**The Relativity of Socio-cultural Factors on Young people’s Access to Higher Education in Africa**

## Abstract

The development of sociological discourse and research have focused attention on social issues from one that is primarily concerned with individual rationality to an explanation of cultural norms, values, religious beliefs and practices that places individuals within their social context. Through a critical review of existing literature which identifies the social processes through which young people’s access are mediated in African context, this paper developed a framework which provides understanding of how young people are confronted with various contradictory norms and social constrains with respect to their gender, economic status and relational positions in gaining access to higher education. Essentially, analysis of various empirical and non-empirical studies across Africa provided a clear conclusion that the capacity for securing access and retaining enrolment in higher educational institutions is not entirely determined by the rational considerations of young people, but principally depends on the various contexts in which certain beliefs, norms and values take place.

**Keywords**: Access; Higher Education; socio-cultural factors; Young people; Africa.

## Introduction

In the world of today, education is generally conceived as a basic necessity of life (Mwenda and Mwenda, 2013). Education has also been empirically proven and universally acknowledged to play a crucial role in the continued survival, growth and development of a nation (African Higher Education Summit, 2015). Based on this global recognition of education as an essential social component, a considerable attention has been directed by various governments and international bodies towards the participation of individuals particularly young people who are indisputably the target and future of any nation.

In Africa, education has been recognized as an essential drive for effecting development in the continent in order to reduce or totally eliminate poverty (Asiyai, 2013). However, access to basic and secondary education appeared to have increased over the past decades (UNESCO, 2002, 2013). Studies have revealed that there has been little attention in improving access to school at higher institution levels (Frempong and Mensah, 2012). For instance, the Dakar summit on “Education for All” in 2000 was advocated towards increasing enrollment in primary education as a leading instrument for economic growth, without recognition of the place of higher institution (Tilak, 2003). This probably may be as a result of earlier studies which found no positive relevance of higher education to economic growth or poverty reduction (ibid) in Africa. However, as opposed to the early perception, recent empirical and non-empirical studies from developmental perspective have persistently revealed that higher education has numerous economic benefits both in private and public domains (Bloom, Hartley and Rosovsky, 2006, Asiyai, 2013). Significantly, higher education serves as an instrumental force to achieving social, cultural, intellectual, economic, and political development of any nation (Republic of South Africa, 1997). For instance, a recent report asserts that Africa records the highest level of return to investments in higher education with about 21% (State of Education in Africa Report, 2015). It has further been argued that higher education holds the potential for nurturing the less developed economies and attainment of equitable level of development for the marginalized and socially disadvantaged groups (ibid). Similarly, higher education is viewed as capable of assisting country’s economy in generating higher tax revenue, savings and investment, improve technology, nation’s health as well as leading to a more entrepreneurial and civic society ( Bloom et al, 2006).

As can be argued, one of the ways to achieving these developmental promises that higher education holds is through the empowerment of young people’s capacities in terms of facilitating their access to higher institutions of learning in order to produce a set of educated and skillful workforce that would contribute positively into the development of their nations (World Bank, 2002; Boughey, 2011). In addition to globalization, there has been increasing demand for skilled workers that would accelerate development of a new culture of information technology and effective delivery strategy for their society to become part of the global village. A major problem nevertheless lies in the fact that this goal is yet to be achieved in most developing nations including the Sub-Saharan countries (Boughey, 2005).

Essentially, research have further attested to the fact that a large number of youth in African settings still miss out on opportunities to acquire human capital development which symbolizes the necessary skills and gainful earnings that can be obtained through the attainment of higher educational qualification. For example, a majority (over 60%) of African population are located in rural areas which are usually characterized by poverty and impoverished conditions (NPC, 2011). Thus, many African rural young people are often subjected or oriented into income generating business/activities as children; a kind of practice that undermines the need for children’s enrollment in formal education (Akin, 2013).

Importantly, despite the overwhelming recognition and concerns often expressed on many aspects of young people’s lives across different societies especially as it relates to their access to formal education, only a few studies have attended to the link between the multiple factors and the socio-cultural contexts that influence young people’s access to higher education.

