

Basic Education in Nigeria: between global targets, local challenges, educational inequalities, and curricular (in)justice¹

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria, as a member of the United Nations, adopted the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, aiming to align national policies with global objectives. However, progress has remained slow, particularly regarding SDG 4. This study critically examines how equity is understood and enacted in access to basic education in Nigeria, and the extent to which national policies and practices are aligned with SDG 4. Methodologically, the study is grounded in qualitative research, combining bibliographic and documentary analysis of legal frameworks, national education plans, and official reports produced by the Nigerian government and international organizations, informed by critical and post-critical perspectives. The findings indicate that, despite legal provisions guaranteeing free and universal basic education, weak political commitment, combined with systemic disparities, inadequate infrastructure, and the socioeconomic challenges faced by families, continues to hinder access and progress toward the effective achievement of SDG 4.

KEYWORDS: Educational Policies. Social Inequality. Social Justice. 2030 Agenda. West Africa.

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Educação básica na Nigéria: entre metas globais, desafios locais, desigualdades educacionais e (in)justiça curricular

RESUMO

A Nigéria, como membro da Organização das Nações Unidas (ONU), adotou a Agenda 2030 e os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS) em 2015, visando alinhar as políticas nacionais aos objetivos globais. No entanto, o progresso permanece lento, especialmente em relação ao ODS 4. Este estudo analisa como a equidade é compreendida e implementada no acesso à educação básica na Nigéria, bem como o grau de alinhamento das políticas e práticas nacionais com o ODS 4. Por meio de revisão teórica e análise documental de marcos legais, planos nacionais de educação e relatórios oficiais produzidos pelo governo nigeriano e por organismos internacionais, o estudo destaca barreiras persistentes à justiça curricular. Os resultados indicam que, apesar das disposições que garantem educação básica gratuita e universal, o fraco comprometimento político, aliado a disparidades sistêmicas, infraestrutura precária e desafios socioeconômicos, limita o acesso e o progresso rumo ao cumprimento do ODS 4.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Políticas Educacionais. Desigualdade Social. Justiça Social. Agenda 2030. África Ocidental.

La educación básica en Nigeria: entre los objetivos globales, los desafíos locales, las desigualdades educativas y la (in)justicia curricular

RESUMEN

Nigeria, como miembro de las Naciones Unidas, adoptó la Agenda 2030 y los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) en 2015 con el fin de alinear las políticas nacionales con los objetivos globales. Sin embargo, el progreso ha sido limitado, especialmente en relación con el ODS 4. Este artículo examina críticamente la igualdad y la equidad en la educación nigeriana, evaluando su coherencia con el ODS 4 y las políticas educativas asociadas. Este estudio analiza críticamente cómo se comprende y se implementa la equidad en el acceso a la educación básica en Nigeria, así como el grado de alineación de las políticas y prácticas

nacionales con el ODS 4. Metodológicamente, el estudio se basa en una revisión teórica y un análisis documental de marcos legales, planes nacionales de educación e informes oficiales elaborados por el gobierno nigeriano y organizaciones internacionales, desde perspectivas críticas y poscríticas. Los resultados muestran que, a pesar de los marcos legales que garantizan la educación básica gratuita y universal, el débil compromiso político, sumado a las desigualdades sistémicas, las infraestructuras deficientes y los desafíos socioeconómicos, limita el acceso y el progreso hacia el logro efectivo del ODS 4.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Políticas educativas. Desigualdad social. Justicia educativa. Agenda 2030. África Occidental.

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Introduction

As a committed member of the United Nations, Nigeria adopted the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the aim of aligning national policies with global development priorities. Within this framework, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) assumes particular significance, as it emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education. This study critically examines how equity is conceived and implemented in access to basic education in Nigeria, while simultaneously assessing the extent to which national policies and practices correspond with the objectives of SDG 4.

Considering the country's estimated population of 241,566,783 inhabitants (UN, 2024), alongside its pronounced regional and social inequalities, Nigeria constitutes a particularly relevant case for analyzing the tensions between international public policy commitments and the persistent structural barriers to educational access. Although the National Policy on Education and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme were established with the commitment to providing free, compulsory, and inclusive education for all, Nigeria continues to record the highest number of out-of-school children globally (UNICEF, 2025),

thereby raising critical questions concerning the effectiveness of these policy interventions. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's (2003, 2009, 2010) conception of justice as parity of participation, this study undertakes a review of academic literature on basic education and SDG 4 in Nigeria to examine progress towards global targets considering local realities.

Through a review of the literature, the study identifies persistent barriers to educational access, including socioeconomic inequalities, cultural practices, regional disparities, and chronic underfunding, all of which disproportionately affect girls in rural communities and other marginalized groups. By analyzing Nigeria's progress in relation to SDG 4 indicators, the study seeks to contribute to scholarship on curriculum justice and to inform equity-oriented policy responses capable of advancing beyond rhetorical commitments towards substantive social justice in education.

