

“A tired child from the workshop cannot pick a book to read”: The context of learning deprivation among in-school children

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Introduction

Learning poverty (LP) is defined as the inability to read and comprehend a simple text by the age of 10.¹ To highlight the global learning challenge, the World Bank and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics created the Learning Poverty Index in 2019.² LP combines the share of primary-aged out-of-school children who are schooling deprived, and the share of pupils below a minimum proficiency in reading, who are learning deprived. The high burden of learning poverty is a sign that educational systems are not doing enough for students to acquire the fundamental skills for development².

Evidence prior to the COVID-19 pandemic showed that 6 out of 10 children in low-and middle-income countries were learning deprived.¹ However, recent results indicated that the pandemic has caused a sharp increase in global learning poverty and exacerbated inequalities in education.² Evidence showed that out of the total

number of children not in school worldwide, 20% of them live in Nigeria which translates to 1 in 5 children in Nigeria with girls making up a substantial proportion. In Nigeria, only one in every five children aged 5 to 9 years is literate, and barely half of the school-age children are in school. At least 1 in every 3 children does not complete primary school, and only approximately half of those who complete primary school progress to secondary school.^{3,4}

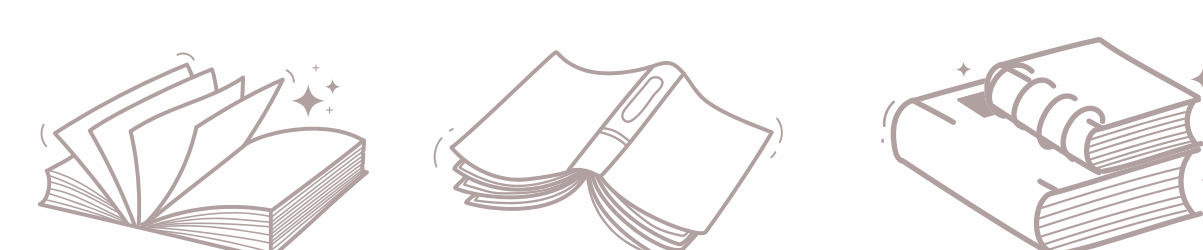
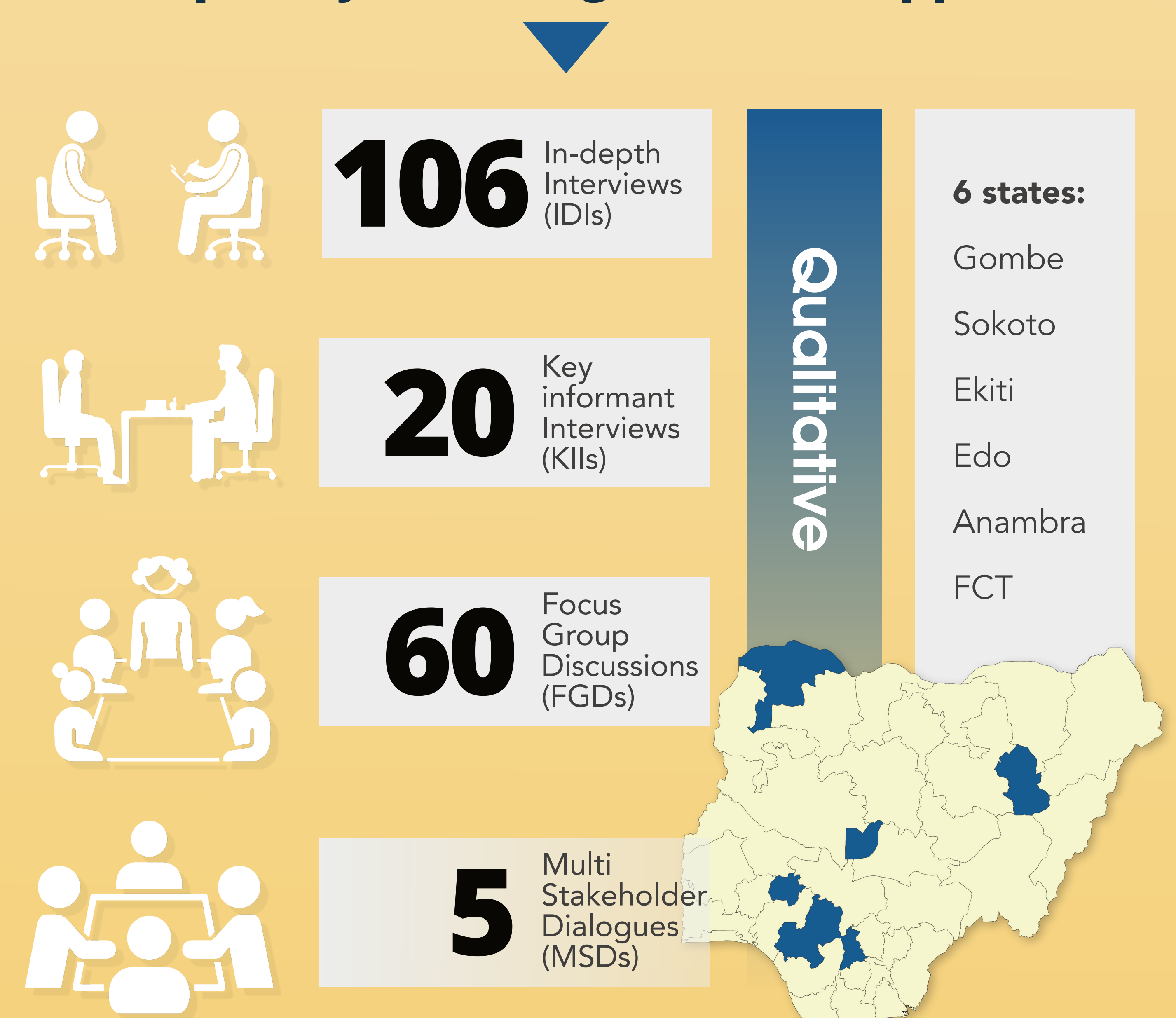
Learning deprivation makes it significantly challenging for children to learn the technical skills required to thrive in the competitive labour markets, as well as for countries to build the human capital required for sustained, inclusive economic growth.² Extreme poverty, child marriage, unemployment status of household heads, and parental indifference to schooling are all contributors to learning poverty. There is limited understanding of the context and dynamics of learning deprivation in Nigeria. This brief provides valuable information about the context of learning deprivation in selected Nigerian states.

