
Educational Psychology and Learner Motivation: Pathways for Re-engaging out of School Children in North-West Nigeria: Implications for Sustainable Inclusive Education

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ABSTRACT

The persistent challenge of out-of-school children in North-West Nigeria continues to undermine the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Although previous interventions have largely focused on economic, socio-cultural, and infrastructural barriers to school participation, insufficient attention has been paid to the application of educational psychology and learner motivation theories in promoting learners' re-engagement and retention. This conceptual paper examines how the application of major educational psychology and learner motivation theories, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory Self-Determination Theory, and Expectancy-Value Theory can facilitate the successful re-engagement of out-of-school children in North-West Nigeria. Using a documentary research approach, the paper synthesizes evidence from scholarly literature, government policy documents, and reports published by international development agencies. The paper identifies poverty, insecurity, child labour, early marriage, displacement, and low learner motivation as major contributors to school exclusion. It further demonstrates that the effective application of educational psychology principles through supportive learning environments, learner-centred instructional strategies, guidance and counseling services, psychosocial support, and community participation can significantly enhance learners' motivation, resilience, school retention and academic success. The paper concludes that integrating educational psychology into educational planning and intervention programmes is essential for achieving sustainable inclusive education in North-West Nigeria. It recommends strengthening teacher capacity in motivational strategies, expanding school-based counselling services, promoting family and community involvement and formulating policies that address both the psychological and structural barriers to education.

Keywords: Learner Motivation, Educational Psychology Theories, Out-of-School Children.

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely acknowledged as a fundamental human right and a powerful instrument for promoting social inclusion, economic development, national cohesion and sustainable development. It equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, values and competencies required for

lifelong learning, productive employment, responsible citizenship and meaningful participation in society. Consequently, ensuring equitable access to quality education has remained a priority at both national and international levels as reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG

4), which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Despite considerable investments by the Federal Government of Nigeria, State Governments, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) and international development partners such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, Nigeria continues to have one of the largest populations of out-of-school children globally. The challenge is particularly pronounced in North-West Nigeria, where poverty, insecurity, armed conflict, displacement, child labour, early marriage, nomadic lifestyles and socio-cultural barriers continue to prevent many children from enrolling in, attending or completing basic education. These challenges have far-reaching implications for human capital development, national security, poverty reduction, gender equality, and the attainment of sustainable development (UNICEF 2024). While many interventions have concentrated on expanding access to education through school construction, free basic education, school feeding programmes, conditional cash transfers, and community mobilization, evidence suggests that improving access alone does not guarantee learners' successful re-engagement or retention. Many children who return to school after prolonged absence encounter psychological challenges such as low self-esteem, poor academic confidence, learning anxiety, trauma arising from conflict or displacement, fear of failure, and limited motivation to learn. Unless these psychological barriers are addressed, many learners remain vulnerable to poor academic performance, irregular attendance and repeated dropout.

Educational psychology provides a valuable framework for understanding how learners think, develop and respond to educational

experiences. Through the application of learner motivation theories, educational psychology explains how cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social factors influence learners' decisions to enrol, participate actively, persist and succeed in school. Theories such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, Self-Determination Theory and Expectancy-Value Theory provide practical strategies for creating supportive learning environments that enhance learners' motivation, resilience, self-efficacy and academic engagement.

Objective of the paper

The paper has the following objectives

1. To identify the factors responsible for the increasing number of out-of-school children in North-West Nigeria.
2. To examine the application of educational psychology and learner motivation theories in the re-engagement of out-of-school children in North-West Nigeria.
3. To highlight the contributions of educational psychology and learner motivation theories to sustainable inclusive education.
4. To find out the challenges associated with applying educational psychology and learner motivation theories in the re-engagement of out-of-school children.
5. To come up with practical strategies for applying educational psychology and learner motivation theories to enhance the re-engagement of out-of-school children and promote sustainable inclusive education.

Statement of the Problem

The persistent increase in the number of out-of-school children in North-West Nigeria remains one of the most critical educational and developmental challenges confronting the country. Although governments at

different levels, together with development partners and non-governmental organisations have implemented several interventions including the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, conditional cash transfers, school feeding initiatives, accelerated learning programmes and community sensitisation campaigns yet millions of school-age children remain outside the formal education system. Recent reports indicate that North-West Nigeria continues to account for a substantial proportion of the country's out-of-school children, largely because of poverty, insecurity, displacement, child labour, early marriage, inadequate educational facilities and socio-cultural practices that limit access to schooling (UNESCO, 2024; UNICEF, 2024 & UBEC, 2024).