The Concept of Basic Education in the Nigerian Context

The trajectory of basic education in Nigeria dates back to 1976 with the introduction of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme under General Olusegun Obasanjo, which guaranteed free primary education and significantly expanded school enrolment. In 1999, the initiative evolved into the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, extending the scope to encompass nine years of schooling (six years of primary education and three years of junior secondary education), as well as adult and non-formal education, thereby consolidating the legal and institutional foundations for educational reform. This development aligns with the 1999 Constitution, in which Section 18 establishes the government's commitment to eradicating illiteracy and providing "free, compulsory and universal primary education, free secondary education and free adult literacy programmes" (Nigeria, 1999). The UBE programme was therefore conceived as universal, free, and compulsory, with the objective of guaranteeing unrestricted access to nine years of formal basic education for all school-age

Nigerian children, reducing dropout rates, and improving the relevance, quality, and efficiency of the educational system (Maigida, 2017).

Recognizing education as a collective responsibility, a decisive milestone was the enactment of the Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act on 18 March 2004, which was promulgated on 26 May of the same year. The legislation established the compulsory and free provision of basic education, from primary to junior secondary level, by all tiers of government—local, state, and federal—while also defining, in Part 1, Section 2(1) of the UBE Act 2004, the specific responsibilities of the federal government.

Without prejudice to the provisions of item 30 of Part II of the Second Schedule and item 2(a) of the Fourth Schedule of the 1999 Constitution relating to primary education, the intervention of the Federal Government under this Act shall only be an assistance to the States and Local Governments in Nigeria for the purpose of ensuring uniform and qualitative basic education throughout the country (Nigeria, 2004, p. 115).

State and local governments are jointly responsible for the provision and financing of basic education, while the federal government contributes 2% intervention funds, subject to evidence that the state will provide a 50% counterpart contribution. To coordinate the programme across the 36 states of the federation, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) was established on 7 October 2004 under the provisions of the UBE Act (Nigeria, 2004). The Commission performs intervention, coordination, and monitoring functions aimed at strengthening the capacity of governments entities and communities in ensuring access to quality basic education. UBEC operates in collaboration with the State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs) and the Local Government Education Authorities (LGEAs).

In 2008, further revisions to educational policy expanded the definition of basic education by recognizing early childhood care and education as an integral component of it. However, Early Childhood Education and Development is divided into two age categories: children aged 0–4 years, whose education takes place in crèches and nursery schools under the responsibility of the private sector and social welfare services; and children aged 5–6 years, who are incorporated into the formal education sector (Nigeria, 2013). This expansion sought to align Nigeria's educational framework with the global objectives of Education for All (Igbokwe, 2018). To formally integrate one year of pre-primary education into the programme, the National Policy on Education was revised once more in 2012, resulting in the publication of its 6th edition in 2013, with updated implementation commencing in September 2014. Consequently, basic education, beginning at age six, became a continuous ten-year process for school-age children.

The central objective of basic education in Nigeria is to ensure lifelong literacy and numeracy, promote effective communication, scientific and critical thinking, and strengthen moral and social values, patriotism, a sense of justice, and national unity. It also seeks to develop learners' capacity to adapt to changing contexts and acquire practical skills that enable them to function productively within society.

According to the National Policy on Education (Nigeria, 2013), universal basic education comprises one year of pre-primary education, six years of primary education, and three years of junior secondary education. Nevertheless, although Early Childhood Education is conceptually recognized within the policy framework, it is not formally included within the operational scope of the Universal Basic Education programme.

Early Childhood Education is organized into two stages. Early Childhood Care Education (ECCE), intended for children aged 0–4 years, involves care, protection, stimulation, and learning in crèches and nursery schools, with the objective of facilitating the transition from home to school,

supporting families, and promoting social and moral values. At this level, the government establishes minimum standards, while programme administration remains largely private.

Pre-primary education, intended for children from the age of five, emphasizes play-based learning, encouraging inquiry, creativity, cooperation, and the early development of literacy and numeracy skills (Nigeria, 2013).

Primary education, designed for children aged 6–12 years, consolidates competencies in literacy, numeracy, communication, critical thinking, and ethical formation through a curriculum that includes English Language, a Nigerian language, Mathematics, Basic Science and Technology, Religion and National Values, Pre-vocational Studies, Cultural and Creative Arts, as well as optional subjects from the fourth year onward, such as French and Arabic. Subsequently, Junior Secondary Education, which lasts three years, deepens these areas of study and seeks to prepare students for entrepreneurship and further education, while reinforcing civic responsibility, moral values, respect for labour, and national unity.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative inquiry that combines bibliographic and documentary research procedures to analyze the tensions between the global targets of SDG 4 and the reality of basic education in Nigeria. The investigation adopts a critical and post-critical perspective, theoretically informed by Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of capitals (1986, 2005), Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice (2003, 2009, 2010) and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework (1989, 1991). In this sense, the selection and reading of sources go beyond the mere description of policies and indicators, seeking instead to reveal, through these lenses, how structures of power and inequality are reproduced within the educational field.

