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Exorbitant Private Schooling, Age Gating and Quality Education in Nigeria: A Sociological Investigation of the Intersections and Implications

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the interplay between exorbitant tuition fees, age factors, and the quality of education in Nigerian private schools. Education, as a cornerstone for national development, has seen increasing reliance on private schools, especially following the 1999 Federal Government's introduction of the Private Partnership Initiative to alleviate the burdens on public institutions. However, the rapid proliferation of private schools, often of questionable quality, and the imposition of exploitative fees have raised concerns about educational accessibility and equity. The study evaluates how exorbitant tuition fees and age profiling impact the effectiveness of private schooling, particularly in fostering equitable access to quality education. Despite the notion that private schools provide superior academic outcomes compared to public schools, this paper highlights the socio-economic barriers that exacerbate inequalities in education access. Through an appraisal of these factors, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges facing Nigerian private education systems.

Keywords: *Exorbitant Tuition Fees, Age Profiling, Private Schools, Educational Quality, Nigerian Education System*

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Introduction

The education sector in Nigeria has undergone significant transformations since the 1990s, with the proliferation of private schools being a notable trend (Oke, 2010). It became crystal clear that the burden of providing education appears huge for the government to bear solely. This necessitated the 1999 Federal Government's introduction of Private Partnership Initiative in education to meet the increasing demand for education. However, the growth of private schools has been driven by the perceived decline in the quality of public education, leading to increased demand for private educational institutions (fowowe 2022). Quality decline has featured commodification of education, with many private schools charging exorbitant fees that are beyond the reach of many Nigerians (Adebayo, 2015).

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the number of private schools in Nigeria increased from 18,271 in 2010 to 44,996 in 2020 (NBS, 2020). This growth has been accompanied by a significant increase in the cost of private education, with many schools charging fees that are equivalent to several months' worth of salary for the average Nigerian worker (Ogundipe, 2020).

Research has equally shown that the high cost of private education in Nigeria has significant implications for access to quality education, particularly for marginalized groups (Adeyemi, 2012; Adebayo, 2015). For example, a study by the Nigerian Education Research and Development Council (NERDC) found that the cost of private education was a significant barrier to access for many Nigerians, particularly those from low-income backgrounds (NERDC, 2018). Furthermore, as most private school enrollment has disregard global standard of stipulated age, age factor in pupils enrollment has been identified as a significant determinant of educational outcomes in Nigeria (Oke, 2010). Research has shown that younger students are more vulnerable to the negative consequences of exorbitant private schooling, including reduced access to quality education and increased likelihood of educational dropout (Adeyemi, 2012).

In light of these concerns, this study provides a sociological appraisal of the relationship between exorbitant private schooling, age factor, and quality education issues in Nigeria. The study aims to investigate how the exorbitant costs of private schools affect access to quality education, particularly for younger students, and to identify policies that can promote equitable access to quality education in Nigeria.

Private Schooling and exorbitant schooling

Private education connote people's increasing reliance and preference on non-state services, tilting towards private provision of education services by entrepreneurs (Umar, 2008). As further corroborated by Rose, (2007) private school are managed and run under many different types of arrangements, and may be owned and managed numerous actors such as 'NGOs, faith-based organisations, communities and commercially-oriented private entrepreneurs, each with diverse motive for involvement in education. Most private schools are entirely independent of government (self-financing). Assertion by researches posit that the academic performance of students in private schools is better than the academic performance of students in public schools, prompting parents preference for private schools against public schools (Uyi, 2012 & Afolabi in Ehigiamusoe, 2012). Notionally, parents assumes that private schools provide value for the fees strife to pay tuition fee as affordable due to socio-economic status. Parents' patronage and preference of private schools has further led to exploitation, class consciousness brewing unequal access to education.

