



EFFECTIVENESS, INCLUSION, AND SUSTAINABILITY OF ACCELERATED BASIC EDUCATION IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED NORTH-EAST NIGERIA

Iorhemen, Benjamin Terzungwe,

Department of Arts and Social Science Education, Faculty of Education,
Federal University of Kashere, Gombe State, Nigeria

benudus2016@gmail.com **ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1357-7859>
+2348034581621, +2348157825839

And

Musa, Ali Bwala

Department of Arts Education, Faculty of Education,
Yobe State University, Damaturu, Nigeria

musaalibwala69@gmail.com

And

Omega, Moses

Department of Arts Education, Faculty of Education, University of Ilorin,
Kwara State, Nigeria

omagamoses@gmail.com

And

Alhamdu, Yakubu

Department of Arts Education, Faculty of Education,
University of Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria

alhamduyakubu83@gmail.com

And

Ahmed, Muhammad Waziri

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education
Federal University of Kashere

ahmed.wazirikumo@fukashere.edu

Abstract

This study examines the Effectiveness, Inclusion, and Sustainability of Accelerated Basic Education Programme (ABEP) in Conflict-Affected North-East Nigeria in addressing the persistent challenge of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Yobe State. Specifically, the study seeks to: examine the socio-economic drivers of school exclusion; assess the effectiveness of ABEP in improving access and learning outcomes; evaluate the role of community engagement; and analyze institutional and sustainability challenges. A qualitative case study design was adopted. The population comprised 730,100 stakeholders, including policymakers, programme implementers, facilitators, learners, parents, and community leaders. Using purposive sampling, 215 participants were selected based on their direct involvement in the programme. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observation, and document analysis. Instrument validity was ensured through expert review and pilot testing, while reliability and trustworthiness were established through triangulation, member checking, dependability, and confirmability procedures. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, while frequency counts and percentages were used to show the prevalence of recurring themes. The findings reveal that



poverty (76%), insecurity (67%), inadequate infrastructure (60%), and socio-cultural norms (50%) are the major drivers of educational exclusion. The study concludes that while ABEP is an effective and inclusive model for learning recovery and human capital development in conflict-affected contexts, its sustainability depends on stronger institutional integration and government ownership. The study contributes to knowledge by demonstrating the need to simultaneously address efficiency (human capital outcomes) and equity (social inclusion) in education interventions. Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that Government should integrate education policies with social protection programmes, such as conditional cash transfers to support vulnerable households and maintain sustainable national security.

Keywords: Accelerated Basic Education Programme, Out-of-School Children, Non-Formal Education, Conflict-Affected Contexts, Nigeria

Introduction

Education is recognized globally as a fundamental human right and a critical driver of socio-economic transformation, human capital development, and social inclusion. It plays a central role in enhancing productivity, reducing poverty, and promoting sustainable development. Education is important for the development of any society, particularly because the goals of wealth creation, poverty reduction and value re-orientation can only be attained and sustained through an efficient educational system which imparts relevant skills, knowledge, capacities, attitudes and values into individuals (Khalil, Iorhemen, & Sani, 2021). Despite global commitments under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all, millions of children remain excluded from formal education systems, particularly in developing and conflict-affected regions (UNESCO, 2022).

Globally, an estimated 244–251 million children and youth are out of school, with Sub-Saharan Africa accounting for the largest share of this population (UNESCO, 2022). Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, represents the epicenter of this crisis, with estimates ranging between 10.5 million and 18.3 million out-of-school children (UNICEF, 2023). This implies that Nigeria alone contributes approximately 20%

of the global out-of-school population, highlighting the magnitude and urgency of the problem. Northern Nigeria experiences the worst situation, especially in the North-East geopolitical zone, which comprises Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe (BAY States). These regions have been significantly affected by prolonged insurgency, displacement, and socio-economic instability. It is estimated that over 2 million children in the North-East are out of school, with many facing barriers such as insecurity, poverty, and limited access to educational infrastructure (UNICEF, 2023). In Yobe State specifically, the number of out-of-school children remains alarmingly high, reflecting deep-rooted structural and systemic challenges. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the interaction between poverty and conflict has been identified as a major driver of school exclusion (UNESCO, 2022). Studies show that children in conflict zones are significantly less likely to enroll in school and more likely to drop out compared to those in stable regions (Justino, 2016). This aligns with findings that insecurity reduces both demand for education (fear, displacement) and supply (teacher shortages, infrastructure destruction).

