

The Rising Cost of Living and Access to Quality Secondary Education in Rivers State: How do Parents See it?

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Abstract

The paper investigated parents' perception on the effects of the rising cost of living and access to quality secondary education in Rivers State. Three research questions were raised and answered and three hypotheses were tested in the study. The design employed for the study was descriptive survey. The population of the study consisted of all parents in the 302 public senior secondary schools in Rivers State while convenience sampling technique was used to select 284 parents, who volunteered to participate in the study. The instrument adopted for collection of data was a 15-item questionnaire titled "Parents Perception on the Effects of Rising Cost of Living and Access to Quality Secondary Education Questionnaire". The instrument was face and content validated by three Measurement and Evaluation experts from the Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling, University of Port Harcourt. The reliability of the instrument was estimated using Cronbach alpha and it yielded a coefficient of 0.89. Out of the 284 copies of the questionnaire administered, 279 copies from 78 males and 201 females were retrieved which represented 98.2% retrieval rate. The research questions raised were answered using mean and standard deviation while the hypotheses were tested using t-test at 0.05 level of significance. The findings of the study indicated that the parents perceived that quality education comes at a high cost. It was revealed among others that high living cost affects enrollment of children and transition to higher education. The need for scholarship and social security services were identified as mitigating measures for accessing quality secondary education. However, a significant difference existed in the opinion of the sampled parents. It was recommended that allocation to public education should be improved to make it more accessible and qualitative.

Keywords: Parents, Perception, Cost of Living, Secondary Education, Quality

Introduction

The need for quality education that can meet the demands of society for sustainable growth and development has continued to occupy the front burner in all educational discourse across all levels and spheres. This is because education is considered a right for all and must be provided for every citizen without discrimination. Johnstone as cited in Mphafe et al., (2014) alluded to this by stating that education is the principal claimant on public treasuries everywhere in the world for both the rich and poor countries and everyone irrespective of their placement in the society are expected to benefit from this essential social service.

However, Akaguri (2011) pointed out that the lowest rate of upper secondary education enrolment across the world is found in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This is as a result of several social, economic, political and personal factors. The cost of education has continued to be a source of worry for citizens in developing countries including Nigeria where there are over 50% of the

citizens who are classified as multidimensional poor. The current hike in the cost of living therefore constitutes a course of concern as it has the potential of eroding citizens access to essential services including education and health. Ashraf (2012) asserted that quality of education has remained a serious concern throughout education policy with reference to differentials in quality and consequent opportunities of children. Therefore, improving access with a focus on quality has remained the most central strategic education policy priority across all fora but this remains a hard nut for parents to crack given the rise in cost of other goods and services.

More than ever before, educational stakeholders particularly parents are on the look for measures that can help protect their educational interest and aspiration despite this worrisome situation. Asante (2022) mentioned that government policies are expected to begin to look at the possibility of subsidized education for all.

Unfortunately, Darmody et al., (2021) stated that relatively very little recognition is given to the educational condition of students particularly as it relates to their social lives and well-being. There is therefore an urgent need to understand how the rising cost of living is affecting access to quality education for households. This is to proffer relevant solutions for meeting the goals and objectives of education particularly at the secondary education level while also targeting sustainable growth and development.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to investigate parents' perception on the effects of rising cost of living and access to quality secondary education in Rivers State. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. examine the perception of parents on the quality of secondary education in Rivers State
2. determine the ways in which the rising cost of living has affected access to quality secondary education in Rivers State
3. find out the measures for mitigating the effects of the rising cost of living on access to quality secondary education in Rivers State

Research Questions

The following research questions were answered in the study:

1. What is the perception of parents on the quality of secondary education in Rivers State?
2. What are the ways in which the rising cost of living has affected access to quality secondary education in Rivers State?
3. What are the measures for mitigating the effects of the rising cost of living on access to quality secondary education in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at 5% level of significance:

1. There is no significant difference in the mean scores of male and female respondents on the perception of parents on the quality of secondary education in Rivers State
2. There is no significant difference in the mean scores of male and female respondents on the ways in which the rising cost of living has affected access to quality secondary education in Rivers State

3. There is no significant difference in the mean scores of male and female respondents on the measures for mitigating the effects of the rising cost of living on access to quality secondary education in Rivers State

Literature Review

The quality of education remains one of the greatest priority of education seekers as this has several social and economic benefits including access to decent employment in the long run. Quality education has been identified as fundamental to providing the right human resources for social and economic productivity across different sectors which facilitates wealth creation and improves the living standard of citizens (Abdullah as cited in Gobena, 2018). This means that quality of education is that education that has the potential to solve individuals and societal social and economic needs. This kind of education according to Patah et al., (2016) must contribute to intellectual achievement, career aspiration, personal development among other needs.