Adelabu and Rose (2004) schools serving low-income families in mostly urban and peri-urban areas, but remain unaffordable, fee levels are determined by the socioeconomic status of parents and location, in parents most cases based on economic reality experience difficulty in paying fees. Below are catalogues of private schools with elitist status, charging extremely exorbitant schools fees:

Table. 1. TOP 16 MOST EXPENSIVE PRIVATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA (FEES PER ANNUM)

SN	SCHOOL	TUITION FEES PER ANNUM	LOCATION
1	Grange School	N4.5million	Lagos
2	British International School	N4.48million	Lagos
3	Lekki British International High School,	N4million	Lagos
4	Day Waterman College	N3.7million	Abeokuta
5	White plains British School	N3.6million	Abuja

6	Green springs School	N3.185million	(Lagos)
7	Meadow Hall	N3million	Lagos
8	Loyola Jesuit	N2.8million	Abuja
9	Hillcrest School	N2.65million	Jos
10	Corona Secondary School	N2.55million	Agbara
11	Atlantic Hall	N2.27million	Epe, Lagos
12	Chrisland College	N2million	Ikeja, Lagos
13	Downen College	N2million	{Lagos}
14	International Community School,	N1.9million	Abuja
15	Nigerian Turkish International College	N1.6million	Abuja
16	Lead British International School,	N1.5million	Abuja

(Fieldwork: Oladeji, 2024)

Sociological import of the table above reveals class consciousness. Georg Lukács, observed that class consciousness purposefully emerge and are integrally connected to contestations between classes founded on the need to create subordinate prompting class dominance. Studies on students socio-economic status and achievement assert that non-privileged (low-SES) backgrounds students have lower educational and career ambitions, diligence rates, and educational accomplishment compared to affluent students (high-SES) backgrounds (Astin, 1993; Boatsman, 1995; Lareau, 1987; Pascarella & Terensini, 1991). Nigeria context reflects private schools cater to wealthier families who can afford high tuition fees. Socio-economic status has widen the gap between the rich and the poor due to exorbitant school fees.

Some research suggests that low-cost private schools can play a positive role in promoting equity, asserting that such schools have the potential to give access to education to poorer communities (Alderman, 2001& Tooley, 2004). Tooley (2004) responds to criticisms that for profit schools will seek to charge high fees, suggesting instead that entrepreneurs are motivated by a desire to serve the poor, however charging excessive fees would run against such interest. In this formulation, the profit motive is viewed as a factor in promoting socio-economic equity.

Meanwhile, the literature reveals little evidence that the very poor cannot afford even the lowest of fees (Cameron 2011),

Due to recent economic hardship many Nigerian parents are creaking under ridiculous and bogus fees charged by many private. It is depressing that the demands from the owners or proprietors of private schools are gradually going out of the reach of many parents. According to the report, the owners of some private schools collect as much as N287,000 as application fee while tuition fee goes as much as N7.25m in some of these schools! Though, the National Association of Proprietors of Private Schools (NAPPS), said that these schools are offering value for money, the truth is that these fees are no longer affordable to many parents considering the level poverty and inflation in the country. (Vanguard, January 25, 2022).

Access to quality education has been grossly stratified leading to disparities in educational outcomes based on income levels. The implication of this class consciousness is the rich will continue to be ahead and possibly dominate their counterparts from low or poor socio-economic background. As observed by Oladeji (2024), exorbitant schooling may not guarantee educational attainment. Positing despite the exorbitant tuition fee, none of student from the schools schools regularly came first in WASCE, JAMB and other external examinations. Further assert they are none these students are regularly first class products in conventional Nigerian Universities. Coupled with the fact that well-known personalities such as Professors Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Dr. Dora Akuyili and so on were not product of private schools paying exorbitant school fees.

Age Gating Conceptual Anchorage

As stipulated the fundamental Universal Basic Education (UBE) Law in 2004the 9–3–4 education system, students are expected to commence school at age 6 and end by 18. This seem tenable in public school while abound cases of under age students in most Nigerian private schools. Parents in the bid to evade schools fees erroneously claim their wards are brilliant and in most cases student are choked with overloaded curriculum. The inherent danger is pupil lacking the cognitive maturity to cope academically. As asserted by age factors affects performance as younger students are liable to more difficulties than relatively older students (Martin, Foels, Clanton & Moon 2004).

