

## **Comparative Analysis of Access to Education in the United States, Jamaica, and Nigeria**

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**Abstract:** This article presents a comparative analysis of access to education in the United States, Jamaica, and Nigeria. Access to education is an essential aspect of development that every country must prioritize. Educational opportunities vary significantly in the United States, Jamaica, and Nigeria, affecting literacy and economic development in these countries. Education is highly valued in the US, and there is a high level of access to primary and secondary education. However, higher education costs remain a significant barrier for many students. In Jamaica, access to education is also high, but the quality of education is often subpar, leading to low literacy rates. In Nigeria, access to education is the biggest challenge, with many children unable to attend school due to poverty and lack of infrastructure. Drawing on the collective knowledge of country-specific education studies over time, the article focuses on fundamental questions: does everyone have access to education? Are countries investing enough in education and achieving a sound balance across levels of education? Are the resources well deployed and managed to ensure the efficient functioning of education systems? In this study, I employed secondary analysis, a method frequently used in comparative research due to its convenience in accessing primary data on extensive subjects, such as the policy environments of countries. In each country, I conducted an extensive review of various sources, including published journals, articles, national laws, policy documents, educational guidelines, future plans for education, and government websites. The findings revealed that in the United States, the focus is on disparities based on socioeconomic status and the rising costs of higher education impacting access to education. Jamaica faces similar challenges with disparities, especially in rural and low-income areas, alongside infrastructure and educational resources issues. Nigeria's situation is compounded by its history, infrastructure deficits, economic barriers, and gender disparities. The article discusses potential strategies for improving educational access in these diverse contexts, considering socioeconomic, cultural, and infrastructural factors.

**Keywords:** Access to education, Education inequality, Infrastructure, Education policy.

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### **1. Introduction**

Education is a fundamental right that lays the foundation for an individual's future success and contributes to the overall development of a nation. However, access to quality education remains a challenge in many countries. This article compares and analyzes access to education in the United States, Jamaica, and Nigeria, shedding light on the similarities, differences, and progress made in each country. The United States, often regarded as a developed nation, has a well-established education system. Public schools are available in every state, offering free education to students from kindergarten through high school. However, despite the presence of accessible schools, the quality of education can vary significantly depending on the locality and socioeconomic status (Karen, 1991; Smith & Johnson, 2023; Williams, 2022). According to Darling-Hammond (2013), funding, resources, and teacher quality disparities contribute to educational inequalities. Students from low-income backgrounds often face challenges in accessing quality education, leading to achievement gaps. Additionally, higher education in the US can be prohibitively expensive, limiting access to college and university for many individuals, particularly those from marginalized communities (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012).

Moving to the Caribbean region, Jamaica faces challenges in providing equal access to education (Fiszbein & Stanton, 2018; Thomas & Richards, 2023). The country has made significant progress in recent years, achieving universal primary education and improving enrollment rates. However, there are still issues regarding the quality of education and access to secondary and tertiary institutions. Many rural areas in Jamaica lack proper school infrastructure and resources, making it difficult for students to access quality education (Gordon, 2022). Limited funding and teacher shortages also impact the overall education system. Despite efforts to address these challenges, there remains a need for further investment in education to ensure equitable access and enhance the quality of learning opportunities in Jamaica. Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, faces numerous obstacles to providing access to education. While there have been improvements in enrollment rates, especially at the primary level, challenges persist. Access to quality education is highly unequal, with rural areas

and disadvantaged communities experiencing the most significant disparities (Okeke & Adegoke, 2023). Infrastructure deficiencies, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient learning materials are common issues in many Nigerian schools (Ikpuri, 2018). Moreover, socio-cultural factors, such as gender inequality, early marriages, and child labor, hinder access to education for certain groups, particularly girls. The Nigerian government and NGOs are making efforts to address these challenges and promote inclusive education, but more work is needed to ensure all children have access to quality education.

