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## Destitute Learner in Nigeria Education System: Slogan or Reality?

**Mukaila. Ayinde. Olatoye**

Lagos State Ministry of Education, Education District 3, Department of Technology, Research and Remote Learning, Falomo, Lagos state, Nigeria.

**Email:** [olatoyekoncepts@gmail.com](mailto:olatoyekoncepts@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

Despite worldwide vows to provide “education for all,” extreme poverty continues to keep millions of youngsters out of meaningful educational opportunities. This study investigates the educational experiences of destitute learners—children living in extreme multidimensional poverty—in Nigeria’s formal education system. The research conceptualizes poverty as a structural predictor of educational disparity rather than a secondary background condition, drawing on the Capability Approach, Social Reproduction Theory, and Human Capital Theory. The paper uses policy analysis and secondary empirical data to show that many inclusive education programs are just rhetorical promises that don’t take into account the material limitations that the ultra-poor experience. Results show that access, retention, and learning outcomes for impoverished students are consistently compromised by hunger, hidden educational expenses, child labor, and inadequate targeting mechanisms. The essay makes the case for a rethinking of inclusive education that puts the most disadvantaged students first through integrated social protection, equity-based funding, and accountability frameworks that are sensitive to poverty.

**Keywords:** Education Policy; Multidimensional Poverty; Inclusive Education; Impoverished Students



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## 1. Introduction

Education is commonly regarded as both a fundamental human right and a key engine of social and economic progress. Global frameworks like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) reaffirm the commitment to inclusive and equitable quality education for everyone. However, these promises coexist with ongoing educational marginalization, particularly among children living in extreme poverty. According to UNESCO (2022), around 244 million children and adolescents are still out of school globally, with poverty being the most major predictor of exclusion.

Nigeria is a critical instance in this regard. Despite official commitments to universal basic education, the country has the highest proportion of out-of-school children globally. While existing research focuses on geographical disparities, gender gaps, and conflict-related exclusion, little attention has been dedicated to destitute learners—children whose educational paths are affected by extreme and overlapping deprivations. This essay tackles this gap by asking: To what extent do existing education policies make inclusive education a reality for Nigeria's poorest students?

**Understanding Destitute Learners** This study defines destitute learners as children from families facing severe multidimensional poverty. According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) and World Bank standards, destitution is defined as extreme income poverty (less than \$1.90 per day), chronic food insecurity, restricted access to healthcare and sanitation, inadequate housing, and high dependency ratios (World Bank, 2021).

This conception extends beyond income-based categories to include the cumulative disadvantages that influence children's educational involvement. Destitution has an impact on not only school access but also cognitive development, emotional well-being, and the ability to transform schooling into learning outcomes (Mani et al., 2013). As a result, poor students hold a unique position within educational systems, facing both material and institutional exclusion.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The study is based on three complementary theoretical approaches. First, Sen's Capability Approach highlights that educational achievements are dependent on individuals' actual freedoms to perform valued functions (Sen, 1999). Destitution limits vital capabilities—nutrition, health, and safety—reducing the effectiveness of education.

Second, Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory focuses on how education institutions perpetuate inequality by prioritizing dominant cultural capital (1986). Destitute students frequently lack the linguistic, social, and cultural resources valued in schools, resulting in marginalization and low academic expectations.

Third, Human Capital Theory describes how poverty limits household education investments due to immediate survival demands and large opportunity costs (Becker, 1964). For impoverished families, education competes with child labor and caregiving responsibilities, exacerbating intergenerational poverty.

When taken as a whole, these frameworks present poverty not as a passive background condition but as an active force influencing educational outcomes.

## 3. Methodology and Data (Empirical Approach)

**3.1 Design of Research** Using a mixed-methods and empirical methodology, this study combines qualitative policy and documentary analysis with secondary quantitative data analysis. Given the study's emphasis on structural exclusion and the lived educational realities of impoverished students, which call for both statistical support and contextual interpretation, the methodology is suitable. The study examines how poverty affects educational access, participation, and learning outcomes in Nigeria by synthesizing nationally representative statistics and policy texts rather than producing primary survey data.

### **3.2 Information Sources Four Primary Data Sources are Used in the Empirical Analysis**

Nigeria Health and Demographic Survey (NDHS, 2018) used to look at health-related absenteeism, school attendance, child nutrition, and household poverty. The Nigeria Living Standards Survey (NLSS, 2018/19) offers information on child labor, household income, and educational expenses. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) provides national and subnational data on learning-adjusted years of education, enrollment, and dropout rates. Free Administrative and Policy Documents including data on the implementation of the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP), reports from the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), and Nigeria's National Policy on Education.

When combined, these sources enable the triangulation of educational outcomes, policy intent, and household-level deprivation.

**3.3 Key Variable Operationalization Poverty** In line with the MPI, a multidimensional poverty framework is used to operationalize destitution. If a child lives in a household that satisfies three or more of the following criteria, they are considered destitute: Inadequate housing (overcrowding or non-durable materials); high dependency ratio ( $\geq 4$  dependents per working adult); food insecurity or child stunting; lack of access to better water or sanitation; and income below the international extreme poverty limit (\$1.90/day). Instead of depending only on income metrics, this method captures overlapping deprivations.

