

GATEKEEPING AND INEQUALITY IN NIGERIAN EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR ACCESS AND EQUITY

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Abstract

Education is an important instrument of the nation's development, social change and personal growth in all societies. However, in Nigeria, access to quality education is inequitable because there are socio-economic, cultural, institutional and political factors that continue to exacerbate inequality of access to education for learners. The paper discusses the contribution of gatekeeping mechanisms to the perpetuation of inequality in the Nigerian educational system. It explores the issues of socio-economic status, school fees, admission policies and systems, examination systems, language barriers, gender inequality, urban-rural differences, political and institutional obstacles that hinder access to quality education and learning, especially for marginalised groups. It also clarifies that inequalities in the provision of education resources, qualified teachers, modern learning facilities, and fair admission practices still affect learners from privileged backgrounds and leave learners from poor and rural backgrounds behind. It argued that these inequalities have serious consequences on access and equity such as higher social inequality, joblessness, poverty, less social mobility, educational exclusion, regional imbalance and lower national development. Finally, it concludes that unless deliberate action is taken to address institutional and socio-economic barriers in the Nigerian educational system, educational inequality and unequal access to quality education in Nigeria will persist. The paper recommended for greater funding of education, better town-school facilities, more open admissions, more equal allocation of teachers, more generous scholarships, more inclusive learning policies, and better access to digital learning.

Keywords: Gatekeeping, Access and Equity, Inequality to Education, Nigerian education Equity

Introduction

The modern world education plays an important role in human and national development and it continues to play a pivotal role in development of modern societies. It is known to be a strong tool for knowledge formation, social development and economic productivity in countries. Education is considered to be one of the most powerful tools of national development, social change and empowerment at the individual level (UNESCO, 2022). It is a key factor in providing learners with knowledge, skills, values and competences enabling them to live productively and

participate in society actively (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). Education can help societies to drive economic development, alleviate poverty, stimulate innovation and build social cohesion (World Bank, 2023). Education is also a tool to help improve social mobility, in that it gives people the chance to improve their social and economic situation and fulfil their dreams. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022). Education has been seen as key to the growth of a nation, inclusion in society and economic development of many developing countries, Nigeria being one of such countries (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014).

Despite the significance of education in the promotion of national development, equal opportunities and quality of education had not been a reality at all tiers of the educational system in Nigeria. Socio-economic, political, cultural and institutional barriers continue to hinder access to quality education in different regions, social classes and among different demographic groups (Aluede 2020). Although some of the students in urban areas are enabled by well-equipped schools, qualified teachers and modern learning facilities, many students in rural and disadvantaged areas are not able to have access to adequate educational resources and infrastructure (Akinsolu, 2021). Economic hardship, poverty, gender discrimination, insecurity and lack of government funding have also exacerbated gaps in educational opportunities in Nigeria between citizens (United Nations Children's Fund, 2022). This has therefore resulted in inequality in accessing educational opportunities, which is inherent in the Nigerian educational system and weakens education equity (Nakpodia, 2023).

Gatekeeping in education refers to the policies, practices, and institutional structures that regulate access to educational opportunities, resources, and progression within the education system (Dougherty, 2024; Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2024). It operates through mechanisms such as admission requirements, standardized examinations, certification procedures, school fees, and selection processes for advancement from one educational level to another. While these measures are often intended to maintain academic standards and manage limited educational spaces, recent studies indicate that they frequently reproduce inequality by disadvantaging students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and marginalized groups (Madriaga, 2023; Millward, 2024). Educational gatekeeping is therefore closely linked to issues of power and social stratification, as unequal access to quality preparatory resources, digital learning opportunities, and educational support systems often determines who gains access to higher education and who remains excluded, particularly in competitive educational systems such as Nigeria's (Deem *et al.*, 2022; Boliver *et al.*, 2022).

