

Exploring Asymmetrical Relations and Diverse Processes of Enslavement in The Educational Sector (Private Schools) in Nigeria

Samuel, Kinikanwo-Chimenim Paul

Ph.D., Reader, Industrial Relations and Human Resources Management, Department of Sociology, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Abstract:

This paper examines asymmetric forms of structural enslavement in the Nigerian system of privately run basic and secondary schools. It is on this basis that contemporary exploitation can be perceived as economic dependency, subordination and disposability rather than historical chattel slavery. Consequent upon the failure of the public school, there is a surge in the emergence of the privately owned schools, ranging from quality to high-end and low-end mushroom schools, which are mostly driven by profit thereby resulting to the commodification of education and exploitation of teachers. The study is anchored on a qualitative interpretivist approach guided by Marxist surplus value extraction, Weberian conflict theory, and Foucaultian disciplinary power through semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers in various private schools in urban/semi-urban southern Nigeria. Thematic analysis revealed four themes, including chronic wage precarity (salaries that are generally less than ₦70,000 minimum, delays, no contracts), denial of autonomy through authoritarian surveillance, devaluation of professional identity, and high retention uncertainty with a large turnover intention. Results point to systematic extracting of proprietor profits at the expense of precarious terms, demoralizing teachers, creating instability, and lowering the quality of education. There is urgent need to make changes to bring back equity and dignity of force through minimum wage, contracts, regulation and support of unions.

Keywords: Exploring, Relation and Diverse, Educational Sector

Introduction

The sector of the private education in Nigeria has been growing very fast and tremendously in the last three decades. This growth covers a very broad range of institutions, including expensive elite international schools attended by a rich urban elite to cheap and loosely regulated community-based schools (commonly known as mushroom schools) in underserved localities.

The emergence of the private schools is to a great extent a direct reply of the unresolved issues within the system of the public schools that include insufficient infrastructure, excessively packed in classrooms, absence of teacher motivation and common industrial strikes. Therefore, a significant number of Nigerian parents consider private schools to be the most secure way of obtaining a stable and quality education and as a possible source of social and economic prosperity. Although such a development has occurred and the advantages are usually linked to the privatization (innovation, efficiency in operation, and perceived academic quality), the sector is marked by high levels of contradiction and structural disparity. The profit motive is often considered by the private schools, which results in commodification of education and the remarkable labour exploitation[1]. This paper uses the metaphorical image of an act of enslavement to analyze the unequal power dynamics between the owners of schools, teachers, parents, and students. Here, the term enslavement has no historic connotations of chattel slavery; rather, it is a modern day neoliberal education process where economic dependency, subordination and structural inequalities are enforced with or without conscious intent[2]. This research will be centered on the exploitation and subordination that teachers in private schools go through. Teachers are subjected to deplorable working conditions in most institutions, especially low and mid-end schools, which include salaries often lower than the national minimum wage 70,000 per month, heavy workloads, lack of formal employment agreements, unpredictable and slow pay increments, and unpredictable or late payment of wages[3]. In low-fee schools, teachers usually earn between 40000 and 90000 a month, which is not enough to afford basic living standards in the present economic conditions in Nigeria, yet the proprietors are receiving high tuition fees[4]. All these factors have fueled the teacher turnover, where most of the educators abandon the vocation to seek other career options, thus, continuing to destabilize the teaching field and affect the quality of education[5]. This paper explores how the issue of reliance on an unstable and exploited teaching labour force by the private schools in Nigeria is connected to structural similarities in contemporary modes of economic exploitation in the education system.