Existing studies have largely examined these structural, economic and policy-related factors. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the application of educational psychology and learner motivation theories in addressing the psychological barriers that hinder children's successful return to school. Many out-of-school children experience diminished self-confidence, low self-efficacy, trauma, fear of failure, weak educational aspirations and reduced motivation, following prolonged absence from school. These psychological factors often undermine school attendance, academic achievement and long-term retention, even where financial and physical barriers have been reduced.

Educational psychology offers evidence-based theories and practical strategies for addressing these challenges by promoting learner motivation, emotional well-being, resilience, positive teacher-learner relationships and supportive learning environments. Despite their proven relevance, these theories have not been sufficiently integrated into educational

policies and programmes designed to re-engage out-of-school children in North-West Nigeria.

It is against this background that this paper examines how the application of educational psychology and learner motivation theories can strengthen the re-engagement of out-of-school children in North-West Nigeria. The paper argues that combining psychological interventions with existing educational initiatives will enhance learner motivation, improve school retention and academic success, and contribute to the attainment of sustainable inclusive education in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Educational Psychology

Educational psychology is the scientific study of how individuals learn and how psychological principles can be applied to improve teaching, learning, assessment and educational outcomes. It draws on theories of cognitive development, motivation, memory, intelligence and human behaviour to explain learners' differences and to develop evidence-based instructional strategies. Educational psychology also assists teachers, counsellors, curriculum planners and policymakers in creating learning environments that support learners' academic achievement, emotional well-being, and social development.

Schunk (2020) defines educational psychology as the application of psychological theories and research to educational practice, with particular emphasis on learning, motivation, cognition and classroom processes. Similarly, Woolfolk (2022) describes educational psychology as a discipline that enables educators to understand learners' developmental characteristics, learning needs and behavioural patterns in order to enhance teaching effectiveness. Santrock

(2021) further notes that educational psychology promotes learner-centred instruction by helping teachers understand how motivation, emotions and classroom interactions influence learning.

Within the context of North-West Nigeria, educational psychology provides a useful framework for understanding the emotional, cognitive, and social factors that influence whether out-of-school children are willing to return to school, participate actively in learning and remain in school until completion. The application of educational psychology is therefore indispensable for designing interventions that address both the educational and psychosocial needs of vulnerable learners. Recent evidence also shows that learner-centred and psychologically supportive approaches improve students' motivation and engagement.

Learner Motivation

Learner motivation refers to the internal and external forces that stimulate, direct, and sustain learners' willingness to engage in educational activities and persist in achieving academic goals. Motivation determines whether learners attend school regularly, participate actively in classroom activities, overcome learning difficulties and remain committed to their educational aspirations.

Educational psychologists classify motivation into intrinsic motivation, which arises from personal interest, curiosity and enjoyment of learning, and extrinsic motivation, which is influenced by external rewards such as praise, recognition, scholarships or future employment opportunities. Self-Determination Theory argues that learners are more motivated when they experience autonomy, competence and supportive relationships, while Expectancy-Value Theory suggests

that learners are more likely to engage in education when they believe they can succeed and perceive education as valuable.

Out-of-School Children

Out-of-school children are children of official school age who are not enrolled in formal education or who have withdrawn before completing the basic level of schooling. This category includes children who have never attended school, those who have dropped out and those whose schooling is frequently interrupted because of poverty, insecurity, displacement, child labour, disability, gender discrimination or socio-cultural practices.

Nigeria continues to have one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children globally, with the burden concentrated in the northern part of the country. This situation is attributed to multiple interacting factors, including insecurity, household poverty, weak educational infrastructure, early marriage and governance challenges. Scholars therefore recommend integrated interventions that combine educational access with psychosocial support, learner motivation and community engagement to improve school participation and retention

Empirical and conceptual literature consistently demonstrates that educational psychology plays a critical role in improving learner participation, academic achievement and school retention. Studies have shown that learners who experience supportive classroom environments, effective teacher encouragement and positive peer relationships exhibit stronger academic motivation and greater resilience when confronted with educational challenges.

