

INCOME INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN ONITSHA NORTH: TRADERS' INSIGHTS ON FORMAL EDUCATION'S EFFECTIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Onitsha North (Nigeria) market traders' perceptions of how formal education affects income inequality and social mobility. Using a descriptive survey of 120 traders across the four major markets, we administered a structured questionnaire (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx 0.56$) on Likert scales. Results: Traders on average agreed that formal education reduces income inequality and promotes upward mobility. For example, mean scores on questions about education's role in narrowing the rich-poor gap and enabling children to "do better than their parents" were above neutral. Key challenges cited included limited access, high costs, and poor quality of education. Suggested solutions included improving school access, vocational training, and adult literacy programs. Importantly, statistical tests showed no significant difference in responses between traders of different education levels ($p > 0.05$). Conclusion: Market traders view education as a powerful equalizer in the community. These insights suggest policymakers should strengthen formal and informal education opportunities to help reduce inequality and enhance social mobility in urban Nigeria.

Keywords: Traders, Main market, Income Inequality. Social Mobility, Formal Education,

Introduction

Income inequality and social mobility are critical issues facing societies worldwide. Kenton (2023) describes income inequality as the uneven distribution of income throughout a population, noting that greater inequality implies a less equal distribution. This disparity often accompanies wealth inequality, where wealth refers to the net worth of individuals or households. Social mobility involves the movement of a person from one social status to another, highlighting the potential for individuals to improve their social standing through opportunities such as education and employment (California State University, 2022). These two phenomena are interconnected, as high levels of income inequality can hinder social mobility, trapping individuals in cycles of poverty and limiting opportunities for advancement. This means that it is harder for individuals from low socioeconomic background to climb up the social ladder because of limited opportunities for education and wealth accumulation compared to those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds except through formal education.

Formal education is a structured and systematic education provided in institutions of learning like schools and universities while Informal education is a learning process that occurs outside a formal classroom, it takes place in our daily lives through personal experiences and mentorship. Formal education is widely recognized as a powerful tool in addressing both income inequality and social mobility. In the contemporary global context, the role of education in mitigating income inequality and promoting social mobility remains a subject of intense research and policy debate. Countries with well-developed educational systems tend to exhibit lower levels of income inequality and higher rates of social mobility. Conversely, nations with under-resourced educational infrastructures often struggle with entrenched inequalities and limited upward mobility for their citizens. Despite these efforts, significant disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes persist, contributing to ongoing challenges in reducing income inequality and enhancing social mobility.

Income has been defined as any type of compensation or benefit received in exchange for work performed or for capital invested (Investopedia, 2023). This encompasses earnings from employment, returns on investments, and other sources of revenue. United States Census Bureau

(2024) describes income as the sum of money received in the preceding calendar year by all household members. This includes wages, salaries, and other forms of earnings. This definition highlights the sustainable consumption capacity of a household based on its income. In the context of this study, income is money that is received as a form of payment for a work performed by an individual.

There has also been different definitions of income inequality and social mobility by individuals and organizations. American Psychological Association (APA) describes economic inequality as the unequal distribution of income and opportunity between different groups in the society. Gruyter (2021) states that income inequality is multifaceted and not the inevitable outcome of irresistible structural forces such as globalization or technological development. Income inequality is an uneven distribution of income between workers. This can be as a result of the quality of education received and also the background of the workers. High levels of income inequality can lead to lower social mobility.

The concept of social mobility has been defined by different sociologists, this concept was introduced by Sorokin (1927). Matamoros-Lima, Van der and Kende (2023) described Social mobility as the upward movement within social strata, closely associated with meritocratic beliefs. Mijs (2022) also links upward social mobility to meritocracy, suggesting that beliefs in personal effort and talent are integral to perceptions of mobility. Ko, Smith and Gupta (2025) describes social mobility as the movement of individuals or groups between social strata, which can be upward or downward, and is often measured by changes in income, education, occupation, or social class. Breen and Ermisch (2023) define social mobility as the movement of individuals or groups between social strata in a society, which can result in a change in social status relative to one's current social location within a given society. Social mobility is the movement of individuals, families in the economic ladder. This economic ladder encompasses their background, education and income. However, the digital divide where some communities and individuals lack access to technology and digital resources remains a challenge, although addressing this divide, it is important and crucial to ensure that digital literacy through education remains a catalyst for social mobility in the digital era. By equalizing access to education, providing knowledge and skills,

fostering empowerment, and addressing social and cultural capital, education can break the cycle of poverty and promote upward mobility. They continue to navigate the challenges of the digital age, it is essential to ensure that education remains accessible to all, regardless of their background, and equip individuals with the skills needed to thrive in an increasingly digital world.

