Improving Learning Outcomes in Nigeria: Rethinking School as a Community and Community as a School

Abstract

There is no clear way to analyze the problem of low educational outcomes in Nigeria. On the one hand, it does appear to be a policy issue, and on the other hand, it seems, with an overwhelming prevalence, that the real problem is a learning crisis. When it comes to education delivery in Nigeria, interventions, and policy design especially in basic education have focused primarily on increasing enrollment. For instance, the Universal Basic Education Board (UBEB) was specifically set up by President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration to increase the number of primary school enrollments across the country (Ejere, 2011). But amidst all these policies, techniques of education delivery, and the quality of learning have been completely overlooked. This paper aims to do a broad systems analysis of education delivery in Nigeria, and more specifically examine the determinants of learning quality in northern Nigeria where there is an ongoing conflict against formal/western education that is targeting schools, students and displacing entire communities. Looking across the historical and institutional setup of the Nigerian society, this paper also seeks to understand the many ways that community comes into play in the education of a child and uses results from a project called Technology Enhanced for All (TELA) to suggest bolstered demand-side integration that brings local and family-level factors to the core of the learning journeys of students.

Introduction and Argument

For a country like Nigeria, the current socio-political climate does not suggest that major improvements will be made in the quality of education delivery in the next two decades, however, this has not always been the case. For twenty years after Nigeria's independence from British rule in 1960, it is fair to say that what followed was a period of great progress in the education sector. Despite the civil war that took place between 1967-1970 from which over two million people lost their lives, the education system blossomed tremendously between the 1960s and 1980s. The Nigerian education system not only served as a model for other African countries, but it also attracted and produced some of the brightest scholars across the continent like Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, and Chinua Achebe. A significant point of inquiry now however is answering the question about where all the current loopholes originated from. At first glance, two answers are obvious from history. First, the abrupt changes in government personnel and policies through military coups between the 1970s to 1999, and secondly, the government's lack of sustained interest in building both human capacity and physical infrastructure.

In recent times, this educational decline is often attributed to the numerous conflicts that happen across the country especially by the Boko Haram group in the northern part of the country, and other banditry groups like herdsmen, and "unknown gunmen," as they are often called in the media, that are wreaking havoc in other parts of the country. When organized conflicts break out in Nigeria, schools are often the first institutional casualties, and this can get drastically severe when the group in charge of the conflict is ideologically against formal education, which is precisely the Nigerian case. In this paper, I explore the nature and history of education in Nigeria. After that, I carry out a broad systems analysis of education delivery in northern Nigeria using the TELA project as a framework for success. Then I argue that massive improvements in learning outcomes in Nigeria will not come from merely increasing the number of enrollments at different levels of education or by introducing numerous technologies, but by improving instructional techniques and engaging students' communities to become part of their learning journeys.

Context and History

The Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) expired in 2015, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) took over. The socio-economic impact of the MDGs on communities across the developing world has remained a

topical arena of enormous contestation. Economists associated with the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank will argue that grand economic strides have been achieved while anthropologists and sociologists might produce a different story. In the MDGs, goal two was set up to achieve universal primary education, and according to Eustace Uzor, policy designs to increase primary school enrollment completely littered the developing world with very little attention on bolstering the quality of education, and Nigeria was no different (Uzor, 2017). Nigeria tops the chart for out-of-school children with about 9 million out-of-school children, so the country continues to explore ways to get this population enrolled in schools, however, household surveys on children's numeracy and literacy skills show that even when in school, children are not learning basic skills (Uzor, 2017). In the SDGs however, a big shift was made from focusing on primary enrollment to improving access to quality education for everyone, which was touted as a breakthrough in policy design for global education. Although this new approach created an avenue for researchers and policymakers to come up with a variety of ideas for how to make education more accessible for all in the developing world, it begs the question of who needs to be involved and what their roles are in the education system. In his book *The Predictable Failure of Education Reform,* Sarason argues that the education system can become intractable if stakeholders are not working together to design solutions within the system, and then he posits that it is the ginormous complexity that comes with the need for stakeholder alliance that is the root cause of education reform failure.