### **1.1 Purpose and Significance of the Study**

This study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of access to education in three distinct countries, the United States, Jamaica, and Nigeria, to explore access to education and examine the challenges these countries face. By comparing access to education across these diverse countries, this study offers an understanding of how socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional factors influence educational opportunities. Understanding disparities in access to education is crucial for promoting equity and inclusion within societies. By examining these three countries, the study sheds light on the factors that contribute to educational inequality.

## **2. Method**

Comparative research encompasses a variety of approaches. The predominant method involves cross-national comparisons, examining differences within a single country or across regions or governmental structures (Muoneke, 2023). Drawing on the collective knowledge of country-specific education studies over time, the article focuses on fundamental questions: Does everyone have access to education? Are countries investing enough in education and achieving a sound balance across levels of education? Are the resources well deployed and managed to ensure the efficient functioning of education systems? In this study, I employed secondary analysis, a method frequently used in comparative research due to its convenience in accessing primary data on extensive subjects, such as the policy environments of countries. This approach primarily involves the analysis of aggregate data, focusing on examining vast datasets often sourced from governmental records.

The selection of these three countries was based on the considerable variation in educational opportunities they present, affecting the literacy and economic development levels in these countries. Each country has a distinct history and development trajectory, presenting unique challenges and prospects. These differences offer a rich, contrasting backdrop for examining access to education. In each country, I conducted an extensive review of various sources, including published journals, articles, national laws, policy documents, educational guidelines, future plans for education, and government websites. The inclusion criteria for the documents were stringent: they had to be national in scope and officially recognized, originating either from the government or a relevant ministry.

Additionally, these documents needed to encompass provisions for school-based education. This article gives those concerned with education in Africa an analysis of a cross-country perspective aimed at drawing lessons from individual countries. A comparative perspective is useful to show the range of possibilities in key education policy variables and learn from their distinct situations.

## **3. Review of Literature and Policy Documents**

When comparing these three countries, it becomes evident that various factors influence access to education, including socioeconomic status, geographical location, and government investment in the education sector. In the United States, although access to education is relatively widespread, inequities persist, particularly in higher education. Jamaica and Nigeria face more significant challenges in providing universal access to quality education due to issues such as infrastructure, teacher shortages, and cultural barriers.

### **3.1 Access to Education in the United States**

In the United States, access to education has long been considered a fundamental right (Kennedy, 2019; Naassana, 2020). While the country has made significant strides in expanding educational opportunities, challenges remain, particularly in terms of equity, quality, and affordability. One of the critical challenges in accessing education in the United States is the presence of disparities based on socioeconomic status. Public schools in every state offer free education from kindergarten through high school (Peske & Haycock, 2006). However, the quality of education can vary significantly depending on the locality and funding available to schools. Schools in affluent areas often benefit from more resources, highly qualified teachers, and better infrastructure, providing students with a higher quality education. On the other hand, schools in low-income communities face resource constraints, inadequate facilities, and lower-performing teachers, resulting in achievement gaps and limited opportunities for students (Parmegiani & Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2022).

Another barrier to access is the rising cost of higher education. While public schools offer free education up to the high school level, the cost of attending college and university has skyrocketed in recent years. Tuition fees, accommodation, and other expenses associated with higher education can be prohibitive for many students, particularly those from low-income families (Schneider et al., 2006). This financial burden often forces students to take on significant student loan debt or forego higher education altogether, limiting their future prospects and perpetuating socioeconomic inequalities. In addition to socioeconomic disparities, access to education in the United States can also be influenced by geographical factors (O'Day & Smith, 2016). Rural areas, in particular, face unique challenges regarding access to quality education. These areas often lack resources, including well-equipped schools, advanced courses, and extracurricular activities that are more readily available in urban and suburban areas (O'Day & Smith, 2016). Additionally, limited transportation options and long distances to schools can pose logistical challenges for students in rural communities, further hindering their access to education.

While the United States faces these challenges, opportunities, and efforts are underway to improve access to education. The federal government and state and local authorities have implemented various programs and initiatives to address educational disparities. For example, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures that students with disabilities have access to appropriate educational services (Lim, 2020). Similarly, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) funds schools serving low-income students to bridge the achievement gap (Skinner, 2021).