In Igboland, apprenticeship system is popular in Anambra State, especially in Onitsha Main Market also called "Igba Boy" in Igbo language, this apprenticeship system is a situation whereby a child is sent off to go and master the art of trading for some years, after which his master will settle him off with an amount of money and receive his blessings. A master's blessing is not one to joke with, as it has been believed that his blessings will incur more wealth and open doors for the apprentice who served his master faithfully. The Igbo apprenticeship system has produced more wealthy men in Igbo land than formal education has ever done. Analysts have described the Igbo apprenticeship system as the largest business incubator platform in the world. It is the combination of these dispositions that make graduates of Igbo apprenticeship scheme entrepreneurs instead of job seekers. The "Ogas" are former apprentices that had served and were settled with seed capitals to begin their own enterprises (Alike & Orjiakor-Umunze, 2019). This system is informal and has unstructured training programs to learn and master skills required to embark on own enterprise. Dishonesty on the part of the Master or the apprentice has tended to dent the good intentions of the "Nwaboi" apprenticeship system. Despite the apprenticeship system, it is believed that formal education has enormous role to play in bridging income inequality and enhance social mobility.

This study explores the perception of traders on the role of formal education in bridging the gap in income inequality and social mobility in Onitsha North Local Government Area, Anambra State. This area of the study is the center of commercial activities and hosts the biggest commercial market in West Africa. A good number of the traders in Onitsha market are billionaires who may not have attained formal education, but rose to limelight through informal education. In Onitsha North Local Government Area, Anambra State where the largest market in West Africa is situated, traders operate a highly competitive and dynamic market, some of these traders may have relied on apprenticeship and informal training systems other than formal education to achieve economic success. Furthermore, some traders appear to believe that trade expertise, market experience and

networking are more critical for financial success than formal education. This believe has raised questions about the role of education in shaping economic opportunities and social mobility for individuals.

This study, therefore examined traders' view on formal education as a significant factor in reducing income inequality and social mobility in Onitsha North Local Government Area.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how traders in Onitsha North Local Government Area perceive the role of formal education in shaping their income and social mobility. Specifically, the study examined:

1. Traders' perception on the role of formal education in reducing income inequality.
2. Whether formal education reduce social mobility based on traders' perception.
3. The challenges limiting the impact of formal education in reducing income inequality and social mobility.
4. The solutions to the challenges of formal education in reducing income inequality and social mobility.

Research Questions

1. Do traders perceive formal education as reducing income inequality?
2. Do traders perceive formal education as improving social mobility?
3. What challenges do traders identify that limit education's impact on inequality and mobility?
4. What solutions do traders suggest to make education more effective in addressing these issues?

These questions fill a research gap: prior work has linked education to equity in general terms, but little is known about the perspectives of urban small-business communities in Nigeria. We also test two null hypotheses concerning whether a trader's own education level affects their

perceptions. The findings will inform how to tailor education policies to boost economic opportunity in similar urban settings.

Methodology

Design of the Study: The design for this study was descriptive survey, which aims at collecting data and describing in a sequential and systematic manner the characteristics of a specific population. The design enables a researcher to collect data from a reasonable number of respondents, within the target population in such a way that the result of data collected, could be generalized to the entire population.