Across the developing world, there is no better example of what Sarason describes than Nigeria. When it comes to education reform, the scale of the challenge is quite significant, and the SDGs have chosen 2030 to achieve its global education goal. In the solution space for education, equitable access, relevant learning, skill acquisition, and quality teaching are all in the mix of desirable outcomes, but these solutions cannot be achieved with the traditional piecemeal approaches. The reason for this is that education reform is a *wicked problem* that requires multiple parts of the system to be in sync for prolonged periods since there is often no one clear way of solving issues as they arise. In the case of Nigeria, the wickedness of education reform manifests itself in many forms, but one form that has appeared to be more prevalent in recent times is the ongoing conflict by the Boko Haram group in northern Nigeria that have attacked schools, students, and have left institutional infrastructure in the region dilapidated. Interestingly, this attack on formal education does not tell the full story because it is just an added layer of complexity to the social history and nature of schools and learning in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, schools have become these institutional instruments that are thought of to be very separate from the home, but history shows that this was not always the case. Before the institutionalization of schools in Nigeria, learning predominantly took place at home, so in designing education reforms and interventions for the northern region that is strife with conflict, care needs to be taken to relocate learning within the cultural and social contexts where it originated from (Jacob and Ensign, 2020). This is not a move to do away with schools, teachers and all the institutional lot, but to seek new ways of making learning more meaningful for students and their communities. Education in Nigeria needs to reignite its place in society by placing civic engagement at its core to achieve the common good of communities. The big question then, is whether formal education has failed in Nigeria, and to answer this, it makes sense to look at how traditional forms of learning have been excluded from the education system over time. Precisely, this exclusion has created hostile learning relationships within communities and particularly between western education and the predominant Islamic population of northern Nigeria.

Before the arrival of western education in Nigeria in the 1840s, the different cultural groups of Nigeria had their local ways of learning. The Hausas of Northern Nigeria typically learnt by gathering in small groups and going over local manuscripts, and the Igbos of eastern Nigeria adopted a system of apprenticeship where students would join a well-skilled master in a trade, learn for several years before starting their ventures. Adelabu argues that the education problem that Nigeria has today is a result of the gross negligence of these traditional forms of education (Adelabu, 1971). Because western education was

presented as the best and only way to learn and achieve status in society, entire communities felt disempowered and robbed of their sense of cultural belonging. The negative effects of western education ran deep because it established a gaping chasm between daily-lived communal experiences and education. Children now had to leave their homes to attend schools in uniforms, and this brought about so many changes in family dynamics. Only favorite children were allowed to go to school, boys were given preference over girls, parents no longer had a stake in the children's education, children had to learn in English, and so on.

In recent years, studies have shown that developmental outcomes for Nigeria youth are strongly influenced by family characteristics such as parental involvement, support, and connectedness (Odumegwu et al., 2017). In other parts of Nigeria like the west and south-east regions, western education was adopted with relative ease as these families saw value in how the colonial missionary schools were set up. However, suspicion about western education loomed large in the northern region where it was considered an inauthentic form of education compared to the traditional Islamic forms of education. Given this educational dynamic, a new set of social elites sprung up from those who were able to send their children to expensive schools to gain formal education, which further fragmented societies (Jacob and Ensign, 2020). The term *Boko* will come to represent this cultural inauthenticity of western education in the north, and coupled with the word *Haram,* which means anything that is forbidden in Islamic law, *Boko Haram* became this group that is now fighting against all forms of western education in the north. During colonization, it was not quite clear whether there was a learning crisis in Nigeria because no one was actively researching to understand the problem, and the colonialist had complete control over the education narrative. However, the educational shortcomings of the colonial era became visible at independence in 1960, when the country was completely short of an educated labor force to fill positions in its newly created federal civil service unit. Out of 4607 available senior positions that were available, only 1853 were filled, 1170 posts remained unfilled while 1533 posts were filled by foreign officers (Jacob and Ensign, 2020).

