

Counselling and Government Policy as Panaceas for Repositioning Girl Child Education in Nigeria: Some Lessons from Edo State

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Abstract: *Counselling is a service targeted at enhancing the potentials of the individual through self- understanding and self- development. So, counselling girls, who are denied access to education will help them acquire basic education since one of the goals of counselling is to help individuals learn how to make informed decisions. Current authors posit that government policy at various levels is a strong instrument for effecting positive changes that would enhance the education of the girl child. This paper further posits that if government makes it a policy that counsellors should be trained, working tools and facilities provided for the counsellors, and ensures that each school has a counsellor, with the primary objective of counselling girls at risk of dropping out of school and those denied access to basic education, enrolment of girls in school would be increased. This paper recommended that government should as a matter of urgency, train more counsellors and ensure that counsellors are equipped with professional tools/facilities and posted to all schools in the Federation. In addition, the government should put in place policies that would ensure conducive atmosphere where the girl child can maximize her potentials, contribute towards national development, transformation and secure her own empowerment.*

Keywords: 3, Government Policies, Girl Child Education, School Success Increased Access to Schooling

Introduction

Nigeria considers the education of her citizenry as an indispensable tool to fulfill the desires of the country of having “a free, just and democratic society ... a land full of bright opportunities” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). Education no doubt is a vehicle through which individuals could acquire appropriate skills, abilities and competencies, as well as, train their minds in understanding the world around. Repositioning Girl Child Education in Nigeria will therefore go a long way in ensuring that the gender gap which hitherto exists is reduced to the barest minimum. In pursuant of the desire to ensure

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that education is accessible to all children in the country, the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013) stipulates that:

Pursuant to the commitment to the global education for All (EFA) initiative, the millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as National Developmental Goals encapsulated in the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) document, Basic Education is by law, compulsory for all children of school age in Nigeria...., education is compulsory and a right of every Nigerian irrespective of gender, social status, religion, ethnic background and any peculiar individual challenges.

As can be observed from the statement above, education will be highly rated in national development plans, including the education of the Girl Child. No wonder the National Policy on Women in section 6:1:3 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, as cited in Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2011) states that:

For the Nigerian women to enjoy the full benefits of contemporary living, they require basic education to contribute meaningfully to the development of the country. Government shall in this regard increase girls and women participation in education, irrespective of their location and circumstances”

Consequently, it is expected that if government fulfills her obligation in this regard, that is, in ensuring an increase in girls and women participation in education, as this will go a long way in enhancing and repositioning girl child education in the country. Unfortunately, government, certain factors subsumed in historical, religious, socio-economic, cultural beliefs and school-related factors, affect the Girl Child's access to education. Research in developing countries indicates that females in the household, especially young daughters, act as providers of free childcare at home (Pitt & Rosenzweig, 1990).

Mohammed (2000) reports that a girl may be withdrawn from school if lucrative marriage prospect arises. Alika and Egbochuku (2008) in a study on the factors hindering the girl child access to education found that poor socio-economic status ranked the highest (53%), followed by poor academic performance (16%), bullying by the opposite sex (10%), unfriendly school environment (9%), distance of school from home (5%), pregnancy/early marriage(4%), while ill health, inadequate teaching and death of parents (1%).

UNICEF (2004) report indicates that girl's school attendance still lags severely behind that of boys. Moreover, the same report by UNICEF on “Progress for Children”, shows that the current rate of progress in Nigeria is too slow to achieve gender parity and universal primary education.

In Nigeria, about 10 million children are out of school and 52% are girls (Alika, 2009). UNICEF (2004) report indicates that the gender gap favouring boys has remained consistently wide in Nigeria over the years. This could be as a result of some factors identified above. Therefore, there is the need to explore the role of counselling in repositioning Girl Child education in Nigeria. Educating girls is a priority as stated in the National Policy on Women. Each year, a girl in school is a progressive step towards eliminating poverty, advancing sustainable human development and controlling preventable illnesses. In this paper therefore, efforts were made to explore the role of counselling and government policies in repositioning the education of the girl child in Nigeria.