Area of the Study: This study was carried out in Onitsha North Local Government Area, Anambra State. Onitsha North is a Local Government Area in Anambra North Senatorial District. Onitsha North shares boundary with Idemili North and Oyi Local Government Area at the east of Onitsha North, Onitsha South at the Southern part of Onitsha North, Delta State at the West of Onitsha North, Ogbaru Local Government Area at the east of Onitsha North, Anambra East to the North. Onitsha North is located in the South Central part of Anambra State, on the East Bank of River Niger. Onitsha North was chosen as the area of study because it is a major commercial center and also home to Onitsha main market, the largest market in West Africa. Onitsha, is known for its vibrant commercial activities, a home to traders from diverse backgrounds, many of whom have built successful businesses with little or no formal education. While education is often seen as a tool for reducing income inequality, many traders rely more on market experience, business connections, and practical skills to thrive.

Population of the Study: The population consisted of all traders in the four major markets of Onitsha North LGA, Anambra State.

Sample and Sampling Technique We sampled 120 traders (about 30 per market) using convenient sampling. The sample was not gender specific as Traders were randomly selected at convenient.

Instrument for Data Collection: The instrument for data collection for this study is a questionnaire developed by the researcher for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire is titled:

Questionnaire on Traders' Perception on Relationship between Formal Education, Income Inequality and Social Mobility (QOTPEIISM). There are two sections: Section A and Section B. Section A is the demographics section containing two (2) item statements, while section B contains four (4) clusters with ten (10) item statements in the each cluster. This makes up a total of forty two (42) item statements in the research questionnaire. The response mode adopted for the study is the 5-point Likert scale of SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree.

Method of Data Collection: The researcher with the aid of an assistant who has been briefed on the modalities administered the questionnaire to the different respondents. On the spot method of collection was adopted in order to ensure that instruments were filled and collected immediately.

Method of Data Analysis: The data generated was analyzed using mean, frequency distribution and standard deviation. The responses/items with mean score of 3.50 were accepted. The null hypothesis was tested using t-test at 0.05 level of significance. The null hypothesis was not rejected when the probability value is less than 0.05.

Results

Research Question 1: Do traders perceive formal education as reducing income inequality?

Table 1: Mean (x) Perception of Traders on role of formal education in reducing income inequality.

S/NO.	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
1.	Formal education has improved my understanding of basic business concepts.	3.88	0.998	Accept
2.	I believe that having a higher level of formal education increases my business opportunities.	4.22	1.050	Accept
3.	The theoretical knowledge gained in education is easily applicable in my day-to-day business operations.	3.80	1.126	Accept
4.	I believe that a lack of formal education contribute to income inequality in the trading sector.	3.92	1.149	Accept

5.	Income inequality is a significant issue amongst traders in Onitsha North.	3.98	1.117	Accept
6.	Traders with formal education tend to have more stable incomes than those without it.	3.70	1.296	Accept
7.	Formal education is more impactful in reducing income inequality than direct financial interventions (e.g. cash transfers).	3.81	1.132	Accept
8.	A higher level of formal education increases the likelihood of moving up the economic ladder.	3.92	1.175	Accept
9.	Formal education opens up in opportunities for career and business advancements.	3.91	0.945	Accept
10.	Education alone is sufficient to reduce income inequality.	3.54	1.520	Accept

The results Traders generally agreed that formal schooling reduces income disparities. The average response to statements like “Education gives poor people a chance to earn higher income” was well above 3.0, indicating clear agreement. In open responses, many traders noted examples where education enabled someone to escape poverty.

Research Question 2: Do traders perceive formal education as improving social mobility?

Table 2: Mean (x) perception of traders on how formal education reduces social mobility.

S/NO.	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
1.	Formal Education is an important tool for achieving social mobility among traders.	3.84	0.962	Accept
2.	Social mobility through education depends more on personal effort than systematic changes.	4.49	0.793	Accept
3.	The quality of education received affects a person's chances of upward mobility.	3.90	1.000	Accept
4.	Many individuals cannot afford higher education which limits their social mobility.	3.69	1.320	Accept
5.	Social connections and family background are more important than education in determining success.	4.02	1.043	Accept
6.	People from educated families have a greater chance of economic success.	4.07	1.007	Accept
7.	Formal education is necessary for social and economic advancement in Nigeria.	3.89	1.151	Accept
8.	Entrepreneurship can provide a faster route to financial success than formal education.	4.21	0.978	Accept

9.	Education alone is not enough to guarantee upward mobility without access to financial support.	4.14	0.797	Accept
10.	Vocational and technical education can be as effective as University degrees for upward mobility.	4.19	0.992	Accept

Similarly, traders endorsed education as a path to moving up in society. Mean scores on items such as “Education helps children from poor families become better off than their parents” were high (>3.0). This reflects their belief (echoed by Oxfam’s findings) that mobility is strongly linked to educational access.