Access to quality education remains a priority and also a right for most citizens particularly at the basic education level according to the United Nations declaration. However, some other advanced nations have further extended this right to upper secondary and even tertiary education level because of the benefits that educated citizens can give to their society. Raj and Chand (2023) stated that this access to education refers to the provision of equal opportunities to all students, regardless of socioeconomic standing, race, physical or mental disability. This means that every citizen should have access to quality education at all times irrespective of their social and economic status. Unfortunately, this has remained a dream particularly for households that cannot afford the direct and indirect cost of education across all the levels.

In developing countries like Nigeria, the family is the most important unrestrained structure that contributes to the education of the inhabitants (Cetin & Taskin, 2016). The family particularly the household head must therefore have the required resources in order to meet the educational need of members of the family. This includes being able to afford the cost amidst other competing expenses. Scholars such as Liu et al., (2020) have pointed out that the socioeconomic status of a family is a principal contributor to the education of children and the rise in the cost of other needs of the family has continued to threaten this critical social service. There is no doubt that parents have high individual perceptions and expectations in making choices about the education of their children (Wang & Eccles, 2013). However, this can only become a reality when there is the ability to pay.

Scholars such as Raj and Chand (2023) OPINED that people who live in the low socioeconomic cadre now develop a low perception about education and believe that higher education is not for their children. This is no doubt because of the cost implication amidst other demands. On this note, some countries have continued to devise other methods of cushioning this effect and Mphafe et al., (2014) identified that cost sharing is being applied in some countries to reduce the effect of the cost of education on the household. In other places, essential services such as transportation, feeding, clothing and others. are provided for the learner so that the cost of education on parents can be reduced and more children can go to school. Ndolo and Simatwa (2016) identified the existence of free education in some countries through adequate funding that makes it easy for the school to acquire the needed resources for teaching and learning. Zhang et al., (2020) identified that some government also provide support for equipping disadvantaged students while others provide learning materials and such interventions cannot be ignored for access to quality education for households amidst the current rise in the general cost of living.

Researchers have continued to investigate how rising cost is affecting the education sector across all nations. Raj and Chand (2023) investigated the relationship between parent's socioeconomic status and secondary school student's academic achievement in Fiji. Twenty-one teachers, 117 students, and 32 parents participated in the study. Mixed method research design was adopted for the study. Quantitative data were collected through the use of a questionnaire, while qualitative data were gathered through semi structured interviews and observations. The findings of the study revealed that parent education level and occupation have a negligible effect on students' academic performance in school. It has also been established that the home environment and family income have a significant impact on the student's academic achievement.

A related study was conducted by Gobena (2018) on family socio-economic status effect on students' academic achievement at the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Haramaya University, Eastern Ethiopia. Descriptive survey research design was employed. The target population was students from the College of Education and Behavioural Sciences while 172 students were sampled from the target population through stratified random sampling. The results showed that first, family income did not bring anything new to students' academic achievement and that there was statistically significant negative relationship between sex and students' academic achievement. It was revealed that family education level contributed 40.96% to students' academic achievement.

The study by Ravi and Suresh (2016) was on parent's perception towards fees and quality of education in private schools at Krishnagiri District. The study was conducted among parents in Krishnagiri District; and their children from private schools. The research design used in this study was descriptive research. The sampling techniques which are used in the research was purposive sampling where 70 parents were drawn. Primary data was collected from the parents in Krishnagiri District using questionnaire and analyzed descriptively. The findings revealed that 50% of the parents were not satisfied with the fees structure in schools in Krishnagiri District. The alternative hypothesis was accepted that there is a significant difference between Occupations (Business and employee) towards quality education and fees structure.

Ngetich et al., (2021) investigated the effect of rising cost on quality of education in public secondary schools in Ainamoi Sub-County, Kenya. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. There were 20 respondents sampled for the study who were presented questionnaire for data collection and analyzed using frequency and percentages. The participants also responded to some interview questions. The findings indicated that rising costs has affected the quality of education in public secondary schools in Ainamoi Sub-County. The effects identified includes cases of demotivated teachers, poor academic performance, inadequate materials for teaching and learning as well as uncompleted syllabus.