The first era of military rule in Nigeria took place between 1966-1979. Known as the era of the first republic, it was the first time that edicts regarding education were made by indigenous people. In 1967, the country was divided into twelve states, and by 1976, there were nineteen states, and each state was tasked with the regulation, and provision of its education edicts, but all the edicts by the states had common features like setting up a system of unified teaching service, establishing school management boards, and completely taking over schools from individuals and voluntary agencies (Fabunmi, 2003). What was interesting about these first set of education edicts is that none of them had anything to do with improving the quality of learning or teaching skills, they were mainly about gaining control over the system and determining who owns what. The government overestimated its abilities to cater for the needs of the citizens by nationalizing every form of post-colonial life because it was not too long before gross forms of incompetence and corruption began to come into play. Between 1979-1983, new laws were enacted to direct government policy towards ensuring adequate and equal educational opportunities at all levels. With this new move, the 1979 constitution mentions that the government shall *strive* to provide free and compulsory primary, secondary and adult literacy training, but forty-two years on, Nigeria continues to suffer from the same problems it had at independence.

By 1999, the year which marked the end of military rule and the beginning of *democracy,* new education laws were enacted to represent the zeitgeist of the time. Some of the objectives of education policy during this time shifted to account for human values and the birth of democracy in the country (Umo U.A., 2014). Constitutional policies aimed to inculcate the right type of values and attitudes in Nigerians for the survival of the Nigerian society, to train the minds of Nigerians in the understanding of the socio-economic realities around them, and to help Nigerians develop practical skills and mental, physical,

and social abilities that will enable them to live equitably and contribute to the development of the Nigerian society. What was missing, however, were actionable plans to make all these grand ideas happen, and having gone through only minor revisions since 1999, the Nigerian constitution has remained largely the same, and not much has been done at all to make it work for the common Nigerian.

Fast forward to today, and schools have become casualties of war and conflict across Nigeria. As mentioned earlier, education policies have succeeded in increasing enrollment across different levels of education, and this seems like the easier part of the problem to solve, however, in areas affected by conflict, enrollment levels have remained low, and learning outcomes have worsened. In northern Nigeria, this problem is amplified by the socio-cultural dynamic that gives no educational preference to females. International organizations have chimed in here and there, working with the government to boost learning outcomes in northern Nigeria. One way they have done this was through the Female Teacher Training Scholarship Scheme (FTTSS), which was devised to address the under-representation of female teachers and improve teacher supply in rural northern Nigeria (Humphreys et al., 2020). Through this scheme, young women from rural areas were awarded scholarships to participate in a three-year initial teacher training (ITT) course to gain their National Certificate of Education (NCE), and upon graduation, they were required to return to their villages to teach. 30% of the program was funded by the United Nations Children's Fund and the remaining 70% by state governments where the program was implemented, and in states where research was conducted like Bauchi and Niger, only 45% and 17% of participants graduated, and were deployed from the program (Humphreys et al., 2020).