However, the drivers of educational exclusion in these contexts are multidimensional and interrelated. Poverty



remains a dominant factor, as economically disadvantaged households often prioritize immediate survival needs over education (Basu & Tzannatos, 2023). Insecurity further exacerbates the problem by disrupting schooling systems, displacing communities, and creating unsafe learning environments (Burde et al., 2017). Additionally, socio-cultural norms, particularly those affecting girls, limit access to education through early marriage and domestic responsibilities (Unterhalter et al., 2020).

Empirical evidence suggests that Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) significantly improve access and learning outcomes. For instance, a randomized evaluation of accelerated “speed schools” in Niger found that participants were three times more likely to transition to secondary education and demonstrated improved literacy and numeracy skills (Diazgranados, Lee, Ohanyido, Hoyer, & Miheretu, 2022). Similarly, evidence from Nigeria indicates that AEPs improve literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional learning outcomes among out-of-school children (Anne, Andreas & Jing, 2025; Diazgranados, Lee, Ohanyido, Hoyer, & Miheretu, 2022). However, sustainability remains one of the most critical challenges in education interventions, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. Many programmes rely heavily on donor funding, raising concerns about continuity after donor exit (Pritchett, 2015). Additionally, community participation has been identified as a critical factor in the success of education interventions, particularly in marginalized and conflict-affected settings. Studies show that community engagement enhances enrolment, retention, and accountability (Bray, 2018; Nishimura et al., 2020).

However, despite the growing adoption of such interventions, there remains limited

empirical evidence on their effectiveness, inclusiveness, and sustainability, particularly in Nigeria. Most existing studies focus on access and learning outcomes, with less attention to institutional dynamics, policy integration, and long-term sustainability. Furthermore, the impending withdrawal of donor agencies raises critical concerns about programme continuity and scalability.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to evaluate the ABEP in Yobe State, focusing on its effectiveness in improving educational access and learning outcomes, its inclusiveness in reaching marginalized populations, and its sustainability within existing institutional frameworks.

Statement of the Problem

The global commitment to achieving inclusive and equitable quality education under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) continues to face significant setbacks, particularly in conflict-affected and low-income contexts. Despite decades of global interventions, approximately 244–251 million children and youth remain out of school worldwide, with Sub-Saharan Africa bearing a disproportionate share of this burden (UNESCO, 2022). Within this global crisis, Nigeria stands out as the country with the highest number of out-of-school children (OOSC), accounting for a substantial proportion of the global total. Recent estimates indicate that Nigeria has between 10.5 million and 18.3 million out-of-school children, depending on measurement frameworks and age cohorts (Lawal, 2024). Critically, Nigeria alone accounts for one in every five out-of-school children globally, underscoring the magnitude of the problem. At the subnational level, these disparities are even more pronounced. Northern Nigeria, particularly the North-East and North-West regions, accounts for the largest share of excluded children, with states such as Yobe



contributing significantly to this burden. For instance, Yobe State alone has been estimated to have over 730,000 out-of-school children, reflecting deep-rooted structural inequalities (UNICEF, 2024; Lawal, 2024). The situation is further exacerbated in the conflict-affected North-East region (Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe), where approximately 2 million children remain out of school, largely due to prolonged insurgency, displacement, and socio-economic instability (UNICEF, 2023). In these areas, access to education is severely constrained, with 56% of displaced children not attending school and only 29% of schools having adequately qualified teachers, indicating both access and quality deficits. These statistics reveal not only the scale of exclusion but also the fragility of the education system in conflict-affected contexts (UNICEF, 2024).

Beyond access, participation and retention indicators further highlight systemic inefficiencies. Nationally, only about 61% of children aged 6–11 regularly attend primary school, while attendance rates drop significantly in northern regions to approximately 53%, with even lower participation among girls. Gender disparities remain stark, as more than half of girls in some northern regions are not in school, reflecting entrenched socio-cultural barriers and gender norms. These patterns suggest that exclusion is not merely a function of availability but also of social, cultural, and economic constraints (UNICEF, 2024). Furthermore, the persistence of the OOSC crisis is closely linked to broader systemic and governance challenges. Evidence indicates that despite the availability of funding mechanisms such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) matching grants, over ₦135 billion in education funds remained unutilized between 2020 and 2024, reflecting inefficiencies in policy implementation and institutional

coordination. This paradox where significant financial resources coexist with widespread educational deprivation points to deeper issues of governance, accountability, and capacity within the education sector (Lawal, 2024). In addition, the learning crisis in Nigeria extends beyond school attendance to include learning poverty, defined as the inability of children to read and understand simple text by age 10.

In response to these challenges, non-formal and accelerated education interventions, such as the Accelerated Basic Education Programme (ABEP), have emerged as alternative pathways for addressing the needs of out-of-school children, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. These programmes aim to provide condensed, flexible, and inclusive learning opportunities that enable learners to acquire foundational skills and transition into formal education systems. While such interventions have shown promise in improving access and learning outcomes, there remains limited empirical evidence on their long-term effectiveness, inclusiveness, and sustainability, especially within the Nigerian contexts.

