

LEARNING PLUS INITIATIVE - A PANACEA FOR ACHIEVING QUALITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

The issue of Quality Education and how to realize it has become a matter of concern to all stakeholders in the education industry. Closely related to this is also the question of how Nigeria can achieve the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Quality Education according to UNICEF is the education which is inclusive of all populations, especially the most vulnerable; seeks participation of stakeholders of all constituencies and ensures gender equity in the short and long term. One key component of Learning Plus Initiative as postulated by UNICEF is Inclusive Education which implies that “ schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions”. This paper examines Learning Plus Initiative as a panacea for achieving quality education in Nigeria, child inclusion, rationale for child inclusion and strategies for child inclusion.

The Federal Ministry of Education (FME) has put in place several programmes as a strategy to achieve the goals of Education for All (EFA), Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the objectives of the Universal Basic Education (UBE). However, gaps still exist between current policies that are aimed at achieving this goals and the implementation of the policies. In order to achieve some of these goals, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in collaboration with FME proposed the Learning Plus Initiative as part of quality education, care and protection for children infected and affected by HIV & AIDS and other factors such as poverty, all forms of discrimination, violence, abuse, mismanagement of resources etc. in recognition of the importance of education as a vehicle of change and the roles played by children as the future of any nation, the schools and alternative learning centres where children spend most of their time for learning purposes are being targeted as channels for delivering essential services. (African Ministers of Health Conference, 2005).

In Nigeria, disparities which exist based on gender and geographical locations pose a challenge to the achievement of the EFA goals. Thus to ensure quality basic

education for all children, as called for by the MDGs agenda and EFA declaration, UNICEF developed the Child-Friendly Schools (CFS) model, which is based on a participatory, inclusive and gender-sensitive philosophy of education. This model also promotes a healthy and protective environment for learners. Hence, this paper focuses on Learning Plus Initiative as a panacea for achieving quality education in Nigeria in the 21st century.

Concept of Learning Plus Initiative

The concept of Learning Plus Initiative was proposed to by UNICEF and derives its meaning from the concept of quality Education. Quality Education according to UNICEF is the education which is inclusive of all populations, especially the most vulnerable; seeks participation of stakeholders of all constituencies and ensures gender equity in the short and long term. UNICEF also postulated that “A quality basic education will better equip girls and boys with knowledge and skills needed to adopt healthy lifestyles, to protect themselves from HIV? AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and to take an active role in social, economic and political decision-making as they transit to adolescence and adulthood” (UNICEF, 2007). To UNICEF learning Plus Initiative means what stakeholders need to do outside the traditional teaching and learning (Curriculum) to assist pupils/students who are vulnerable. Vulnerability according to them refers to learners with special needs (physically/mentally challenged, gifted/talented and migrant farmers) orphans (children who have lost one or both parents, children living with terminally or chronically ill parent(s) and children on or of the street/child hawkers).

The singular purpose of the Learning Plus Initiative is to intensify the systematic use of schools as integrated centres of learning and for the delivery of other social services for children, including care and support, in circumstances where the normal provision of these services by families and communities has come under increased threat from major challenges. Learning Plus strategy and action include child friendly schooling, School fees abolition, essential learning package, life skills based education, children and AIDS campaign and partnerships (FME, 2010).

One key issue that UNICEF emphasizes in determining the quality of education in any nation is the issue of inclusiveness. Child inclusion has therefore become a major cross cutting issue in Learning Plus Initiative, if any nation is to achieve a qualitative education as put forward by UNICEF, that nation must as a matter of concern make her education all inclusive at all level. An emerging issue that readily comes to mind as it concerns Nigerian educational system as to whether it is qualitative or not according to UNICEF’s definition is that: Does every learner irrespective of race, tribe and class benefit from the educational service?

