

## **Reintegration and Education: Addressing the Needs of Out-of-School Children in Displacement Contexts in North Central Nigeria**

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**Article DOI:** 10.48028/ijprds/ijarppads.v8.i1.15

### **Abstract**

**T**his study explores the critical issue of reintegration and education for out-of-school children in displacement contexts within North Central Nigeria. As conflict and environmental challenges lead to significant displacement, millions of children are at risk of losing access to education, thereby exacerbating their vulnerability. This research examines the multifaceted needs of these children, focusing on psychosocial support, inclusive educational practices, and community engagement. By analyzing existing interventions and identifying gaps, the study highlights best practices for reintegration programs that not only prioritize educational access but also promote social cohesion and emotional well-being. The findings aim to inform policymakers, educators, and humanitarian organizations about effective strategies to create a supportive learning environment for displaced children, ensuring that their right to education is upheld and that they can successfully reintegrate into their communities.

**Keywords:** *Reintegration, Out-of-School Children, Displacement, Education*

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## **Background of the Study**

The rise of internal displacement in Nigeria has created a crisis that significantly affects educational access for children, particularly in North Central Nigeria. Factors such as conflict, violence, and environmental changes have led to the displacement of millions, with many children being forced out of school. As of 2025, over 3 million children are estimated to be out of school due to these circumstances (UNICEF, 2025). Nigeria is home to one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children in the world, with estimates suggesting over 10 million children are not enrolled in any educational institution (UNICEF, 2021). This staggering figure reflects a complex interplay of socio-economic factors, cultural attitudes, and systemic issues within the educational framework. North Central Nigeria, in particular, has been significantly affected, with the situation exacerbated by ongoing conflicts and insecurity. According to a report by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC, 2020), the region's conflict-prone areas have seen school closures, teacher shortages, and an increase in educational inequities, further marginalizing vulnerable populations, particularly girls and internally displaced children. The predicaments that lead to displacement are generally complex. They result from a range of factors, including political instability, conflict, violence, inequality, and poverty, and are often exacerbated by natural disasters, health emergencies, and environmental instability (FAO 2016). Many such emergencies are protracted and characterized by recurrent conflicts and/or natural disaster, weak governance capacity, chronic food crises, etc. (FAO 2016).

Displacement in North Central Nigeria is driven by a multitude of factors, including the Boko Haram insurgency, violent clashes between Fulani herdsman and farming communities, and broader economic instability. Driven by conflicts, banditry, and economic hardships, Nigeria faces a major crisis with roughly 18.3 million out-of school children which the-highest globally. In Central Nigeria, within internally displaced person camps and host communities, over 60% of displaced children lack basic educational access, making tactical, conflict-sensitive educational interventions a national emergency Inienger (2025). As of 2025 and mid 2026 reports by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), says there are over 1.3 million internally displaced persons tracked across combined assessment in the North-Central and North-West zones of Nigeria, driven by communal clashes and armed violence. 1,378,124 individuals across North-Central States like Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau, Niger and Kogi are displaced, 81% of displaced persons reside within local host communities, while 19% live in formal or informal camps and relocated sites. Out of this, Nigeria has estimated 18.3 million out of 20 million out of school children and youths, giving it one of the highest numbers globally. Breakdown of out of school rates (ages 6 – 16 across key North Central States includes; Niger State 42.8% out of school age children, Nasarawa State 25.4%, Plateau State 23.2%, Kwara State 22%, Kogi State 10.2% Federal Capital Territory 12.8% and Benue State 18.4% which also host high numbers of localized internal displacement affecting education access. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2022) estimates that millions of individuals are internally displace, creating a humanitarian crisis that severely affects access to essential services, including education. The ongoing violence and insecurity have disrupted normal life, leading to school closures and the destruction of educational

infrastructure. As noted by Owoaje et al. (2021), displaced children often face unique challenges, such as psychological trauma, stigma, and a lack of resources, which hinder their ability to reintegrate into educational settings.