Though the education sector in Nigeria has been praised to have increased access to education through the failure of the state institutions, it has been typified by the systemic exploitation of teachers. Teachers in most private schools, especially those that charge a low fee or middle-income, regularly work under precarious employment conditions, such as wages that often are below or even below the national minimum of 70,000 per month (most of the low-fee schools pay 40,000-90,000 illegally), a lack of formal employment contracts, no job security, work overload, and delays or irregularities in salary payments [6,7]. They are structural asymmetries and form traps which keep educators in the trap of economic dependence and subordination as is being done to modern types of structural enslavement in an economic system built on profits. Moreover, low-fee private schools also have the problem of overcrowded classroom setups, poor facilities, unqualified or demotivated teachers, and strict discipline that borders on psychological bullying. Proprietors, who are operating in weak or loosely applied regulatory standards, exercise disproportionate power, restraining the autonomy of the teacher profession, the collective voice, and effective communication with parents. Although these issues impact the majority, much of the existing research focus on the topic of private education in Nigeria has focused on questions of access, enrollment, and educational achievement, yet these inequalities only loosely described the problems of inadequate structural conditions, labour exploitation, and power dynamics within the daily functioning of these schools. Such labour relations must thus be critically examined in a sociological context in order to demonstrate that private schools operate as locus of economical oppression, imposed dependence and systemic inequality with far reaching consequences of teacher survival, professionalism and the standard of education as a whole.

The study helps to develop a further sociological insight into the private school sector in Nigeria by changing the center of interest towards examining the existing and ongoing access and performance of the sector to the root cause of power and labor exploitation that dictate day-to-day functioning. Using critical theoretical approaches of Marxism [8], Weberian conflict theory[9] and Foucault notion of disciplinary power[10], the research will examine how the autonomy, agency and professional identity of teachers can be limited within the neoliberal education system. The results will be useful to policymakers interested in enhancing labor laws and regulations; to the teachers unions, NGOs, and other interest groups that want to better the labour conditions in the private schools. The results come especially timely in 2026, when NLC continues to push for the implementation of the 70,000 minimum wage in the private sector and as teacher shortages continue to drive the inequality in the education system [11].

This research paper is limited to the concept of private basic and secondary education in Nigeria and will not involve the tertiary education institutions as well as government schools. To ensure the research includes the variety of the types of private schools including low-fee community schools up to the middle and high-end schools, the study is confined to urban and peri-urban regions, specifically in the southern parts of Nigeria. It analyses teacher-proprietor asymmetries in power, the existence of labour exploitation (wage precarity and failure to adhere to labour standards), and institutional practices that can be theorised as contemporary versions of structural capabilities of modern day enslavement. The possible difficulty in reaching the participants due to the unwillingness of the proprietors to undergo external scrutiny is recognized as a limitation.

The study was limited by the fact that the subject under discussion was rather sensitive, and thus proprietors might not co-operate, and some schools could be closed to the researcher. Although the sample was heterogeneous in terms of school fee levels, it was mainly represented in urban and peri-urban communities in southern Nigeria (possibly concentrated around the Uyo/Akwa Ibom influences), which limits external validity to the North or more rural settings. Self reporting data can be affected by a certain amount of social desirability bias, but this can be eradicated by confidentiality and member checking. The sample size and the geographic dispersion were also limited by funding issues.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Address the magnitude of labor abuse in the private schools in Nigeria.
2. Determine the types of labor exploitation amongst teachers.
3. Inquire into the conditions that make and promote labor exploitation in the Nigerian private school industry.

The exploitation of teachers in the privatized sector of Nigerian schools has become a burning issue over the last few years, with the accumulating evidence of the ongoing inequality in terms of payments, working conditions, and employment safety. As a report shows, many teachers in most of the privately run institutions, including low-fee and mid-tier schools, face extremely low pay (which in many cases is below the national minimum wage of ₦70,000), prolonged working hours with no remuneration, lack of official contracts, and no or limited benefits such as health insurance or pension payments [12]. Lack of strict adherence to labour regulations exposes educators to arbitrary treatment, such as the failure to pay on time or irregular salaries and the dismissal of the educator because of the concern raising[13]. There are particular forms of exploitation that are still rampant: forced overtime without pay, working without contracts, deprivation of a professional career, an atmosphere of fear that prevents organizing[14]. Such practices flourish in a commercialized education sector of the country where owners are more concerned about their financial gains than with the welfare of the educators and, in fact, can often rake in huge tuition fees and accuse of paying low salaries that teachers are barely able to sustain themselves in the current economic conditions of high inflation and the cost-of-living crisis in Nigeria[15]. The factors that make this eventual and reinforce the situation are the mostly deregulated character of the industry, the disparate enforcement of labour regulations, and the overall economic stress that causes teachers to resort to precarious

survival measures. These forces are indicative of more profound structural imbalances, in which the work of private schools serves as places of accumulation by dispossession, commercialising education whilst reducing teachers to the exploitative disciplines of hierarchical relationships.