Social and educational inequality is well connected with gate keeping (or filter)

systems that work in favour of privileged socio-economic status and against less privileged socio-economic status. High-quality schools, private tutoring and learning technologies provide a strong advantage for students from more affluent households to achieve competitive admission to schools and pass high-stakes exams (Glewwe & Michael, 2006). Students in rural and low-income neighborhoods, however, are more likely to be overcrowded in their classrooms, lack adequate facilities, and lack qualified teachers, and therefore are less likely to do well in school or to advance toward graduation (Madriaga, 2023). These structural disadvantages mean that social class and geography have a key role in determining educational success, not ability. This also means that gatekeeping mechanisms in Nigeria's education system serve to perpetuate inequalities that translate socio-economic privileges into academic privileges, thus restricting the possibility of realizing equity in access and achievement.

Educational inequalities continue to pose serious challenges to the Nigerian educational system because they undermine the principle of educational equity and weaken the role of education as a tool for social transformation and national development. Access to quality education is not equally available to all learners, as opportunities for educational attainment are often shaped by factors such as socio-economic status, geographical location, and institutional advantages (UNESCO, 2022; Madriaga, 2023). Consequently, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those in rural and low-income communities, frequently experience limited access to quality schools, learning resources, qualified teachers, and supportive educational environments, thereby widening existing social and educational disparities (UNICEF, 2021; Keller *et al.*, 2023). This is detrimental to social mobility as the disadvantaged are deprived of educating themselves to improve their socio-economic status. It also increases the social class divide as the education privilege of the privileged becomes a privilege of the privileged. Such differences in the long run can foster the perpetuation of poverty and social inequalities leading to a decline in a country's national unity and ability to achieve sustainable development.

Rational for the Study

In Nigeria, education is expected to provide equal opportunities, social mobility and national development; but there are profound and enduring disparities in access, quality and outcomes of education in Nigeria. High school fees, poor school infrastructures and a lack of learning materials obstruct many Nigerians, especially those from low-income and rural communities, from accessing quality education. Schools, teachers, additional tutors and advanced teaching facilities are more likely to be

available to students from affluent and urban backgrounds, providing them with a considerable educational edge.

Some of the problems in rural schools are well known, such as the lack of adequate instructional materials, laboratories, and stable staffing, however, the impact of these factors on students' academic performance and progression opportunities in rural schools remains a significant disadvantage. Other gatekeeping mechanisms, such as admission systems and competitive examinations are also more likely to reproduce inequalities, as they are more likely to benefit students who have been better academically prepared. Financial constraints to education become even more significant as education costs keep increasing, excluding many kids from poor backgrounds from schooling, and some children from continuing or dropping out of school. The challenges persist and educational inequality is on the rise in Nigeria, which threatens fairness, inclusion and equal opportunity to educational opportunities. Thus it is appropriate to explore the issue of gatekeeping and inequality in Nigerian education with implications for access and equity.

Conceptual Review

Concept of Gatekeeping

In education, gatekeeping is a system, a policy and an institutional process that determines access to education, progression and availability of resources in the educational system (Hirschl & Smith, 2023). In modern educational literature, gatekeeping is not just about upholding educational quality; it is also a system that shapes the educational inclusion/exclusion process (Madriaga, 2023).

Opportunities are managed by educational institutions in a formal and informal way, including via admission policies, standardized tests, funding policies and institutional capacity constraints. Empirical evidence in Nigeria suggests that these mechanisms tend to perpetuate inequality by favouring students with access to better learning opportunities, such as private tutoring and better schools, and disadvantage students from disadvantaged and rural backgrounds (Ige & Naicker, 2023). Consequently, it is becoming more and more difficult for children who are not from socio-economically favoured backgrounds to gain access to education.

Other ways that schooling is seen as a privilege include access policies, fees, language requirements, admission tests, and quotas. Evidence from recent studies in Nigeria reveals that tertiary education admission processes remain inequitable and that high-stakes tests remain a major determinant of access to tertiary education for students from under-resourced areas (Ogunode & Abubakar, 2022). Furthermore, cost of

education is a major challenge as it restricts enrolment of students from low-income families and thereby exacerbates educational inequities (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2024). Overall, these mechanisms illustrate that education gatekeeping is a key determinant of the continued existence of educational inequality and unequal access to education in the Nigerian education system.

