

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Parents' and children's perception of the challenges of acquiring primary and post-primary education in rural communities of Rivers State

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**This study investigated parents' and children's perception of the challenges of acquiring primary and post-primary education in Tai and Etche communities of Rivers State. Qualitative data were obtained via individual interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). Parents within the age range of 16 to 45 years and children in the secondary school within the ages of 14 to 18 years participated in this study. One hundred questionnaires were administered to the adults while a focus group discussion was conducted among thirty four children. The findings revealed lack of infrastructure, lack of funds/poverty and long distance walk to school as the three major barriers to acquiring education in these communities; which could also be said to cut across several schools in Rivers State. Over 60% of the population are peasant farmers with meagre earnings and less than 8% are civil servants. About 10% of the children are fully responsible for the funding of their education while the remaining also hawk goods to support their parents' meagre earnings paying for their education. This study recommends full implementation of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) which makes education free and compulsory for all children. Philanthropic aids and governmental or non-governmental interventions would equally be needed to create enabling environments for learning and motivation for the children of these communities.**

**Key words:** Universal Basic Education, illiteracy, rural community, poverty, children, parents, perception, child labour.

## INTRODUCTION

Education is the process by which knowledge is acquired from learning when taught for the development of individual and benefit of the society (Labo-Popoola,

2009). It is about impacting skills and the acquisition of knowledge for a particular trade or profession in which appropriate methods are applied (Amzat, 2010). It is a

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fundamental human right (UNESCO, 1990) and is one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) adopted after the failure to achieve the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015 (Sachs, 2012). Consequently, education has become one of the most powerful means to reducing crime, poverty and inequality in societies (Awan et al., 2011; Machin et al., 2011). It is also used for laying the foundation for sustainable growth and development (Sterling and Huckle, 2014; Water, 2018).

Primary education is the level where attitudes and approaches to learning are developed (Lockheed and Verspoor, 1991) and it is the core of development for most societies. This level of education instills in the individual the capacity to read, write and articulate; in other words, it helps to eradicate illiteracy which is one of the strongest pre-determinant of poverty (Bhatty, 1998; Watt, 2000). Primary education is the only level of education available everywhere, both in the developed and underdeveloped countries. It has come to be known as the largest sub-sector of any educational system offering opportunities which eventually result in the transformation of societies (O'Connell and Birdsall, 2001). Contrariwise, post primary education, also known as secondary education, is the level where pupils are equipped with certain skills necessary to be self-employed or gain employment (Tilak, 2007). It also prepares them to continue to pursue academic career in higher education.

In the history of primary education in Nigeria a new era was opened in September 1976 when the then Head of State, Lt. General Olusegun Obasanjo, officially announced the Universal Primary Education (UPE) declaring basic education as every Nigerian child's right and heritage (Nwagwu, 1976). Years later, due to the failure of the UPE, the National Policy on Education (NPE) came into existence in 1997 after over four years of deliberations at various levels (Salihu and Jamil, 2015). In Section 1 Sub-Section 5 of the policy, it states that the Nigeria's philosophy of education is based on the development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen. The policy further stressed the full integration of the individual into the community and the provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels both inside and outside the formal school system (Odukoya, 2009). Once again in November 1999, under the leadership of President Olusegun Obasanjo, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Scheme was launched. This was designed to cater for a child's education from primary school to the end of the Junior Secondary School; being an expansion of the UPE duration (Labo-Popoola, 2009). It was also expected to be universal, free and compulsory (Enemuo, 2000).

Despite all these policies, illiteracy is as high as 60% in the country (Odukoya, 2009). The poor state of education in Nigeria is still an issue that should stand as top priority in the nation's current agenda. The National Development

Strategy revealed the national literacy rate at 57 and about 49% of the teaching force unqualified (Commission, 2004; Odukoya, 2009). Some of the causes of the problems are: negligence of the educational policy framework; inconsistency with the policy implementation; acute shortage of infrastructure and facilities; wide disparities in educational acquisition and educational standards; emphasis on theoretical knowledge at the expense of technical vocational and entrepreneurial education; un-reviewed school curriculum and corruption (Labo-Popoola, 2009; Moja, 2000 and Odukoya, 2009).