This study relies on critical sociological insight in questioning these labour relationships:

Further structural consequences include: 1) the extraction of surplus value Marxist theory (Marx, 1867/1976): since proprietors receive high tuition fees at the expense of parents, and pay low wages to teachers, this theory emphasizes the level of profit maximization by appropriating teachers and undervalued professional labour time.

Weberian conflict theory: The theory sheds some light on bureaucratic authoritarianism and the status hierarchies in schools where owners/managers exercise unquestioning power over schools that left teachers with limited power and no voice.

The idea of disciplinary power as discussed by Foucault describes how continual surveillance (e.g., strict arrival/departure, teaching technique, and teacher behaviour), random rules, and the threats of termination get to create docile and compliant teacher-subjects, who internalize the subordination instead of fighting.

Collectively, these frameworks offer a strong perspective to the examination of how neoliberal privatization in education sustains structural enslavement economic coercion, dependency, and disposability, which hurl educators into exploitative cycles.

In summary, labour exploitation in the private schools of Nigeria is institutional in terms of the structural, regulatory, and economic factors, and it requires urgent reforms in the form of stronger implementation of the minimum wage legislation, compulsory contracts, support of unions, and supervision of the situation in order to bring back dignity and justice to the teaching profession.

Methodology

Since the research topic focused on subjective lived experiences of teachers, power structure, and how the phenomena of exploitation and coercion are sub-optimized in everyday school activities, instead of statistical generalization, a qualitative research design was chosen, which is based on the paradigm of interpretivism. In this way, the emotional, psychological, and structural aspects of labour precarity in private schools were explored in-depth by means of examining the narratives of the participants.

The theoretical orientation of the study is based on the critical social science views where it relies on the viewpoints of Marxist analysis of the extraction of surplus values and commodification of labour, the Weberian views on conflict and status asymmetry in the bureaucracies, and the Foucaultian perspectives of disciplinary power to question the institutionalized inequalities, surveillance, and constrained obedience that is embedded in the system of privatisation of education in Nigeria.

The main source of data collection was semi-structured interviews because it gives the researcher the latitude to explore emerging themes and yet focuses on areas of great concern including wage insecurity, institutional control, professional devaluation, and retention uncertainty. This approach is long-established in the qualitative research to provoke comprehensive, contextualized views of the participants that could not be determined by quantitative measures. The open-ended design gave the teachers a chance to express their situation of mistreatment, subordination, and lack of professional identity in a manner that would be limited by the standardized tools.

Purposive sampling was adopted in the selection of participants as it is a strategic technique of sampling, which is focused on people who are in the best position to provide rich in-depth answers to the research questions. The sample size was 15 teachers representing a purposive sample of private basic and secondary schools of varying fee levels - high resource (high-resource, better-resourced environments), mid-tier (mid-fee and resources), and low-fee (low-resource community based schools with very stringent resource restrictions).

This stratification deliberately encompassed the range of the exploitation terms: in low-fee schools, teachers are usually subjected to the strongest wage precarity and expendability (also below 2026 economic pressures usually below 70,000 minimum wages), whereas teachers in elite institutions are

faced with more nuanced exploitation in the form of surveillance and lack of autonomy despite higher salaries. The sample size of the study participants was diverse in terms of teaching experience (2-15 years), type of contract (full-time, part-time, ad hoc), and school type, which allowed the research study to underscore the issues of labour exploitation, power imbalances and structural enslavement in secondary schools in urban/semi-urban Nigeria.

Semi-structured interviews, each ranging between 45 and 60 minutes, were used to collect data in confidential conditions in order to make the respondent feel free to disclose more information. The interview guide had open-ended questions that inquired about the lived experiences of employment conditions (salaries, delays, and contracts), job satisfaction, opinion about the existence of proprietor-dominated power relations, institutional control, and loss of professional identity and resignation intentions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed word-to-word and analysed with the explicit informed consent.