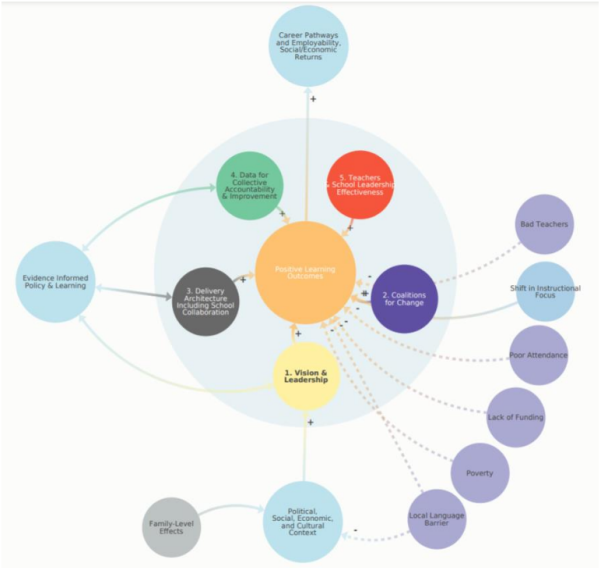
The above intervention is an example of a case where context, culture, inclusion, and issues of equality come into play. What made the program unsuccessful in some states and successful in others? The program ran from 2008 to 2015 right when the Boko Haram crisis started in the north, and it may have been the case that participants feared being deployed to remote areas to teach so they dropped out. The focus on getting an equal number of girls and boys through school may not be the only approach, instead, identifying inherent and established gendered power structures that exist within formal education and the wider society might be a good first step. Female students want to see not just more female teachers coming through their classes, but more female teachers that are highly qualified, well-achieved, and inspiring. Typically the declared interest of teachers, educational background, experience, and professional qualifications, are all taken into consideration when classes are allocated, however, at a lot of schools in northern Nigeria, classes and subjects are allocated only based on vacancies, and the average teacher to student ratio is one to forty students (Adelabu M.A., 2005), which could get significantly higher in rural areas.

Back to the question of the learning crisis in Nigeria, and specifically, in northern Nigeria, data from the Education Sector Program in Nigeria (ESSPIN) and the Service Delivery Education Indicators (SDIs) show that stakeholder involvement and participation through Parent Teachers' Association (PTAs) and School-Based Management Committees have yielded positive results for both teachers' performances and students' learning outcomes (Nchare, 2021). Especially during the recent covid-19 pandemic, for children whose schools had implemented remote online forms of learning like WhatsApp, parents played a significant role in their children's learning journeys only if they were educated themselves and knew how to use these digital platforms. In a qualitative interview of students during the pandemic, a four-year-old child from Taraba state in north-eastern Nigeria shared that her parents helped her tremendously to learn spellings using digital tools, as well as access the internet for many other academic exercises (Azubuike et al., 2021). Coupled with the ongoing Boko Haram conflict, the pandemic has exacerbated learning outcomes in northern Nigeria. Much like the disparities that were created by the Boko Haram crisis, the pandemic came with its unique challenges. The reason for this is that the majority of the Nigerian population with access to the internet live in urban areas and have better socio-economic statuses than

their counterparts in rural areas. So already, there is a spatial disadvantage that exists that prevents rural students from achieving high learning outcomes. This disparity also shows up for students who attend under-funded government schools when compared to their counterparts in well-run private schools (Azubuike et al., 2021).

Taking context into consideration, technology use in the classroom presents many opportunities for growth and improvement, and in Nigeria, the big concern is solving the equity problem. But after solving for access and equity, the next challenge is teaching technology to students who, on one hand, have never used technology before and, on the other hand, cannot understand or engage critically with the language of instruction, which is typically English. Despite these challenges, some interventions account for both community and family level factors, and one of those programs is the Technology Enhanced for All (TELA) project, which was implemented by the American University of Nigeria (AUN) in Yola between 2015 – 2016 at the height of the Boko Haram insurgency. In the rest of this paper, I use this project as the base for the systems analysis of learning outcomes in northern Nigeria.

Systems and Stakeholder Analysis



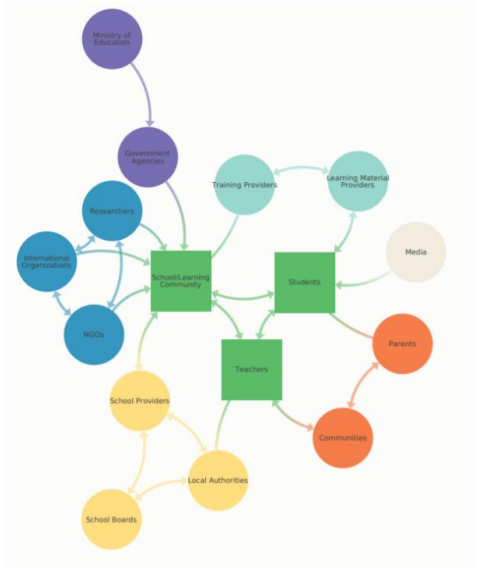


Fig 1: Systems Map for the TELA Project Fig 2: Stakeholder Map for the TELA Project

