

# Assessment of the Level of Physical Access of Pupils to Lower Basic Schools in River State, Nigeria

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**To Cite:** Osah, Sarah Oyemwen and Kenneth Kelechi Obasi (2021). Assessment of the Level of Physical Access of Pupils to Lower Basic Schools in River State, Nigeria. *BRICS Journal of Educational Research*, 11 (4), 180-183.

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## Abstract:

This study examined the level of physical access of pupils to lower basic schools in Rivers State. One research question guided the study. The descriptive research design was used. The population for the study was the 942 public lower basic schools in Rivers State. A sample of 289 schools was used for the study. Stratified random sampling was used to draw the sample. Document analysis was the instrument used for the study. The instrument was validated by five experts. Mean statistic was used to answer the research question. Finding revealed that the radius per child for pupils in Rivers State lower basic schools is unsatisfactory high. It was therefore recommended among others that the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Universal Basic Education should ensure that schools are properly sited in such a way that it will adhere to the 2 kilometre standard distance for developing countries. The Ministry of Education should ensure strict compliance with the policy provision on the maximum distance a child could cover to access the nearest school by re-mapping the current school network

**Key words:** Radius per child, access, basic education, catchment area



## INTRODUCTION

Education is recognized as a potent instrument for the development of the human person, societies and countries. Many claims that education is formal schooling; others refer to it as lifelong learning. Scholars describe education as a means of gaining knowledge, skills together with competence in a particular field. All these elements show that education does not have one specific universally accepted definition. According to Churr (2015) education is an organized mechanism, through which a society develops its human resources by equipping them with the desirable competence, attitudes together with values that will make them operate effectively in the social institutions of a given country or nation. Similarly, Asodiike (2016) conceptualized education as an organized procedure through which a child or an adult acquires knowledge, expertise,

skill together with values. Ikwuegbu together with Nwaneri (2014:352) defined education as a process that enables an individual to acquire the many physical and social capabilities demanded by the society in which he/she is born to function.

Education can therefore be defined as a means by which a nation transmits its wealth of values, skills, culture along with knowledge from one generation to another. Education has the power to transform the burden of the population into productive human resources. Education does not only furnish an individual with the essential abilities and skills to function in a society but it is also a key instrument to transmit values along with sound moral attitudes. Worlu (2014) characterised education as a lifelong process in developing specific traits of human

personality. It is an open-minded discipline as it helps people to change their attitude towards life along with other people. It is a preserver of social order as it helps maintain the balance between people's interests, economic, political together with cultural issues. Additionally, education conserves culture by transmitting knowledge from one generation to another. In the modern world, meaning along with the significance of life is dependent on knowledge derived from education. It is an agent of transformation along with change as it makes a person cultured, refined, responsible and responsive to his or her social responsibilities. Through the process of education, the individual's productive capacity is developed and enhanced. Education is an investment in people that brings great benefits to both individuals along with the society. Every country values education because it is associated with growth along with development. The right to basic education is the focal point of many national policies on education globally.

After the Jontiem World Conference on Education for All in 1990, the focus on education shifted to basic education. The conference recommended that basic education should incorporate the following; formal, non-formal together with informal possibilities; it should not be confined to orthodox education, but should involve other socio-economic developmental sectors and should involve a strong emphasis on earning together with success in fundamental skills of numeracy, literacy along with real-life skills. In conceptualizing basic education, Anero (2014) stated that basic education is the educational activity intended for individuals to acquire necessary knowledge along with abilities to continue to exist and to build up their complete competence. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2012) conceptualized basic education as an action considered to meet critical learning needs. This definition highlighted the significance of meeting 'critical learning needs' which is viewed as the 'final aim'. Basic education can therefore be seen as the attainment of generic skills such as numeracy, science and literacy, along with communication skills that provide the basis for further education along with training. It also includes the development of attitudes necessary for the workplace along with the society at large. It is also a foundation for physical, social, economic, mental along with the political form of human development. It aims at making an individual adapt and contribute positively to society.

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme was launched in Nigeria on the 30th of September 1999. It is designed to provide free, compulsory and nine years of uninterrupted education for children. The UBE Act was signed into law in 2004. The act is all-encompassing as it includes the poor, street and roaming children, nomads, rural and remote population, migrant workers, minorities, and people with special needs including refugees. Lower basic education which is conventionally referred to as 'primary education' or 'elementary education' is the first phase of formal learning that is required to lay a solid foundation for literacy, numeracy, essential skills including values that will make a person function well in any given society. Lower basic refers to basic 1-6 including the legal age for entry into lower basic one in Nigeria is six years (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2014).