Bandura's concept of self-efficacy has received considerable empirical support, with research showing that learners who believe in their capabilities are more likely

to persist in difficult learning tasks and achieve better educational outcomes. Similarly, Deci and Ryan's (2020) Self-Determination Theory emphasises that satisfying learners' psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness enhances intrinsic motivation and long-term educational engagement.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on three complementary theories: Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT), and Self-Efficacy Theory. These theories provide a comprehensive psychological explanation of how motivation influences learners' decisions to enrol, participate, persist and succeed in education. Together, they offer a strong foundation for understanding how educational psychology can support the re-engagement of out-of-school children in North-West Nigeria.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (2020), posits that human motivation is strengthened when three basic psychological needs are fulfilled: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy refers to learners' sense of choice and control over their learning. Competence reflects learners' belief in their ability to perform learning tasks successfully while relatedness concerns the feeling of belonging and receiving support from teachers, peers, and family members.

For out-of-school children in North-West Nigeria, many of these psychological needs remain unmet due to poverty, insecurity, displacement, family responsibilities, and prolonged absence from school. Consequently, these children often develop low confidence, fear of failure, and diminished interest in returning to school.

Educational psychology recommends learner-centred teaching approaches that promote participation, provide emotional support, encourage positive teacher–student relationships and create welcoming classroom environments. Such practices help satisfy learners' psychological needs, strengthen intrinsic motivation, and improve school attendance, engagement, and retention.

Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT)

Expectancy-Value Theory, advanced by Eccles and colleagues, explains that learners are motivated to participate in educational activities when they believe they can succeed (expectancy) and when they perceive education as valuable for achieving personal, social, or economic goals.

In North-West Nigeria, many out-of-school children and their families may not perceive immediate benefits from schooling because of economic hardship, unemployment, insecurity or cultural beliefs that favour early marriage or child labour. As a result, the perceived value of formal education declines.

Educational psychologists argue that interventions should increase both learners' confidence and the perceived relevance of education by connecting classroom learning to real-life opportunities, vocational skills, employment prospects and community development. Career guidance, mentoring, parental sensitisation and community advocacy can significantly enhance learners' educational aspirations.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-Efficacy Theory, proposed by Albert Bandura (1997), emphasises that individuals' beliefs about their capabilities strongly influence their motivation, persistence and achievement. Learners with high self-efficacy approach difficult tasks with

confidence, persevere through challenges and recover more quickly from setbacks.

Many out-of-school children who have experienced prolonged educational interruption often possess low academic self-confidence. Feelings of embarrassment, fear of failure and negative previous schooling experiences discourage them from re-enrolling.

Educational psychology addresses this challenge by promoting mastery experiences, continuous encouragement, constructive feedback, peer modelling and supportive classroom interactions. These strategies rebuild learners' confidence and enhance their willingness to participate actively in school.

Relevance of the Theoretical Framework to the Study

The integration of Self-Determination Theory, Expectancy-Value Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory provides a comprehensive explanation of learner motivation within the context of out-of-school children in North-West Nigeria. While self-determining theory (SDT) explains the importance of meeting learners' psychological needs, Expectancy-value theory (EVT) highlights the significance of learners' expectations of success and perceived value of education. Self-Efficacy Theory complements both by demonstrating how confidence in one's abilities influences educational participation and persistence.

Collectively, these theories suggest that successful re-engagement programmes should extend beyond improving access to education. They should also incorporate psychological support, learner motivation, positive teacher-student relationships, counseling services, parental involvement, and community participation. Such an integrated approach is more likely to achieve

sustainable inclusive education and reduce the number of out-of-school children in North-West Nigeria.

Application of Educational Psychology and Learner Motivation Theories in the Re-engagement of Out-of-School Children in North-West Nigeria

Educational psychology emphasises that learning is influenced not only by cognitive ability but also by emotional, social, cultural and environmental factors. Consequently, interventions designed to return children to school should address these multiple dimensions simultaneously

- a) Psychologically safe and inclusive classrooms should be created where returning learners feel accepted, respected and supported. Many out-of-school children have experienced trauma arising from insecurity, displacement, poverty or prolonged absence from school. Teachers therefore need training in psychosocial support, inclusive teaching practices, and trauma-informed education to rebuild learners' confidence.
- b) learner-centred instructional approaches should replace rigid teacher-centred methods. Active learning, cooperative learning, differentiated instruction and continuous formative assessment increase learners' participation, improve academic confidence and strengthen intrinsic motivation.
- c) Counseling and guidance services should become integral components of re-engagement programmes. Educational psychologists and school counsellors can help learners overcome anxiety, fear of failure, low self-esteem and other emotional barriers that hinder successful reintegration into school.
- d) Parents, traditional rulers, religious leaders and community-based organisations should actively participate in promoting the value of education and

also community sensitisation programmes can address misconceptions about schooling, discourage early marriage and child labour and encourage sustained school attendance.