Educational Results School enrollment status, attendance consistency (days missed each term), grade progression, and dropout are used to quantify educational results. Age-grade mismatch and literacy/numeracy benchmarks, where accessible, are examples of proxy learning markers.

**3.4 Method of Analysis** Descriptive and comparative methods are used in the quantitative study to look at how educational achievements differ between learners who are poor and those who are not. To identify intersecting disparities, results are broken down by gender, rural-urban location, and poverty quintile. Additionally, after adjusting for child age, gender, household size, and geography, logistic regression models are used to assess the likelihood of school attendance and dropout as a function of poverty status. The models offer reliable estimates of the direction and strength of connections, but they refrain from making causal claims.

Additionally, after adjusting for child age, gender, household size, and geography, logistic regression models are used to assess the likelihood of school attendance and dropout as a function of poverty status. The models offer reliable estimates of the direction and strength of connections, but they refrain from making causal claims. Targeting mechanisms, coverage of pro-poor activities, and alignment between policy pledges and budgetary allocations are the main topics of the qualitative component's thematic analysis of policy texts and implementation reports. This makes it possible to evaluate whether educational approaches effectively meet the limitations that impoverished students confront.

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**3.5 Moral Aspects** The study only uses publicly accessible materials and anonymised secondary data. All analyses adhere to ethical guidelines for social science research, and no primary data collection involving human participants was conducted.

**3.6 Restrictions** Although using secondary data improves national representativeness, it makes it more difficult to capture subjective student experiences and complex classroom dynamics. Additionally, because of data inadequacies, learning outcomes for the poorest kids are frequently underestimated. However, the validity of the results is strengthened by triangulation across several sources.

## **4. Obstacles to Education for Poor Students**

**4.1 Opportunity Costs and Economic Pressures** Many impoverished students are forced to work as children, engage in street dealing, or perform household chores due to economic hardship, which results in inconsistent attendance and early dropout. According to projections from the International Labour Organization (2021), child work continues to be a major obstacle to low-income households' ability to continue their education.

**4.2 Deficits in Nutrition and Health** Learning capacity and cognitive growth are severely hampered by malnutrition and untreated disease. According to empirical data, children who are malnourished perform 0.3–0.5 standard deviations worse on cognitive tests (Mwaniki, 2022). Hunger-related absenteeism is still common among the poorest students in Nigeria.

**4.3 Unspoken Expenses of Education** Even with official pledges to provide free primary education, impoverished children are nonetheless excluded due to hidden expenses including uniforms, textbooks, test fees, and transportation. According to national survey data, among the poorest households, primary school dropout rates reach 12% due to these expenses (DLSHEA, 2022).

**4.4 The Dimensions of Destitution by Gender** Gender norms and destitution combine to exacerbate marginalization. Girls from the poorest homes are more likely to marry young and work around the house, which restricts their ability to attend school. According to UNICEF (2023), almost 30% of girls in the poorest quintile of Nigeria get married by the time they are 15 years old.

## **5. Policy Reactions**

**Symbolic Commitment or Inclusive Education?** Nigeria has a strong verbal commitment to inclusivity in its educational policies. The goal of initiatives like conditional cash transfers, school nutrition programs, and universal basic education is to lower access obstacles. Evidence, however, points to substantial discrepancies between the intent and execution of policies.

Only a small percentage of eligible schools receive school food programs, and impoverished households who are unable to meet attendance or documentation criteria are frequently excluded from conditional cash transfers. Furthermore, less than 6% of Nigeria's education budget goes toward programs created especially for the poorest students, indicating that education finance is still poorly targeted. Therefore, rather than serving as revolutionary methods, inclusive education programs often serve as symbolic pledges.

## **6. Conversation**

The results highlight a fundamental paradox; impoverished students continue to be structurally disadvantaged despite the widespread support for inclusive education in policy debate. People who live in extreme poverty are excluded from education systems because they nonetheless operate under the presumption of minimum home stability. Equal learning outcomes cannot be achieved by education alone if hunger, health, and economic insecurity are not addressed.

According to this analysis, inclusive education frameworks need to address the material realities influencing learning in addition to access-based measures. A crucial test case for the legitimacy of equity-oriented educational changes is impoverished students.

**7. Implications for Policy** Five important policy directions are highlighted in the study funding based on equity utilizing MPI and poverty metrics. Integrated social protection that combines health, nutrition, and education services. systems of unconditional assistance for extremely destitute households. systems that track results by poverty status using disaggregated data. Poverty-sensitive pedagogy was the main focus of teacher preparation.

## **Conclusion**

This write up makes the case that impoverished students, highlight the shortcomings of the inclusive education frameworks in use today. "Education for all" will remain a catchphrase rather than a reality as long as education policy does not address extreme poverty as a structural barrier. Achieving social justice and genuine educational inclusion requires reorienting policy toward the needs of the extremely poor.

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