Methods

The qualitative methods explored context and factors influencing learning among school-age children in Gombe, Sokoto, Ekiti, Edo, Anambra, and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). To better understand the context of learning poverty among in-school children in the study states, interviews were conducted utilizing a Participatory Learning and Action approach. The relevant government ministries, departments, and agencies participated in multi-stakeholder dialogues and provided insights into education policies, challenges to policy implementation, and factors that contribute to learning deprivation. In-depth interviews (IDI) with teachers and in-school children, as well as Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with parents, were used to describe experiences and perspectives about the causes of learning deprivation. FGD with community structures elicited information about the negative normative drivers impacting learning, whereas Key Informant Interviews (KII) with school administrators elicited information about institutional elements influencing learning. There were 106 IDIs, 20 KIIs, 60 FGDs, and 5 MSDs in all. Rigorous measures were undertaken to guarantee the confidentiality of the participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the National Health Research Ethical Committee. Qualitative data was organised and coded

using Dedoose software. In addition, thematic analytical approach was used to explore emerging patterns and themes within the data.

Participatory Learning & Action Approach



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Findings

Learning deprivation among in-school pupils was driven by a myriad of factors. The study findings indicated that these characteristics may be classified into four levels: individual, interpersonal, societal, and institutional.

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Individual-level factors influencing learning included disinterest, low self-esteem, and short attention span. Some drivers of disinterest in schooling were identified as inferiority complex, peer pressure, low parental commitment and a preference for income generating activities over school. Disinterested children were not motivated about attending school and this consequently limited academic progress with consequences for learning and development. Similarly, low self-esteem made students question their skills and capacity to cope with school, made them reluctant to participate in learning activities, resulting in poor academic achievement.

“Shy, yes, because most of them do not want their colleagues to make jest of them when they pronounce wrong things” –

Teacher, Female, Ekiti

“... if you give them instructions or you ask them to learn, they are not concentrating and they are becoming more arrogant” –

Teacher, Male, FCT

INTERPERSONAL FACTORS

School age children were exposed to different forms of child labour and were involved in hawking as a result of the poor socioeconomic status of the family and this in turn distracted them from learning. Farming was identified in Sokoto state as the most common form of child labour while participation in trading activities was reported in Anambra and Edo states. In the FCT, children who did not stay with their parents had to fend for themselves by engaging in menial jobs. **Child labour affects education outcomes as child labour limits school enrolment, influences dropout, and transition rates in school.**

“Their parents give them stuff to hawk and make money. Some children are enrolled as an apprentice to learn a skill, so immediately after school, they go to their workshop. A tired child from the workshop cannot come back and pick a book to read.” –

Community Leader, Female, Ekiti

Bullying and sexual harassment also contribute to learning deprivation. Perpetrators of sexual harassment were reported to be neighbours, family members, and teachers. These factors result in psychological difficulties that are harmful to the child's overall development.