The concept of educational inequality

Educational inequality is the unequal treatment of different groups in society with regard to access to education, participation in education, and the achievement of educational goals (Bladen *et al.*, 2022). There is unequal access to schools and educational resources: one major dimension. Pupils from low-income and rural families are at increased risk of attending poorly resourced schools with poor facilities and limited resources for teaching and learning compared with their non-poor counterparts from wealthier families and urban areas (Obasuyi, 2022).

It is also evident that there is educational inequality through the provision of unequal education. The quality of instruction, school facilities and learning environments leads to different learning outcomes for students, even when their abilities are identical (Bladen *et al.*, 2022). Multiple factors help to explain inequality, and social class differences are important. Children from higher income families are more likely to attend private schools, get tutoring, and experience enriching learning environments, while children from disadvantaged families have multiple barriers that hinder their achievement (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2023).

Inequalities related to gender also play a role in education inequalities as cultural and economic factors affect the access to education and completion rates of girls in some regions (UNICEF, 2023). The rural–urban gap is still very wide in Nigeria, as rural schools tend to be less well-resourced in terms of facilities, teachers and learning materials than urban schools (Lew, 2023).

Access and Equity in Education

Access in education is the right of learners to enter, enrol in and be able to participate in education at various stages of the educational system. This encompasses the presence of schools, the cost of schooling, admission of students and the elimination of physical, economic and social barriers that may keep others from enrolling in school (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2022). In practice, access goes beyond mere enrolment to include consistent participation and progression within the education system.

Equity in education is the fairness of the provision of educational opportunities, resources, support to all learners based on their individual circumstances (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022). Equity takes account of socio-economic status, location, gender and ability, as well as looking to minimise disadvantage and to maximise inclusive educational outcomes, compared to simple access.

Difference Between Equality and Equity

Equality in education refers to the provision of equal access to education resources, opportunities and treatment to all learners irrespective of their background or needs. It is based on the assumption that all learners enter a learning environment at a similar level, and thus, they need the same support to achieve the same (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). Equality fosters uniformity but does not necessarily open up opportunities to decrease the inequalities among learners as they exist.

Equity in education, on the other hand, is about fairness, acknowledging that learners may have unequal access to learning and therefore need varying degrees of support to attain the same learning outcomes. Equity is an issue of redistributing resources and opportunities in favour of the disadvantaged to help reduce disparities in achievement (Amartya, 2009). This way of working is designed to be more flexible, to address the needs of all learners, rather than standardising them.

To summarise, equality is treating all learners the same, equity is treating learners fairly by making up for individual and contextual disadvantage. Equity is of special significance in education systems like Nigeria where there is a continuing inequality in access, availability of resources and learning conditions in various areas and social groups.

Theoretical Framework

Conflict Theory

In Karl Marx's perspective (conflict theory), society is an organization of people that is unequal and competitive for resources. This view would argue that social institutions—such as the school mirror and reinforce the interest of dominant groups and not necessarily the equality of all people in the society (Marx & Engels, 1848). One of the core tenets of conflict theory is that society is fundamentally unequal and the power and resources are held by those who rule or dominate. This inequality is not coincidental, but is sustained by social arrangements that are designed to give advantages to the privileged and to the disadvantage of the less privileged. Conflict

theory postulates that education is geared toward the good of the rich and the poor remain disadvantaged, since they do not get access to quality education or learning resources to the same extent as the rich. These benefits enable them to do better in examinations to access higher education and in the best jobs, whereas students from the less affluent sections of society have structural disadvantages. Institutions of schooling are perceived as places where class inequality is reproduced. Education does not remove social inequalities; it may rather reinforce them by giving rewards to the students who already have an economic and cultural advantage. This process makes sure that social class status is carried over from one generation to the next (Dougherty, 2024).). In addition, strong societal actors are perceived to have power over educational opportunities via policy, admission and resource allocation. These mechanisms affect access to quality education, and exclusion, which maintain social dominance.