In Rivers State, corruption and gross mismanagement of government funds stand as major barriers to provision of primary and post primary education in the state. The human rights watch reported these in a study carried out in Etche and Khana local government areas of the state (Watch, 2007). The findings arrived at via interviews with staff of the councils, describe the barriers in greater depth (Watch, 2007). In this study, unlike the one carried out by the human rights watch, parents and children who were the beneficiaries of the education being provided were interviewed. Our specific goal was to highlight the challenges being faced by these communities and how government and private individuals can support and encourage acquisition of education in these localities and the state in general.

## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative method of investigation was used in this study. This decision was influenced by the aim of obtaining the subjective experiences of the beneficiaries of education and those of their parents. Likewise, due to the limitation of the study to get larger samples, as a result of the insecurity in Rivers State, qualitative method was utilised being a design that does not require collection of large data but which can provide adequate insight into the topic of study. Although qualitative methods were found to fit an investigation of this type because it would gather information via feelings, emotions, non-numerical and unquantifiable elements (Berg et al., 2004; Qu and Dumay, 2011), the study risked being over-subjective and over-generalised, but chances of developing theories and discovering multiple realities based on differing interpretations would be envisaged in the study.

Due to the fact that the study aimed at carrying out investigation amongst particular persons, a purposive sampling was carried out. The study therefore advanced a non-probability purposive sampling methodology (Tansey, 2007). This decision was made due to the fact that the subject being investigated is a basic and universal one and would not affect the basis of generalization as such.

### The design and sample of the study/sample audience

Qualitative data can be collected via individual interviews, focus groups, observations, action research and group interviews. In this study, individual interviews through questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were utilised. Questionnaires are individual interviews where there are conversations between two people (Qu and Dumay, 2011). It usually has a purpose though it may or may not have a structure (Qu et al., 2011). The interviewee's perspective about a topic is usually elicited. Questionnaires were therefore chosen for this study being found to

be appropriate for exploring respondent's beliefs, feelings, experiences and perspectives which was exactly what the study aimed to achieve. This method of data collection was also found to be cost and time efficient. The questionnaires utilised were semi-structured interviews, sometimes referred to as focused interviews (Merton, 2008) bearing open ended questions. Some questions had some prompts to help the interviewer probe the interviewee when going into new lines of inquiry. FGD provides opportunities for respondents to discuss about an issue within a context where they are comfortable and free to agree or disagree with each other (Finch and Lewis, 2003). It allows researchers to explore the range of opinions, ideas, inconsistencies and variations amongst participants of the study (Finch and Lewis 2003). This was utilized for the children to gather information from a number of them through an organised discussion with groups of about 8 to 9 students.

### **Samples**

The samples for this research work were gathered from parents within the age range of 16 to 45 years and the children in the secondary school within the ages of 14 to 18 years. One hundred questionnaires were administered to the adults while FGD was conducted amongst 34 children. This sample size was conveniently and purposefully selected because of the security limitation previously mentioned. The research team could only visit these communities a few occasions while being escorted by policemen to ensure there were no incidences of kidnapping. This sampling was also subscribed to in order to maximize time. During each group discussion, the researchers who were the moderators guide the course of the discussion while gathering the data by recording and jotting important information. This method was found to be very appropriate for gathering collective views about a topic from children who would be shy or uncomfortable doing an individual interview session.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

The current educational policy focusses on: providing free universal education for every Nigeria child of school age; ensuring unaltered access to 9 years of formal basic education; reducing the incidence of dropout from the formal school system; and ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulation, communication and life skills as well as the ethical, moral and civic values needful for laying a solid foundation for life-long learning (Aluede, 2006). This study investigated how the implementation of this policy and previous educational policies have alleviated the challenges of acquiring education from the point views of the parents and children in Tai and Etche communities of Rivers State.