“A teacher takes advantage of a girl; she becomes just like his wife. That is why a mother will not allow her daughter to go to school. She is thinking her daughter is studying but that is not

what is happening.” – **Community leader, Female, Sokoto**

SOCIETAL FACTORS

Gender norms had a detrimental impact on educational outcomes as society has distinct educational expectations for male and female children. Across all study states, the male child is expected to be more helpful and complementary to income generation activities at home. This in turn increased the likelihood of their participation in child labour that subsequently affected their learning. This is a notion rooted in the negative normative expectation that males should fend for the family. Female children, on the other hand, were denied education due to the erroneous impression that learning is a waste of time for the girl child.

“Yes, there are norms, especially for women and girls. They believe that when a girl goes to school, it does not have any importance to them especially they will say a girl child education is not important to the society because a woman will be getting married tomorrow, she will be under somebody, so her education is not important” –

Teacher, Female, FCT

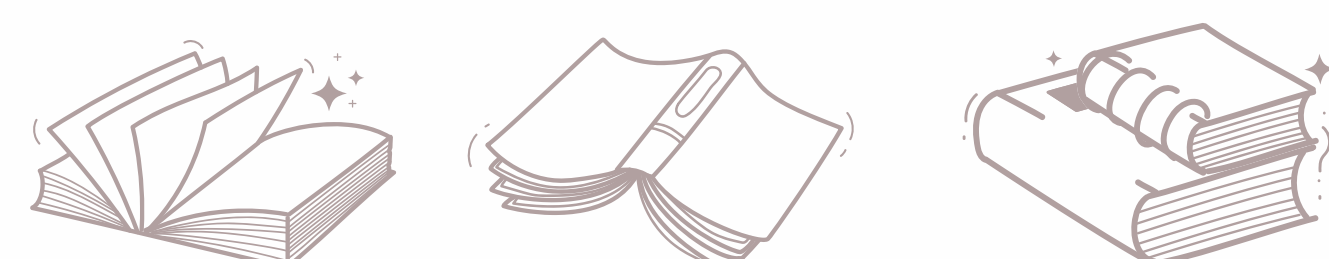
INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

The incompetence of teachers, lack of teacher training, proximity to school, inadequate school infrastructure, insufficient staffing, and insecurity were institutional factors that had a detrimental effect on children's academic performance. Lack of subject-matter teachers was reported in Ekiti state while findings from Anambra and Edo states showed that the human resource was insufficient due to the poor commitment of new teachers and inadequate arrangements for replacement of retired teachers. **The inexperience of teachers limits students' academic performance and diminishes the drive for self-improvement.** Inadequate staffing in rural areas in Sokoto state and the reliance on part-time teachers in Anambra state was reported to have a negative impact on learning.

“So, we have qualified teachers but that is the problem we are going to face by 2023; most of these people will retire and there will be a problem... The last set they employed here was in 2014, most of them do not know the techniques and the criteria.” –

Teacher, Female, Anambra

“The teachers are not committed. The teachers do not go for training, they do not upgrade. Imagine a teacher remaining at



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*one level and just remaining like that.” – **Government stakeholder, Male, Edo***

Insufficient staffing increase the student-teacher ratio, increasing the burden on the teachers, and reducing their availability to provide comprehensive services to students in their care. Inadequate school infrastructure was reported across states in various forms such as insufficient furniture, overcrowded classrooms, lack of water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities.

*“Sometimes you find out they do not have toilets or drinking water in their schools. You will see children in the community during school hours looking for water to drink or toilets to urinate or defecate.” – **Community Leader, Female, Sokoto***

*“An overcrowded classroom hosts about 70-80 students, no matter how much a teacher wants children to understand they will not because the children are many.” – **Teacher, Female, Sokoto***

“We have this gap only in the far rural areas... sometimes you have to cross the river, sometimes you have to trek, and sometimes you do not get bikes to these areas. There is no accommodation in these areas... in these schools.” –

Government stakeholder, Male, Sokoto

Bullying and fighting in schools make the learning environment unsafe and hostile for children. A hostile school environment is not attractive to children and has negative consequences for physical and psychological wellbeing, retention, academic performance and consequently learning poverty.

*“There are periodical fights in the vicinity of the school. I sometimes hear that they killed someone. That is why I am not always excited to go to school.” – **Student, Female, FCT***

Policy and programming needed now

- Innovative strategies such as gamified learning approaches should be developed to better engage students and improve school retention, fosters learning-related behaviour as well as the development of basic reading and comprehension skills.
- There is a need to incentivize learning as this is key in discouraging parents and guardians from putting their wards through child labour.
- Anti-bullying mechanisms ranging from school policies to disciplinary processes should be institutionalised in schools.
- Gender norms that limit male and female education should be addressed through targeted social behaviour communication messages and education programs to facilitate community acceptance of the girl child education.
- Comprehensive teacher assessments should be implemented to ensure they meet up with minimum competency requirements and opportunities for on the job skills development should be incorporated into teachers learning programs.
- To maximize learning opportunities for school-age children, production and recruitment of trained teachers should be prioritised by the government and relevant stakeholders.

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