The bibliographic Research search was carried out in the ERIC and Google Scholar databases, complemented by manual searches in the reference

lists of articles and documents already identified. Although this is not a systematic review, explicit selection criteria were adopted: priority was given to texts that directly address basic education in Nigeria, SDG 4 and related dimensions, such as funding, regional inequalities, gender and curricular justice, published mainly between 2000 and 2025, in English and, when available, in Portuguese and Spanish. Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, research reports and documents produced by multilateral organizations were privileged, with the aim of building a corpus capable of supporting a critical analysis of the relations between global goals and local challenges in guaranteeing the right to education.

In addition to the academic literature, documentary research was conducted, in line with Sá-Silva, Almeida and Guindani (2009), understood as the examination of legal frameworks, plans and reports that express official positions and guide state action. The core documents selected were the National Policy on Education (Nigeria, 2013), the Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act (Nigeria, 2004), the 1999 Constitution, the UNESCO Incheon Declaration (2015) and Nigeria's SDG 4 country profile produced by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UNESCO, 2025), as well as UNICEF reports on out-of-school children. These documents were chosen because they simultaneously condense the legal and programmatic commitments undertaken by the Nigerian state concerning the universalization of free and compulsory basic education and the international indicators and parameters used to monitor SDG 4.

The selected corpus was subjected to critical reading, and the information was organized around three central analytical categories: education funding, regional and gender disparities, and the implications of these factors for the promotion of curricular justice. This approach made it possible to produce a theoretically informed and argumentative interpretation that goes beyond the descriptive presentation of data, seeking to grasp the structural roots of educational exclusion and the tensions between policy and the Nigerian reality.

Finally, it is acknowledged that the study faces important limitations, given the scarcity of research that systematically articulates funding, regional inequalities, gender and curricular justice in the Nigerian context, as well as the predominance of macro-level analyses over ethnographic investigations in schools and classrooms. These gaps, however, reinforce the exploratory and critical character of the study: by bringing together and reinterpreting academic literature and official documents through the lens of social justice and intersectionality, it seeks, on the one hand, to systematize scattered evidence and, on the other, to make visible contradictions that call for future research more closely grounded in concrete curricular and pedagogical practices.

A Theoretical Framework for Understanding Educational Inequalities and Curriculum (In)Justice

Educational inequalities in Nigeria cannot be understood through a one-dimensional lens. While Bourdieu's theory of capital (1986; 2005) explains how the cultural and economic inheritance of families privileges certain groups within the school system, Fraser's perspective demonstrates that such disparities constitute a failure of redistributive justice, whereby the state fails to allocate resources capable of mitigating disadvantages rooted in social origin. This dynamic becomes even more complex when examined through Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality (1989, 1991), which reveals that exclusion is not merely a matter of class, but rather emerges from the intersection of gender, territory (rural/urban location), and ethnicity, thereby placing, for instance, girls in Northern Nigeria in positions of heightened vulnerability.

As these forms of capital mutually reinforce one another, students from privileged backgrounds tend to mobilize cultural dispositions and social networks that guarantee access to schools and learning opportunities of higher quality, thereby generating cumulative advantages across

generations. Conversely, students from disadvantaged contexts remain excluded from such cycles of accumulation (Huang, 2019).

Although Bourdieu recognizes the tendency of schools to reproduce inequalities, he also underscores the normative responsibility of educational systems to ensure democratic access to knowledge. In response to persistent disparities, states have implemented equity-oriented policies; however, such interventions frequently fail to confront the underlying structural inequalities that sustain exclusion.

Nancy Fraser (2003, 2009, and 2010) reformulates this challenge by positioning redistribution as a central dimension of social justice, arguing that the unequal allocation of material and educational resources, particularly between urban and rural areas, undermines equity within educational systems. This perspective highlights how the maldistribution of resources perpetuates inequalities in learning conditions, a reality particularly evident in Nigeria, where regional disparities require deliberate redistributive measures from more privileged regions towards historically marginalized ones (Fraser, 2003, 2009; Cazden, 2012).

More recent theoretical developments further deepen this analysis through the framework of intersectionality, which challenges one-dimensional explanations of inequality. Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) framework demonstrates that educational disadvantage emerges from the interaction of multiple social positions, such as class, gender, race, and territory, rather than from isolated factors. Intersectionality therefore reveals how policies and practices that treat students as a homogeneous group obscure overlapping structures of disadvantage and systematically exclude those situated at multiple margins of society.