The impact of displacement extends beyond immediate educational disruptions; it influences children's psychological well-being, social cohesion, and future opportunities. A report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2020) highlights that displaced children are more likely to experience long-term educational deficits, which can perpetuate cycles of poverty and hinder community development. Despite the critical need for educational reintegration for out-of-school children in displacement contexts, existing policies and programs often fall short. Barriers such as inadequate resources, lack of community involvement, and the ongoing insecurity hinder access to education for displaced children in North Central Nigeria. This paper explores the intersection of reintegration and education for out-of-school children in displacement contexts, aiming to identify strategies for effective support and policy implementation.

### **Conceptual Review**

Understanding these concepts is vital for assessing the needs of out-of-school children.

#### **Reintegration**

Reintegration refers to the process of returning individuals, particularly children, to their educational systems and social environments following displacement. Education is a fundamental human right and a critical factor in promoting stability and resilience among displaced populations. Research shows that conflict-related displacement severely disrupts children's education. According to Ezeani (2022), children in displacement contexts face multiple barriers, including lack of access to schools, financial constraints, and psychological trauma.

#### **Reintegration Strategies**

Scholars like Abimbola (2022) have highlighted the importance of community-based approaches for the reintegration of displaced children, emphasizing that local engagement can enhance educational outcomes. Existing literature suggests that successful reintegration requires tailored interventions that consider local contexts and the specific needs of displaced populations.

**Reintegration:** This refers to the process of re-admitting or integrating displaced individuals, particularly children, back into the educational system. Reintegration is complex, as it often involves addressing psychological, social, and logistical barriers that hinder children's ability to return to school. The need for tailored reintegration strategies is emphasized by Smith and D'Amato (2019), who discuss the importance of comprehensive support systems for effective educational reintegration.

### **Out-of-School Children**

According to the United Nations, out-of-school children refer to children who are yet to be enrolled in any formal education, excluding pre-primary education. The age range for out-of-school children is 6-11 years. Out-of-school children are school-age children who are supposed to be in schools but are not in schools due to parental and governmental failures to provide accessible quality education for them. Out-of-school children are young children in the age group of 1 to 12 who are roaming the street without access to a functional educational system (Ojelade, Aiyedun & Aregebesola, 2019).

Out-of-school children are the children whom the government and the parents have failed to provide quality basic education for. The term "out-of-school children" is a non-attendance of the school of school-age children for some established factors (Ogunode, Chinwuba & Ayoko, 2022). The prevalence of out-of-school children makes one think of the leadership failure in Nigeria. Thus, it has been noted that leaders can either enhance national development or retard development (Asaju & Ayeni, 2020). The attitude of political leadership in Nigeria is the causal variable of the type of education the country is having.

Out-of-School Children are children who are of school age but are not enrolled in any formal or informal educational institution. According to UNICEF (2021), Nigeria has one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children globally, significantly affecting the nation's development. The issue of out-of-school children is multifaceted, involving barriers such as economic constraints, cultural attitudes, and infrastructural deficiencies (Ngware et al., 2018).

### **Displacement**

Displacement is defined as the forced movement of individuals from their homes or countries due to various factors, including conflict, violence, natural disasters, or economic crises. In North Central Nigeria, factors such as the Boko Haram insurgency and communal conflicts have led to widespread displacement, significantly impacting children's access to education (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2022). According to McConnan et al. (2017), the consequences of displacement extend beyond immediate educational access, affecting long-term educational outcomes and psychological well-being.

Displacement' is a forced movement born of 'persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing public order' (UNHCR, 2022). It encompasses temporary and permanent movements, within and across borders (Opitz-Stapleton et al., 2017). For the purposes of this paper, displacement can occur due to conflict or to the negative impacts of climate change.