Application of Conflict Theory to the Nigerian Educational System

The education system in Nigeria can be analyzed using the conflict theory because it helps to explain the relationship between unequal social and economic structures and access to quality education and educational outcomes. The theory states that education is not a pure and impartial institution, but one that reflects the interests of dominant social groups and helps to perpetuate inequality in society. Compared to students who come from poor families, students from wealthy families generally have access to private schools, modern learning centres, good electricity service, internet access and private tutors, which boost their academic achievement and prospects of gaining admission to top secondary schools and university institutions. By contrast, many students from impoverished, rural backgrounds are enrolled in poorly funded public schools with overcrowded classrooms, substandard infrastructure, a lack of qualified teachers, and low-quality instructional materials. These inequalities result in unequal opportunities for education for different classes.

Another aspect of standardized tests and admission processes is that they are also gatekeeping processes, and this is explained by conflict theory. Those who have access to better preparation materials will do well in exams like that of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board, compared to those who do not. Thus, educational attainment is strongly correlated with socio-economic status, more so than with merit. In addition, the fast expansion of the private educational sector in Nigeria is indicative of the inequitable allocation of educational opportunity. Many private schools and universities have very high tuition, thus restricting access primarily to children from

affluent families and children coming from poor families are less able to access quality education. This arrangement and context reinforces class divisions and helps to perpetuate class inequality from generation to generation. Thus, according to the conflict theory, the Nigerian educational system may not reduce inequality but instead reproduce and perpetuate the existing social and economic inequalities, by providing unequal access to educational resources, opportunities, and institutional support.

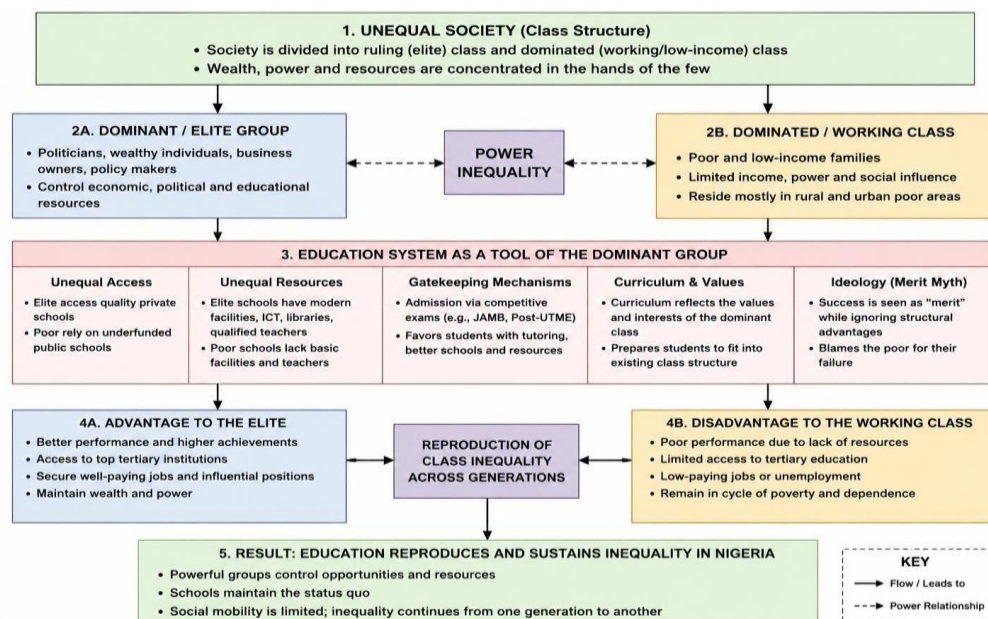


Figure 1: Model of the Application of Conflict Theory to Nigeria's Educational System

Social Reproduction Theory

Social Reproduction Theory is a concept created by Pierre Bourdieu that describes how the education system helps to perpetuate and transmit social inequalities from one generation to the next. The theory is that education is not just an equal opportunity provider for all students; it can actually perpetuate social and economic benefits experienced by certain groups in society. (Bourdieu, 1986). The theory states that children that come from rich and educated families have an advantage in learning and achieve more success in school. These benefits encompass quality schools, learning resources, private tutors, stable learning contexts and parental academic help. This means that students from a higher socio-economic status have a better opportunity of being prepared to meet the expectations and standards of the education system, compared to students from lower socio-economic status.