Vadivel et al., (2023) investigated the impact of low socioeconomic background on a child's educational achievements. A descriptive survey research design was used to conduct the study. The target population was 50 students who were selected through random sampling. Focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and observation techniques were used in collecting data. The findings of the study were that most of the students with low socioeconomic status had poor achievements in their academics, which led them into the labour market at an early age. It was also found that parents with low socioeconomic backgrounds were less interested in educating their children. Kids from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more focused on employment instead of pursuing their studies after completing their secondary education. These studies therefore point to

the fact that when the cost of education become unaffordable, it will have several effects not just on the household but also on the society as a whole.

Methodology

The descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study was made up of all parents in the 302 public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. Convenience sampling technique was used to randomly select 284 parents who volunteered to participate in the study. The instrument used for data collection was a 15 item questionnaire titled “Parents Perception on the Effects of Rising Cost of Living and Access to Quality Secondary Education Questionnaire” . The questionnaire had two sections namely; Section A for the collection of demographic data on the respondents and Section B which contained the questionnaire items. The questions were responded to on a four-point modified Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA=4), Agree (A=3), Disagree (D=2) and Strongly Disagree (SD=1). The weight of the responses were summed and divided by 4 to arrive at 2.50 which is the criterion mean score of agreeing or disagreeing with the questionnaire items. Three Measurement and Evaluation experts from the Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling, University of Port Harcourt assisted in the face and content validation of the questionnaire. The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach alpha and it yielded a coefficient of 0.89 which showed that the instrument was reliable. Out of the 284 copies of the questionnaire administered, 279 copies from 78 males and 201 females which represented 98.2% were properly filled and used for data analysis with the other 1.8% discarded for being unsuitable due to several errors. Research questions raised were answered using mean and standard deviation while the hypotheses were tested using t-test at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question One: What is the perception of parents on the quality of secondary education in Rivers State?

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Parents’ Perception of the Quality of Secondary School Education in Rivers State

S/No	Items	Parents n=279		
		Mean	SD	Decision
1	The education provided pays little attention to behavioural change among students	2.83	0.86	Agree
2	There is little emphasis on skill development which is important for employment	2.92	0.81	Agree
3	Accessing quality education comes with a high cost which parents cannot afford	2.97	0.78	Agree
4	There are no sufficient policies mandating schools to provide quality education	2.45	0.97	Disagree

5	The education given to students is not relevant for global competitiveness	2.43	0.98	Disagree
Grand Mean and Standard Deviation		2.72	0.88	Agree

Table 1 indicates that the responses of the parents to items 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 produced mean values of 2.83, 2.92, 2.97, 2.45 and 2.43. Following the decision rule using the criterion mean score of 2.50, only items 1, 2 and 3 with mean values of 2.83, 2.92 and 2.97 were above the criterion mean, an indication that parents agreed with these statements. This implied that the parents perceived that the education provided does not contribute to behavioural changes or skill development and that quality education comes with higher cost. Items 4 and 5 with mean scores of 2.45 and 2.43 were below the criterion mean score of 2.50 an indication that parents disagreed with these statements. This means that they are of the view that there are policies on quality education and that the education provided can contribute to global competitiveness. The grand mean score of 2.72 implied that the parents' have a fairly high perception about the quality of secondary education in Rivers State.

Research Question Two: What are the ways in which the rising cost of living has affected access to quality secondary education in Rivers State?

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the Effect of the Rising Cost of Living on Access to Quality Secondary Education in Rivers State

S/No	Items	Parents n=279		
		Mean	SD	Decision
6	Number of children enrolled in school has dropped as a result of rising cost of living	2.95	0.79	Agree
7	Transition and completion rates in schools has lowered due to high cost of living	2.88	0.83	Agree
8	Educational inequality has widened due to increased cost of living faced by households	2.77	0.89	Agree
9	Difficulty in accessing schools with record of good academic performance	2.72	0.92	Agree
10	Students are unable to access support services such as after school lessons for improved academic performance	2.93	0.80	Agree
Grand Mean and Standard Deviation		2.85	0.85	Agree

Table 2 revealed that the responses of the parents to items 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 produced mean responses of 2.95, 2.88, 2.77, 2.72 and 2.93. All of these items had mean scores that were above the criterion mean score of 2.50 used for making decision and this means that parents agreed with all the statements. The grand mean value of 2.85 suggested that parents strongly agreed that the rising cost of living has affected students' access to quality secondary education in Rivers State.