A critical gap exists in understanding whether programmes like ABEP can be effectively institutionalized within national education systems or whether they remain dependent on donor funding and external support. The anticipated withdrawal of development partners in several regions raises concerns about programme continuity, scalability, and sustainability, particularly in contexts where government capacity and resources are constrained.

Moreover, existing studies on OOSC in Nigeria have largely focused on descriptive analyses of the problem, with insufficient attention to the interaction between



programme effectiveness, community engagement, institutional frameworks, and sustainability dynamics. Therefore, the problem this study addresses is twofold: First, the persistent and large-scale exclusion of children from education in conflict-affected regions such as Yobe State, despite ongoing interventions; and second, the lack of comprehensive empirical evidence on the effectiveness and sustainability of accelerated education programmes designed to address this crisis.

Consequently, this study seeks to critically evaluate the ABEP as a strategic intervention for addressing the OOSC crisis in North-East Nigeria, with particular emphasis on its effectiveness in improving learning outcomes, its inclusiveness in reaching marginalized populations, and its sustainability within existing institutional and policy frameworks.

Objectives of the Study

Specifically, the study sought to;

1. examine the socio-economic drivers of school exclusion,
2. assess the effectiveness of ABEP in improving access and learning outcomes,
3. evaluate the role of community engagement, and
4. analyze institutional and sustainability challenges.

Research Questions

1. 1 What are the key socio-economic, cultural, and security-related factors contributing to the high rate of out-of-school children in Yobe State?
2. How effective is the Accelerated Basic Education Programme (ABEP) in improving access to education and learning outcomes?
3. What role does community engagement play in the success of ABEP?

4. How effective are existing institutional and policy frameworks in supporting ABEP?

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the effectiveness, inclusiveness, and sustainability of the Accelerated Basic Education Programme (ABEP) in Yobe State, North-East Nigeria. While the study is qualitative, frequency counts were used to quantify the prevalence of themes (quasi-quantification approach).

The study was conducted in Yobe State, a conflict-affected region in North-East Nigeria characterized by high levels of educational exclusion, insecurity, and socio-economic vulnerability. The state provides a critical context for examining interventions targeting out-of-school children (OOSC). The population comprised 730,100 stakeholders, including policymakers, programme implementers, facilitators, learners, parents, and community leaders. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 215 participants with direct experience and knowledge of the ABEP. Sample size was determined based on data saturation, where no new themes emerged after repeated interviews. The sample included: Policymakers (NMEC officials), Programme implementers (NGO staff, e.g., Save the Children), ABEP facilitators, learners, Community leaders and parents. Multiple qualitative data collection methods were employed to enhance triangulation and an in- depth understanding: Semi-structured interviews (to capture individual perspectives), Focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore shared experiences and social dynamics, Non-participant observation to assess learning environments and programme implementation while Document analysis was used to review policy and programme reports. To ensure the validity of the instruments, the interview guides, FGD



guides, observation checklist, and document review framework were subjected to expert review. Specialists in educational research, non-formal education, and qualitative methodology examined the instruments to determine their relevance, clarity, appropriateness, and alignment with the objectives of the study. Additionally, a pilot test was conducted with a small group of participants outside the main study area but with characteristics similar to the study population. Reliability was addressed through trustworthiness criteria as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The study ensured Credibility through triangulation of data sources and methods, prolonged engagement with participants, and member checking to confirm the accuracy of participants' responses and interpretations. Dependability through maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting data collection procedures, coding decisions, and analytical processes to ensure consistency and transparency while confirmability was established by ensuring that findings were grounded in participants' responses rather than researcher bias. Field notes, recorded interviews, and coding records were carefully preserved for verification. Finally, transferability through rich and detailed descriptions of the study context,

participants, and procedures to enable readers determine the applicability of findings to similar contexts.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: Familiarization with data; Initial code generation; Searching for themes; reviewing themes; Defining and naming themes and producing the report. Data coding was conducted using a manual coding approach, involving both inductive and deductive strategies: Inductive coding: Themes emerged directly from participants' responses. Deductive coding: Guided by the study objectives (e.g., effectiveness, inclusion, sustainability) Frequency counts were used to indicate the prevalence of themes across participants. These frequencies were converted into percentages to provide a clearer representation of dominant patterns, without compromising the qualitative nature of the analysis.

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent, and their anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage of the study.