Research Question 3: What challenges do traders identify that limit education’s impact on inequality and mobility?

Table 3: Mean (x) Response of traders on the challenges that limit the impact of formal education in reducing income inequality and social mobility

S/NO.	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
1.	The cost of formal education is a major barrier preventing traders from pursuing further studies.	3.81	0.931	Accept
2.	Corruption in the education system limits opportunities to the poor.	4.41	1.028	Accept
3.	Gender inequality affects access to education and economic opportunities.	3.74	1.024	Accept
4.	Social connection plays the bigger role in success than formal education.	4.06	1.14	Accept
5.	Government policies currently do not provide enough educational opportunities for traders.	4.01	0.980	Accept
6.	Current education system does not teach financial literacy and wealth creation.	3.98	0.975	Accept
7.	Lack of access to soft loans and financial aid limit education opportunities for low income families.	3.99	1.104	Accept
8.	Education does not always lead to upward social mobility due to economic instability in Nigeria.	3.93	1.092	Accept
9.	School dropout rate are high because children needs to assist their families in business.	4.01	1.112	Accept
10.	Many educated individual struggle to secure well-paying jobs despite their qualifications.	4.10	0.970	Accept

The main barriers identified were cost and quality of education. On average, traders rated statements about high school fees, limited school facilities, and low educational standards above 3.0, signifying agreement that these problems hinder education’s impact. For instance, many remarked that poor families struggle to pay fees or that teachers are often underqualified.

Research Question 4: What solutions do traders suggest to make education more effective in addressing these issues?

Table 4: Mean (x) perception response on the solutions to the challenges of formal education in reducing income inequality and social mobility

S/NO.	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
1.	Vocational training should be given equal priority as formal education in addressing inequality.	4.08	0.829	Accept
2.	The government should introduce flexible education programs tailored for traders.	4.29	0.981	Accept
3.	Policy makers should consider low income families when making educational policies.	4.02	0.954	Accept
4.	Education funding should be redistributed to focus more on undeserved communities.	4.12	0.988	Accept
5.	More investment in quality education can help reduce poverty and inequality in society.	4.18	0.959	Accept
6.	The government should increase teachers' salaries and provide better training programs.	4.07	1.055	Accept
7.	Rural areas have fewer educational opportunities compared to urban areas due to poor government policies.	4.02	0.944	Accept
8.	The government should implement policies to ensure that all students have access to technology for learning.	4.11	0.974	Accept
9.	Stronger monitoring and evaluation of education policies are needed to ensure they are effective.	4.22	0.897	Accept
10.	Adult education program should be expanded to help traders and workers improve their skills.	4.28	0.849	Accept

Traders suggested concrete improvements. The most supported solutions (highest mean ratings) were: providing free or subsidized education, expanding vocational/technical training programs, and improving teacher training and school infrastructure. For example, several respondents proposed adult education classes and apprenticeships to complement formal schooling. A bullet-point summary of popular suggestions includes: Increase access to free basic and adult education programs, Invest in vocational/technical schools and on-the-job training, Enhance school quality (better teachers, materials, facilities).

Hypothesis Testing

In order to test the hypothesis of this study, the researcher used the one-sample t-test that compares the mean values of traders' responses to a hypothesized mean value. Since this research uses a Likert type questionnaire to gather the data, the hypothesized mean is derived by taking the average

of the possible responses. The possible responses for this study have scores ranging from 1 to 5. Therefore, any score of 3.50 is considered credible enough for acceptance.

Hypotheses One: Traders' level of Education has no significant influence on their mean perception scores on role of formal education on income inequality

Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	t-statistic	DF	p-value
3.8686	0.59950	0.05936	-2.213	101	0.029

The result in table above suggests that the null hypothesis that traders' level of education has no significant influence on their mean perception scores on the role of education in income inequality is to be rejected since the probability value (0.029) is less than 0.05. This means that the level of education of the traders plays a role on their perception about the role of education on income inequality.