The semi-structured format compromised structure and flexibility to permit participants to narrate their realities without limitations and the researcher enquire on the emerging themes, including, but not limited, chronic underpayment, fear of reprisal, and psychological toll. This technique was particularly suitable in exploring issues of delicate labour exploitation, which created a receptive atmosphere to allow teachers to express their experiences of subordination and coercion that would otherwise not be evident in the less personal medium (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006).

The thematic analysis of the verbatim transcripts was done using the six-step framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). Phase 1 entailed the familiarization readings (repeated) to be immersed in the data and to record the first impressions. Phase 2 involved a systematic coding of meaningful sections in the data set. Phase 3 involved coding and Phase 4 included the refining of these codes into coherent patterns that were defined. Theme review in Phase 5 was done against the coded extracts and the entire dataset in question to demonstrate validity and Phase 6 generated the final thematic structure that is presented in the findings.

The analysis was also reflexive and iterative and it was done through constant comparison to make sure that the themes sufficiently captured the account of participants on wage insecurity, autonomy denial, identity devaluation and exit intent. The NVivo software was employed to aid in organization and member checking boosted trustworthiness.

Since the topic of the research was sensitive, ethical considerations were of the utmost importance. All the participants had signed an informed consent, being fully aware about the purpose of the study, their right to confidentiality, and their right to withdraw without penalty. To ensure strict confidentiality measures in the research, the study utilized pseudonyms of the participants and schools so that the participants and schools remain unidentified.

There were several strategies used to guarantee the validity and reliability of the study, such as member checking (participants were given the opportunity to focus on the accuracy of the interview transcripts) and triangulation (data and multiple looks were compared). The reflexivity of the researcher was also highlighted and any bias was noted and transparency was made in the data collection and analysis processes (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Results and Discussion

Participant Profile

School Type	Typical Teacher Salary Range (2025–2026)	Notes
Low-fee	₦40,000 – ₦90,000/month	Often below national minimum wage; delays common
Mid-tier	₦90,000 – ₦300,000/month	Varies by location/experience
Elite	₦200,000 – ₦1,000,000+/month	Perks may include health, bonuses

The number of teachers who participated in the interviews was fifteen and these teachers had different experiences of teaching, type of schools, and contract statuses. The profile of the participants is

summarized in the table below:

Pseudonym	Type of School	Years of Teaching Experience	Type of Contract
Teacher A	Mid-tier	7	Full-time
Teacher B	Elite	10	Full-time
Teacher C	Mid-tier	5	Full-time
Teacher D	Low-fee	3	Part-time
Teacher E	Low-fee	4	Part-time
Teacher F	Low-fee	2	Ad hoc
Teacher G	Mid-tier	6	Full-time
Teacher H	Elite	9	Full-time
Teacher I	Low-fee	3	Part-time
Teacher J	Mid-tier	5	Full-time
Teacher K	Low-fee	4	Part-time
Teacher L	Elite	11	Full-time
Teacher M	Mid-tier	6	Part-time
Teacher N	Low-fee	2	Ad hoc
Teacher O	Elite	12	Full-time

Based on the thematic analysis, four key themes that accounts on the lived experiences of teachers who teach in the Nigerian private schools came out as follows. These motifs are the expression of the overall structural inequalities and exploitation of the private education sector.

Chronic Wage Precarity

One of the most prevalent themes that were identified during the interviews was a chronic wage precarity of teachers. Respondents also complained of low pay persistently, salaries failure to be paid on time and inconsistent payments that put them in a financial stress. This motif is used to indicate that the labour of teachers in the era of privatized education has become a commodity as they work to attain high profits to their owners yet they do not get much in return.

As an example, Teacher A (middle-level school, 7 years of experience) told about the financial burden that they endure:

I earn only 20,000 -and that too, is sometimes two or three weeks late. I can hardly make ends meet; I do tutoring side-jobs to provide food to my family.

Likewise, Teacher D (3 years' experience in low-fee school) observed that payment was not consistent:

One month we were not paid a salary, the owner informed us that parents had not paid school fees yet we had to teach. I used to take odd jobs to make ends meet and we had bills to pay.

