

The Promise of Education: Improving Literacy Levels in Nigerian Schools

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A cross-section of secondary students in Sokoto State, Nigeria during a baseline study [Source: LEAP Africa]

Education is an important tool to foster individual and national development. It is a transformative force, a powerful catalyst that has the unparalleled ability to shape minds, uplift communities, and transform nations. Through education, individuals are able to unlock their full potential, pursue their passions, and contribute meaningfully to society. Furthermore, a well-educated population is the foundation of a strong and prosperous nation. Recognising the pivotal role of education in shaping a sustainable future for all, the United Nations enshrined it as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4)¹,

underscoring its significance in the global agenda for progress.

However, to realise the many promises and possibilities of education, it is important to ensure that schooling transforms into education. While education is a broader concept that transcends the confines of schools, studies within the formal education system have shown that an increase in school enrolment may not necessarily translate to improved educational outcomes.² Several factors such as inadequate facilities, overcrowded

¹ United Nations (2017). [Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 6 July 2017. Work of the Statistical Commission pertaining to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development \(A/RES/71/313\)](#). United Nations. [Accessed 21 Feb. 2024].

² UNICEF (2018). [Progress for Every Child in the SDG Era](#). UNICEF. [Accessed 21 Feb. 2024].

classrooms, and poor teaching, can negatively impact learning experiences. However, *ceteris paribus*, a major factor that hinders educational progress is poor literacy.

Literacy in education

Literacy encompasses the skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and numeracy. In education, literacy is the cornerstone upon which all learning is built. For learning to be effective, a certain level of proficiency in literacy is required. Proficiency in literacy not only enables individuals to acquire and internalise knowledge but also fosters critical thinking, effective communication, and confidence.

Youth literacy in Nigeria

Globally, 87% of illiterate youth aged 15 to 24 are found in South Asia and Africa. According to the 2021 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), in Nigeria, the national youth literacy rate is 48.9%, which is an average of the rates of literacy among young men (55.2%) and women (42.5%).³ Although this data could be a reflection of the gender disparity in education in the country, wider disparities exist across regions and states. The highest and second-highest literacy rates are in the South East (73.8%) and South West (62.7%) regions, while the North East (31.1%) and North West (32.3%) have the lowest and second lowest rates. Similarly, high literacy rates are found in many southern states (such as 81.2% in Lagos, 75.4% in Imo, and 69% in Anambra), while very low rates are found in some northern states (such as 16.4% in Kebbi, 16.7% in Jigawa and 18% in Sokoto). While this data indicates that youth literacy in Nigeria is generally low, it may not fully capture the true extent of the issue or accurately reflect the literacy rates nationwide. The actual youth literacy rate in the country might be even lower.

The MICS measured literacy by the ability of respondents to read a short, simple statement or based on school attendance; respondents who have attended at least junior secondary school are immediately classified as literate and are therefore not asked to read the statement. These metrics have some limitations. Reading a short, simple statement may not fully capture the broad concept of literacy. Also, years of schooling may not strongly correlate with literacy levels. A study has shown that, in Nigeria, just 10% of women who had completed Grade 6 (primary school) could read a single sentence in their native language.⁴ Similarly, during a recent visit by the LEAP Africa team to ten secondary schools in Sokoto State, a significant number of students in the penultimate year were unable to read or comprehend simple sentences in English language.

Challenges plaguing English literacy in primary and secondary schools in Nigeria

Secondary education is a crucial link between primary and tertiary education. It acts as a bridge between foundational learning and specialised knowledge. In Nigeria, secondary education is the highest level of education attained by many youths and is expected to prepare them for work and life aspirations. However, English literacy levels within these schools, particularly in government-owned or public schools, present a disconcerting reality that demands urgent attention and concerted efforts. English is the formal language of instruction in Nigerian schools; therefore, it is essential for students to have functional literacy in the English language. The poor literacy in secondary schools could be attributed to ineffective primary education.

Primary education is meant to equip children with foundational literacy skills that prepare them for

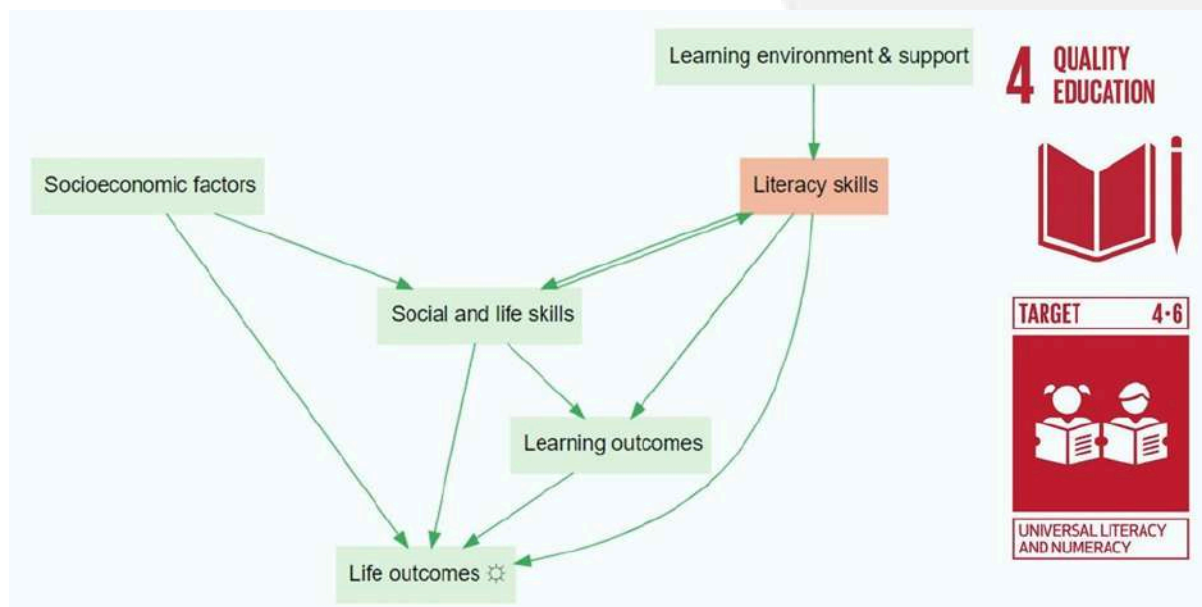
³ National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2022). *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2021, Survey Findings Report*. Abuja, Nigeria: National Bureau of Statistics and United Nations Children's Fund.