Hypothesis Two: Traders' level of education has no significant influence on their mean perception scores on role of formal education in social mobility

Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	t-statistic	DF	p-value
4.0431	0.44176	0.04374	0.986	101	0.326

Hypothesis two measures the traders' level of education and their perception about the role of education in social mobility. The result shows that we fail to reject the null hypothesis at the 5% level of significance since the probability value is less than 0.05 (i.e $0.986 > 0.05$). This suggests that the level of education of the students does not play a role on their perception about the role of education in social mobility.

Discussion

the course of this research, it was found out that traders in Onitsha North believe that one's level of education plays a pivotal role in shaping his or her business strategies as education not only makes one understand basic business concepts but also increases business ideas, improves the day-to-day business activities, opens the opportunities for career and business advancement, and above all, helps to reduce income inequality amongst the traders. This means that formal

education in Onitsha North may bridge the income gap between traders by providing business knowledge and financial literacy.

Also, this study found out that education is an important tool for achieving social mobility amongst traders in Onitsha North. These traders believe that formal education is a ready tool for social and economic advancement in Nigeria, however, entrepreneurship provides a faster route to financial success than formal education. In their views, formal education and entrepreneurship should be placed side-by-side in order to foster social mobility in the society.

Furthermore, in trying to unravel the challenges formal education faces in reducing income inequality and social mobility amongst traders, this study found several reasons formal education has failed to bridge the income inequality in the country. These challenges include; the corrupt education system, the high cost of acquiring standard education, obsolete curriculum that does not embody the current demands of the society, lack of job opportunities for graduates, and the high rate of success in the business environment, making it a better option over formal education.

Finally, in trying to find out the solutions to these challenges of formal education in reducing income inequality and social mobility, the researcher discovered some solutions such as government implementing policies to ensure that all students have access to technology for learning, adult education program should be expanded to help traders and workers improve their skills, vocational training should be given equal priority as formal education in addressing inequality.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveals that while traders acknowledge the benefits of formal education in enhancing economic opportunities, many still rely on entrepreneurial skills and informal learning for financial success. However, the study highlighted the challenges of access to quality education, economic constraints, and the need for policies that bridge the gap between formal education and practical business skills. To foster greater social mobility and reduce income inequality, there is need for government intervention in providing affordable and quality education, skill-based training programs, and financial support for small businesses. By integrating education

with entrepreneurship and vocational training, traders can better leverage formal learning to improve their economic standing and contribute to sustainable development in the region.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made by the researchers based on the study's findings and implications:

1. **Improve Access to Quality Education:** The government should provide scholarships, grants, and financial aid to students from low-income families to ensure equal access to education. Establish more affordable and well-equipped public schools in Onitsha North to bridge the education gap.
2. **Strengthen Vocational and Entrepreneurship Education:** Introduce and expand vocational training centers tailored to the needs of traders, focusing on financial literacy, business management, and digital marketing. Encourage secondary and tertiary institutions to integrate entrepreneurship and business-related courses into their curricula.
3. **Reform the Formal Education System:** Address systemic challenges such as poor infrastructure, inadequate teacher training, and outdated curricula to improve education quality. Increase government funding for the education sector and ensure proper utilization of resources to enhance learning outcomes.
4. **Promote Adult and Informal Education Programs:** Organize adult literacy and continuing education programs targeting traders who may not have completed formal education. Partner with trade associations to provide workshops and seminars on business growth and financial management.
5. **Enhance Public-Private Partnerships in Education:** Encourage private-sector investment in education through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, such as funding scholarships or upgrading school facilities. Collaborate with NGOs and international organizations to support education reforms and capacity-building programs.
6. **Leverage Technology for Learning:** Develop and promote online and mobile learning platforms that provide flexible learning opportunities for traders and young entrepreneurs.

Introduce digital literacy programs to enhance access to global markets and modern business strategies.

7. Monitor and Evaluate Education's Impact on Income Distribution: Conduct periodic research to assess the effectiveness of educational reforms in reducing income inequality. Establish a policy framework to track students' career progress and income levels post-education, ensuring that education translates into economic empowerment.

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