Culture capital is a key part of the theory which involves the knowledge, language style, attitudes, behaviours and culture experiences that people absorb in their family and social environment. Bourdieu argued that the cultures of dominant social

groups are valued and rewarded by schools, and that this gives an advantage to students' cultural capital from privileged groups (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Students with language patterns, communication styles and cultural experiences that are expected of the school system will more likely perform academically and advance through the school system.

In Nigeria, the concept of social reproduction theory is manifested when access to education is perceived as being unequal between rich and poor families. Wealthier children go to better-equipped and better-supported private schools, and children from poor and rural homes are under-resourced and lack good school facilities. Therefore, the educational system perpetuates class inequalities, giving more chance to those who have economic and cultural advantages.

Application of Social Reproduction Theory to the Nigerian Educational System

Social Reproduction Theory can be adopted to the Nigerian educational system with the aim of examining how education perpetuates the socio-economic inequalities from generation to generation. The theory is that students from educated and rich backgrounds have the luxury of access to quality schools, private tutors, digital learning facilities and supportive home environments that enhance their academic Equity and prospects for success in school. Learners from poor and rural socio-economic backgrounds, on the other hand, rarely have access to well-funded schools equipped with good infrastructure, sufficient qualified teachers and adequate learning materials, thus limiting their intended learning achievements. The theory also highlights cultural capital: children from privileged families have better skills of communication, are more proficient in the language, and have more positive attitudes and social experiences, which are more aligned with the school system's expectations (Dougherty, 2024). As a result, educational institutions in Nigeria are more likely to give higher grades to students who have an economic and cultural advantage, which further reinforces the class divide and prevents equal educational opportunities for those who are disadvantaged.