Furthermore, organizations and non-profits are working diligently to promote access to education in underserved communities. They offer scholarships, mentorship programs, and educational resources to support students' academic journey. Additionally, technology is being leveraged to enhance access to education, particularly in remote or underserved areas. Online courses, educational apps, and virtual classrooms allow students to access educational materials and resources regardless of their location. Several measures can be considered to further improve access to education in the United States (Archerd, 2013; Baffoe & Ghahremaninezhad, 2024; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Tirozzi & Uro, 1997). Firstly, there should be a continued focus on equitable distribution of resources (Muoneke, 2023), ensuring that schools in disadvantaged communities receive adequate funding, well-trained teachers, and necessary infrastructure.

Additionally, expanding early childhood education programs and providing comprehensive support services can help mitigate the effects of socioeconomic disparities and prepare students for success from an early age. Efforts to make higher education more affordable and reduce student loan debt are crucial (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). Increased investment in need-based financial aid programs and scholarship opportunities can help alleviate the financial burden on students, enabling them to pursue higher education without the fear of overwhelming debt.

### **3.2 Access to Education in Jamaica**

Access to education remains a significant challenge in Jamaica (Cook, 2020; Jules, 2008). Disparities in access, particularly in rural and low-income areas, impede the educational opportunities available to children. Unequal access to education perpetuates socioeconomic inequalities, hindering human capital development (Fiszbein & Stanton, 2018). Jamaica has a free and compulsory education system for children up to the age of 18 (Evans, 2001). This includes primary and secondary education, with primary education being provided from ages 6 to 12 and secondary education from ages 12 to 18. Public primary and secondary schools are available throughout the country, but private schools tend to have better resources and facilities. While access to primary education is relatively high, there are still issues with attendance and retention rates in secondary schools, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas (Miller, 2017). Access to tertiary education has improved in recent years, but affordability-related challenges remain, especially for low-income families. Scholarships and financial aid programs are available but may not cover all expenses. Jamaica has recognized the importance of early childhood education and has made efforts to expand access to preschool and kindergarten programs. Initiatives like the Early Childhood Commission (ECC) have been established to improve the quality and accessibility of early childhood education (Miller, 2017).

Despite the progress, there are persistent challenges in Jamaica's education system (Cook, 2020). These include inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and a lack of educational resources, especially in rural areas. Socioeconomic disparities continue to affect access to quality education. Children from low-income families often face difficulties accessing educational materials and may have lower academic achievement. The quality of education can vary significantly between urban and rural areas, with urban schools generally having better facilities and resources (Cook, 2020). High violence and crime rates in some areas can also impact school attendance and the overall learning environment (Parry, 1997). The Jamaican government has implemented various initiatives to address these challenges, such as the Path Program (Levy & Ohls, 2007), which financially supports vulnerable families to keep children in school. The government also works with international

organizations and donors to improve education infrastructure and access to quality education (Stampini et al., 2018).

### **3.2.1 Factors Affecting Access to Education in Jamaica**

Several factors affect education access in Jamaica (Cook, 2020). These factors can be broadly categorized into social, economic, and infrastructural challenges (Cook, 2020; Fiszbein & Stanton, 2018; Miller, 2017). Access to quality early childhood education is crucial for a strong educational foundation, but not all children have equal access to these programs. High poverty levels in some communities make it difficult for families to afford school-related expenses, such as uniforms, textbooks, and transportation. There are significant disparities in educational opportunities between urban and rural areas. Urban schools have better resources and facilities, while rural schools often struggle with limited infrastructure and teaching staff (Nkrumah-Young et al., 2008). In rural and remote areas of Jamaica, access to schools can be challenging due to the lack of transportation options and long distances to educational institutions. Some communities, especially in certain parts of Kingston and other urban centers, are affected by violence and crime (Parry, 1997), which can deter students from attending school. Shortages of qualified teachers, especially in subjects like math and science, can lead to larger class sizes and reduced learning outcomes. Outdated curriculum and teaching methods may not align with the needs of the modern workforce and can hinder educational quality (Thomas-Brown, 2020).