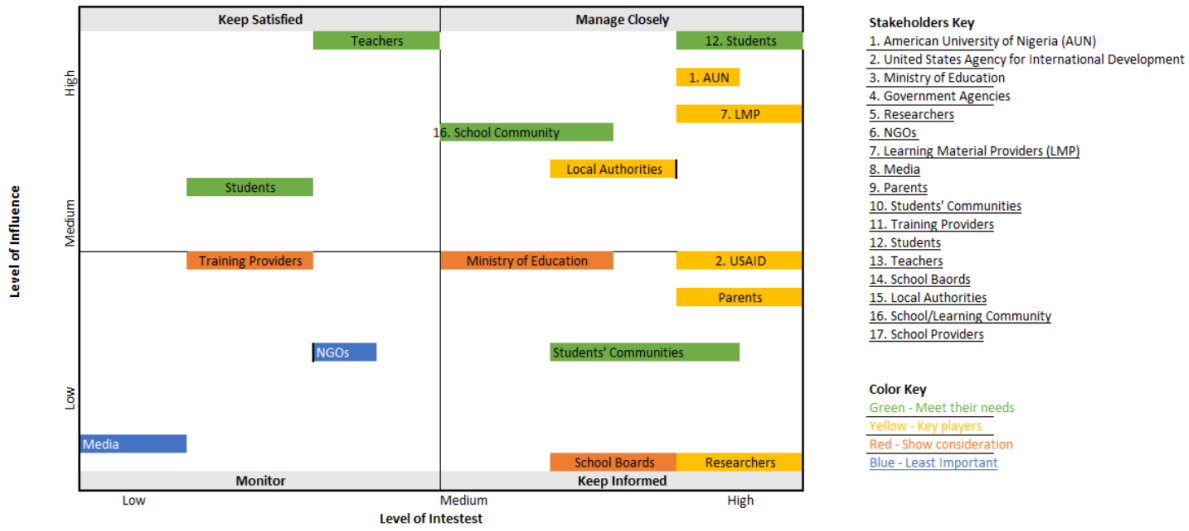


Fig 3: Stakeholder Influence/Interest Map for the TELA Project

This historical and contextual analysis of educational policy formulation and intervention in Nigeria has a lot of implications for both educational planning and policy. A lot of the post-colonial educational policies focused on increasing enrollment without considering the local peculiarities of Nigerian communities in their formulation. Critically examining both past and present policies also make it possible to incorporate what has worked so far into proposed education policies. For a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria, the only approaches to stakeholder alignment, policy formulation, and education planning that would work are those that are participatory in nature. With about three hundred and fifty-four ethnic groups in Nigeria, each group seeks to get their fair share of the national cake and educational services, and conflicts often erupt when certain groups begin to feel marginalized (Fabunmi, 2003). To minimize these conflicts and protests, it is necessary for both policymakers and educational planners to involve representatives from across society in educational planning and policy formulation. The TELA project was funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented by AUN to engage community and religious leaders, students, teachers, and learning center facilitators using a participatory model they describe as Transactional Radio Instruction (TRI) that was able to reach thousands of students in remote hard-to-reach areas through radio (Jacob and Ensign, 2020). This systems analysis uses the TELA project as a microcosmic framework for how participatory models can be used to solve education challenges in resource-constrained contexts like northern Nigeria.