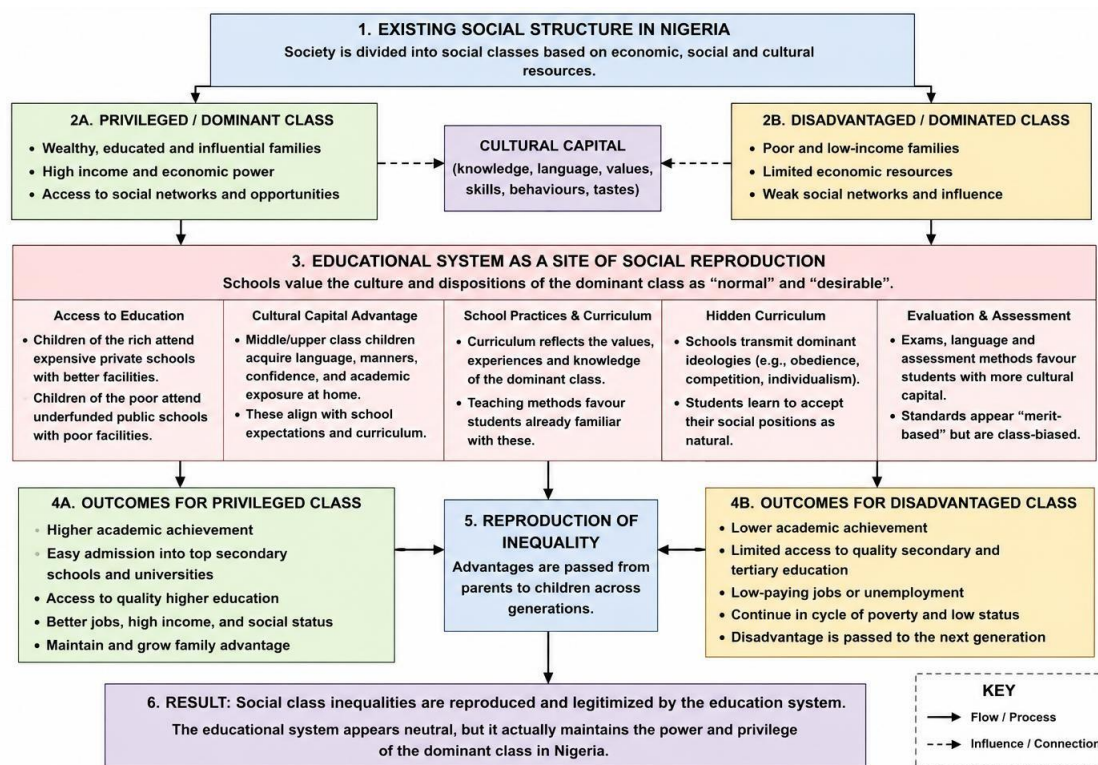


Figure 2: Model of the Application of Social Reproduction Theory to Nigeria's Educational System

Forms of Gatekeeping in Nigerian Education

Economic Barriers

Economic constraints continue to be one of the leading factors for access disparity in schools, especially for pupils from the poor and rural communities in Nigeria. Poor family income reduces the ability of many families to afford the various school/education needs of children, including school fees, school books, writing materials, transportation etc., impacting school enrolment, attendance and performance (Madriaga, 2023). Public education is supposed to make education more accessible, but there are still some parents whose education is still under financial strain due to indirect education costs and administrative fees (Oketch *et al.*, 2012). The high cost of textbooks and instructional materials also play a disadvantageous role for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who don't have access to good learning opportunities. Another factor affecting absenteeism and school dropout among learners of disadvantaged families is transportation difficulties particularly in rural areas where schools are located far away from the residential areas (Nakpodia, 2010). More recently, the digital divide has emerged as a growing obstacle, with variations in access to computers, internet services, electricity and digital learning technologies persisting and further widening the educational gap between urban and rural learners and

between rich and poor households (Adarkwah, 2021). This, in turn, perpetuates the existing inequalities in access to quality education, linking to the wider social inequalities in the Nigerian education system.

Admission policies and examination systems

The gatekeeping mechanisms such as admission policies and examination systems are significant in Nigeria's education system, especially at tertiary level. The Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) is responsible for conducting the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) for admission into universities, polytechnics and colleges of education. The system is designed to be fair and standard, but it has also been a source of inequity in higher education as students have variations in their academic preparation and access to learning resources. Students from more privileged communities are more likely to meet the cut-off marks set by institutions and children from more disadvantaged communities are less likely to do so, which is attributed to the fact that the institutions they attend are better and they receive additional academic support. Having to compete for admission—with many more applicants than seats available—also makes admissions more inequitable by giving an advantage to those who can afford private tutoring and access to better learning instruments. Favoritism, political influences and corruption in the recruitment process have also raised concerns on fairness in the recruitment process (Ogunode & Musa, 2020). Further, the quota system, which was established to ensure regional balance and to include educationally disadvantaged areas, is controversial, and some view it as impacting merit-based admission. Overall, admission policies and examination systems still remain to have a significant effect on access to tertiary education and further contribute to educational inequality in Nigeria.

Urban–Rural Educational Disparities

The education sector in Nigeria still faces the challenge of urban–rural educational gaps and rural schools are commonly disempowered compared to urban schools. Many rural communities lack adequate school infrastructure, with substandard classrooms, lack of furniture, classrooms that are overcrowded, and a lack of basic teaching materials which all impede learning and teaching. This is consistent with the conclusions drawn by various studies on the correlation between the performance of teachers and the quality of school infrastructure, which are not very good in rural areas (UNESCO, 2020). The lack of qualified teachers in rural schools also poses a significant problem because of better prospects in urban schools, such as improved living,

developmental opportunities, and social facilities, resulting in understaffing of rural schools (Adedeji, & Olaniyan, 2011). Furthermore, rural communities have limited access to electricity that goes beyond that of school buildings, which can impact instructional technologies as well as instructional preparation and classroom activities. Inadequate internet connectivity further exacerbates the problem by limiting students' access to online learning platforms and educational resources, the latter of which are increasingly becoming a vital part of modern education. Research has revealed that the digital divide between urban and rural schools has significantly contributed to the inequitable learning opportunities and outcomes (Adeleke & Akinbode, 2022). Overall, these factors contribute to the growing disparity in educational quality and achievement between urban and rural learners in Nigeria.

