

Tackling the Largest Global Education Challenge? Secular and Religious Education in Northern Nigeria

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Summary. — With more than 10 million children out of school, Nigeria is the country furthest away from universal primary education. A tradition of religious education in northern Nigeria has been seen as an opportunity for expanding access to secular education. This paper demonstrates two constraining factors. First, unobserved household characteristics favoring religious education attendance are negatively correlated with secular school attendance. Second, the poor quality of secular education acts as a disincentive to secular school attendance. The findings cast doubts at policies aimed at increasing secular school enrollment through the integration of religious and secular school curricula.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is the country furthest away from the goal of universal primary education, one of the international targets agreed at the World Education Conference in Dakar in 2000. In absolute terms, the number of out-of-school children exceeded 10.5 million in 2010, up from 6.9 million in 2000. Despite accounting for just 4% of the global population of children of primary school age, 17% of the global out-of-school population lives in Nigeria. In relative terms, 42% of children of primary school age are estimated to be out of school, making Nigeria one of the 10 countries with the lowest enrollment ratios in the world (UNESCO, 2012). According to the two latest rounds of the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), the net primary school attendance rate increased from 60% in 2003 to only 62%, in 2008 (Nigeria National Population Commission & ICF Macro, 2009; Nigeria National Population Commission & ORC Macro, 2004a). By contrast, major progress was achieved in most of sub-Saharan Africa over roughly the same period.¹

Most out-of-school children live in the north of the country. Of those children, however, the majority receives some kind of Islamic religious education. The comparative advantages of Islamic religious education institutions in western Africa, including proximity, informal organization, and community involvement, have long been acknowledged. The possibility to build literacy skills through the medium of Arabic has been used as an argument that these institutions could be a stepping stone toward achieving universal primary education (Easton *et al.*, 1997; Wagner, 1989). The example of Asia is often invoked, where Islamic religious education institutions have been a key ally in efforts to achieve Education for All, for example, in Bangladesh (Asadullah, Chaudhury, & Dar, 2007), Indonesia (Ali *et al.*, 2011), and Pakistan (Andrabi, Das, Khwaja, & Zajonc, 2006).

In the years after independence in 1960, the expansion of public secular education in northern Nigeria, although slower than in other parts of the country, was paralleled by the expansion of Islamic religious education. A study that compared the determinants of religious and secular education of two cohorts of young males in Kano, the metropolis of northern Nigeria, in the 1960s and 1970s concluded that “the social

forces that enable and encourage Kano youth to achieve in one system of schooling increasingly have become the same forces that promote achievement in the other system” (Morgan & Armer, 1988).

The idea that secular and religious education may be complementary encouraged the federal government to take over the management of many religious education institutions in the 1970s and to introduce secular subjects in them as part of its efforts to achieve universal primary education. Since the restoration of democracy in 1999, there have been further efforts, this time at the level of state governments, to provide incentives to Islamic religious education institutions to offer an integrated curriculum with secular subjects in order to accelerate the achievement of universal primary education.

However, the effectiveness of these interventions has been limited, as the slow progress in reducing the number of out-of-school children demonstrates. As of 2010, only 45% of children aged 6–14 years in northern Nigeria were attending some form of secular education. And yet, of those children who were out of school, more than eight in 10 were attending some form of religious education.

This paper aims to explain why this extensive non-formal religious education system has not become a springboard to secular school enrollment. First, controlling for a rich set of individual, household, and community characteristics, we find that unobserved household characteristics which make it more likely that a child receives religious education are negatively related to the probability that the child receives secular education.

Second, among different reasons put forward to explain low levels of school participation in northern Nigeria, it is shown

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that the failure of public secular schools to deliver quality education is undermining efforts to expand access to secular school through integration. The paper uses evidence on learning outcomes to substantiate the claim that formal schools have “become foreign islands to rural, poor, migrant or nomadic children thereby increasing their sense of alienation and rejection” and that, as a result, many, mostly poorer, parents continue to show preference for religious education, which is “tailored to special needs of those with limited engagement with the state” (Baba, 2011).