Curriculum and Social Justice in the Context of Nigerian Education

Curriculum has historically functioned as a powerful mechanism for the reproduction of social order and as a means through which dominant groups preserve their privileges and status (Connell, 1993). Rather than

operating primarily as an instrument of social transformation, the curriculum frequently functions in ways that reinforce pre-existing inequalities. Paradoxically, the very curriculum that claims to challenge social disparities often becomes the mechanism through which such inequalities are reproduced and sustained.

Fraser (2009, 2010) conceptualizes justice as the establishment of social arrangements that enable individuals to interact on equal terms. Within the Nigerian context, this implies understanding the curriculum as a contested terrain. In a society characterized by extensive cultural and religious diversity, the curriculum frequently fails to recognize these identities in pursuit of standardized global goals, thereby undermining parity of participation from the very foundation of pedagogical practice.

Within this framework, curriculum injustice in Nigeria manifests concretely through three interconnected dimensions: chronic underfunding, which empties the curriculum of emancipatory knowledge and reduces learning in peripheral regions to basic literacy; regional disparities, which transform geography into a mechanism of exclusion from valued forms of knowledge; and gender norms that remain insufficiently challenged by the curriculum, thereby perpetuating the intersectional invisibility (Crenshaw, 1991) of girls, particularly in Northern Nigeria. This configuration undermines the counter-hegemonic function of the curriculum (Connell, 1993) while simultaneously compromising the equitable redistribution of resources, the recognition of diversity, and the representation of marginalized communities in curriculum decision-making processes (Fraser, 2004).

Nigeria, as a profoundly heterogeneous society marked by extensive cultural, religious, social, and economic diversity, encompasses differing belief systems, social classes, and living conditions, ranging from privileged groups to historically marginalized populations. In response to this complex social reality, successive educational reforms have been introduced under the promise of ensuring equal, free, and universal access to education, with the

objective of guaranteeing that no individual or social group is excluded from full participation in social life (Nigeria, 2004; 2013).

Although these reforms have been accompanied by optimistic rhetoric concerning the creation of an inclusive and socially responsive curriculum aimed at building a just and equitable society through the provision of free and equal access to education (Nigeria, 2013), the curriculum continues to reproduce the very structures of inequality it purportedly seeks to eradicate. This reality therefore necessitates differentiated approaches capable of addressing the specific needs of diverse individuals and social groups within society.

As Edgar (2022) observes, although policy documents frequently claim to provide equitable and high-quality curricula for all learners, many students do not meaningfully engage with these curricular proposals. This disjuncture between policy discourse and educational practice indicates that curriculum justice extends beyond formal declarations of equality, requiring concrete actions directed towards confronting structural inequalities and guaranteeing genuine access to meaningful learning experiences. Consequently, the promotion of curriculum justice necessitates the reduction of inequalities and the provision of equitable education through inclusive and contextually responsive pedagogical practices capable of enhancing educational outcomes.

To this end, Raewyn Connell (1993) proposes three principles for a counter-hegemonic curriculum justice in the reconstruction of dominant educational systems. The first is universal participation and common schooling, which ensures that all students share a common educational experience regardless of social background. The second involves reorienting the curriculum towards the interests of the least advantaged, thereby shifting educational priorities away from dominant social groups towards the needs of marginalized populations. The third principle concerns a commitment to the radical production of equality, which requires active engagement in transforming the social and institutional structures that generate inequality.

The promotion of curriculum justice in Nigeria is therefore constrained by a structural triangle of challenges. Without equitable redistribution of resources (Fraser, 2003), schools located in marginalized regions lack the material conditions necessary to implement curricula that extend beyond basic instruction, thereby condemning students to limited acquisition of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This dynamic is further aggravated by gender norms that exclude girls in Northern Nigeria from access to emancipatory knowledge, thereby denying them forms of identity recognition (Crenshaw, 1991). The result is a curriculum that, rather than functioning as an instrument of transformation, operates as a technology for the reproduction of inequality.

In this regard, Fraser's (2004) tripartite model of social justice — redistribution, recognition, and representation — offers a robust analytical framework for understanding curriculum injustices in Nigeria. Redistribution, as a foundational pillar, requires the equitable allocation of educational resources to economically disadvantaged groups, particularly rural schools that have been systematically neglected and deprived of essential pedagogical infrastructure. This premise resonates with Keddie's (2012, p. 2) assertion that “when disadvantage is structurally economic, redistributive interventions become imperative,” thereby underscoring the urgency of policies capable of translating egalitarian rhetoric into concrete material action.

Recognition involves valuing diverse cultures, histories, languages, and systems of knowledge within the curriculum. Within the educational context, Cazden (2012) argues that this requires ensuring, in the everyday reality of schools rather than merely within policy discourse, that all students have access to a coherent curriculum, with particular attention given to those historically excluded from such opportunities due to cultural and social inequalities that produce hierarchies, devaluation, and unequal recognition.