Although there have been improvements in gender parity in education in Jamaica, some gender disparities still exist, particularly in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. Societal norms and expectations can sometimes limit girls' access to certain educational opportunities. Access to quality education for children with disabilities can be limited due to inadequate facilities, trained staff, and appropriate resources. Stigma and social attitudes toward disabilities can also affect these children's inclusion in mainstream schools. Jamaica is culturally diverse, with different linguistic backgrounds. Some students may face language barriers, as English is the primary language of instruction, and some children speak Patois (Jamaican Creole) at home. Child labor remains a challenge in Jamaica, particularly in some rural and impoverished communities. Children involved in labor may have limited access to education.

In recent years, the Jamaican government has modified the formal education system to provide lower-class members with more effective opportunities for upward mobility (Dwyer, 2023). Since secondary education is a more realistic goal for the villagers, competition for this type of education has become a dominant theme in local disputes. These disputes arise because villagers are sensitive to the slightest indication of superior status from kin or status equals whose children are successful in school. These disputes thus reflect the contradiction between the norms of the local social system and the norms of individual achievement in society. It is suggested that these local conflicts may have integrative functions for the total society.

Furthermore, education in Jamaica is undergoing a significant transformation, particularly considering the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapidly changing global economic landscape. A central focus of this transformation is developing a more inclusive and internationally competitive education system. The 2021 Reform of Education in Jamaica, often called the Orlando Patterson report (Thomas, 2021), underscored the critical need for a transformative overhaul of the Jamaican education sector. This report highlighted a drastic learning deficit during the pandemic, with an estimated 1.3 billion hours of in-person education lost during the 19 months of school closures. This adversely affected the mental well-being of students and educators and called for a novel approach to teaching and learning that emphasizes social and emotional learning (SEL) for a nurturing educational environment (Dwyer, 2023; Henry, 2023).

Prime Minister Andrew Holness initiated the High-Level Commission of Education Transformation to tackle these issues. This body is dedicated to forging an education system that is accessible to all Jamaicans, irrespective of their economic background. The emphasis is on crafting a framework that equips Jamaicans with the skills and knowledge essential for thriving in the global economy of the 21st century. According to the World Bank's human capital index, despite notable advancements, children born in Jamaica today are likely to achieve only 54% of their potential productivity if they receive complete education and optimal health. This underscores the necessity for a thorough overhaul and enhancement at every level of education, from early childhood to tertiary education.

UNICEF is also playing a pivotal role in bolstering the Jamaican educational framework. Their initiatives are centered on fostering a resilient, fair, inclusive, and high-quality educational system, with a particular focus on supporting children with disabilities and those at risk of dropping out. UNICEF's approach includes ensuring the safe operation of schools, aiding students in recouping educational losses, and fortifying the educational system against future disruptions. Their strategy also prioritizes inclusivity in early childhood education, developing evidence-based policies, and widening access to quality education for marginalized children. These endeavors are aimed at smoothing the transition of adolescents and young adults, particularly those who are disadvantaged or have disabilities, into the workforce.

### **3.3 Access to Education in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, a country with a population of over 200 million, access to education has been a significant issue throughout its history (Ikpuri, 2018; Fafunwa, 2018). Before colonization, education in Nigeria was primarily informal and traditional, with knowledge passed down through generations. The arrival of European colonial powers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries introduced a formal education system. Still, it was largely limited to the elite and aimed at producing clerks and interpreters to serve the colonial administration. Indigenous languages and cultural practices were marginalized in favor of European languages and curricula. (Fafunwa, 2018). After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, efforts were made to expand access to education. Universal primary education was declared a national policy in 1976, but the implementation faced numerous challenges. Insufficient funding, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of trained teachers hampered progress. Disparities in access were also evident, with rural areas and marginalized communities having limited educational opportunities compared to urban areas.