### **Parents' perception of the challenges of acquisition of education**

In Etche, education is given a place of high value and importance. Many of the community members are willing to make efforts to ensure their children get educated. We could only get 91 respondents to complete the questionnaires used for this study. The women were

reluctant to provide information about their children's education because of cultural belief: questions about children's education are meant for their fathers. Therefore, out of 91 respondents only 14 women completed the questionnaires. Data analysis from the information gathered from the questionnaires revealed that all the respondents accepted that education is not only important but that it is also very necessary. However, the education that is supposed to be free and hence, prevent poverty as an excuse or hindrance to getting basic education is not free after all.

It was indicated by 80 of the parents that they fund their wards' education from their meagre income while 10 parents confirmed that their wards are responsible for the funding of their education. Only 1 parent signified that funding was from the government possibly in other state where UBE has been implemented. The parents explained that their children engaged in various forms of child labour such as farming, hawking, cleaning and running errands in order to get funds for their education. The funding pattern clearly is at variance to the UBE policy where education is supposed to be free. Poverty has been suggested to be associated with social/academic function of children (Ferguson et al., 2007; Levin, 1995 and Payne et al., 1999). It was suggested that by the social economic status, one could predict the score or grades of a child (Levin, 1995). It was revealed that except in rare occasions the children from the lower socioeconomic status (SES) score lower in cognitive tests such as literacy, vocabulary, and mathematics, and secondly they are more likely to drop out of school (Cuyvers et al., 2011; Ferguson et al., 2007; Levin, 1995; Payne et al., 1999).

### **Infrastructural facilities**

School infrastructures are necessary tools for making access to education easier and successful (Cuyvers et al., 2011). Provision of facilities like: classrooms, computers, sanitary facilities, science laboratories, and audio-visual resources facilitate effective teaching and learning process (Benjamin and Orodho, 2014). Previous works have attributed students' dissatisfaction, low scores and drop out tendencies to lack of infrastructure (Cuyvers et al., 2011). Table 1 shows the recommended infrastructural facilities to be provided by the government under the UBE.

It was gathered from the parents that infrastructural facilities are grossly inadequate and poorly managed at Etche. Twenty nine (29) parents indicated that their children have classrooms while the remaining 62 parents said theirs did not. No parent confirmed possession of libraries and laboratories (both Science and computer) in their children's school. This suggests that majority of the respondents admit that most of the school infrastructures were not being provided by the government, though they were government owned schools. In the absence of

**Table 1.** Functional requirement of schools of various sizes [<http://www.ubeconline.com>].

<b>No. of Streams</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
Maximum enrolment	240	480	720	960	1200	1440
Classrooms (based on "Home allocation") Number could be less where some classrooms (actual requirement)	6	12	18	24	30	36
Classrooms are merged into single streams)	6	12	18	24	30	36
Laboratory	-	1	1	1	1	2
Workshops	-	1	1	1	1	2
Library	-	-	1	1	1	2
Toilets (Note: Separate for male and female)	6	12	18	24	30	36
Head Master's/Principal's Office	1	1	1	1	1	1
Asst.Head Master's/Vice Principal's Office	-	-	1	1	1	1
General Office	-	-	-	1	1	1
Staff Room	1	1	1	1	1	1
Store	1	1	1	1	1	1
First-aid Room/Sick Bay	1	1	1	1	1	1

buildings, many students gather under trees to be taught. To alleviate infrastructural problem, the indigenes of the community themselves, led by the paramount leader in Etche - His Royal highness Eze Oporum, contributed fund for the renovation of Ndashi-Etche government secondary school (which was visited during this study) and the construction of Igbodo Etche Primary School (Figure 1).

### Impacts of previous educational policies

The impacts of previous educational policies were evaluated in this study. The prominent level of education acquired in Etche is the secondary education. Thus English language is popularly spoken in Etche and due to their keen interest in education, which is being delivered only in the English language, many of the community members try to learn the language because it is essential for further learning. This factor also helps to ensure that their children learn to speak the language as well. However, their proficiency in English is neither adequate for higher tertiary educational systems nor for competition in the global market (Figure 2). Higher forms of education are not very common in this community and most of the parents who could not get the tertiary education because of issues like lack of funds, lack of proficiency in English language, lack of family support and absence of any social security, do not want to see the same happen to their children. Yet, they, on their own, do not have the ability or enabling environment to make that happen.