To understand this system, I take a closer look at the different factors that make up the system like a clear vision and leadership by stakeholders, cohesive coalitions for change, strong delivery architectures that included school collaboration, streamlined data collection platforms for accountability checks, effective teacher and school leadership, evidence-informed policy formulation and learning, all of which led to both improved outcomes for learners. The complexity of participatory models of change stems from the many tensions that arise from the interactions between stakeholders that require time and focus. Here, I

explore the following tensions in my examination of the TELA project:

1) rethinking education as a web of systems and fixing the learning crisis without forgetting those without access to education in the first place,
2) attempting to be evidence-informed while operating in socially, culturally, and politically dynamic environments that has conflicting priorities,
3) balancing the focus on the education system with the responsibilities and contribution of the community as well as personal agency,
4) and reconciling big education reform plans within the realities and the capacities of the smaller systems in which those plans will be implemented.

Vision and Leadership

The importance of clear vision statements and transformative leadership cannot be overstated when it comes to learning and organizational effectiveness. After teaching, transformative leadership is the most influential factor affecting learning outcomes. At the national level, good leadership in education requires both the political and social will to understand and measure the different levels of equity and inequality in the education system (Crouch et al., 2021). Eliminating all disparity may truly be unattainable, but much can be done to eliminate 'unfair' inequality. For instance, measurement approaches that use gap metrics are useful in determining the magnitude of specific axes of unjust disparity, while systems-related inequality metrics give a comprehensive assessment of all inequality, independent of the source or level of 'fairness' involved.

After the kidnap of about 276 schoolgirls from the community of Chibok in Borno State of northeast Nigeria, and the closure of schools across the state, it became clear that a new form of teaching was needed to bring students up to speed, and TELA was introduced to fill this gap. But before TELA was launched, painstaking care was taken to carry out formative trials that revealed insightful factors that influenced students' learning in the area. The goal was to get children to learn for 45 minutes a day by listening to the radio, and for them to come back twice every week (Jacob and Ensign, 2020). Given the nature of the environment, this seemed like an impossible goal to achieve, but knowing the importance of community in students' learning journeys, the project implementers worked with the local Imams, who are seen as spiritual leaders of the community, to conduct a successful formative evaluation before launching TELA. This kind of leadership and vision is precisely what is needed in education reform today.

Coalitions for Change

One thing that the TELA project did well is its acknowledgement of the complexities of social change, that actions and solutions rely on collaboration, and the continuous negotiation of outcomes among stakeholders, rather than a purely technocratic approach. In Nigeria, COMPASS (Community Participation for Action in the Social Sector) was a major interactive radio instruction (IRI) project that lasted for five years, was funded by USAID and carried out by Creative Associates International. COMPASS was implemented in the Nigerian states of Lagos, Kano, and Nasarawa. From 2004 through 2009, the IRI components of COMPASS worked to improve literacy and mathematics instruction, as well as provide health education. It impacted nearly 700,000 students in 1400 schools. Before COMPASS, an earlier IRI project called Literacy Enhancement Assistance Project (LEAP), which was undertaken by the Enterprise Development Center (EDC) with USAID financing was implemented to improve fundamental math and literacy abilities among primary school students in both public and local Islamic schools called Islamiyah. In Lagos, Kano, and Nasarawa, LEAP reached 330 schools, 128 of which were Islamiyah schools. The IRI programs were intimately interwoven with the classroom and community because both LEAP and COMPASS focused on training instructors on optimal teaching practices. Also, as part of its efforts to encourage and increase school attendance and enrollment, particularly for female students, COMPASS reached out to over 10,000 instructors and 4200 parents through Parents–Teachers Associations (PTAs). The

TELA project which followed in 2015 was particularly successful because it used results from these previous coalitions of change that recognized the complexity of the education system, and the problem they were trying to solve.