⁴ Pritchett L & Sandefur J (2020). [Girls' schooling and women's literacy: schooling targets alone won't reach learning goals](#), International Journal of Educational Development, 78: 102242.

higher levels of education and the world beyond school. However, primary schools, particularly in northern states are falling short in fulfilling this crucial role. English is a foreign language and is not spoken in many homes in Nigeria, therefore a child primarily learns the language while in school. And from teachers and colleagues, who in many cases, themselves have poor proficiency in the language. It is essential to make foundational education work, because inadequacies acquired from these formative years are often difficult to correct in later years.

Even though primary education is free in most public schools, the quality of education in many of these

schools is generally subpar. Many primary schools in Nigeria lack basic facilities such as classrooms, textbooks, and teaching materials, which hinders the ability of teachers to effectively educate students. Additionally, the low salaries and poor working conditions of teachers in primary schools can lead to high turnover rates and a lack of qualified and committed educators in the system. Furthermore, there is often a lack of accountability and oversight in the management of primary schools. These mismanagement and neglect often compromise educational outcomes. In some schools, exams are either not conducted, or the results are not used for student promotion.



Some factors and outcomes related to literacy proficiency [Source: Author]

Measures for improving English literacy in Nigerian schools

The impact of literacy transcends the classroom and spreads across every facet of life. The English language has often been described as the language of international communication and commerce. Thus, functional literacy in English may facilitate not only

functional literacy in English may facilitate not only positive learning outcomes but also life outcomes. Some key measures can be implemented to improve English literacy in Nigerian schools.

► *Improve teachers' quality & school management:* Providing professional development opportunities for teachers to improve their English language

teaching skills can significantly impact student literacy levels. Evidence abounds that teacher quality is strongly correlated to student learning outcomes. Teachers should be equipped with effective strategies for teaching reading, speaking, writing, and comprehension skills. It is also important that the government shows due diligence in the management of schools, to ensure that the right crops of teachers and best practices are employed within schools. For instance, in 2017, it was reported that over 20,000 teachers in Kaduna State failed a competency test conducted by the state government.⁵ Primary school teachers teaching English language could not score 75% in a test meant for Primary 4 pupils.

► **Parental and community involvement:** While the government is primarily responsible for resourcing and managing public schools in Nigeria, parental and community involvement plays a crucial role in complementing the efforts of the government to improve education in these schools. In some educationally advanced states of the country, more parents and community members recognize the importance of their roles as key stakeholders in the education system. In these states, the efforts of the government are often complemented by the support of parent-teacher associations (PTA) and alumni associations. Some schools even have “PTA teachers,” “Old students’ Hall,” “Alumni block,” etc. These are teachers that are employed and paid from the PTA purse, and facilities donated by the old students’ or alumni association. These extra resources have the potential to enhance educational outcomes.

► **Structured literacy programme:** Developing a structured literacy programme that focuses on phonics, vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension can help students build a strong foundation in English language. This programme could be

introduced at the primary or junior secondary level and should be tailored to the specific needs of the students and incorporate culturally relevant content. An example of such a programme is the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)⁶ initiative that has been piloted in a few states in northern Nigeria.

► **Promote a culture of literacy:** Encouraging students to read and speak regularly can improve their vocabulary, comprehension, writing and functional literacy skills. Schools can establish literacy, reading or press clubs, organise book fairs, and provide access to a variety of reading materials to foster a love for reading and speaking among students. While having classroom libraries may not be feasible at present, all schools should at least have a functional school library. Schools could further adopt a mandatory library period, for students in respective classes, particularly at the junior secondary level, to visit the library. These approaches are already in use in some schools in Nigeria, and such schools often have good literacy levels and educational outcomes.

Conclusion

It is evident that education holds immense promise for an individual, his community, and nation. The importance of literacy, especially in English, cannot be overstated, as it is the cornerstone of all learning. To address the challenges plaguing literacy in primary and secondary schools in Nigeria, measures such as improving teacher quality, increasing parental and community involvement, implementing structured literacy programs, and promoting a culture of literacy are crucial. By working together to prioritise literacy and education, we can empower the youth of Nigeria to unlock their full potential, contribute meaningfully to society, and drive national development.

⁵ Oluwasanjo, A. (2017). [El-Rufai insists on sacking over 20,000 teachers who failed competency test](#). [online] Premium Times Nigeria. [Accessed 21 Feb. 2024].

⁶ Teaching at the Right Level (n.d.). [Nigeria](#). [online] Teaching at the Right Level. [Accessed 21 Feb. 2024].