SAFE SCHOOL INITIATIVE: A NECESSARY TOOL FOR PROMOTING SAFE AND SECURE CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO BASIC EDUCATION IN NIGERIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Basic education is a fundamental level of education which equips the learners with basic knowledge of literacy, numeracy and communication skills; thereby laying a very solid foundation for life-long learning. The extent to which children have full access to basic education in Nigeria may be largely dependent on how they perceive the school environment to be safe and secure for effective teaching and learning. Thus, the issue of safe school is a major concern to all stakeholders in education and it remains very essential for both students and teachers. This work therefore focused on safe school initiative as a tool for promoting safe and stable children's access to basic education in Nigeria in the 21st century. It discussed elaborately the concepts of safe school and safe school initiative, historical dimensional of safe school initiative in Nigeria, incidences of unsafe school environment in Nigeria, benefits of safe school to children's access to basic education and benefits of safe school to children's access to basic education.

Keywords: Safe school, basic education, school and 21st century

Introduction

Basic education is the foundation upon which other levels of education are built and it forms the basis for the educational transition of a child. It is a fundamental level of education which equips the learners with basic knowledge of literacy, numeracy and communication skills; thereby laying a very solid foundation for life-long learning. According to National Policy on Education (2013), basic education is the type of education given to children aged 0-15 years with the aim of ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, communicative and life skills etc. In the opinion of Okediran (2013), basic education is the pillar of formal education in any nation; as its possession is a pre-requisite for socioeconomic, cultural, religious and political advancement and lack of it portends primitiveness and backwardness in the scheme of things of a nation. **Basic education is important for children because they are the pillars upon which the future of the society is built on.**

It is therefore, necessary to stress that in order for children to have full access to basic education and for the optimum realization of the objectives of basic education to be achieved, both students and teachers should perceive the school environment as being totally safe and secure for teaching and learning to take place. This is corroborated by California State PTA (2016) which maintained that every child is entitled to a safe and peaceful school environment that is orderly and empowering.

However, after over 70 years from the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; making education the right of a child, hundreds of millions of children are still being denied this right by way of some countries not making the school environment absolutely unsafe for both students and teachers. This has been evidenced in series of attacks, violence, bullying, drug abuse and other forms of unsafe activities being found within the school environment. UNICEF (2016) observed that too often and in many countries, schools are still places of violence and fear. In the same vein, Applebury (2010) posited that every child should feel safe from violence in their school, yet there are many that do not. Today, it is not unusual for students to violently attack other students, teachers, security guards and school personnel, showing a complete lack of respect for authority. These attacks often result in injury and at times, death. Witnessing these acts can also cause intense fear and anxiety within other students as well as staff members, making the school environment a psychologically distressing place to be.

In Nigerian context, Sadiq (2018) maintained that considering the number of school children and teachers who have lost their lives in recent times in Nigeria due to Boko Haram, kidnapping and banditry activities, there is need not only to advance towards the construction of school territories that offer integrated and true safety and security to both teachers and students but also to alert decision-makers and government agents on the serious need and implications of not doing so in a timely and appropriate manner.

According to Lamini (2017), the ability to obtain basic education is currently being jeopardized for millions of children worldwide by lack of safety experienced in or around schools. Children can be attacked on their way to or from school, be deterred from attending school by real or perceived threats and are increasingly being attacked within schools themselves by militias, gangs and extremist groups looking to recruit, abduct, indoctrinate, intimidate or use the school infrastructure itself for military purposes. Attacks on children and schools including sexual assault are often carried out as a specific military tactic. From within schools, bullying, corporal punishment and gender-based violence by teachers and fellow pupils remain disturbingly common.

Concepts of Safe School and Safe School Initiative

The term safe school has been defined and explained by several scholars. James (2011) perceive safe school as one where teaching and learning are not distracted; disruptions are minimized; violence, drugs, bullying and fear are not present; students are not discriminated against; expectations for behavior are clearly communicated; and consequences for infractions are consistently and fairly applied. Safe school environments can be threatened by internal threats, such as bullying, corporal punishment and gang recruitment while external threats, such as attacks on schools and environmental threats, such as natural disasters all have the potential to significantly decrease students' academic performance. Safe school simply refers to the process whereby the school environment is made free from all forms of violence, bullying, harassment and substance use etc. It promotes

Safe school according to California State PTA (2016) is a school environment in which students and staff are free to learn and teach without any threat of physical and psychological harm. Hence, a safe school provides surroundings that are nonviolent with clear behavioral expectations and disciplinary policies that are consistently and fairly administered and which confer recognition for positive behavior. It has established policies for proactive security procedures, emergency response plans and the timely maintenance, cleanliness and attractive appearance of the campus and classrooms. Additionally, a safe and peaceful school environment has a crisis response plan in place to deal with unforeseen emergencies. In a safe school, students feel respected and know that the learning community cares about their individual needs and expects them to succeed; parents and community members are welcomed and encouraged to share ideas, talents and resources for improving the school; high standards exist and are communicated on a regular basis; students and staff know that learning and achievement are encouraged and highly valued and that positive social behaviors are expected; there is continued involvement and cooperation of parents, students, teachers, security staff, classified staff and law enforcement representatives in designing and revising of the school's discipline, disaster, safe school and crisis plans; prevention is stressed and the staff and students are prepared for emergencies and other unforeseen situations.