Such wage precarity is structural exploitation in which the work of teachers is underestimated and not well paid despite the exorbitant school fees. The assumption behind the system is that teachers will be motivated to remain at the job because they are dependent on the job, therefore, making sure that the supply of cheap expendable labour without alternatives.

Denial of Institutional Control and Autonomy

The other important theme that came out was denial of autonomy and institutional control. There was a general shortage of professional autonomy in the private schools. Their working conditions were very controlled, they had no or little contributions towards the decision making process as to curriculum, method of teaching, or the school policies. The majority of teachers believed that their professional judgment was subordinated to managerial and institutional directions and this manifested the top-down system of control.

According to teacher B (elite school, 10 years' experience), the level of control of their work is the

following:

It is all controlled out here, everything, when we arrive, when we depart, our instruction. Recommend something to be done better and you get termed as a troublemaker.

Teacher F (low-fee school, 2 years of experience):

We are not permitted to organize and talk about salaries amongst ourselves. Any mention of collective bargaining, they threaten you with warnings or the threat to fire you.

This shows the authoritarian type of management that prevails in the private schools whereby the teachers are expected to do what they are told without question. The want of autonomy causes the sense of disempowerment and it is one of the factors of teacher dissatisfaction. Moreover, it increases the levels of hierarchical power between the proprietors and the teachers, which enhances the imbalance of power within the school system.

Professional Disillusionment and Identity Devaluation

The third theme was also very strong and was professional disillusionment and devaluation of identity. A lot of teachers shared the feelings of frustration, and disappointment with their jobs saying that the bad working conditions and lack of appreciation made them lose their professional identity. At first, the professionals serving as teachers in the field were driven by their cause and wanted to play their role in shaping students. Nevertheless, the demotivation and undermining of their value of labour and support over the time caused the loss of morale and professional identity.

Teacher C (mid-tier school, 5 years' experience), has provided the following:

I used to love teaching at the beginning of my teaching career, I felt I was moulding minds. But as time goes on, wages are low, esteem is brief. I am put about, humiliated like a slave, not an educator.

Teacher E (low-fee school, 4 years of experience) complained:

I trained, learned, and achieved qualifications. But the work subjects me to the same as any unskilled work. I am no longer proud to identify myself as a teacher.

This motif brings out the psychological price of exploitation. The undervaluation of teachers who receive lower wages and are undervalued as professionals also leads to the feeling of worthlessness and discouragement among the teachers. Most participants talked about how they were now treated like servants, instead of being treated as professionals.

Intent to Exit / Retention Uncertainty

The fourth theme that would have come out of the interviews was intent to exit and retention uncertainty. Many teachers indicated that they would quit the profession in case the conditions were not improved. The inability to earn a good salary, high levels of job insecurity, and the perception of professional identity as devalued established a sense of dissatisfaction that was rife among teachers and prompted many of them to consider ways to change their careers.

According to teacher G (mid-tier school, 6 year experience) said:

I will abandon teaching in case nothing changes, pay, support, and another year. I already start applying to jobs that do not involve education.

Teacher H (elite school, 9 years experience) was also of the same view:

Even here, the better pay, the pressure and the lack of voice are making me think: maybe it is not worth it. I'm looking at something else."

This is the uncertainty of making a long-term commitment to a career combined with the high rate of turnover, which is a major challenge to the stability of the teaching workforce in the private schools. The danger of losing the experienced teachers does not only destabilize the teaching profession, it also endangers the quality of teaching offered to the students. The systemic weakness of teachers is reflected in this high turnover, which is even made worse by the exploitation and non-supportive nature of the teachers.

The interviews showed similar trends of exploitation, denial of autonomy, devaluation of identity and uncertainty of retention. The private schools in Nigeria experience the constant economic insecurity of the teaching staff, oppressive management, and professional disregard. These results apply to the main argument of the current research and indicate that the sector of private education in Nigeria is based on an abused and exploited precarious labour force, which can be viewed as a modern version

of the notion of enslavement.