### **Education and Forced Displacement**

Forced displacement inevitably leads to a temporary or permanent halt in a child's school career. Education opportunities in situations of displacement are often very limited, and refugees and IDPs face numerous additional barriers to accessing education. In general,

forcibly displaced persons are less likely to access education than their non-migrant peers (Dryden-Peterson 2011). However, forced displacement does not universally lead to a reduction in access to education; where families are forced to flee from areas with very few schools to urban areas or organised camps with more schools, displacement can in fact increase access to education (Ferris and Winthrop 2010). Research suggests that non-formal and formal education opportunities of a reasonably high standard can provide a certain level of psychosocial protection and support for forcibly displaced peoples, as regular education activities can help to restore a sense of stability and hope among affected populations (Dryden-Peterson 2015, Shah 2015a). High-quality education that emphasizes learning and pays particular attention to the varied needs of forcibly displaced peoples has the potential for societal benefits, including community cohesion, in addition to individual benefits (Dryden-Peterson 2015, McCorriston 2012).

However, research also indicates that the education generally available for forcibly displaced persons is of such low quality that it commonly fails to exercise this protective dimension (Dryden-Peterson 2011). As a result of displacement, IDPs lose access to educational facilities and services. Schools and training facilities in places of origin are no longer safely accessible and may be destroyed, while teachers and administrators are often dispersed. Arranging for education where IDPs find themselves displaced is often complicated. If IDPs are located in camps or grouped shelter that is remote or inaccessible to local population centers, then primary education facilities (at least) must be built up from scratch within the camp, an undertaking which is often complicated by lack of resources and expertise. On the other hand, where IDPs do enjoy access to local school systems, a number of other problems typically arise:

1. IDPs may suffer from discrimination because they do not belong to the local ethnic, linguistic or religious majority group, or may simply not understand the local language of instruction.
2. IDPs may have no other shelter options than collective centers normally used by the local community as schools, presenting an obstacle to education for both displaced and non-displaced children.
3. Where local schools are available, the arrival of large groups of displaced children can lead to overcrowded classrooms, straining the relationship with host communities.
4. Where local schools are located at a distance from IDP settlements, traveling to school may be dangerous where the route goes via mined areas or security checkpoints where children may be subject to harassment, forced recruitment, or abduction.
5. IDPs often lack personal documentation; lack of identification or records attesting to prior enrollment or the level of studies that displaced children have completed can prevent them from registering locally for education; such bureaucratic obstacles can also prevent displaced teachers without access to proof of their qualifications from providing badly needed instruction.
6. In some cases, local residency requirements and other bureaucratic requirements can prevent enrollment of IDPs in local educational facilities.

7. School fees, other costs such as books and uniforms, or in some cases the need to pay bribes to teachers and administrators can render education unaffordable for IDPs, in light of the impoverishment risk that typically accompanies displacement.
8. Displaced children may find themselves either required to abandon school in order to contribute to their family's economic survival, or to work so hard outside of school hours that their education suffers.
9. Displacement is often accompanied by physical or psychological trauma in cases when children have been recruited as child soldiers, witnessed atrocities, or been separated from family members. Under such circumstances, displaced children's ability to learn may be limited in the absence of psycho-social care

### **Importance of Addressing Educational Needs**

Education is a fundamental human right, essential for individual growth and societal progress. Displacement exacerbates existing educational inequities, limiting access to quality education and hindering long-term development. The impact of displacement on education is profound, affecting children's psychological well-being, social integration, and future opportunities (UNESCO, 2019). Research by Betancourt et al. (2018) indicates that educational disruptions can lead to increased vulnerability among displaced children, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization. For displaced children, educational access can provide a sense of normalcy and stability, which is crucial for their development and resilience. The loss of education during critical formative years can have lasting effects on their lives, including diminished employment opportunities and reduced social mobility (Cameron et al., 2020). Therefore, it is imperative to prioritize the educational needs of out-of-school children in displacement contexts to foster inclusive growth and enhance community resilience.