Girl Child Education in Nigeria

Education remains a vital tool for self-reliance and national development in Nigeria, including the education of the Girl Child. Studies (Egbochuku & Alika, 2005; Egbochuku & Alika, 2008) have shown that education or human development is at the core of every socio-economic development. No wonder Alika and Egbochuku (2009) found that the socio-economic status of the girls in Nigeria imposes considerable constraints upon their stay in school. In fact, they asserted that a girl's particular socio-economic inheritance may have a direct and important effect on her educational attainment. Moreover, Girl Child education in Nigeria is a mirage in the lives of some Nigerian girls because some of them are forced into early marriage as from the age of 12 and the regression in basic education is reflected in the fact that the net enrolment rate for girls is very low, with a high drop-out rate (Ocholi, 2002).

UNICEF (2004) reports that Nigeria is one of the 25 developing countries of the world with low enrolment rates for girls with a gender gap of more than 10% in primary education and more than 1 million girls out of school. The same report indicates that Girl Child Education leads to more equitable development, stronger families, better services, better child health and effective participation in governance. Osakwe, Osagie, Madunagu and Usman (1995) observed that Nigerian girls, for various cultural, socio-economic, health and school related factors are not given a fair chance in the educational sector. In Nigeria about 7.3 million children do not enroll in schools of which 62% are girls (UNICEF, 2004). The same report indicates that girl's primary school completion rate is far behind that of boys, at 76% compared with 85% for boys. Moreover, gender variation still exists in school attendance in Nigeria. For example, in 2010 female attendance in schools stood at 81.2% lower than that of males with 88.1% (*Federal Republic of Nigeria*, 2010). Nigerian males continue to constitute a significant portion of the student body in the country, increasing its percentage share each year from 77.55% in 2010 to 83.82% in 2012. The number of Nigerian male students enrolled in schools increased by 59.12% between 2010 and 2012. Nigerian female students increased only by 8.43%. In fact, Nigerian female students number increased at an average of only 4.13% between 2010 and 2012, while their male counterparts number increased at an average of 26.42% (*Federal Ministry of Education*, 2015).

Meaning of Counselling

Counselling is the skilled and principled use of relationship to facilitate self-knowledge, emotional acceptance, growth and optimal development of personal resources. The overall aim of counselling is to provide an opportunity to work towards living more satisfyingly and resourcefully with a view to facilitating normal development and prevent frustrations, anxiety, stress and disengagement from school. Guidance and Counselling focuses on a programme of relevant services as well as processes of helping individuals within and outside the school environment to realize their fullest potentialities in their emotional, moral, social, academic and vocational development (Okobiah & Okorodudu, 2004). Egbule (2002) opined that guidance and counselling is discerned to help people cope with their problems with the assistance of an expert whose aim is to facilitate behaviour change, enhance coping skills, promote decision making process, improve relationship with others and facilitate the development

of individual's potentials. When the Girl Child is counselled appropriately, she could reconsider the need to go back to school and complete her education. UNESCO (2000) asserted that there are three major components of Guidance and Counselling; these are educational, vocational and personal social guidance. The main goals of counselling are to enable each individual to derive maximum educational benefits, so as to enhance his/her potentials. In line with this goal, one of the objectives of the Nigerian National Policy on Education states "in view of the apparent ignorance of many young people about career prospects and in view of personality maladjustments among students, career officers and counsellors will be appointed in post-primary institutions" (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004).

Counselling and Girl Child Education

It is pertinent to note that despite the issuance of the statement above and how vital these statements are in repositioning the education of the Girl Child who, if given the privilege of counselling would have completed her education, the stated objective has not been given the attention it deserves in the country, in that studies have shown that counsellors and career masters are only posted to a few urban schools in Edo State, Nigeria (Egbochuku and Alika, 2010).