Expressed by Fraser (2009, p. 19) as the “political dimension of justice,” representation involves listening to and incorporating the voices of those

affected by curriculum decisions, particularly marginalized communities, thereby broadening opportunities for equitable political participation and voice within curriculum processes. These dimensions are intrinsically connected to broader questions of justice, access, equity, and inclusion in schooling. As Riddle, Mills, and McGregor (2023) argue, the multiplicity of approaches to curriculum equity demonstrates that social justice in education constitutes a complex and contested domain, without a singular solution, but rather multiple possible pathways towards educational opportunities that promote equity alongside quality.

Within the Nigerian context, the three dimensions of curriculum injustice — material, identitarian, and political — constitute what Fraser (2009) describes as misframing, whereby global policies such as SDG 4 are implemented without sufficient contextual mediation, disregarding local epistemologies and reproducing colonial hierarchies. This dynamic can only be disrupted when educational policies structurally integrate Fraser's tripartite framework through the equitable redistribution of resources, the recognition of subordinated epistemologies, and the effective political representation of marginalized communities within curriculum architecture and decision-making processes.

Social Inequality and Educational Disparities in Nigeria

Analyses of curriculum policies in Nigeria reveal the persistence of structural inequalities originating from the broader social sphere, which permeate the educational field and cannot be understood in isolation from other dimensions of injustice. Particularly notable are the geographical disparities between rural and urban areas, which place rural students at a disadvantage (Naim, 2025), as well as institutionally produced inequalities associated with inadequate state funding and the precarious condition of school infrastructure.

In a country characterized by profound socioeconomic disparities, education is widely acknowledged as a fundamental mechanism for expanding opportunities and, by extension, reducing social inequalities. Nevertheless, education does not exist in isolation (Mao & Sun, 2023); rather, it reflects broader inequalities arising from interconnected social, cultural, economic, and political factors.

Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 2005) advances a critical understanding of the concept of capital by arguing that it should be conceived as a structuring principle of social relations and a central element in the reproduction of inequalities. From his perspective, capital is not confined to the economic sphere alone, but also encompasses cultural, social, and symbolic forms, all of which are accumulated, invested, transmitted, and converted into one another. These various forms of capital constitute the range of resources mobilized by social actors in the contest for positions of power and recognition across different social fields, thereby contributing either to the maintenance or transformation of existing hierarchies within society.

With the development of the economy and society, education has gradually become an important factor influencing occupational attainment, income generation, and even social status. In essence,

education plays a critical and definite role in development process more broadly within the scope of economic growth, workforce development, environmental sustainability, health, nutrition, peace and social justice (Oghenekohwo e Torunarigha, 2018, p.10).

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental mechanism for expanding opportunities and reducing social inequalities and is commonly perceived by families as both an asset and a strategic investment. According to Mao and Sun (2023, p. 186), this perception is “deeply rooted in people’s minds.” However, although economic resources facilitate the acquisition of

cultural capital — such as educational qualifications and socially valued knowledge — schools frequently interpret these advantages as evidence of individual merit, while disregarding the structural privileges that underpin them. Children from low-income backgrounds, on the other hand, encounter significant barriers to accessing quality education due to limited resources and their inability to attend better schools (Peer, 2025). Furthermore, unstable living conditions, stress, and hunger negatively affect both their academic performance and overall well-being.

Under such circumstances, greater governmental commitment to education would have provided this category of children with the opportunity to realize the promise of a just and egalitarian society, as enshrined in the National Policy on Education (Nigeria, 2013). In the work of Nancy Fraser (2010), justice is conceptualized as the existence of social arrangements that enable individuals to interact with one another on equal terms. Although her analysis focuses primarily on adults, this framework remains equally valuable for understanding access to education, as it draws attention to the social structures and institutional patterns that generate inequality and prevent individuals from being recognized as equals.

According to Fraser (2010), combating injustice requires the continuous examination and dismantling of these structural constraints in order to create conditions in which all individuals can participate as full and equal partners in social interaction. This responsibility rests upon the government, which must guarantee access and equitable participation for all school-age children through the rigorous implementation of public policies.

Consequently, UNESCO advocated the allocation of at least 15% of public expenditure to education (UNESCO Incheon, 2016) as a strategy through which countries committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) could attain global educational targets. Within this context, Zickafoose et al. (2004, p. 2) maintain that “funding is vital to the quality of education.” This understanding underscores the fact that adequate investment in education constitutes an essential element in the promotion of

inclusive, equitable, and quality education, as envisaged in the fourth Sustainable Development Goal, which is directed towards ensuring universal access to quality education and reducing educational inequalities.

Nevertheless, the authors of the study identified inadequate funding as one of the principal challenges confronting the educational sector, given that resource shortages undermine school infrastructure, the provision of instructional materials, and the conditions necessary for expanding students' access to and retention within the school system. This reality disproportionately affects children from low-income families, many of whom may become entirely excluded from the educational system. Data concerning out-of-school children, presented in the national profiles of the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4), indicated a rate of 24.3% in 2023, thereby demonstrating the persistence of profound inequalities in access to education. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics emphasizes that such indicators reveal the urgent need to strengthen public policies on educational financing and to expand the conditions necessary for school inclusion.