In highlighting the importance of lower basic education, Etor et al (2013) stated that lower basic education provides the background framework on which the standard of other levels of education is attached. It is therefore a preliminary stage for the child to keenly share in the subsequent levels of education. Uma et al (2018) noted that lower basic education is made available for children and is planned to give pupils a solid basis in literacy, numbers, science along with an understanding of the world around them. These subjects help to build pupils' skills in obtaining and processing information needed to exist well in the home along with the society. Admission into lower basic education does not require any prior formal education; however, children tend to attend pre-school prior to entry into lower basic education. The value of basic education is far-reaching; hence locating lower basic schools to ensure equal access to educational opportunities for all children of school age is very paramount.

Access is embedded in human rights along with the development aspirations which are the progressive vision together with the goals of Education for All (EFA). As substantiated by Egboosi and Offor (2016:43), access to education is characterized as making it workable for every individual who is qualified for schooling to get it. It implies making education affordable to both urban and rural dwellers as well as males and females irrespective of any other demographic variables. It includes bridging the existing gaps in the dimensions of educational infrastructure allocation. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2019) assessed that by 2030, the number of youngsters that will be denied formal education across the globe will amount to 60 million. The interest in essential schooling continues to expand due to the development of the populace. This projection that shows that there will be an appeal for essential schooling, later on, should be satisfactorily made arrangements for, thus the need to focus closer on school area planning. A significant thought in the planning of school location or area school stems from the total number of students in a given location together with the distance it would take for the understudies to arrive at school every day. An index used to measure physical access or distance travelled is radius per child. Radius per child is the average distance the school population covers to go to school.

The Federal Government of Nigeria (2010) stipulated that schools should be located in such a way that pupils do not walk more than two kilometres (2 km) on the average to get to the nearest school provided that there are pupils within the radius of 2 km to fill a two-stream school, that the pupils are not enrolled in another school and that the land is readily available for development. This is in accordance with the standard for school distance specified by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2012) for developing countries. However, Duze (2011) submitted that a distance of one kilometre to school on foot is seen by headteachers to be unacceptable for children between the ages of six and seventeen and it will not be in the best interest of both the child and the school if a pupil treks more than 1 kilometre to school.

Research findings showed that children travel a long distance to schools in Nigeria. Ebinum et al (2017) study showed that an overwhelming majority of Nigerian pupils trek many

kilometres to and from school every day, especially in the rural areas. In the same vein, Geo-Referenced Infrastructure and Demographic Data for Development (2020) pointed out that Nigeria's Universal Basic Education Commission established a range of policies that aimed to address the issues of school absenteeism as identified in the minimum standards for basic education in Nigeria, part of which stipulated that no student should have to travel more than two kilometres to the nearest school. However, due to its large and overwhelmingly young population, Nigeria is characterized as having the world's greatest out-of-school population. While this is due to a variety of socio-cultural together with economic factors, the inaccessibility of educational facilities is often flagged as a key issue. One of the contributing factors to primary school absenteeism is prohibitive distances to schools. Living 20 or more minutes away from a school reduces the odds of attendance by 52%. Poor access to schools especially in the rural areas of developing countries has unimaginable negative consequences on both the academic life of the children together with their safety.

Another component in distance travelled to school is the catchment area. A school catchment area is the administratively defined geographical area served by a school; it is the area from which the school admits its pupils. Fabiyi and Sheidu (2015:49) defined a school catchment area as the "area from which an institution attracts a population that uses its service". The Governments used catchment areas for planning in order to ensure universal access to services. UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (2020) stated that the construction of new schools is the most straightforward way to reduce school distances. As building new schools can be costly along with a slow process, the use of catchment areas can be described as a medium to long-term strategy, unlike other more short-term strategies. The establishment of catchment areas can have a significant impact on children's education because it can determine which school children can attend, and even in some countries, whether or not education is considered compulsory. In Nigeria, geographical, historical along with demographic factors are taken into consideration when establishing a school and defining its catchment area (Omeje, Egwa & Adikwu, 2016). The catchment area is determined by the highest approved distance a pupil can walk to school and back, the density of the school-age population along with the size of the school.

### Statement of the Problem

One strategy to ensure every child gets basic education is school location planning. Distance travelled to school is a major consideration in school location planning. This is because travelling long distances has a significant relationship with education problems like lateness, truancy, absenteeism poor academic performance, out-of-school syndrome, safety along with security. Pupils in lower basic schools are often the most disadvantaged because they cannot walk for several kilometres and still remain productive. This leads to dropping out of school along with low academic achievement at school. Also, pupils may be unenthusiastic about going to school if they are punished or chastised for lateness after a long trek to school. Despite these adverse effects, studies have shown that an incredible number of pupils in Nigeria trek many kilometres to and from school

especially in the rural areas. These factors along with others are major obstacles that prevent many children from going to school. Out of logical necessity, these factors grossly impede the attainment of the goals of the Universal Basic Education Programme. The report reveals that Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school age children in the world. In Rivers State, 9.4% of children within the age bracket of 6-11 are out of school despite the fact that basic education is free and compulsory. This situation attracted the attention of the researchers to examine the level of physical access of pupils to lower basic education in Rivers State in Nigeria.