Thus, this study presents a socially and culturally situated study of how young people’s access to higher education has been constructed within their local context. Through a critical review of the socio-cultural contexts that impacted on young people’s access to higher education, this study also explores other relational positions such as the effect of poverty on young people’s access to higher education using Nigerian context as a case study.

## Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical perspectives

This paper draws on Bourdieu’s notion of social capital which is explicitly focused on the social contexts that produce and reproduce dominant class in the capitalist societies. Social capital is explained in terms of individuals’ ability to sustain and utilize one’s social networks as resources to move up to a higher social hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1986). Here, the emphasis is on values, socially negotiated ties (relationships) and resources. By way of implication, social capital becomes a resource or an investment in the social struggles and those with more social resources, use their valuable connections to accumulate more capital resources in order to maintain their dominant positions (Bourdieu, 1986).

This approach explains how education becomes a form of cultural capital that are rewarded in terms of educational qualifications and a better future life which young people without educational capital have as penalties in their future (Bourdieu, 1977). Essentially, higher institutions where young people acquire their educational qualifications are therefore referred to as agents of social exclusion (for non-cultural capitalist) and reproduction for cultural capitalist (Bourdieu, 1977). That is, young people who lack cultural capital face the penalty of remaining in poverty or lower socio-economic class/status. Also, the institutional form of cultural capital as discussed by Bourdieu (1990) explains the different patterns of institutional recognition and educational qualifications acquired by the individuals. These include academic success, certificates of competencies, diplomas and so on. In sum, the major argument behind cultural capital is the fact that it embodies or generates practices that establishes social hierarchies in a given society. Essentially, Bourdieu’s analysis allows the present study to address the social processes that may be influential to young people’s access to educational capital which is *sine qua non* to their access to personal and societal development. As this study reveal shortly, analysis of factors that impacted on young people’s access provides understanding of young people’s access as not inherently based on individual rationality but shaped within their socio-cultural milieu and other relational conditions such as poverty and other relational positions.

# Gender Imbalance

From a gender perspective, it is crucial to acknowledge that earlier education in Sub-Saharan Africa including Asia was available for men (Ogunniyi and Dosunmu, 2014). Women were from the onset placed at a disadvantaged or marginalized position due to their low access to formal education and consequently less privileged to take up formal employment in public sector (ibid). Owing to this established gender norm, the various international conventions that canvas for ‘education for all’ in limiting the gender gap in terms of negotiating access for women’s participation in education have not yielded the expected results (Temba, Warioba and Msabila, 2013). Studies have persistently revealed that many African countries have continued to lag behind in sustaining women’s access to higher education and their retention in school either (Aja-Okorie, 2015). For instance, in the Nigerian setting, women’s access to higher education has been negatively affected by various discriminatory practices in the form of norms and traditional values that increased the number of women with incomplete schooling, high level absenteeism, early marriages or tendency for younger women being conditioned into coercive relationships with older men as a way of raising funds to educate their male siblings or fending for the family (Ogunniyi and Dosumu, 2014). These circumstances militate against women’s access and completion of school, resulting in 60% and 40% literacy rates for men and women respectively and far worse off in the predominantly less-educated northern part of the country (Okpukpara and Chukwuone, 2005; Ogunniyi and Dosumu, 2014).

# Socio-cultural Contexts

In African context, culture has been identified as a major component which may impede access to education. For instance, in a Tanzanian study, Ngoitiko (2008) assessed the multi-facet factors that impacted on girls’ education among the marginalized group of Massai. In spite of the various efforts by the Tanzanian government to promote Massai girls’ education notably with the development of MED, that is ‘Massai Education Discovery’ which offers free education to girls in the region, gender disparity was found to exist as male education were prioritised over their female counterparts. One of the factors that were found to have accounted for the unequal access to education among the Massai was the dominant patriarchal culture which encourages male dominance and subjugation of women as inferiors with marginalised positions observable by forced marriages, heavy workloads and other physical constraints that limit girls’ access to formal education.