According UNICEF (2016), a safe school environment is not always easy to describe. The ideal environment does not rely on federal, state and district laws, regulations and policies alone, it is dependent on how every school functions every day. It boils down to ensuring that each person who crosses the threshold of that school or boards a school bus on any given day feels safe, supported and secure. UNICEF therefore admitted that safe schools are not those schools which are free of risks but those with sufficient resistance and resilience to avoid disasters or to recover from them.

Safe school initiative on the other hand, is an intervention aimed at ensuring that every child is offered a safe place to learn, play and realize their full potentials especially for children in emergencies and conflict. In essence, the intervention is to protect Nigeria children in schools from the insurgent attacks in form of kidnapping, hostage taking, rape and outright killing by the hoodlums. Safe schools which offer supervision, services and teaching can save children's lives in the short term and help them to develop in the long term. Safe school initiative was borne out of series of researches, campaigns and programmatic activities in a collaboration between Their World and the Global Business Coalition for Education to raise the profile of safe schools and learning environments in times of conflict and emergencies (Their World, 2018). According to Chester (2015), safe schools initiative is a response to children and schools affected by militants in the North Eastern states of Nigeria. Basically, the safe school initiative entails a combination of: transfer of secondary students to other states, support to education in internally displaced persons' camps and pilot safe schools models including community mobilization.

The management of safe school initiative in schools in Nigeria involves a synergy approach between the school authority, community members, parents, government and other stakeholders in the school system. Based on this, the school administrators/principals are expected to make adequate use of human, material and functional resources available through planning, organizing, coordinating and provision of adequate staff, among others by

devising policy framework on how to control the violent attacks on Nigeria children in schools. The safe school initiative entails a combination of three main management systems. According to United Nations Development Programme (2018), the three management approaches are the school based management or interventions, community based management to protect schools and the special measures for some risk populations.

Historical Dimension of Safe School Initiative in Nigeria

Globally, safe school initiative evolved as a result of Safe Schools Declaration which is an inter-governmental political commitment that was opened for endorsement by countries at an international conference held in Oslo, Norway, on 28–29 May, 2015. The Declaration provided countries with the opportunity to express their political support for the protection of students, teachers and schools during times of armed conflict. Representatives from more than 60 countries attended the conference launching the Safe Schools Declaration in 2015. On March, 28–29, 2017, the ministries of foreign affairs and defense of Argentina co-hosted the Second International Safe Schools Conference in Buenos Aires and representatives from more than 80 countries attended. In May 2017, the United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres, urged all Member States to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration. On May 28–29, 2019, the Third International Safe Schools Conference was hosted in Palma De Mallorca, Spain. The Fourth International Safe Schools Conference will be hosted by Nigeria in 2021. The Declaration has begun to influence countries' military policies for protecting schools from military use. As of September 15, 2021, 112 countries (Nigeria inclusive) have endorsed the safe schools declaration, which remains open for additional countries to join (Sheppard, 2019).

In Nigerian context, safe school initiative was launched by the Federal Government of Nigeria in May, 2014 to protect Nigeria children in schools from the insurgent attacks in form of kidnapping, hostage taking, rape and outright killing by the hoodlums. Nigeria Safe school initiative was launched in response to alarming rate of violence and insecurity across Nigeria schools especially in the North East, which is particularly targeted at children and female students in schools. The awareness campaign among other things; step up actions on how to better protect the nation's schools against all forms of violence as well as potential threats which may not well be articulated by school administrators in order not to endanger the attainment of the stipulated educational objectives. This led the government and other stakeholders in education sector to step up to the challenge to save the children from violent attacks through appropriate safe school management strategy (Idris, 2018).

Incidences of unsafe school environment in Nigeria

There are several occurrences in Nigerian schools that tend to threaten or render the school environment unsafe and insecure for both learners and staff. Anyanwu (2016) maintained that in April 2014, more than 200 girls aged between 16 and 18 were abducted from a secondary school in the Nigerian town of Chibok by Boko Haram insurgents. Hundreds of schools and other educational facilities have been destroyed, school teachers killed and students kidnapped. Between 2009 and 2015, attacks in North-Eastern Nigeria destroyed more than 910 schools and forced at least 1,500 to close. This has left more than 600,000 school-age children without access to learning due to the conflict. Okafor (2020) in the same vein observes that the Nigerian school environment has not been safe and healthy in recent times; as kidnapping of teachers and students, bullying, cultism, drug abuse,

violence between students and students, violence between students and teachers as well as violence between teachers and teachers have become the other of the day.