Chronologically, age determines a child mentally mature to cope with school rigorous academic expectations. The instances a child of seven or eight found in most Nigerian private secondary is an academic aberration due to overloaded curriculum. Occasionally, as observed by Gillian and Giani (2018) parental income issue prompt the zeal to rush a child through the schooling process. However the ideal education process globally stipulates fundamental enrollment age for pupil ranges between age six to eight taken a clue from the table below.

Table 2. Survey of Selected Countries Enrollment age

<i>SN</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i><u>Enrollment Age</u></i>			<i>Remark</i>
		<i>Primary</i>	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Tertiary</i>	
<i>1</i>	Brazil	6	15		<i>Ideal Cognitively</i>
<i>2</i>	China	6	12	15	<i>Ideal Cognitively</i>
<i>3</i>	Australia	5 Reception	12		<i>Ideal Cognitively</i>
<i>4</i>	India	6	14		<i>Ideal Cognitively</i>
<i>5</i>	Japan	6	12	15	<i>Ideal Cognitively</i>
<i>6</i>	Germany	6	10		<i>Ideal Cognitively</i>
<i>7</i>	United Kingdom	4 Reception	11		<i>Ideal Cognitively</i>
<i>8</i>	United States	5 Reception	11	17	<i>Ideal Cognitively</i>

(Fieldwork: Oyeyemi, 2024)

The basis for enforcing age six for minimum enroll was hinged on the attainment of cognitive maturity to cope with academic rigour. As substantiated by Mahar, (2006) that increase academic intake must be correlated with learner's self-regulation and behavioral inhibition, and the ability to inhibit off-task behavior, postulating that cognitive skills appear to affect learning and academic achievement in school, as well as classroom behavior. Low Cognitive maturity based Blair (2007) study was attributed to underpin learning and cognition in academic performance in learners literacy and numeracy activity. Measure to earnest this ideal global practice in the Nigerian context has been futile. Despite efforts by Ministry of Education to ensure that private schools comply with the laid down system associated with ideal enrollment age. Nigeria pupils enter secondary schools from primary five thereby skipping primary six classes, resulting in young pupils enter secondary school and even university under-aged and ill-prepared academically (N.P.E, 2004).

Worrisomely, elite and educated are deliberately involved in this ill-act of not putting a child through the right foundation, needed for a grounded development. Pathetically, culture abound of Nigerian parents sending their children to secondary school under-aged occasionally due to economic reasons associating with school fees hikes. The resultant effects featured under-aged undergraduates in most Nigerian tertiary institutions. No doubt, this may be adduced for reasons why product of most Nigerian tertiary institution lack behind in global competitiveness.

The proliferation of exorbitant private schooling in Nigeria has significant implications for the quality of education, particularly for marginalized groups (Adeyemi, 2012; Adebayo, 2015). Private schools, especially those in urban areas, often charge high tuition fees that create a barrier to access for families from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This limitation is particularly evident in the context of the country's vast population, where many families struggle to afford the escalating costs of private education, forcing them to rely on underfunded and often overcrowded public schools. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2020), the increasing number of private schools in the country further emphasizes the divide between the educational opportunities available to the wealthy and those accessible to poorer communities. The stark contrast between the quality of education available in private institutions and public schools deepens the educational divide, limiting opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. As a result, the growing reliance on private schooling compounds the educational inequality that already exists, leaving children from poor and marginalized communities with fewer opportunities to achieve high-quality education (NERDC, 2018).

Additionally, the high cost of private schooling disproportionately affects younger students, who are more vulnerable to reduced access to education (Adeyemi, 2012). This is particularly concerning given that early childhood education and primary education play a crucial role in shaping cognitive development, foundational skills, and future academic success. The age factor exacerbates the problem, as children from low-income families are more likely to experience educational disruption due to the inability to afford private schooling fees. As these children fall behind in their early educational years, they are at an increased risk of academic failure, dropping out of school, or never progressing to higher education levels (Oke, 2010). The psychological and

emotional toll on these students can also be profound, leading to disengagement from their education and a lack of motivation to continue.