### Effect of walking long distance to school

Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) specified

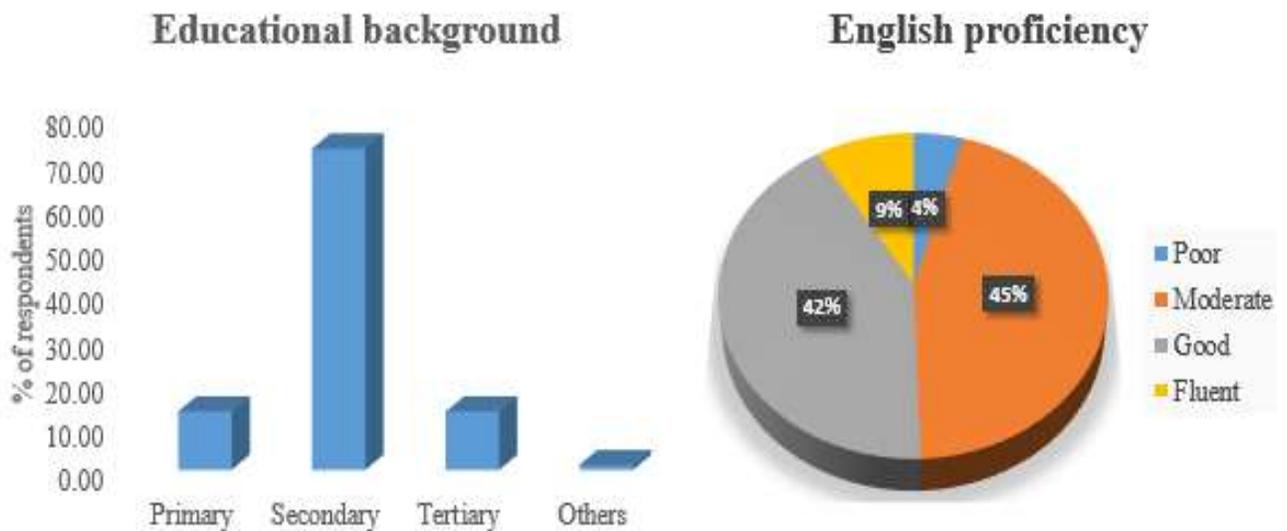
that schools are to be located in such a way that the average number of pupils does not walk more than 2 km to get to the nearest school (<http://www.ubeconline.com>). School location has effect on the learners' academic performance. This was demonstrated in a study where students who walked far distance were discovered to arrive school very tired and unprepared for their lessons, and ultimately failed their exams as a result of accumulation of this stress (Mhiliwa, 2015). This was highlighted by Okugbe (2009) in an overview of the challenges facing the UBE scheme in Delta State, Nigeria (Edho, 2009). Unfortunately, majority of the respondents in this study are victims of this predicament. Some of the children walk two and a half hours to and from school, making a total of five hours while trying to acquire education. It was discovered in this study that some of these students become inconsistent in attending school because of the stress and difficulty involved in walking so long distance daily. Despite their professed determination to get educated, the undesirable fatigue involved was not just a barrier to its accomplishment but also to the substance and quality of education attained. This therefore necessitates the need to ensure the availability of transportation for school students by construction of motor-able ways. It is also necessary that current plans to build schools should include thoughtful decisions about accessibility and distance from the places of abode of the students.

### The children's perception of the challenges of acquisition of education in Etche, River State

The children who were questioned gave responses very similar to those given by their parents but with some exceptions in their scale of prioritization. Their responses



**Figure 1.** Infrastructural facilities: (A): Igbodo-Etche community primary school built by community effort. (B) Abandoned school building overtaken by grass and bushes. (c) Laboratories also overtaken by grass and bushes. (D) Dilapidated classroom in Ndashi Government Secondary School, Etche.