Similarly in the northern part of Nigeria, Eweniyi and Usman (2013) found that, one of the major social factors that shape access to education for a girl-child is parental religious orientation. Most parents expressed their fulfilment in adhering to their religious obligation which entails denying their female children access to western education. Similar findings have also been reported in a study by Bagudo (2007) on assessment of girl-child education in Sokoto State, also in northern Nigeria. Due to parental religious beliefs and love for Qua’ranic education for their children, Bagudo observed that female children were restrained from attending formal schools. This was coupled with the trepidation that formal education may expose their children to other religious orientations, western values and teenage pregnancy (Bagudo, 2007; Eweniyi and Usman, 2013).

Additionally, studies have found that there is a close link between economic status and access to school. For instance, in a study conducted in the Eastern part of Nigeria, Onyeka (2013) observes that a number of young men were dropping out of school in pursuance of prosperous businesses. As this study observes, a number of young men could not complete their secondary school education while some who could do not attempt to seek entry into higher degree due to the notion that they would find it easier to accumulate wealth as young businessmen than undergoing rigorous pathway of higher education. However, as Onyeka (2013) concludes, many of the young men in this setting do not become successful business men due to lack of adequate skills and literacy level that higher education would have imbued on them.

In a related study that examined key determinant of school drop-out in Uganda, Mike et al. (2008) identifies parental educational status as key determinant to young people’s access to school. The study observes that parents with high academic attainment are most likely to facilitate access for their young adults and prevent them from dropping out of school than the non-educated parents.

A Similar study was conducted in Nigeria to reveal the socio-economic and educational attainment of parents as instrumental to their children’s access to formal education. Through a critical review of existing literature, Kainuwa and Yusuf (2013) reported that parents’ level of education, occupation and income act as dominant influence on parents’ attitudes towards their child’s education which also determines the level of support they provide for their children. It was observed in the review that parents with relatively high socio-economic status and educational attainment often facilitate their children’s access to school, and encourage their completion and achievement of higher educational goals.

In a Kenyan study, Mucee et al., (2014) examined the socio-cultural factors that influenced students’ access to secondary school in Tharaka south sub-county of Kenya. Through the survey of the opinion of teachers, principals, and head teachers in this region, the study found that family size, gender preference, parental educational attainment and social class are major influences that determine young people’s access to school in the region. It was revealed that majority of parents in this setting are from large families (with 5-8 children) with limited economic resources. This led to preference for male children’s enrolment in secondary school with a number of parents involving their children in income generating activities. Also, given that only 1% of parents in this region had higher educational attainment, they lacked the capacity and social status to ensure the retention of their children’s enrolment in school or to facilitate their entry into higher education.

More recently, Osagiobare, Oronsaye and Ekwukoma (2015) examined various ways in which religious and cultural beliefs have impacted on girl-child education in six area councils of the Abuja Federal Capital Territory. It was affirmed that literacy rates among young women have remained low due to the cultural interpretations and negative meanings attributed to females’ access to education. For example, it is generally conceived in the study areas that educating the girl-child would empower them and contravene their traditional gender roles of becoming house wives with domestic relevance and fulfilment of religious precepts that constraint women within the private domain. Consequently, a number of girl-children from this region were found in circumstances or victims of early marriages, poverty-stricken conditions and mainly occupied with domestic duties of which they are culturally constrained (Osagiobare et al, 2015). The above studies further corroborate the assertion of Sutherland-Addy (2005) stating that:

*“Socio-cultural factors place a premium on the productive and domestic roles of girls and women. The girl-child is made to assist mother or female relatives in playing their domestic roles, and to make transition into adulthood role of wife, mother or producers of food and other economic goods and services. Her chances of completing secondary education are lost. Thus, girls have less incentive to persist through secondary education because of the gender roles associated with them and are not deemed to require high level skills or academic background” (p53).*

The above statement reinstates findings from available studies on the various challenges confronting the young female adults especially in many African countries. Such gender norms and practices have been noticeable through various existing studies as major barriers that hindered equitable access to formal education among African young people (Obasuyi and Igudu, 2012).