The neglect of this objective of the National Policy on Education may be responsible for the high incidence of drop out from schools among adolescents in the country (Alika & Ataha, 2012). There is the need to accord counselling a position of pre-eminence in our society, if the education of the Girl Child is to be prioritized and repositioned. No wonder Abiri (1978), Alika and Ohanaka (2013) asserted that if the society is not to be plagued by a band of disgruntled, frustrated and unrealistic individuals, it is desirable that adequate guidance, counselling and career information be provided to the adolescents. These would enable schools, parents, government and the society to arrive at a realistic vocational choice for the girl child.

Counselling helps the individual to see things more clearly, possibly from a different view-point. This can enable the individual to focus on feelings, experiences or behaviour with the goal of facilitating positive changes and enhancing his/her potentials. Counselling has a broad range of activities, programmes and services all with a view to assisting individuals to understand themselves, their problems, their school environment, family environment, their world and to develop the capacity for making wise choices and decisions. With adequate access to counselling, the Girl Child could complete her education and contribute towards national development. However, studies have shown that, Education which is the right of every child male or female, according to article 29 of The Convention on the Right of the Child is a mirage in the lives of some Nigerian girls because some of them are forced into early marriages as from age 12 (Ocholi, 2002; Alika & Egbochuku, 2008; Alika 2013). In a study conducted by Alika (2005) it was discovered that there was a decline in the enrolment of girls into school in Edo State. Therefore counselling becomes a viable tool in ensuring that the education of the girl child is given a position of pre-eminence in the nation as there is a positive correlation between counselling and re-entry of girls into school (Egbochuku & Alika, 2005). In addition, theories and policies have

identified the significant role of counseling families and the government in ensuring school re-entry and achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Chao, 2000; Seginer, 2006).

The Role of Counselling in the Repositioning of the Girl Child Education

In view of the role of counseling in repositioning Girl Child Education, there is the need for the application of counseling approaches in ensuring school completion by the Girl Child. This could be done by organizing self-confidence workshop or training for the girls who are at risk of dropping out of school, equipping them with skills on how to adjust, knowing that is not the life events that create problem but how the individual experiences life events and how positively they feel about themselves which no doubt will boost their self-esteem and confidence in harnessing their potentials. Moreover, the behavioural approach to counseling could be adopted in counseling girls on the need to complete their educational pursuits especially those who hitherto had dropped out of school as a result of some life challenges. The girls may be taught some skills to help them manage their lives more effectively. Edo State Government in Nigeria has been responsive in this regard by establishing Skill Acquisition Centres in the State and the construction of Model Schools for adolescents and girls who have been denied access to education. Also, cognitive behavioural counselling like Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy could be one of the counselling approaches that could be utilized in helping the Girl Child access education and complete her educational career. This approach aims at getting them change whatever negative beliefs they may be experiencing, with the view of boosting their self-esteem and optimally enhancing their potentials. In addition, Alike (2008) advocated that academic advisers should create environments that are students friendly and help them build their self-confidence; provide adequate counselling facilities and tools amongst others.

Some Barriers to Girl Child Education in Nigeria

- Poverty and Economic issues could be hindrance to the girl child access to education, with 70% of the population living below poverty line. Girls are often sent to generate income to families by selling wares in the market or on the streets. Thus, the social economic status of the girls imposes considerable constraints upon their continuous stay in school; they asserted that a girl's particular social economic inheritance may have a direct and important effect on her educational attainment (Egbochuku & Alike, 2005).
- Early Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy may hinder a girl's access to education. This has also militated against girl's attendant, retention and achievement in schools. About 30% of school age girls drop out of schools Ocholi, (2002) having begun child bearing before the age of 18. Mohammed (2000) also found that a girl may be withdrawn from school, if a good marriage prospect arises.
- Inadequate Infrastructure may affect the Girl Child access to school. For example, if class room space, furniture and equipment are lacking and if the schools are in rugged and unsafe physical condition with no water, poor health and sanitation facilities and if pupil teacher ratios are high with as many as 100 students in one class, especially in school in urban slums, these factors may hinder the Girl Child's access to school. No wonder, Azikiwe (2000) and Egbochuku and

Alikas (2005) reported that unfriendly school environment may account for girls drop out of school.