**Figure 2.** Educational background and English language proficiency of respondents. Most respondents have secondary school education. This reflected in the level of communication in English with 45% of the respondents able to use the language moderately.

**Table 2.** The emerging topics from the thematic analysis of the focus group discussion.

S/N	Re-Occurring themes	Number of respondents	Most re-occurring
1	Lack of infrastructure	21	1 <sup>st</sup>
2	Poverty/Financial lack	18	2 <sup>nd</sup>
3	Hunger	12	4 <sup>th</sup>
4	Lack of teachers	3	8 <sup>th</sup>
5	Long distance walk to access school	17	3 <sup>rd</sup>
6	Lack of learning/teaching aids	3	8 <sup>th</sup>
7	Ill-treatment/exploitation by teachers	4	7 <sup>th</sup>
8	Child labour (hawking)	8	6 <sup>th</sup>
9	Lack of qualified teachers	9	5 <sup>th</sup>
10	Uncommitted teachers	3	8 <sup>th</sup>

confirmed the challenges which greatly hindered their educational pursuit within the communities of Rivers State. The emerging topics from the thematic analysis of the focus group discussion of 34 students between the ages of 14 to 18 year old are stated in Table 2.

The most re-occurring issue common to the children respondents was the lack of infrastructure both within the school and community as opposed to the parents who said it was lack of funds. The second most mentioned challenge for the students was that of poverty while the third challenge common to all the participating student respondents was the very long distance they have to cover walking from their homes trying to access their schools; this was their parents' second in priority. Those affected with this challenge admitted to attending school only 2 to 4 times a week; this of course, led to drop in school attendance.

The least mentioned educational issues within the Etche community were lack of uncommitted teachers and lack of learning and teaching aids such as study books and materials, teaching boards and learning chalks. However, this study cannot make a general conclusion as these may be issues in some other community schools but are not in Ndashi Etche and the entire Etche local government where the study was conducted.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenges of education in Rivers State are a complex combination of several causes which will require collective efforts from the government and non-governmental organisations to be addressed. This study revealed the three key problems to acquisition of primary and secondary education in these communities to be the absence of school infrastructure, lack of funds and difficulty in accessing school.

The following recommendations were deduced based on the information gathered and analysed from the parents and children of these communities:

(1) Full implementation of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) which makes education free for all children and compulsory

(2) In order to encourage continuous and sustainable educational pursuit, infrastructural problems should be solved. The community, private, government and non-government bodies must work together to ensure that necessary infrastructures are provided in all the government-owned community schools.

(3) It is of utmost necessity that the poor and disadvantaged students be encouraged both within the school and outside the school environments through interventions that would bring motivational changes, create enabling environments for learning, increase intellectual abilities as well as increase access to aids.

(4) It is very important that current plans to build schools should involve thoughtful decisions about accessibility and the distance from the potential students' place of residence.

(5) In order to solve the current problems, all the stakeholders: the government, community and non-profit sector or foreign aids should prioritize the need to make transportation available for school students by constructing motor ways and providing school vehicles to convey students to and from school.

(6) Further investigations should be made to discover ways of ensuring that children in developing communities with poorly educated parents not only aspire to attain beyond their parents' educational achievements but eventually attain them.

Again this study strongly recommends an external support system to such children in order to ensure they acquire higher forms of education like the tertiary education, which they may never be able to attain by themselves.

Finally, the attainment of primary, secondary and tertiary education in the English language is a barrier to many Nigerians who are not so proficient in English. Many poorly educated parents were desirous of attaining

higher forms of education but would first have to acquire some level of proficiency in English; meanwhile, language learning sometimes gets more challenging with advance in age and less frequent usage. Some of these parents may likely not use the English language very often in their homes and communities. This study is therefore recommending that an educational curriculum be developed with a generally accepted and well-spoken Nigerian dialect so that people can be given the opportunity to attain higher forms of education; by this such persons will be enabled to support and positively impact their children.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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