The major themes and examples can be summarized as presented in the table below:

Theme	Elusive Quotations
Wage Insecurity & Delay	“I receive 20,000 and I usually get two or three weeks behind.” (Teacher A)
Institutional Control & No Autonomy	“It is all controlled... Propose something and you are called a troublemaker.” (Teacher B)
Identity Devaluation	“I no longer take pride in the fact that I am a teacher.” (Teacher E)
Retention Uncertainty	“I will retire from teaching. I am already seeking employment outside the field of education.” (Teacher G)

Retrospect About Analysis and Limitations

Although the results gained are very informative to the issue of teacher exploitation in the private schools of Nigeria, the study has a number of limitations. The number of 15 teachers could be interpreted as a sufficient sample size used to analyse qualitative data, but it might not be representative of all teachers and all areas of Nigeria or in other schools. Also, since the study was based on self-reported experience, it is possible that there was a social desirability bias, especially since the topic of the study was sensitive. These biases were however reduced by ethical protection by use of pseudonyms and member checking techniques.

The results of this study reveal inherent exploitation and structural power imbalances in the Nigerian private school industry where teachers are devalued and subordinated in a systematic way to maximize the profits of the proprietors.

Wage precarity and surplus extraction Proprietors make an enormous amount of surplus value from the high tuition fees parents pay and minimal wages that teachers receive that are often below or even slightly less than the 70,000 national minimum wage. Salaries are usually late, inconsistent or randomly suspended, most teachers are compelled to engage in side hustles that drain away their professionalism and even their physical wellbeing and dignity. This trend of systemic and ongoing underpayment and financial insecurity places educators in loops of economic dependence and subordination, and squarely fits into Marxist discussions on commodification of labour and a surplus appropriation.

Institutional control and disciplinary power School owners have virtually complete authoritarian control over the professional and personal lives of the teachers. The ways of teaching, lesson planning, day to day schedules, dress code and even off duty behaviour are micromanaged by constant surveillance, random inspections and punitive over-sight. Dissent whether it is challenging the policy, demanding better terms and conditions or protecting rights is constantly met by threats of instantaneous termination. This panoptic space produces docile and self-regulating teacher-subjects who internalize fear and obedience instead of exercising professional agency, which is more or less the same as Foucault understood disciplinary power.

Professional self is undermined and estranged. Low remuneration, the absence of autonomy and outright disposability make teaching deprived of professionalism. Educators recount how they are being taken as replaceable, low-value labour instead of quality teachers that are worthy of respect or a voice or developmental opportunity. This is a systematic dehumanization that creates mass disillusionment, demotivation and alienation. A lot of participants indicate a serious loss of pride in their profession, and morale is so worn out that proper classroom interaction becomes hard to achieve and this in direct consequence weakens the education provided to the pupils.

Retention crisis and long-term instability. There is a powerful wave of departure throughout the testimonies: several teachers openly refer to the fact that they are in the process of seeking a different form of employment or will completely stop teaching unless the situation changes. The situation is already high turnover especially in the low fee private schools when resources are already strained

and it is putting pressure on the staff. The ensuing loss of the senior educators disrupts the school operations, the continuity of learning of students, and creates the cycle of viciousness in poor working conditions and instability of the workforce.

To conclude, the exploitation of the teachers of the private-schools in Nigeria is not accidental or random but on the contrary systemic, which is based on the profit motive, lack of control of the owners, and a failure of the regulation to ensure adequate protection. These complementary relationships of wage theft, dictatorial discipline, identity loss, and future mass flight form a centralised precarious labour regime that is detrimental to teachers, students, and the educational ecosystem. It needs immediate, wholesale reform: a firmer implementation of labour legislation, mandatory compliance with minimum wages, effective protection of professional autonomy, and effective regulatory control over institutions of the private sector. Until the sector is intervened in this way, it will still be perpetuating inequality and educational damage in the name of privacy of enterprise.

Conclusion

Finally, this paper has underscored the endemic exploitation of the teachers in the Nigerian private school industry by highlighting the power, labour and professional disparities. The wages paid to teachers are precarious, there is uncertainty on the job security and dictatorial control, all of which add up to economic and psychological subjugation of teachers. The results indicate that the dependence on an overexploited workforce has deteriorated the quality of education, in which the implications on teacher retention and student achievement are huge. There is pressing need to reform these inequities to eliminate the lack of labour protection, regulation, and a paradigm shift that the role of educators should be valued to make the education system more sustainable and equitable.

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