United Nations International Children's Education Fund (2014) affirmed that the global community has now focused its attention to the recent kidnapping of over 200 Nigeria girls and the horrific attacks on innocent children for their urge to obtain western education which the Boko Haram abhors. Chester (2015), posited that from 2009 to 2015, violence, kidnapping, rape and other atrocities created by the insecurity in schools has resulted in over 10, 600 lost of lives among students, teachers and community members where the schools are located. These attacks and other forms of vices were rife in schools especially female ones. This has untold effects on the academic achievement of the students and the enrolment rate of schools especially basic education.

Aderinto (2010) observed that the rate of insecurity issues in Nigerian school system is becoming highly alarming; as abduction of students and teachers across schools in Nigeria is on the increase. Aderinto noted that in February, 29th, 2016, unknown gun men abducted the principal, teachers and pupils of Model College, Igbonla, Epe, Lagos State. Ugwumba and Odom (2015) reported that education is under attack; as the incidents of insecurity in schools is on the rise. Deliberate threat against students, academics, teachers and education facilities create barrier to accessing quality basic education for all. The immediate impact of attacks include the loss of life of innocent school children, injuries, abduction of students, teachers and personnel and damage of buildings and facilities most typically due to the burning, bombing or shelling of buildings.

Oppong in Uduma (2015) posited that the incidences of sexual harassment in Nigerian educational institutions is on a higher side in recent times; teachers harass students, harass fellow teachers and students also harass themselves. Oppong added that when students (male/female) are being sexually harassed, it makes them to live in fear and also dropout of the school system. Oppong also maintained that often times, students who are victims of sexual harassment may not return back to school again as a result of stigmatization and depression. Renzetti (2012) maintained that beyond sexual harassment making students victims suffer set back in their academic performance, it also creates a threatening, aggressive or unpleasant study environment and eventual withdrawal of the victims from school. Sexual harassment also makes it absolutely difficult for victims to access basic education; as they become scared of school environment for fear of falling victims again.

In the view of Robinson (2015), so many primary school pupils in the Nigerian schools have experience one form of sexual harassment or the order. This could take the form of male teachers harassing female students, male students harassing female students, male teachers harassing female non-academic staff, male non-teaching staff harassing female students, male teaching harassing female teaching staff and male non-teaching staff harassing female non- teaching staff. Robinson observed that the students are always at the receiving end of sexual harassment within the school environment; as the victims are very much likely to withdraw from school and may lack the courage to go back to school any longer. Aderinto (2010) conducted a survey on the prevalence of sexual abuse among primary school students in Ibadan, Oyo State. The study indicated that a lot of children have refused to enroll in basic education because of fear and incidences of sexual harassment often reported in schools.

Keeping schools safe allows children to look forward to being in an encouraging environment that promotes social and creative learning. When basic safety needs are not met, children are at risk for not feeling comfortable at school and may stop coming to school. According James (2011), a safe and healthy school does not only protects both staff and students from all forms of fear and threat, it can also lower or reduce absenteeism on the part of teachers and while many students may take to truancy, dropout and perform very poor in their studies. In the opinion of Benson (2015), a safe school ensures teaching and learning are not distracted and disruptions are minimized, reduces the rate of violence, drug abuse, bullying and fear are not present. It also ensures that students are not discriminated against and the consequences for infractions are consistently and fairly applied.

Safe school initiative promotes the protection of students from violence, exposure to weapons and threats, theft, bullying and the sale or use of illegal substances on school grounds. Safety school is linked to improved student and school outcomes. In particular, emotional and physical safety in school is related to academic performance. At the same time, students who are victims of physical or emotional harassment or who are involved in the sale or use of illegal substances on school grounds are at risk for poor attendance, course failure and dropout (Agaptus, 2018). According Applebury (2010), keeping schools safe allows children to look forward to being in an encouraging environment that promotes social and creative learning. Promoting school safety creates an open space for kids to explore, learn and grow.

The importance of building safe learning environments for students is something that cannot be overstated. While it is true that every student learns a bit differently from the next, the environment itself plays a significant role in their development. Safe learning environment translates into comfortable learning environment. This is because in surroundings where students are willing to open their minds and actually listen to what teachers have to say, they can be empowered to achieve their highest potentials (Jack, 2019).

Conclusion

When the school environment is threatened by security issuesof any sort, parents would rather prefer their children stay back home and take to skills than accessing basic education which will expose them to kidnapping, molestation and other forms of threats in schools. When their basic safety needs are not met, children are at risk for not feeling comfortable at school and may stop showing up or they may remain on edge throughout the day. Therefore, children's access to safe and secure learning environment ensures that both teachers and students are not discriminated against and the consequences for infractions are consistently and fairly applied, reduces the rate of violence, cultism, kidnapping, sexual abuse, drug abuse, bullying and fear etc.

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