Meanwhile in a study that examines factors associated with dropping out of school girls in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, Grant and Hallman (2008) reveal that even though teenage pregnancy is not conceived as a social problem in KwaZulu-Natal, young women are observed to be at risk of becoming pregnant while attending school. Consequently, teenage pregnancy was found as a major factor affecting young women’s capacity to complete their education or follow up their educational plans.

It is important to summarize here that majority of empirical studies confirm some levels of disparity in accessing formal education, which afford the male folks an advantage position over their female counterparts. Most of the African studies discussed so far have found the socio-economic and cultural context to be important factors in promoting gender gap in literacy rates.

# Socio-economic Capacity

Empirical studies have demonstrated that young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds have better chances or access to higher educational attainment than their counterparts from lower economic backgrounds (Kainuwa and Yusuf, 2013). Similar to most countries in developing regions, evidence from available studies across Sub-Saharan Africa have shown that the numerous strategic policies adopted by various governments to attain sustainable literacy rates for young people in Africa have often been thwarted by the depth of poverty level which confronts the African region (Ogujiuba, 2014). In most African countries, young people have continued to be vulnerable to the effects of poverty, keeping a high number of them out of school and others as drop-outs. Evidence from empirical findings from different nations of Africa such as Senegal, Sierra Leone, and the Republic of Congo have revealed that more than half of adult population are among the working poor masses, with the highest rates of them being young women and rural youth (Hervish and Clifton, 2012).

Undoubtedly, Africa is one of the highly populated continents in the world. Consequently, the high population growth especially in the Sub-Saharan region is noticeable to be exerting extreme pressures on the available resources such as housing, health and educational facilities which are most basics of human needs. For instance, evidence from a study conducted in Ghana reveals that poverty is an essential factor that shapes access to higher education. As Pryor and Ampiah, (2003) unfold, after considering the households income and the financial implications of schooling, a majority of Ghanaians in the study viewed formal education as a ‘relative luxury’. This apart, a number of statistical and empirical studies have affirmed the link between poverty and access to school (UNESCO, 2002; Hunt 2008; Ofoegbu, 2009).

A review of literature on the poverty situation in Nigeria presents a paradox as it is observed that despite the fact that the country (Nigeria) is endowed with vast human and material resources, the level at which poverty is being experienced by a large proportion of Nigerian populace is pervasive, chronic and multifaceted (Omonona, 2009; Yakubu and Aderonmu, 2010; Ogujiuba et al., 2011; Ojimba, 2011). In the same vain, several quantitative analysis have attested to the growing incidence of poverty at its depth across the nation (UNESCO, 2002; Ibrahim and Umar, 2008; Ofoegbu, 2009). More so, as Lincove (2009) argues, given the high levels of poverty in Nigeria where about 68% of the population live below poverty line (below $1.25 per day) (UNDP, 2013) enrolment and retention of children in school by poor parents may be impossible (Ejere, 2011). Also, it has often been observed that enrolment of children and their level of educational attainment highly dependent on family’s socio-economic status (Lewin, 2009).

Moreover, it has been well documented that in many parts of the country, young people are often constrained by unsafe and degraded environment, poor sanitation, and lack of access to health care facilities, clothes, food and other basic amenities by virtue of their social and historical backgrounds (World Bank 2001; Ogujiuba et al., 2011). The effect of poverty predisposes young people to dropping out of school and raises the need for many young people to combine schooling with economic activities.

# Conclusion

It is important to conclude that majority of empirical studies confirm that a high population of young people across Sub-Saharan Africa still lack access to formal education. Various factors that were found as determinant factors through which young people’s access include poverty, socio-cultural context, economic status and religious backgrounds, and gender disparity of the young people. Most of the African studies discussed so far have found poverty/socio-economic condition of women to be an important factor in promoting inequality of access to school. However, some of the studies in this review lack explanations of how the limited economic resources or poverty influenced individual’s accounts or experiences of negotiating access to higher education. The reason for this is that the studies have relied too heavily on demographic health assessments based on quantitative data. There is an imperative need to augment these findings with further work among young Africans and to pay particular attention to some neglected areas of the studies reviewed.

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