### **Demographic Profile of Affected Children**

The demographic profile of out-of-school children in displacement contexts, particularly in North Central Nigeria, reveals a complex interplay of factors that influence their educational access and experiences which include:

#### **a. Age Distribution**

A significant proportion of affected children are between the ages of 6 to 14, which aligns with the primary and early secondary education age brackets. According to UNICEF (2021), children in this age range constitute about 50% of the out-of-school population in conflict-affected areas.

#### **b. Gender Disparities**

Gender plays a critical role in educational access. Research indicates that girls are disproportionately affected by displacement and are more likely to be out of school due to cultural norms, early marriage, and gender-based violence (Plan International, 2019). In Nigeria, the gender gap is particularly pronounced, with girls accounting for nearly 60% of the out-of-school population in some regions (Nigerian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

**c. Ethnic and Regional Variations**

The affected population often includes diverse ethnic groups, with specific challenges based on regional dynamics. For instance, children from marginalized ethnic communities may face additional barriers due to discrimination or lack of representation in educational policies (International Rescue Committee, 2020).

**d. Socioeconomic Status**

Many affected families live in poverty, which exacerbates educational challenges. Studies show that children from low-income households are significantly less likely to attend school, with many forced to engage in child labor to support their families (World Bank, 2021).

**e. Psychosocial Factors**

Many displaced children exhibit signs of trauma and stress due to conflict-related experiences, which can hinder their ability to engage in learning. (Mastrorillo et al., 2016). Psychological support is often necessary to facilitate their reintegration into educational settings.

**The Impact of Displacement on Education**

Displaced and internally displaced children face distinct hurdles that keep them out of conventional classrooms:

**i. Disruption of Educational Access**

Displacement significantly disrupts access to education, primarily through the destruction of educational infrastructure and the depletion of resources necessary for effective learning. Studies by Adeleke et al. (2020) highlight that conflict-related displacements lead to the closure of schools and the destruction of educational facilities, further exacerbating the existing educational crisis in Nigeria. The authors found that, in conflict-affected areas, many schools are either completely destroyed or rendered unsafe for children. This situation results in a lack of qualified teachers, as many educators have also been displaced, leading to a severe teacher-student ratio and compromised educational quality. Additionally, resource shortages, such as textbooks and learning materials, hinder the ability of children to engage meaningfully in their education. A report by the Nigerian Education Sector Analysis (2021) reinforces these findings, noting that the availability of educational resources has drastically declined in displacement-affected regions, contributing to increased dropout rates among displaced children.

**ii. Psychological and Social Ramifications**

Displaced children often endure significant psychological and social challenges that impact their learning capabilities. Exposure to violence, loss of family members, and the trauma associated with displacement can lead to issues such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Masten (2018) emphasizes the importance of supportive environments in fostering resilience among displaced children, stating that access to education can serve as a protective factor that mitigates the adverse effects of trauma. Masten's

research highlights the role of school as not just a place for academic learning but also a critical environment for social support and emotional healing.

Moreover, the social ramifications of displacement often result in feelings of isolation and stigma among displaced children. The disruption of community ties and peer networks further complicates their ability to adapt and succeed in new educational environments (Betancourt et al., 2018). Studies indicate that creating supportive and inclusive school environments is essential to help these children rebuild their sense of normalcy and belonging, which are crucial for their educational engagement and overall well-being.

### **iii. Economic Pressures**

Displacement deepens family poverty, forcing boys into child labor and driving girls into early marriage or home care roles thereby, abandoning schools.

### **Social Integration:**

Displaced students may struggle to integrate with local peers, leading to feelings of isolation and discrimination.

### **Long-term Consequences:**

Education disruption can affect future employment opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and instability in displaced communities.