Language and Cultural Barriers

Language and cultural barriers are also important factors determining access and performance in the education system in Nigeria. The use of English as the official language from the upper primary level upwards is one major problem. This policy aims to foster national unity and world integration, but can be a disadvantage to learners who do not speak English well, particularly at the early stages of learning. Studies have proven that early language instruction in the child's mother tongue promotes children's understanding and thinking and improves their learning ability (UNESCO, 2016). The benefits of the implementation of mother tongue education in Nigeria however is not extensive because of the inconsistent implementation of the education in the country. Classroom practices in many classrooms leave a gap between local language and school language by either underusing or not using local languages effectively in the classroom. This situation impacts students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and from rural areas more significantly as they must master complex concepts in a second language. Likewise, research has been recorded of a decrease in academic performance of learners from some ethnic groups where language is a barrier to learning, especially if they do not have much exposure to English outside school (Bamgbose, 2011). Consequently, current language policy procedures in education still negatively affect some ethnic groups and perpetuate unequal learning outcomes in Nigeria.

Gender Inequality

Gender disparity is still a major determinant of education in Nigeria. Early marriage is one of the major challenges; girls tend to be withdrawn from school before basic education or secondary studies because of early marriage. This practice is more

prevalent in certain communities and greatly restricts the scope for further education and skill acquisition for girls. Cultural practices also contribute, as some cultural values emphasize boys' education over girls' education and particularly in households with lower economic means. In these situations, the parents might want to invest in the education of their sons, and assume that their daughters will take care of the household. This leads to a decrease in school enrolment and retention of females in some areas. Educational research is clear that socio-cultural norms continue to be a significant influence on gender gaps in educational outcomes (UNICEF 2023). Furthermore, education for women remains low and insufficient in certain areas of the north and rural regions where girls are further limited from attending school due to poverty, insecurity and traditional norms. All these factors are still exacerbating gender disparity in education and restricting equal access to academic and economic opportunity for women in Nigeria.

Political and Institutional Factors

Other political and institutional aspects also have significant impact on the effectiveness and equity of the Nigerian education system. Corruption in the administration and implementation of education policies has been cited as a major problem that impacts on resource allocation, admission processes and implementation of projects in schools and tertiary institutions. The lack of funds for education also compounds the problem because low budget allocation restricts access to infrastructure, pedagogical resources, hiring of teachers and maintenance of facilities. What often happens is overcrowded classrooms and poor education at various school levels. Frequent change of government policies also adds to the education sector's instability, since education reforms are sometimes not fully realized or are not consistent over successive governments, and in both cases, the long-term planning and development of education is disrupted. The other major problem is industrial action by academic staff, especially the strikey actions embarked upon by Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) which may cause the academic calendar to be disrupted, graduations to be delayed and instructional time to be affected. Research has revealed that repeated strikes and lack of policy continuity have adverse impacts on students' learning as well as institutions' efficiency in Nigeria (Ofoegbu & Alonge, 2021). These political and institutional issues, combined with strike actions, negatively affect the education system and lead to imbalanced access among learners across the country.

Implications for Access and Equity

The gap between the different social classes in terms of education is increased because pupils from higher socio-economic groups are more likely to gain access to good quality schools, good teachers, private tutoring and up to date school facilities. The students from poor households, on the other hand, are likely to be enrolled in under-resourced schools which lack adequate facilities, and teaching and learning materials. Consequently, social class and economic circumstance have a strong effect on educational opportunities and academic performance, as opposed to ability and effort.

The unequal access to quality education also plays a major role in the problem of unemployment and underemployment. A large proportion of school leavers and graduates from disadvantaged educational backgrounds have limited skills, knowledge and competencies needed in the modern labour market. This poor educational performance makes them less employable and less likely to get stable and productive jobs, especially among youth.