- e) Overall, applying educational psychology and learner motivation theories provides a holistic framework for addressing both the educational and psychosocial challenges facing out-of-school children. Such an approach aligns with the goals of Sustainable Development Goal which seeks to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all.

DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The review presented in this paper demonstrates that addressing the challenge of out-of-school children in North-West Nigeria requires more than expanding access to education. While governments and development partners have invested in school construction, enrolment campaigns, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme and school feeding initiatives, the persistent number of out-of-school children indicates that structural interventions alone are insufficient. Educational psychology offers an important perspective by highlighting the cognitive, emotional, motivational and social factors that influence children's decisions to enrol, remain in school and successfully complete their education.

The theoretical perspectives discussed in this paper suggest that learners are more likely to return to school and remain committed to their education when they feel competent, supported and able to succeed. Self-Determination Theory explains that fulfilling learners' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness promotes intrinsic motivation, while Expectancy-Value Theory indicates that learners are

more willing to engage in schooling when they perceive education as valuable and believe they can achieve success. Similarly, Self-Efficacy Theory emphasises that confidence in one's academic ability strengthens persistence even when learners encounter difficulties.

In North-West Nigeria, many out-of-school children experience multiple disadvantages that extend beyond economic deprivation. Insecurity, displacement, early marriage, child labour, family responsibilities, inadequate educational facilities and psychological trauma often reduce children's motivation and confidence to participate in formal schooling. Consequently, programmes that focus exclusively on school enrolment without addressing these psychosocial barriers are unlikely to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Educational psychology therefore provides practical strategies for improving school re-engagement. Teachers should adopt learner-centred instructional methods that encourage participation, provide positive reinforcement, recognise individual differences and promote supportive classroom relationships. Such practices help rebuild learners' confidence, reduce anxiety and increase school engagement.

Another important implication is the need to strengthen school counselling and psychosocial support services. Many children returning to school after prolonged absence require emotional support to overcome fear, stigma, learning gaps and low self-esteem. Professional guidance and counselling services can facilitate successful adjustment and improve educational outcomes.

Community participation also remains essential. Parents, traditional leaders, religious institutions, women's groups, youth

organisations and civil society organisations should collaborate with schools to promote positive attitudes toward education, discourage harmful socio-cultural practices and encourage continuous school attendance. Such partnerships increase community ownership of educational programmes and enhance sustainability.

Furthermore, educational policies should integrate motivational and psychological support into national and state-level interventions for out-of-school children. Teacher education programmes should include practical training in educational psychology, classroom motivation, inclusive education, child development and trauma-informed teaching practices. This would equip teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to support vulnerable learners effectively.

Ultimately, integrating educational psychology into educational planning contributes directly to Sustainable Development Goal by promoting inclusive, equitable and quality education while reducing educational inequalities among vulnerable populations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the issues discussed in this paper, the following recommendations are proposed:

- I. Governments at the federal, state and local levels should integrate educational psychology principles into policies and programmes designed for the re-engagement of out-of-school children.
- II. Teachers should receive regular professional development in learner motivation, inclusive education, classroom management, psychosocial support and trauma-informed instructional practices.

- III. Guidance and counselling services should be strengthened in primary and secondary schools to provide continuous emotional, behavioural and academic support for returning learners.
- IV. School administrators should promote learner-centred teaching approaches that encourage active participation, collaboration, critical thinking and positive teacher–student relationships.
- V. Parents, community leaders, religious leaders and civil society organisations should collaborate with schools to create supportive learning environments that encourage children's regular school attendance.

CONCLUSION

The increasing number of out-of-school children in North-West Nigeria remains one of the most pressing educational challenges confronting the country. Although poverty, insecurity, socio-cultural practices and inadequate educational infrastructure continue to contribute to school exclusion, evidence reviewed in this paper indicates that psychological factors also play a significant role in influencing children's decisions to return to school and remain engaged in learning.

Educational psychology provides valuable theoretical and practical insights into understanding learner behaviour, motivation, resilience and educational participation. By drawing on Self-Determination Theory, Expectancy-Value Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory, this paper demonstrates that successful re-engagement programmes should combine educational access with psychological support, learner-centred instruction, effective counselling services and active community participation.

A holistic approach that addresses both educational and psychosocial needs is more likely to improve school enrolment,

retention and completion among vulnerable children. Integrating educational psychology into educational planning and policy implementation will therefore contribute significantly to achieving sustainable inclusive education in North-West Nigeria and support Nigeria's progress toward Sustainable Development Goal

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