The oil boom of the 1970s brought increased revenue to Nigeria, leading to some improvements in the education system (Fafunwa, 2018). The government invested in the construction of schools, the recruitment of teachers, and the provision of free primary education. However, political instability, corruption, and mismanagement hindered the effectiveness of these initiatives (Ajayi, 1975; Ikpuri, 2018; Ukeje & Aisiku, 2022). Economic downturns in subsequent decades further strained educational resources. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Nigeria witnessed a surge in private schools, often filling the gaps left by the inadequate public education system. While this expanded access to education, it also exacerbated socioeconomic disparities. Private schools tended to be concentrated in urban areas and were unaffordable for many Nigerians, perpetuating inequality (Ahika, 2023; Omomia et al., 2014).

In recent years, the Nigerian government has acknowledged the need for educational reform and has taken steps to improve access (Birabil et al., 2020; Ossai, 2022; Ugwu, 2015). The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act was enacted in 2004, aimed at providing free and compulsory education for the first nine years of schooling. The UBE program has increased school enrollment, particularly at the primary level (Ossai, 2022). Efforts have also been made to enhance teacher training and improve the quality of education. However, significant challenges remain. Nigeria has one of the highest rates of out-of-school children in the world, with factors such as poverty, insecurity, cultural practices, and gender disparities contributing to low enrollment and high dropout rates. The quality of education also continues to be a concern, with inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and a shortage of qualified teachers (Birabil et al., 2020; Ossai, 2022; Ugwu, 2015). While progress has been made in expanding access to education and improving educational opportunities, several barriers hinder access to education in Nigeria.

#### **3.3.1 Insufficient Infrastructure**

One of the primary challenges in Nigeria's education system is the lack of adequate infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. Many schools lack proper classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and basic amenities such as clean water and sanitation facilities. Insufficient infrastructure limits the capacity of schools to accommodate students, resulting in overcrowded classrooms and poor learning environments. (Ikpuri, 2018) noted that the government should prioritize investment in educational infrastructure by allocating more funds for school construction, renovation, and expansion. Collaboration with international organizations and private sector involvement can also play a crucial role in bridging the infrastructure gap.

#### **3.3.2 Financial Barriers**

Economic constraints pose a significant obstacle to accessing education in Nigeria. High tuition fees and associated costs, such as textbooks, uniforms, and transportation, often prevent children from disadvantaged backgrounds from attending school. The cost burden is even more pronounced at the tertiary level, leading to a high dropout rate among students. Ahika (2023) recommended that the government implement and strengthen policies providing free and compulsory primary education. Additionally, scholarships, grants, and other financial aid programs should be expanded to ensure that deserving students have the opportunity to pursue higher education regardless of their financial background.

#### **3.3.3 Gender Disparities**

Gender inequality remains a pressing issue in Nigeria's education system. Cultural norms, early marriages, and socioeconomic factors contribute to lower enrollment and retention rates among girls. Girls often face discrimination, limited access to educational resources, and increased vulnerability to child labor and trafficking. Promoting gender equality in education requires a multifaceted approach. Sensitization campaigns should be conducted to challenge traditional attitudes and beliefs that hinder girls' education. Smart (2023) noted

that Providing safe learning environments, implementing gender-responsive policies, and offering scholarships specifically targeting girls can help bridge the gender gap in education.

### **3.3.4 Inadequate Teacher Training and Motivation**

The quality of education depends significantly on the competency and motivation of teachers. In Nigeria, many teachers lack proper training and qualifications, which compromises the learning experience for students. Low salaries and inadequate incentives further contribute to a demotivated teaching workforce. Aduwa (2021) argued that strengthening teacher training programs, providing continuous professional development opportunities, and improving working conditions and salaries are essential to enhance the quality of education. Recognizing and rewarding exceptional teachers can serve as an incentive for attracting and retaining skilled educators.

### **3.3.5 Insecurity and Conflict**

Persistent security challenges, particularly in northeastern Nigeria, have disrupted education for millions of children. Boko Haram's insurgency has led to the destruction of schools, displacement of communities, and the abduction of students, causing fear and hindering access to education. Ogbonnaya (2020) stated that addressing insecurity is crucial for creating a conducive environment for learning. The government must prioritize the protection of schools and provide security personnel in vulnerable areas. Collaborating with international organizations to rebuild damaged schools and offer trauma support services to affected students can aid in their reintegration into the education system.

