how to handle discrimination issues as well as meet the educational needs of the girl child so as to encourage them to remain in school and complete any level of education that they have started.

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