### **Social Welfare Policies Related to Reintegration**

The National Strategic Plan for Out-of-School Children (NSP), launched by the Federal Ministry of Education in 2019, aims to significantly reduce the number of out-of-school children in Nigeria through targeted interventions and policies. The NSP emphasizes inclusive education, aiming to integrate marginalized groups, including displaced children, into the formal education system. According to the Federal Ministry of Education (2019), the plan outlines strategies such as increasing school enrollment through awareness campaigns, improving school infrastructure, and enhancing teacher training to cater to the needs of out-of-school children. This policy serves as a framework for both government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to coordinate their efforts in tackling educational disparities.

### **National Commission for Almajiri and Out-of-School Children Education (NACOSCE)**

The National Commission for Almajiri and Out-of-School Children Education (NACOSCE) was established to specifically address the educational needs of Almajiri children—children who attend Islamic schools but often do not receive formal education. NACOSCE aims to integrate these children into the mainstream educational system by developing curricula that accommodate both secular and religious education. According to a report by the National Commission for Nomadic Education (2020), NACOSCE's initiatives include establishing schools that provide free meals, scholarships, and educational materials

to facilitate the transition of Almajiri children into formal education, thereby addressing their unique challenges and improving their educational outcomes.

### **Community-Based Initiatives**

In addition to government policies, various community-based initiatives play a crucial role in reintegration efforts. Organizations like Save the Children have implemented programs that offer educational support to displaced and out-of-school children. These programs often include mobile schools that bring education directly to children in hard-to-reach areas, as well as psychosocial support services designed to help children cope with trauma and stress related to displacement. A report by Save the Children (2021) highlights the effectiveness of these initiatives in creating flexible learning environments that accommodate the needs of displaced children, fostering both educational engagement and emotional resilience. These community-driven approaches often empower local stakeholders, ensuring that interventions are culturally relevant and sustainable.

### **Community Involvement**

Community involvement plays a vital role in facilitating educational access and providing the necessary resources for displaced children. Engaging local leaders, families, and organizations fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility towards the education of displaced children, which can enhance their acceptance in the community (UNESCO, 2020).

Community support initiatives, such as volunteer-led tutoring programs and awareness campaigns about the importance of education for all children, have shown promise in promoting inclusive educational environments. Furthermore, psychological support programs are crucial for aiding children's adjustment and engagement in educational activities. According to UNICEF (2021), these programs provide counseling and peer support, helping children cope with trauma and fostering resilience. By integrating mental health support with educational initiatives, communities can create a holistic approach that addresses both the emotional and educational needs of displaced children.

### **Challenges to Reintegration**

Reintegrating displaced children into the educational system is a complex process complicated by several interrelated barriers. These challenges can be categorized into cultural, economic, logistical, psychological, and policy-related factors.

### **Cultural Attitudes and Stigma**

Negative perceptions and stigma against displaced individuals severely limit educational access. Communities often view displaced children with suspicion, which can lead to social exclusion and bullying within schools. Research indicates that such stigma not only affects enrollment rates but also impacts the overall educational experience, discouraging displaced children from actively participating in school life (Owoaje et al., 2021; Betancourt et al., 2018). Cultural attitudes that prioritize traditional educational pathways may further marginalize displaced children, making their reintegration even more challenging (Alonso et al., 2020).

**Economic Barriers**

Financial hardships faced by many displaced families can impede children's ability to attend school. Costs associated with transportation, uniforms, and school supplies can be prohibitive, especially for families struggling to make ends meet. According to a report by the International Rescue Committee (IRC, 2020), economic pressures may compel children to contribute to household income rather than pursue their education, further limiting their educational opportunities.

**Logistical Challenges**

The physical displacement of families often disrupts access to schools, particularly in rural or conflict affected areas. Many displaced children may live far from educational facilities or in locations where schools have been destroyed or rendered unsafe. Limited transportation options can exacerbate this issue, making it difficult for children to reach educational institutions (UNICEF, 2021).