Child inclusion as a major concept in Learning Plus implies that “ schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions” (UNESCO, 1994). Inclusion or inclusiveness is a philosophy, and inclusive education is a process leading towards “institutions which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs’ (UNESCO), 1994). All children in a given community should learn together,

regardless of their backgrounds, ethnicity, religion, gender, HIV & AIDS status, impairments, challenges and abilities. It is a rights'-based approach and a social model in which the system adapts to the child through appropriate curricula, infrastructural arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use, and commitment and partnerships with their communities (Hunt, Alwell, Farron-Davis and Goetz 1996). Inclusive education involve rethinking and restructuring policies, curricular, cultures and practices in schools and learning environments so that diverse learning needs can be met, whatever the origin or nature of those need.

Rationale for Child Inclusion

Human Rights – Child inclusion is a matter of Human right, as all children no matter their abilities or constraints are entitled to education (UN 1991). Children should therefore not be devalued or discriminated against by being exclude or sent away because of their disability (Hunt, Farron-Davis, Wrenn, Hirose-Hatae and Goetz, 1997). Children belong together and have no need to be protected from each other just as disabled adults, describing themselves as special school survivors advocate for an end to segregation.

Good Education – Research shows that children do better academically and socially in integrated settings. There is no teaching or care in a segregated school which cannot take place in a regular school. Given commitment and support, inclusive education is a more efficient use of education resources.

Good Social Sense – Segregation teaches children to be fearful, ignorant and breeds prejudice. All children need an education that will help them develop relationships and prepare them for life in the mainstream. Only inclusion has the potential to reduce fear and to build friendship, respect and understanding.

Children for Inclusion

FME (2010) categorizes children who should be included in our main stream educational setting, and to make our education qualitative (all inclusive) into two viz;

Learners with special needs – children who fall under this category include the physically and mentally challenged gifted/talented children and children of migrant farmers/hunters.

The second category are orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). This includes orphans who have lost parent(s) while vulnerable children are those who because of circumstances of birth or immediate environment are prone to abuse or deprivation of basic needs, care and protection, and thus disadvantaged relative to their peers.

However, in a recent research sponsored by UNICEF in collaboration with Federal Ministry of Education to determine the capacity of Nigerian schools to provide quality education for children, and determine the capacity of schools to be used as centres to provide care, support and essential services for all children, but particularly for vulnerable children conducted in the six geographical zones in Nigeria, the following categorization for vulnerable children was put forward after consultations with stakeholders from the zones:

1. Children who have lost one or both parents
 2. Children living with terminally or chronically ill parent(s) or care giver(s)
 3. Children on or of the street/Child hawkers
 4. Children living with aged or frail grandparent(s)
 5. Children exposed to exploitative/hazardous child labour
 6. Children who get married before 18 years
 7. Abandoned Children.
- Other categories of vulnerable children according to the team include:
- Children in child-headed homes
 - Children infected with HIV/AIDS
 - Child beggars/destitute children (including exploited almajiris)
 - Internally displaced or separated children
 - Child domestic servants
 - Child sex workers/sexually abused children
 - Children with special challenges or disabilities, or whose parents have disability
 - Trafficked children
 - Children of migrant workers e.g. fishermen or women, nomads, and hunters.
 - Children living with teenage unmarried parent(s) and
 - Teenage mothers and their children (FME & UNESCO 2007)

The principles of inclusive education as put forward by UNICEF stipulates that all children belong, all children learn in different ways; it is every child's right to be included; all children have right to be with other children of their own age and that individual difference between students are a source of richness and diversity and not a problems as many see it.

Strategies for Inclusion

One major strategy that can be adopted for effective and all inclusive education is advocacy. Advocacy is pleading for, defending or recommending an idea before other people. The International HIV/AIDS Alliance (2001) defines advocacy as a process to bring about change in the policies, laws and practices of influential individuals, groups and institutions". There are three levels of advocacy which can be used to bring about inclusion in the Nigerian educational system, they are; sensitization, which is creating awareness, improve acceptance and reduce stigmatization of the OVC's, the second is counseling which addresses academic, vocational and psychosocial issues and related concerns while the third is networking and collaboration with local and international organizations that will assist in the actualization of quality education in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Education as a tool for overall development of children should through its organs (schools) provide opportunities for emotional support for all children, interaction with other children and the development of social networks. It should also provide capacity development to reduce vulnerability to poverty and HIV/AIDS through increasing knowledge, awareness, skills and opportunities.

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