Transactional Delivery Architecture including School Collaboration

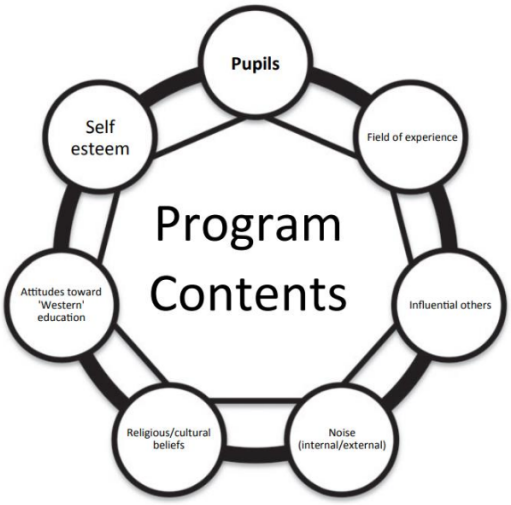


Fig 4: Transactional Delivery Architecture for the TELA Project

The TELA project recognized that in northern Nigeria, the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) should not be thought of as only a compromise or a stopgap measure. There is a large and ever growing body of empirical literature showing that the learning outcomes of e-learning programs can be comparable to traditional programs. What Nigeria needs is a revolutionary new approach to education that tackles the challenges posed by demographic dynamics and an outdated, overstrained, and wholly inadequate schooling system. Digital technologies can provide what it takes to set the nation's youth on the right path to collectively realize Nigeria's full potential, but to succeed they must consider the different aspects of current socio-cultural existence. The use of radio in the TELA project was a very cost-effective way of conducting mass learning that placed the demographic dynamics illustrated in the figure above at the center of its operation.

Data for Collective Accountability and Improvement

In Nigeria, the collection, storage, and analysis of actionable data are some of the major challenges that education reform faces. This is not to say that data is not being collected, but it is more about the standardization of local taxonomies, catalogs, glossaries and accessibility. The National Education Data Survey (NEDS), which collects demographic and educational information on students from pre-primary through junior secondary schools has been conducted three times in Nigeria during the last 15 years (2004, 2010, and 2015). These data could be useful for extending the analysis of educational outcomes to include the role of home and parental characteristics, learners' preparedness, and school and teachers' characteristics (Adeniran et al., 2020). Using this data, Adeniran et al. were able to construct a curriculum-matched metric that revealed the prevalence of the learning crisis in Nigeria. For the TELA project, data collection was at the core of the program and was done with very high competency levels. This data combined with the NEDS data was used to track progress and hold every stakeholder accountable for their part throughout the project.