**Psychological Factors:**

Exposure to violence and trauma can have lasting psychological effects on displaced children, negatively impacting their ability to learn and engage in a classroom environment. Many children may experience anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can hinder their academic performance and social interactions (Masten, 2018). Creating a supportive and understanding educational environment is crucial for helping these children heal and reintegrate successfully (Friedman et al., 2021).

**Lack of Inclusive Educational Policies**

Insufficient policies and programs specifically tailored to meet the needs of displaced children also present barriers to their reintegration. Many educational systems lack the necessary resources and training to accommodate diverse learning needs, resulting in inadequate support for children from different backgrounds and experiences (UNESCO, 2020). This gap in policy implementation limits the effectiveness of educational interventions aimed at reintegrating displaced children.

Addressing these barriers necessitates a multi-faceted approach that incorporates community engagement, economic support, policy reform, and psychosocial assistance to create an inclusive educational environment for displaced children.

**Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, utilizing document analysis and interviews with stakeholders, including educators, NGO representatives, and displaced families. Data collection focused on assessing existing educational programs and their effectiveness in facilitating the reintegration of out-of-school children.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs Social Capital Theory, which asserts that social networks and community involvement play a crucial role in shaping educational outcomes. The theory emphasizes the significance of collaborative efforts in enhancing reintegration and educational access for displaced children. Developed by key sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Putnam (1986): Bourdieu introduced the concept of social capital as part of his broader analysis of capital forms (economic, cultural, social). He argued that social capital is an asset that individuals and groups can mobilize for personal and collective gain. Robert Putnam (2000): Putnam further popularized the concept in his book *Bowling Alone*, where he argued that social capital is crucial for the health of democracy and community well-being. He emphasized the importance of civic engagement and social trust in fostering collective action. Social Capital Theory highlights how strong social ties facilitate access to resources, foster trust and reciprocity, and encourage active community participation.

By applying this theoretical framework, the study aims to investigate how social networks within displaced communities influence educational access and outcomes. It also seeks to identify the roles of local leaders and community members in promoting education, thereby facilitating support systems for families. Ultimately, the insights gained from this framework will inform policy recommendations that leverage community resources to improve educational programs for out-of-school children in North Central Nigeria.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings indicate that displacement severely impacts educational access, with significant gaps in the reintegration processes. Community-based initiatives show potential but require more robust support from government and international agencies to be effective. The role of social capital is evident in successful reintegration efforts, highlighting the need for enhanced community involvement.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

Displacement leads to a significant increase in the number of out-of-school children in North Central Nigeria. Existing reintegration strategies are often ineffective due to resource constraints and lack of community involvement. Community engagement plays a crucial role in successful educational reintegration.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The challenges faced by out-of-school children in displacement contexts require urgent attention. Addressing these challenges through effective reintegration strategies and enhanced community involvement can significantly improve educational access and outcomes for displaced children in North Central Nigeria.

Based on the findings of this study, the following key recommendations are proposed to enhance educational access and reintegration for out-of-school children in displacement contexts in North Central Nigeria:

**Strengthen Community Engagement and Partnerships:** The Nigerian government should foster partnerships between local governments, NGOs, and community leaders to create collaborative educational initiatives. By actively engaging families in decision-making processes, programs can be designed to be culturally relevant and responsive to the unique needs of displaced communities.

**Implement Accelerated Learning Programs:** The government should prioritize the development and expansion of accelerated learning programs specifically tailored for out-of-school children. These programs must incorporate flexible curricula that accommodate the diverse experiences of displaced children, enabling them to catch up with their peers effectively.

**Enhance Teacher Training and Support:** The Nigerian government should provide specialized training for educators focused on supporting displaced children. This training should include trauma-informed teaching practices and strategies for inclusive education, ensuring that teachers are equipped to address the emotional and psychological challenges faced by these children.

By implementing these recommendations, the Nigerian government and stakeholders can create a supportive educational environment that facilitates the reintegration of out-of-school children, ultimately improving their educational outcomes and fostering long-term community resilience.

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