Research Question Three: What are the measures for mitigating the effects of the rising cost of living on access to quality secondary education in Rivers State?

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Measures for Mitigating the Effects of the Rising Cost of Living On Access to Quality Secondary Education in Rivers State

s/n	Items	Parents n=279		
		Mean	SD	Decision
11	Scholarships should be provided for students across all levels of education	2.87	0.84	Agree
12	Social security programmes should be provided particularly for poor households	2.83	0.86	Agree
13	Cost sharing approach should be introduced in schools between parents and educational service providers	2.69	0.94	Agree
14	Free social services should be provided to improve education prospects of households	2.65	0.96	Agree
15	Education loan services should be provided for household who cannot afford educational services	2.78	0.89	Agree
Grand Mean and Standard Deviation		2.76	0.90	Agree

Table 3 shows that the responses of the parents sampled for the study to items 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 produced mean values of 2.87, 2.83, 2.69, 2.65 and 2.78. All of which were higher than the criterion mean score of 2.50 used for decision making. This means that parents agreed with all the statements raised. The grand mean score of 2.76 is an indication that parents see all these measures as effective for mitigating the effects of the rising cost of living on access to quality secondary education in Rivers State

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference in the mean scores of male and female respondents on the perception of parents on the quality of secondary education in Rivers State.

Table 4: Summary of Independent Sample t-test Analysis of Difference between Male and Female Parents' Perception on the Quality of Secondary School Education in Rivers State

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Parents' Perception on Quality Sec. Sch. Education	Male	78	2.80	0.80			
					3.922	277	.000
	Female	201	2.64	0.96			

Table 4 shows that there was significant difference in the mean perception score of male parents (Mean = 2.80, SD = 0.80) and female parents (Mean = 2.64, SD = 0.96), $t(277) = 3.922$, $p = .000$. These results suggest that gender has significant effect on parents' perception on the quality of

secondary school education in Rivers State. Therefore, hypothesis 1, which states that there is no significant difference between male and female parents' perception on the quality of secondary school education in Rivers State was rejected.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant difference in the mean scores of male and female respondents on the ways in which the rising cost of living has affected access to quality secondary education in Rivers State

Table 5: Summary of Independent Sample t-test Analysis of Difference between Male and Female Parents' Perception on the Effect of the Rising Cost of Living on Access to Quality Secondary School Education in Rivers State

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Parents' Perception on Effect of Rising Cost	Male	78	2.95	0.76			
					4.307	277	.000
	Female	201	2.75	0.93			

Table 5 shows that there was significant difference in the mean perception score of male parents (Mean = 2.95, SD = 0.76) and female parents (Mean = 2.75, SD = 0.93), $t(277) = 4.307$, $p = .000$. These results suggest that gender has significant effect on parents' perception on the effect of the rising cost of living on access to quality secondary school education in Rivers State. Therefore, hypothesis 2, which states that there is no significant difference between male and female parents' perception on the effect of the rising cost of living on access to quality secondary school education in Rivers State was rejected.

Hypothesis Three: There is no significant difference in the mean scores of male and female respondents on the measures for mitigating the effects of the rising cost of living on access to quality secondary education in Rivers State

Table 6: Summary of Independent Sample t-test Analysis of Difference between Male and Female Parents' Perception on the on the Measures for Mitigating the Effect of the Rising Cost of Living on Access to Quality Secondary School Education in Rivers State

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Parents' Perception on Measures for Mitigating Effect of Rising Cost of Living	Male	78	2.86	0.85			
					3.840	277	.000
	Female	201	2.66	0.95			

Table 6 shows that there was significant difference in the mean perception score of male parents (Mean = 2.86, SD = 0.85-) and female parents (Mean = 2.66, SD = 0.95), $t(277) = 3.840$, $p = .000$. These results suggest that gender has significant effect on parents' perception on the measures for mitigating the effects of the rising cost of living on access to quality secondary school education

in Rivers State. Therefore, hypothesis 3, which states that there is no significant difference between male and female parents' perception on the measures for mitigating the effect of the rising cost of living on access to quality secondary school education in Rivers State was rejected.