Results and Interpretation

Table 1: *Factors Contributing to Out-of-School Children in Yobe State (n = 215)*

Factor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Poverty	32	76%
Insecurity	28	67%
Poor Infrastructure	25	60%
Cultural Norms	21	50%

Table1 depicts that poverty (76%) is the most significant driver of school exclusion, followed by insecurity (67%), infrastructure deficits (60%), and cultural norms (50%).

This indicates that the OOSC problem is multidimensional, driven by both economic and socio-political factors.

Table 2: Perceived Effectiveness of ABEP on Learning Outcomes and Access (n = 215)

Indictor	Frequency	Positive Response (%)
Improved Literacy	29	70%
Improved Numeracy	27	65%
School Transition Rate	31	58%
Increased Enrollment	24	75%

Table 2 demonstrates that ABEP significantly improves literacy (70%) and numeracy (65%), showing its effectiveness in

addressing learning deficits. The transition rate (58%) suggests moderate success in reintegrating learners into formal education.

Table 3: Impact of Community Engagement on ABEP Outcomes (n = 215)

Variable	Frequency	Agreement (%)
Improved Enrollment	34	81%
Increased Retention	33	79%
School Acceptance	35	83%

Table 3 reveals that community engagement significantly enhances programme outcomes, particularly school acceptance (83%) and

enrollment (81%). This suggests that community involvement is a critical success factor.

Table 4: Perceived Sustainability Challenges of ABEP (n = 215)

Challenges	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Funding Gaps	33	79%
Donor Dependency	30	71%
Weak Institutional Support	27	64%

Table 4 reveals that funding gaps (79%) and donor dependency (71%) are the most significant sustainability challenges. This suggests that the programme's success is externally driven, raising concerns about long-term viability.

Discussion of Results

First, the findings reveal that poverty (76%), insecurity (67%), infrastructure deficits (60%), and socio-cultural norms (50%) are the dominant drivers of school exclusion. Insecurity further compounds this by increasing the perceived and actual risks of schooling, leading to both supply-side

(school closures, teacher shortages) and demand-side (fear, migration) disruptions. This aligns with Education in Emergencies literature (e.g., Burde et al., 2017; Justino, 2016), which shows that conflict reduces both access and quality of education. The implication of this finding is that in Yobe State, structural barriers outweigh aspirational motivations, indicating that access constraints are more binding than demand-side willingness. Second, the study finds that ABEP significantly improves literacy (70%), numeracy (65%), and enrolment (75%), and transition rates (58%). ABEP succeeds because it addresses the



mismatch between learners' age and educational level, which is a key barrier in conventional schooling systems. Traditional schools often exclude overage learners, whereas ABEP provides flexible, accelerated pathways. These align with the principles of Teaching at the Right Level, which emphasize competency-based instruction. Third, community engagement was found to significantly enhance enrolment (81%), retention (79%), and school acceptance (83%). In conflict-affected and culturally sensitive contexts; education is not purely an institutional process but a socially negotiated practice. Community acceptance determines whether children especially girls are allowed to attend school. Bray (2018) highlights that community participation improves ownership and sustainability while Nishimura et al. (2020) show positive impacts on enrolment and school governance. However, some studies argue that community involvement may reinforce existing inequalities, especially gender norms (Unterhalter et al., 2020). These findings indicate that in this context, community engagement acted as a transformative force rather than a conservative one, suggesting effective programme design that mitigates cultural resistance. Fourth, the study identifies funding gaps (79%), donor dependency (71%), and weak institutional support (64%) as major constraints. Many education interventions in developing contexts are externally initiated and funded, leading to weak integration into national systems. Pritchett (2015) argues that many education reforms fail due to lack of system coherence.

Conclusion

This study concludes that ABEP is a highly effective intervention for addressing educational exclusion in conflict-affected contexts. It successfully improves access, learning outcomes, and social inclusion.

However, its long-term impact is constrained by institutional weaknesses and funding challenges. The study highlights the need for integrated approaches that combine educational interventions with socio-economic and policy reforms. Without addressing structural and institutional barriers, the gains achieved may not be sustained.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Government should integrate education policies with poverty alleviation and social protection programmes, such as conditional cash transfers and school feeding initiatives, to address the socio-economic factors contributing to school exclusion in Yobe State.
2. The Accelerated Basic Education Programme (ABEP) should be expanded and adequately funded to improve access, literacy, numeracy, and transition opportunities for out-of-school children, particularly in conflict-affected communities.
3. Community participation should be strengthened through collaboration with parents, religious leaders, traditional institutions, and community-based organizations to enhance enrolment, retention, and social acceptance of education.
4. Government and relevant stakeholders should institutionalize ABEP within the formal education framework by strengthening policy coordination, increasing domestic funding, and reducing overdependence on donor support to ensure long-term sustainability of the programme.



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