Etor, Ekpenyong, and Sule (2020) observe that the inadequate provision of human, material, and infrastructural resources resulting from educational underfunding has led to the adoption of school admission criteria conditioned upon the availability of classrooms, equipment, instructional materials, and qualified personnel. Such logic reveals profound structural limitations within the educational system and restricts a significant proportion of the population from exercising their right to education.

This situation stands in direct contradiction to the conception of social justice advanced by Fraser (2010), for whom democratic societies must guarantee effective conditions for participatory parity among social actors. By restricting educational access based on resource scarcity, the State contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities and to the exclusion of historically marginalized groups, thereby preventing different individuals from establishing themselves on equal terms.

Within this context, the inability of the State to fully discharge its political and financial responsibilities towards education disproportionately affects the most vulnerable populations within society. Such neglect constitutes a grave violation of the principles of access, equity, and social justice in educational provision, thereby compromising not only the right to schooling, but also the broader possibilities for social inclusion, social mobility, and active civic participation.

Because of this, Etor, Ekpenyong, and Sule (2020) describe educational funding in Nigeria as a case of “misplaced priority” (Etor, Ekpenyong & Sule, 2020, p. 85), arguing that successive governments have consistently failed to meet the educational funding recommendation proposed by UNESCO. Rather than sustained and targeted investment, educational funding has remained irregular and grossly inadequate, with a marked decline observed since 2015. According to the authors, these shortcomings stem from weak planning mechanisms, limited professionalism among policymakers, and poor accountability in budget implementation. In the absence of reliable data and transparent administration, they contend that educational funding will continue to remain disconnected from actual societal and institutional needs.

Unequal funding and the poor allocation of resources have contributed significantly to the creation of enduring disparities in access, quality, and opportunities within educational systems (Mao & Sun, 2023). Schools situated in more affluent areas are more likely to benefit from better-trained teachers, improved infrastructure, and adequate instructional materials, whereas schools in poorer regions continue to struggle with overcrowded classrooms and limited facilities. Over time, such disparities become normalized, causing inequality to appear inevitable rather than the consequence of deliberate political and economic choices.

When access to material resources, including public services such as education, is restricted, the ability of individuals to participate fully and on equal terms within social life is directly undermined. Nancy Fraser (2010) deepens this discussion by framing the unequal distribution of resources as a central issue of

injustice rather than merely a technical budgetary problem. According to the author, social inequalities and cultural marginalization are rooted in social structures that prevent individuals from participating equally within society. This, she argues, undermines what she conceptualizes as participatory parity, regarded as a fundamental condition for the realization of justice.

The consequences of this unequal distribution become even more evident when regional patterns are examined. Evidence presented by Uba, Muhammad, and Yusuf (2024) demonstrates that schools in parts of northern Nigeria, particularly in Kano State, frequently suffer from deteriorated infrastructure and inadequate learning conditions. Their documentation of overcrowded and dilapidated classrooms, where the majority of pupils are compelled to sit on the floor, reveals how deficient learning conditions in Kano State function as a mechanism of exclusion rooted in geographical location.

Rural and marginalized regions remain deprived of the institutional and material resources concentrated within urban areas, thereby reflecting an unequal pattern of distribution. Such spatial disparities restrict access to the accumulation of economic and cultural capital, since these regions receive fewer resources than urban areas, consequently limiting students' access to quality education. Peer (2025) documented a similar situation in rural India, where spatial disparities continue to affect students' school attendance rates. In the terms proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, this reflects unequal access to State-supported resources, which in turn constrains the ability of certain groups to acquire the forms of capital that schools recognize and reward.

Agbai, Okafor, and Egbedoyin (2021) demonstrate that, in 2019, the South-West region recorded the highest combined educational budget, followed closely by the South-South region, whereas the North-East region received significantly less funding. These funding disparities are reflected in literacy rates, with underfunded regions such as the North-East recording higher levels of illiteracy. Such educational disadvantages subsequently give rise to broader social problems, including insecurity and insurgency, thereby revealing how educational inequality extends into other dimensions of social life.

These conditions entrap schools in poorer regions within persistent cycles of deprivation. Limited economic capital constrains the quality of education such schools can provide and reduces students' access to the cultural and institutional resources valued within the educational system. Consequently, education ceases to function as a pathway to social mobility and instead becomes a mechanism for reproducing existing inequalities.

The framework advanced by Nancy Fraser (2010) deepens this analysis by insisting that addressing these problems requires more than merely expanding access or superficially improving educational outcomes. What is required are structural reforms grounded in redistributive justice, capable of confronting the root causes of material inequality. Transparent budgeting, needs-based funding, and accountable governance are indispensable if resources are to be effectively directed towards the communities most in need. In the absence of such measures, educational inequality will continue to both reflect and reinforce broader patterns of social exclusion.