### Purpose of the Study

The study sets out to determine the radius per child of pupils of lower basic schools in Rivers State, Nigeria.

### Research Question

What is the radius per child of pupils of lower basic schools in Rivers State, Nigeria?

### Methodology

A descriptive survey was the research design used for the study. The population for the study was the 942 public lower basic schools in the 23 Local Government Areas in Rivers State. A sample of 289 schools was used for the study. Stratified random sampling was used to draw the sample for the study. The twenty-three Local Government Areas were stratified into upland along with riverine areas. Four (4) Local Government Areas were randomly drawn from the two strata. All the schools in each of the selected Local Government Areas were used for the study. Document checklist was the instrument used for this study. Data for the checklist was generated from the Head Teachers of the schools. The checklist was used to elicit data to determine the radius per child. The mean statistic was used to answer the research question. The benchmark (criterion mean) kilometre radius was 2 kilometres. An answer 2 kilometres and below was satisfactory and above 2 kilometres was unsatisfactory.

**Research Question:** What is the radius per child of pupils of lower basic schools in Rivers State, Nigeria?

**Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Radius per Child of Pupils of Lower Basic Schools in Rivers State, Nigeria**

Sr. No.	Local Government Area	Number of Pupils	Kilometre Distance Travel to School	Mean (X)	Standard Deviation	Decision
1.	Abua/Odual	8506	21265	2.50	0.01	Unsatisfactory
2.	Akuku-Toru	4099	9223	2.25	0.10	Unsatisfactory
3.	Bonny	6211	13167	2.12	0.14	Unsatisfactory
4.	Degema	3547	6172	1.74	0.09	Satisfactory
5.	Ikwerre	10678	25307	2.327	0.05	Unsatisfactory
6.	Obio/Akpor	25272	54588	2.16	0.19	Unsatisfactory
7.	OpoboNkoro	3408	8384	2.46	0.04	Unsatisfactory
8.	Port Harcourt	25618	50980	1.99	0.08	Satisfactory
	<b>Aggregate</b>			<b>2.19</b>	<b>0.09</b>	<b>Unsatisfactory</b>

Table 1 revealed that the radius per child for the following Local Government Areas is unsatisfactory: Abua/Odua, Opobo/Nkoro, Ikwerre, Akuku-Toru, Obio/Akpor and Bonny with an average



kilometre radius of 2.50, 2.46, 2.37, 2.25, 2.16 and 2.12 respectively which are above the 2 kilometres benchmark. The radius per child for Port Harcourt along with Degema Local Government Areas is satisfactory with an average kilometre radius of 1.99 and 1.74 respectively because they are below the 2 kilometres benchmark. The aggregate mean of 2.19 kilometres above the benchmark of 2 kilometres further showed that the radius per child for the implementation of lower basic education is unsatisfactory.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the study revealed that the radius per child for the implementation of lower basic education is unsatisfactory. This unsatisfactorily high radius per child is the same with Obingwa Local Government Area of Abia State as shown by a study carried out by Uwaezuoke (2012). The study in Obingwa showed that pupils trekked an average of 11.03 kilometres to and from schools. Similarly, the finding of this study is also in agreement with the work of Ebinum et al (2017). Their study revealed that pupils travel between 2-5 kilometres to schools in Edo State. The radius per child in the study area is above the 2 kilometres standard for school distance specified by the Federal Government of Nigeria. This is a clear indication of a low level of access to public schools considering the average distance that pupils have to trek to go to school. In a survey conducted by the National Population Commission & RTI International (2016), the main reason parents and guardians gave for their primary-aged children not attending school was the distance their wards would have to trek to school. Travelling long distances to school also promote lateness among students which attract punishment. This can also serve as a potential deterrent from going to school. When schools are some distance from home, parents tend to worry about the safety of their children especially female children and often are unwilling to let them go to school. Travelling long distances to school may result in an extra financial burden for parents together with some parents may not be able to afford this extra cost of attending school.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the finding of the study, it was concluded that the level of physical access of pupils to schools for the implementation of lower basic education is low.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The State Universal Basic Education Board should ensure that schools are properly located in such a way that it will adhere to the 2 kilometre standard distance for developing countries.
2. The Ministry of Education should ensure strict compliance with the policy provision on the maximum distance a child could cover to access the nearest school by re-mapping the existing school network.
3. School location planning should be carried out at least once every 10 years in response to the dynamic nature of population behaviours and also before new educational programmes are implemented.

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