- Cultural and Religious Biases could be a factor that hampers a Girl Child's access to education, in that many Nigerian girls especially in large families with limited resources may enroll boys in schools instead of girls. Some parents also keep their daughters out of school due to misinterpretation of tenets of Islamic Religion. This is in line with the findings of Osakwe, Osagie, Madunagu and Usman (1995) who reported that Nigerian girls for various reasons bordering on religion and cultural factors are not given a fair chance in the educational sector.

Nigerian Government Policies and Girl Child Education

The role of government policy in Nigeria as regards the repositioning of girl child education is of paramount importance to all stake holders in the educational sector. The Federal Government of Nigeria formulated and maintained a body of educational policies to help create an effective and viable Educational Sector. One of these policies is the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, with the aim of providing "free universal basic education for every Nigeria child of school age, reducing the incidence of drop out, catering for the learning needs of young persons who for one reason or the other have to interrupt their schooling through appropriate forms of complementary approaches" (Universal Basic Education Commission, 2004). Moreover, the government established the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education to ensure the provision of functional education to individuals.

Some Efforts by the Edo State Government in Repositioning the Girl Child Education

It has been observed that government policy of Free Education and Scholarship Scheme for all in Northern Nigeria had enabled children of school age to access education. The scheme or policy also made provisions for girls who dropped out of school as a result of early marriage, some of these girls were awarded scholarship, this is with the view of updating their education, skills and knowledge so as to secure jobs and adjust to the needs of the society (Daily Trust, 2014). Omoruyi (2012) opined that government policy in Edo State have facilitated the re-entry of girls into schools, in that the Universal Basic Education Act of 2004 (Universal Basic Education Commission, 2004), it stipulates free education for all children in Primary and Junior Secondary Schools, thus making education affordable and accessible to all children of school age. Also, as stated in the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013), government shall provide the following, educational services for the Basic Education level, School Libraries, School Health Services, Guidance and Counseling, Educational Resource Centres, Laboratories and Workshops. To complement the efforts of the federal government, state governments in Nigeria established Mass Literacy Programmes, in some State Ministry of Education, Women Education Unit, Adult and Non-Formal Education Department are established to encourage functional education for Women, Youths and Adults, and eradicate illiteracy. Despite these efforts, government policy as a tool for educational development continues to be a question of critical concern in developing countries in Africa (Tikly, 2001). Specifically, in Edo State, Nigeria the establishment of Institutes of Continuing Education, Skill Acquisition Centres and the introduction of

the Universal Basic Education Programme has no doubt ensured that most girls who should have been out of school are engaged in schools, as observed by Alika (2005) who found in a study on pattern of dropout and re-enrolment of girls in Secondary Schools in Edo State, that girls usually re-enter school after dropping out as a result of some life challenges.

As laudable as the Universal Basic Education programme has been, studies indicate that non-politicization of the programme is key to ensuring its success (Oleri, Ibukun, Oyedeji & Tahir, 2005). In a study by Ohanaka and Alika (2011), found that most adolescents who dropped out of school, re-entered school as a result of government policies. Outreach Programmes by government on the need to be educated, establishment of Model Schools by government, introduction of Free Education, nearness of schools to homes among others. Government policies if well implemented no doubt is a strong instrument for repositioning the education of the Girl Child. Stuart (2010) reported that the formulation of a policy for financial aid option for adults who want to continue their education is a welcomed trend. In Edo State, the construction of Model Public Schools by government, implementation of the UBE programme has restored confidence in parents who now send their children to these schools. The State Government in its determination to make learning conducive for students, procured and distributed 37,440 units of single seaters and 43,242 units of double seaters furniture for use by Public Primary and Secondary Schools, all these have added impetus to the enrolment of the Girl Child in schools. The Government also embarked on training and retraining of teachers in schools so as to meet with current standards and enhance service delivery, and the abolition of illegal levies imposed on students among others (Edo State Government, 2011).