Discussion of Findings

The result of the study established that parents agree on their perception on the quality of secondary education in Rivers State and but that a significant difference existed on the perception of parents on the quality of secondary education in Rivers State. The respondents agreed that the education provided does not pay attention to essential behavioural change among students. This means that the education currently delivered in schools pay less attention to behavioural change and this calls for more attention. The rising cases of anti-social behaviour among school students point to the fact that behavioural need of students may not be given the required attention. The respondents also agree that here is no emphasis on skill development which is important for employment. Skill and behavioural change are critical components of quality education and public schools need to give these areas the needed attention. The parents also perceive that accessing quality education comes with a high cost which parents cannot afford. Unfortunately, the study by Ravi and Suresh (2016) showed that 50% of parents were not satisfied with the fee structure in their children's schools and this can be problematic in accessing quality education. It therefore suggests that the quality of education available to parents may vary and is dependent on how much they are ready to pay. However, the government must ensure that even the public schools sustain a minimum standard in the provision of quality public education for members of the public. However, the respondents disagreed that there are no sufficient policies mandating schools to provide quality education and that the education given to students is not relevant for global competitiveness. This means that while the public schools are not totally behind, there is need for them to be revisited to meet with the educational expectation of education seekers across all spheres.

Parents sampled for the study agree with the items listed as the ways in which the rising cost of living has affected access to quality secondary education in Rivers State. According to Raj and Chand (2023), the income of the family significantly affects the education of their children and this should not be ignored. Similarly, there was a significant difference in parents' response on the ways in which the rising cost of living has affected access to quality secondary education in Rivers State. In the study, the parents agreed that the number of children enrolled in school has deepened as a result of rising cost of living. This means that the number of children that parents are able to send to school seem to have reduced and this may be the case particularly in rural areas where most of these public schools exist. Although Gobena (2018) reported in his study that family income does not affect academic achievement, this may not be the case for enrollment as every child must part with some money even when registering in the public schools either in the form of transportation cost or feeding cost among others. The parents also responded that transition and completion rates in school has lowered due to high cost of living. This means that the prospects of some students to access higher education and move to higher classes may be reduced when parents cannot afford it. The study also showed that educational inequality has widened due to increased cost of living faced by households. The inability of parents to meet the educational obligation of their students may create educational discrepancies between the rural and urban areas and between male and female children. This is so because unequal income has the potential to create educational inequality which may be the case that the parents are reporting. The result of the study also showed that the parents reported that there is difficulty in accessing schools with record of good academic performance and that students are unable to access support services such as after school lessons

for improved academic performance. There is therefore an urgent need for intervention to avoid an educational crisis.

Furthermore, the respondents agree with the items raised as the measures for mitigating the effects of the rising cost of living on access to quality secondary education in Rivers State and there was a significant difference in the response of parents on the measures for mitigating the effects of the rising cost of living on access to quality secondary education in Rivers State. The parents reported that some of the mitigating measures that should be put in place includes providing scholarships for students across all levels of education. This means that students in need can be provided with scholarship as a support to their education amidst the high cost of living. Ngetich et al., (2021) identified that accessing quality education has cost implication and as such providing scholarship can be very helpful to parents. They also pointed out that social security programmes should be provided particularly for poor households. Vadivel et al., (2023) pointed out the education of students from low socio-economic families is often adversely affected and as such social security initiatives can be helpful to such homes. This can be in the form of cash transfers, grants etc. which can assist parents meet the education need of their children. The respondents also stated that cost sharing approach should be introduced in schools between parents and educational service providers. This means that the parents also feel obligated to pay for the education of their children but may feel more comfortable if they are assisted to do so. They also identified the need for free social services which should be provided to improve education prospects of households. There was also an agreement among the respondents that education loan services should be provided for household who cannot afford educational services.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that the rise in the cost of living affects the quality of secondary education in Rivers State and there is a need for immediate interventions to avoid its immediate and long term negative consequences. The parents sampled for the study however differ in their opinion that rising cost of living is affecting access to quality secondary education in Rivers State.

Recommendations

The recommendations proffered based on the findings of the study are as follows:

1. There is need for the government to roll out educational palliatives such as free transformation, learning materials and other subsidized services that can affect access to quality secondary education in Rivers State.
2. The government needs to scale up its allocation to public education as this will help these schools improve in the acquisition of the right quality and quantity of human and material resources that will contribute to improved education which will make parents and students get value for money spent.
3. Educational policies such as the compulsory basic education programme should be further strengthened and revised to ensure that no child is deprived access to education as a form of opportunity cost for parents who wish to further the education of some of their children at the expense of others.

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