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides the background on educational disparities in Nigeria and the main features of Islamic religious education in northern Nigeria. Section 3 introduces a typology of education options that are available to households and presents the relevant data. Section 4 describes the methodology followed to assess the determinants of religious and secular education attendance decisions. Section 5 presents the results. A final section concludes. Throughout the paper, the term “school” is reserved exclusively to describe education institutions, which offer secular subjects.

2. BACKGROUND

(a) Disparities in access to education in Nigeria

Data from the 2008 Demographic and Health Survey demonstrate some stylized features in the history of educational development in Nigeria across the six geopolitical zones (Figure 1).

First, there was a major gap in access to school between the north and the south already at the time of independence. Among the cohort of 60–64 year olds who were of primary school age before independence in 1960, three fifths of those living in the South South and South West and half of those in the South West zones had been to school. By contrast only one in 10 had been to school among those from the North East and North West zones (Figure 2, left panel).

There are historic reasons why northern Nigeria lagged behind southern Nigeria in terms of access to education at the time of independence. The concept of education in northern Nigeria, as elsewhere in Islamic western Africa, has historically been associated with the teaching of the Qur’an and Islamic religious texts (Hiskett, 1975). When British colonization

and missionary activity introduced schools in southern Nigeria in late 19th and early 20th centuries, such initiatives came to be associated with proselytization and were resisted in the north.²

Second, two major federal government attempts to universalize primary education since independence have met with limited success. The first attempt, the Universal Primary Education program (UPE, six-year cycle) (1976–1981), would have had its main impact on the cohort of 35–39 year olds. Yet, the largest progress in terms of access to school took place *before* the implementation of the UPE program, notably among the cohorts of 40–44 and 45–49 year olds in the North Central zone, which has a high level of ethno-linguistic and religious diversity. In fact, the differences in access to school between the North East or North West zones, whose populations are overwhelmingly Muslim, and the educationally more advanced zones of southern Nigeria increased during program implementation. The second attempt, the Universal Basic Education program (UBE, nine-year cycle) (since 1999) has also not had a major impact on the probability that a child goes to school. Access to education in the North East and North West zones continues to grow but at a slow pace that government policies have not been able to influence.

Third, there are large and persistent gender gaps in northern Nigeria, especially in the North West zone, where as few as 39% of females aged 15–19 years had ever been to school compared to 65% of males in 2008. The gender gap closed somewhat for the last cohort as the percentage of boys ever attending school stagnated, while the percentage of girls continued to increase albeit slowly (Figure 2, right panel).

(b) Religious education in Northern Nigeria

Broadly two types of religious education institutions are recognized in northern Nigeria. First, *qur’anic* religious education institutions continue the tradition of Islamic education that focuses on the Qur’an. They take two forms:

- In the standard form (*makaranta allo*, or “school of the slate” on which children copy the Qur’an), children gather at specific locations such as the house of the teacher, a mosque, or a community space. The teacher (malam), who owns the institution, lives off fees or charitable donations made by parents or other benefactors. The knowledge and values they transmit are considered by most parents an essential part of a child’s education. It would be very unusual for any of secular subjects to be offered. As they are informal in terms of time schedule, this allows some children to also a secular school.
- In the traditional form (*tsangaya*), the teacher moves with his pupils in the belief that an itinerant life is essential for them to fully concentrate on their study (Modibbo, 2012).³

Second, *islamiyya* religious education institutions were introduced in the 1950s inspired by the approach taken by other Muslim countries in response to the challenge of secular schooling. These moved beyond Qur’an memorization to cover other Islamic subjects (Bray, 1981; Umar, 2001). Unlike *qur’anic* religious education institutions, they follow a formal structure in terms of time schedules and approaches to teaching. They are also private, owned by individuals, communities, or societies. They take two main forms:

- Most (*islamiyya general*) do not offer secular subjects either because they choose not to or because they cannot offer them for lack of suitably qualified teachers.



Figure 1. Map of Nigeria with geopolitical zones and states.

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