Moreover, the state government embarked on Skill Acquisition Education for the females who could not access formal education. These females were given monthly stipend and at the end of their training they were given take-off grants. In addition the government ensured regular release of the monthly

Table 1: Male and Female Enrolment figures for 2014/2015 Academic Session in Edo State

Class	Male	Female
Primary 1	29522	28723
Primary 2	27549	26879
Primary 3	28794	27403
Primary 4	28590	27641
Primary 5	26915	26825
Primary 6	26660	25403
Junior Secondary School 1	20533	20613
Junior Secondary School II	20389	20807
Junior Secondary School III	19460	19946
Total	228, 407	224, 210

Source: Edo State Basic Education Ministry 2015.

subvention to the Edo State Skills Acquisition Centre at Evbomodu, Benin City, so as to ensure that the education of the Girl Child at the centre is not disrupted. These policies, no doubt, have enhanced the enrolment of the students in schools, as can be seen in the table 1.

The statistics above shows that more needs to be done by all stakeholders to ensure that girls enroll and complete their educational pursuits in the nation. Though, statistics for enrolment of males and females into the Junior Secondary Schools shows that the female enrolment figure is higher than that of the males, this may be attributed to the country's Universal Basic Education policy which is free from the Primary School level to the Junior Secondary School level.

Some Lessons from Government Policies in other African Countries Regarding Girl- Child Education

In Guinea, studies found that Government Policy support or enact a culture of having greater investment on girls' education, such that girls of all ages are beneficiaries of Government Financial assistance. Study postulates that in times of adverse financial condition boys can be withdrawn from school while girls are encouraged to go to school (World Bank Group, 2014).

There is the need to take note of the example of Zambia where the government has put in place a policy to facilitate re-entry of girls into school. Some of the actions that are being taken include:

- Advocacy to ensure that pregnant girls go back to school after delivery her baby.
- Counselling services are offered to girls who get pregnant.
- Bursaries are provided to vulnerable girls to enable them complete their education.
- Affirmative action for girls which lowers entry points in higher grades and tertiary education amongst others. Findings indicate that a consistent 38% to 40% of girls who might otherwise have dropped out of school are being readmitted and are confident of completing their education (Zambia Ministry of Education, 2000).

Conclusion

Counselling is a veritable tool in repositioning the education of the girl child. Consequently, there is the need to ensure that stakeholders are counselled on the need to prioritize the education of the Girl Child. Therefore, Counselling Services as a matter of priority should be made available in schools and the society in general. Also, there is the need to encourage Guidance and Counselling activities for teachers and parents in schools, with a view to getting them involved in the education and continued stay in school of the Girl Child, since they are major key players in this regard. Counsellors could adopt various counseling approaches in ensuring that the Girl Child access to education is not hindered by various challenges.

The Federal Government policy on education sees Education as an indispensable instrument to ensuring that her citizens enjoy a free, just and democratic society. The introduction of Universal Basic Education, Mass literacy Programmes, establishment of Skill Acquisition Centres by Federal and State

Governments no doubt have contributed towards the reduction of drop out from schools and the repositioning of the girl child education in Nigeria. However, it is regrettable that the enrolment figure for the Girl Child still remains low compared to that of their male counterparts.

Recommendations

It is recommended that counseling facilities and tools should be provided in schools. Counselors should identify girls that are at risk of dropping out of school or who may have dropped out of school and provide some counseling services to them with a view to getting them effectively engaged in school. It is the view of the researchers that appropriate counseling approaches should be adopted in counseling the girl child on the need to develop her potentials. Cognitive Behavioural Counseling like Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy could be utilized among other approaches; this is with a view to enhancing their self-esteem, and ensuring that their potentials are optimally enhanced.

In addition, laws should be promulgated by government to ensure that the girl child has access to education, and the prohibition of all cultural barriers that hinder the education of the Girl Child. Schools should be established for the education of girls who may have dropped out of school as a result of some challenges beyond their control. There is the need for the provision of gender responsive school environment, massive sensitization on the education of the Girl Child, and the introduction by government of a mechanism to decisively and systematically deal with all types of gender violence against women.

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