Another major implication is the perpetuation of the cycle of poverty. Poor financial resources of the families limit the quality of education that they can afford for their children, as they lack the funds to afford school fees, textbooks, transportation and other resources needed for learning. As a result, children of poor families are less educated and have less access to economic opportunities, and they are then locked in poverty, transmitting the same disadvantage to their offspring.

Educational inequality also has a bearing on the development of a nation, as the growth of any nation is highly dependent on the human resources of the nation. A lack of access to quality education by large sections of the population results in scarcity of skilled professionals and lower productivity. This has a negative impact on the growth of the economy, technological development, innovation and the progress of a country. Furthermore, educational inequality imposes lack of social mobility in society. Education should empower individuals to enhance their socio-economic status; but unequal access to quality education makes it hard for people from lower social classes to climb up to higher ones. In these cases, things like family background and income are more important factors for success than merit and ability.

Another major impact of inequality in education is the educational exclusion. A large number of learners are unable to access all aspects of schooling and/or to participate fully in the learning process due to factors including poverty, gender discrimination, language barriers, disability and geographic location. This exclusion deprives people of the chance to gain information and skills for their personal

development and to engage in society's activities.

The imbalance of educational resources between urban and rural areas is a regional imbalance in the country. Rural communities tend to be educationally disadvantaged, whereas the schools, teachers, infrastructure and access to digital learning technologies in urban centres tends to be better. The disparity in education access further exacerbates educational and developmental gaps between the regions and ultimately leads to the overall social and economic disparities in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Educational inequality in Nigeria continues to be a problem that poses a great threat to social justice, equal opportunity and national development. While education is known to be a vehicle of empowerment and socio-economic development, quality education remains a challenge for various factors including poverty, geographic location, gender, language and institutional practices. The paper examined the major gate keeping mechanisms in the Nigerian educational system which include economic, admission policy, urban–rural disparity, language, gender, political and institutional gap, all of which are responsible for unequal opportunity and outcomes in education. It has confirmed these inequalities translate to greater social inequality, unemployment, poverty, limited social mobility, and educational exclusion, as well as regional inequality and underdevelopment. Thus, it is important that efforts are made deliberately and practically to foster educational equity in funding, policies, admission processes and distribution of educational resources by government, and other stakeholders. The lack of quality education remains inequitable in Nigeria unless there are appropriate interventions to address institutional and socio-economic barriers that will enhance its role in national development and social change.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made, based on the conclusion:

1. Government and Private sector should increase funding in the education sector to improve school infrastructure, ensure availability of quality teaching materials, recruit qualified staff and improve the quality of education at all levels.
2. Government should focus more on the rural schools by providing modern classrooms, libraries, laboratories, electricity and internet facilities etc. that are necessary for effective teaching and learning.

3. Admission procedures in educational institutions, mainly in tertiary educational institutions, should be made more transparent and merit based to minimize favoritism, corruption and political interference in the selection processes.
4. There is a need for allocating more scholarships, grants and financial support programmes for the students of the low-income families and marginalized communities by the Government, private organizations and non-governmental agencies.
5. Policies should be planned and put in place so that all learners have equal learning opportunities, irrespective of gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, disability or geographical location.
6. The qualified teachers should be distributed fairly among both urban and rural schools and measures like housing allowance and rural posting allowance should be introduced to sensitive teachers to serve in areas where there are shortage of qualified teachers.
7. Government and education stakeholders should increase access to digital technologies by providing affordable internet services, computer facilities, digital learning platforms, particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities.
8. Efforts should be made to cut down on costs for parents where unnecessary fees are charged and where learners of poor families have to pay fees that are not met.
9. Mother tongue language should be used in early childhood and primary education in combination with English language for the development of the language comprehension and learning outcomes of children with diverse language backgrounds.
10. Greater efforts to discourage early marriage, gender discrimination and culture that restrict girls' access to education in underserved areas should be put in place.

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