Another limiting factor identified is the educational level of parents, which significantly shapes parental involvement in their children's education. Parents with higher educational qualifications tend to transmit more than academic support alone; they also pass on attitudes, expectations, and modes of interaction with schools. Mao and Sun (2023) describe this phenomenon of inherited educational disadvantage as the intergenerational transmission of educational inequality, a concept that closely reflects Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. Children who grow up familiar with school norms and academic language are more likely to succeed, not necessarily because they are inherently more capable, but because the educational system itself is structured around what they already know.

Pierre Bourdieu helps us to understand educational inequality as something intrinsic to society itself, rather than as a condition resulting merely from individual failure. He extends the concept of capital beyond money and material resources, arguing that individuals also possess forms of cultural, social, and symbolic capital which shape the ways in which they

navigate social institutions, including schools. These forms of capital are accumulated and transmitted over time, thereby granting certain groups clear educational advantages while simultaneously restricting the opportunities available to others (Bourdieu, 1986).

The multiple dimensions of inequality demand a paradigmatic shift capable of moving beyond single-axis analyses of access to education within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. Such inequalities are also manifested in cultural practices present across several African communities, including Nigeria, where gender norms have historically placed girls at a disadvantage through the provision of less educational support in comparison to boys. Expectations surrounding gender roles, marriage, and inheritance continue to shape family decisions and further deepen educational disparities.

Etor, Ekpenyong, and Sule (2020) describe how entrenched gender discrimination and early marriage remain major obstacles to girls' education, particularly within the northern regions of the country. They explain that many families perceive the education of girls as an economic loss, since daughters are expected to marry into other families and are therefore not regarded as long-term contributors to family sustenance. By contrast, the education of boys is often prioritized because sons are expected to inherit family property and preserve the family lineage. As the authors observe, this logic is further reinforced through early marriage practices and the utilization of bride price payments to finance the education of boys, thereby intensifying the marginalization of girls within the educational system.

This multifaceted disadvantage recalls the notion of intersectionality formulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), by demonstrating that individuals occupying multiple positions of marginalization often escape unidimensional forms of analysis. As Farah Jasmine Griffin (2017) argues, policies focused exclusively on gender, race, or poverty frequently neglect the experiences of non-white women. Within the Nigerian context, concentrating solely on gender parity in school enrolment, without taking into account cultural

norms, economic pressures, and regional inequalities, obscures the structural factors that continue to affect girls' educational experiences.

Viewed from this perspective, educational inequality is not merely the result of poor policy choices or isolated socioeconomic factors. Rather, it is produced within a web of overlapping social structures that mutually reinforce one another. Thus, Nancy Fraser argues that, in order to overcome injustice, the patterns that constrain the possibilities of participatory parity must be continuously examined and dismantled so as to enable individuals to participate on equal terms, "as full partners in social interaction" (Fraser, 2007, p. 27).

In this regard, it is important to consider intersectionality, as conceptualised by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), as a framework capable of deliberately explaining and examining the different ways in which intersecting social markers of difference affect individuals both within and across groups (Tefera, Power & Fischman, 2018). Understanding the educational exclusion of girls through this perspective demonstrates that any meaningful attempt at reform must simultaneously take into account cultural practices, economic conditions, and structural power relations that shape education within everyday life.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Nigeria's Progress

Adebami and Adesanmi (2018) provide a comprehensive description of sustainable development, defining it as the implementation of policies and programmes that generate immense economic benefits capable of meeting the present needs of the population without compromising the needs of future generations (Adebami & Adesanmi, 2018). When the history of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is examined, it becomes evident that the 17 goals adopted by the United Nations were designed to address the shortcomings of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), although significant in scope, the MDGs failed to achieve

many of their proposed targets, particularly in the area of education, across several countries, especially within Africa.

Consequently, the gaps identified within the MDGs necessitated the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with education occupying a prominent position as Goal 4. Education is described as “the key that will enable the achievement of many other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” (UN, 2017 apud Adegbami & Adesanmi, 2018, p. 3). A well-educated population is better equipped to overcome poverty, maintain healthy living conditions, and promote tolerance within diverse societies, all of which are crucial factors for the attainment of sustainable development.

The objective of SDG 4 is to ensure inclusive and equitable education by 2030. However, in Nigeria, persistent underfunding continues to undermine the attainment of this goal. UNESCO, through the Incheon Declaration (2016), recommended that countries allocate between 15% and 20% of public expenditure to education, a target which Nigeria has consistently failed to attain. In 2017, only approximately 6% of the national budget was allocated to the educational sector (Adegbami & Adesanmi, 2018). This percentage subsequently declined to 5.9% (2018–2019), 5.1% (2020–2021), and 4.3% (2022), thereby demonstrating the country’s increasing divergence from global recommendations (SDG 4 – Country Profile 2025).