Overall, improving access to education in Nigeria requires a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach. By addressing infrastructure gaps, reducing financial barriers, promoting gender equality, investing in teacher training, and mitigating security challenges, Nigeria can pave the way for an inclusive and equitable education system. The government, civil society, and the international community must collaborate to ensure that every child in Nigeria can receive a quality education, unlocking their potential and contributing to the nation's progress.

## **4. Discussion and Synthesis**

The comparative analysis of educational access in the United States, Jamaica, and Nigeria reveals a complex interplay of socioeconomic, cultural, and infrastructural factors impacting education. Despite these nations' distinct historical and economic contexts, common themes emerge, such as the critical role of government policy, the importance of addressing socioeconomic disparities, and the need for infrastructure development.

In the United States, addressing disparities requires a multifaceted approach that includes equitable resource distribution and affordable higher education strategies. Similarly, in Jamaica, efforts to enhance access involve addressing infrastructure gaps, improving quality, and mitigating socioeconomic inequalities. Access to education in Jamaica has seen significant improvements over the years, but challenges still exist in ensuring equitable and quality education for all. Nigeria's challenges are perhaps the most daunting, given its infrastructural deficits and the impact of insecurity, but a multifaceted approach is critical, including investment in infrastructure, gender equity initiatives, and tackling economic barriers.

The cross-country comparison underscores the importance of context-specific strategies. While universal primary education is a common goal, the path to achieving this varies significantly across countries. The United States' emphasis on socioeconomic disparities, Jamaica's focus on infrastructure and quality, and Nigeria's need to address security and infrastructure simultaneously highlight the diverse approaches needed. Governments play a crucial role, but the involvement of international organizations, NGOs, and local communities is equally vital. Collaborative efforts that bring together these stakeholders can lead to more sustainable and effective solutions. Adopting technology in education, particularly in response to challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, presents a promising avenue for enhancing access and quality across diverse educational landscapes.

The set of policies needed to reach and keep all children in school, at least until the end of the primary cycle, will likely vary from country to country. Also, policy prescriptions for children who have never been in school differ from those for children who dropped out of school before the end of the primary cycle. The available empirical evidence points to the importance of policies such as these: Making schooling more accessible by bringing schools closer to home— including multigrade teaching to help contain costs in some settings, offering a complete cycle of primary schooling to all children, even in small schools, reducing grade repetition which increases the risk of students dropping out. Increasing the proportion of female teachers to strike a better gender balance among the teaching faculty and reducing the school fees and other costs parents bear, including opportunity costs. Living in a rural area or being poor are strong predictors of a child being out of primary school.

Policymakers must balance conflicting objectives when crafting education policies and making spending decisions (Ikpuri, 2018). Access to information about choices and development paths taken by other countries in and around the region—and to data about their outcomes—can be a valuable aid. To bridge the gap in access to education, several strategies can be adopted. Firstly, governments should prioritize education in their national agendas by allocating sufficient funds for infrastructure development, teacher training, and learning resources. Secondly, efforts should be made to reduce socioeconomic disparities through targeted interventions, such as scholarships and financial aid programs. Additionally, improving teacher quality and professional development opportunities can enhance the overall educational experience. Also, leveraging technology can help overcome geographical barriers and provide access to quality education, especially in remote areas.

Finally, this analysis illustrates the dynamic nature of educational access challenges. As countries evolve and new challenges emerge, so must the strategies to address these issues. Continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation of policies and programs are essential to ensure that every child, regardless of background or location, has access to quality education.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, access to education remains a critical issue in the United States, Jamaica, and Nigeria, albeit with varying degrees of challenges. While the United States faces disparities in education quality and affordability, Jamaica and Nigeria struggle with infrastructure deficiencies, teacher shortages, and cultural barriers. To achieve equitable access to education, governments, civil society organizations, and international stakeholders must collaborate to address these challenges and ensure that every child can receive a quality education, regardless of their background or geographical location. Education is the key to unlocking human potential and fostering sustainable development; no child should be left behind.

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