Teacher and School Leadership Effectiveness

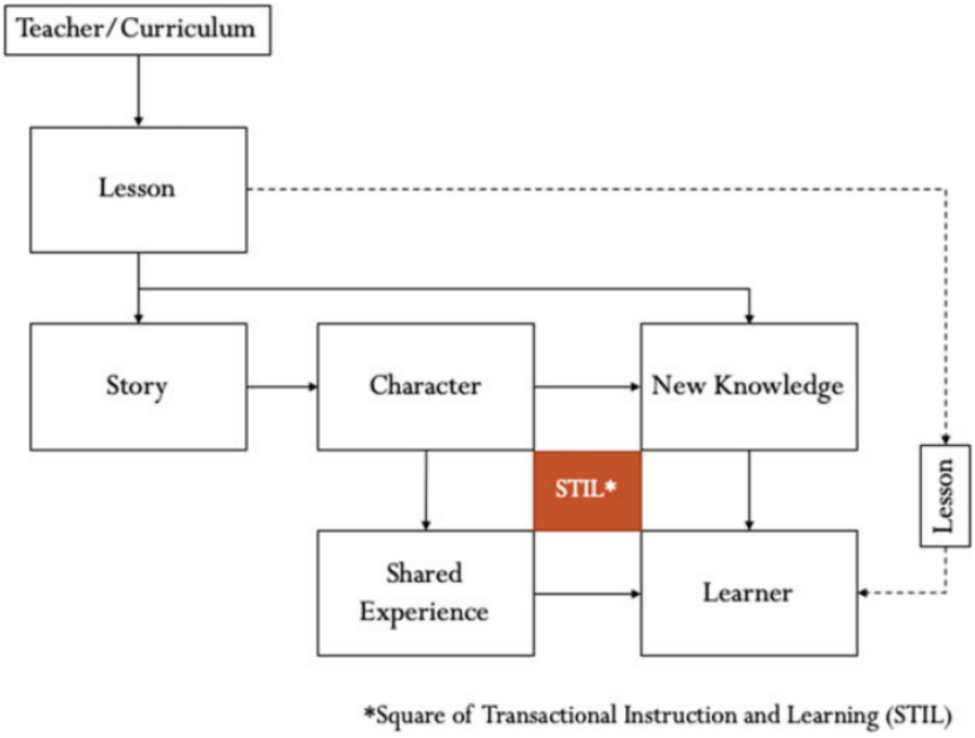


Fig 5: Participatory Teaching Model for the TELA Project by Jacob and Ensign

Learning in Nigeria can be daunting for students in rural areas where English serves as a third or even fourth language, so to have an impact as a teacher, teaching needs to include a focus on multimodal literacies (Ajayi, 2015). To achieve high levels of literacy, Nigerian teachers need to focus on how critical literacy informs teaching, how power relations are subverted or questioned, how males and females are represented as gendered subjects, how they are empowered, how relationships are revised, and how feminist ideologies are embedded in course materials and so on. In the absence of teachers and schools, the TELA project employs a critical multimodal approach through radio to help students learn, imagine, and engage. Recruiting and educating qualified teachers, rebuilding, and outfitting damaged schools, providing security for schools, and other issues within the Nigerian education system will take years, if not decades to achieve, so, efforts must therefore be concentrated on bridging the learning gaps through the use of extremely effective mass learning technology. Just like in the TELA project, teachers need to make their curriculums transactional so that students, even from the most remote and rural areas can find their stories in the learning content that they engage with.

Improved Outcomes for Learners

Finally, as I have pointed out, a tradition of religious education is currently in place in northern Nigeria where the lowest educational outcomes exist, and the TELA project has done well to work within that system to carve out an opportunity to increase access to secular education. As things stand in northern Nigeria, there are two main constraining factors to this type of integration. First, there exist critical unobserved household characteristics that favor religious education and are negatively correlated with secular education. Second, the declining nature of secular education is seen as a disincentive (Antoninis, 2014). These two factors cast doubts on the effectiveness

of policies that are trying to integrate secular education within traditional education, but the TELA project has shown that it is possible when every stakeholder including government, NGOs, community members, teachers, and family members are involved and given a chance to play a role.

During the TELA project, 750 learning center facilitators, 75 university students, three radio production staff, two faculty members, three monitoring and evaluation staff, one intern, two work-study students, and three full-time administrative employees were fully involved. The project also had over 20 volunteers from the American University of Nigeria, and the local community, 35 casual enumerators, who helped administer the baseline and end-line early grade reading and math assessments, and several campus security employees that were assigned to various tasks (Jacob and Ensign, 2020). This level of collaboration both at the local and national levels is what made the TELA project a good model for social change in education reform because after six months of participation in the TELA TRI programs, students' reading scores improved by 99.1%, while numeracy levels improved by 97.2%. These numbers were derived from a survey of 609 students who took part in TELA radio programs. Only 19 of the students who took part in the baseline assessment were unable to be retested, indicating an extremely low attrition rate of 3%. In all, the program reached a total of 22,000 students across its 750 learning centers, and this does not include the hundreds of other children and adults who listened to the program at home.

In conclusion, more programs like TELA need to be designed and implemented not just in northern Nigeria, but at scale in other parts of the country. Even though both policy and resource limitations exist in rural areas, implementing participatory models of teaching and learning that brings all stakeholders into the full picture is the best way to go. Again, the key to education reform is not just to increase enrollment at all levels, but to take extreme care to improve instructional techniques that engage communities at scale.

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