This scarcity of resources generates what may be described as curricular impoverishment. Curriculum justice in Nigeria is undermined when underfunding restricts teaching to only the most basic elements, such as rudimentary literacy and numeracy, thereby preventing vulnerable students from gaining access to the “powerful knowledge” capable of fostering the critical thinking envisioned within the National Policy on Education.

According to SDG 4.1, UNESCO affirms that, by 2030, all boys and girls should complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education capable of producing relevant and effective learning outcomes. Similarly, the National Policy on Education of Nigeria (Nigeria, 2013), in Section 2, Item 12, stipulates that Basic Education shall be provided by the

government as compulsory, free, universal, and qualitative, comprising one year of pre-primary education, six years of primary education, and three years of junior secondary education.

According to UNICEF (2022), the primary school completion rate in Nigeria stood at 59% for boys and 51% for girls in 2020. In 2022, it was further reported that more than 50% of school-age girls were not attending school at the basic education level, with 48% of this population concentrated within the North-East and North-West regions alone, thereby revealing an alarming concentration of out-of-school girls within northern states of the country.

These barriers have produced an alarming deficit in gender parity, leaving school attendance rates below 1.0 in ten states — predominantly within the North — as of June 2022. UNESCO (2022) attributes the educational exclusion of girls to a network of interconnected barriers and obstacles rooted in structural, social, and institutional conditions. Poverty remains a central impediment, as the prohibitive costs associated with schooling compel many families to keep girls at home.

Although legal instruments exist to support girls' education, such as the Universal Basic Education Act (Nigeria, 2004), which stipulates that Nigeria shall “provide free and compulsory education for all Nigerian children” (Nigeria, 2004, A115), significant deficiencies persist in its implementation. UNESCO observes that the UBE Act allocates 2% of Nigeria's Consolidated Revenue Fund annually to the Universal Basic Education Commission (UNICEF, 2022, p. 2), yet these resources are not always utilized in an efficient or effective manner.

Furthermore, the three years of senior secondary education are not provided free of charge, which may help to explain the decline in enrolment figures from 3.9 million at the primary level to 3.7 million at the lower secondary level. By 2022, only 26 out of the country's 36 states had adopted the Child Rights Act (UBE Act, 2004), leaving 10 states — all concentrated in the northern region — without effective legal protection against practices

such as child marriage. Even in contexts where such laws exist, legal loopholes continue to permit child marriage practices.

Drawing from the principles of curriculum justice advanced by Raewyn Connell, the necessity for a counter-hegemonic perspective within the Nigerian educational system becomes increasingly evident. For equity to advance meaningfully, curricular content must be reoriented towards the interests and realities of the less privileged, thereby moving beyond a curriculum logic that merely reproduces the cultural capital of dominant elites while reinforcing the exclusion of those already marginalized through the “misplaced priority” embedded within State educational funding.

Final Considerations

The evidence examined throughout this study reveals that Nigeria is confronted with a profound educational paradox. Although the country possesses robust legal frameworks and an official discourse aligned with the global targets of SDG 4, political and fiscal practice continues to reveal what may accurately be described as a “misplaced priority.”

The systematic decline in budgetary allocation to basic education, within a context of rapid demographic growth, demonstrates that the universalization of access remains largely a rhetorical promise. Without the necessary redistribution of financial resources, the Nigerian State ultimately neglects the fundamental material foundations required for participatory parity, as proposed by Nancy Fraser, to move beyond aspiration and become a concrete reality.

Within this context, curriculum justice emerges not merely as a pedagogical complement, but as the very epicenter of the contradictions identified throughout this study. The analysis demonstrates that the Nigerian school system, constrained by underfunding and infrastructural precariousness, frequently operates as a mechanism for the reproduction of structural privileges rather than as a space for the recognition of diversity.

When deprived of adequate resources and contextual relevance, the curriculum fails to address the intersectional realities of gender and regional inequalities, particularly within the northern regions of the country. It is therefore concluded that curriculum justice is fundamentally compromised whenever the right to learning is curtailed by the inability of the State to guarantee equitable conditions of schooling for all social groups.

Finally, the fulfillment of the 2030 Agenda in Nigeria requires a decisive shift that moves beyond the mere numerical parity of school enrolment. This study reiterates that genuine equity can only be achieved if the country confronts the socioeconomic and cultural roots of exclusion.

It is imperative that political intentions be translated into concrete progress, ensuring that educational funding is treated as an investment in the democratization of knowledge. Only through a policy framework that integrates both economic redistribution and cultural recognition will it be possible to transform the Nigerian basic education system into an instrument of social transformation and substantive justice, capable of overcoming the historical barriers that continue to marginalize millions of children and young people across the country.

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