The commodification of education in Nigeria, where education is treated as a marketable product rather than a basic human right, further intensifies the inequality that exists in the education system (Adebayo, 2015). As education becomes a commodity for those who can afford it, the emphasis shifts away from fostering intellectual growth and critical thinking to prioritizing financial gain. Private schools, especially those catering to the affluent, often focus on enhancing their reputation, offering lavish facilities, and providing international curricula that attract wealthy parents. These priorities can overshadow the need for strong pedagogical practices, teacher development, and inclusivity. This commodification of education means that many students are denied access to quality learning environments simply because their families cannot pay the steep fees required. Moreover, schools that are financially motivated might cut corners in their teaching staff, curriculum offerings, and educational resources, thus further deteriorating the quality of education (Ogundipe, 2020 and Fowowe 2022).

Furthermore, the Nigerian government's failure to regulate the private education sector effectively has contributed to the unchecked growth of exorbitant private schools (Ogundipe, 2020). Despite the increasing reliance on private education, there is little oversight to ensure that private schools maintain high educational standards. The lack of comprehensive regulatory frameworks means that schools can freely set their own fee structures without regard to affordability, further exacerbating the financial burden on parents. In some cases, there are no consistent quality control measures, which means that students from wealthier families have access to better education, while those in public schools face overcrowded classrooms, outdated curricula, and insufficient teaching materials (NERDC, 2018). This regulatory gap allows the growth of a fragmented education system, where access to quality education is determined more by socio-economic status than by merit or need.

In conclusion, the issue of exorbitant private schooling in Nigeria has far-reaching implications for the quality of education. The high costs of private education reinforce existing socio-economic inequalities and limit opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access quality

learning experiences. The age factor and the commodification of education further compound these challenges, while the government's lack of effective regulation of the private education sector contributes to the problem. To address these issues, a multifaceted approach is required, including stricter regulation of private schools, increased funding for public education, and the implementation of policies that promote equitable access to quality education for all students, regardless of their socio-economic background.

Effect of Exorbitant Private Schooling and Age Factor on Quality of Education in Nigeria

The Minister of Education's recent announcement to raise the minimum age for university admission in Nigeria to 18 years has ignited a heated debate among stakeholders in the education sector. Proponents of the policy argue that it will tackle the issues of exorbitant school fees and the cognitive maturity of underage learners. On the other hand, critics have raised concerns about the potential consequences of such a policy.

One of the primary motivations behind the Minister's announcement is the need to address the exorbitant school fees charged by private universities in Nigeria. By raising the minimum age for university admission, the government hopes to reduce the financial burden on parents and guardians. However, critics argue that this policy may not necessarily address the root cause of the problem, which is the lack of affordable education options in Nigeria.

Another argument in favor of the policy is that it will ensure that students are cognitively mature enough to handle the rigors of university education. Proponents argue that underage learners are often rushed into university programs without adequate preparation, which can lead to poor academic performance and high dropout rates ¹. However, critics counter that this policy may unfairly penalize gifted students who are ready for university-level work at an earlier age.

The policy also has potential consequences that need to be considered. For instance, raising the minimum age for university admission may lead to an influx of students in secondary schools, putting a strain on already limited resources. Additionally, students may enter the workforce later than their peers in other countries, which could have implications for Nigeria's economic development. Furthermore, the policy may unfairly penalize students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may not have access to quality secondary education.

Apparently, the Minister of Education's announcement to raise the minimum age for university admission in Nigeria to 18 years has sparked intense debate among stakeholders in the education sector. While the policy may have been well-intentioned, there are potential consequences that need to be carefully considered. Ultimately, the government needs to engage in a broader conversation about the state of education in Nigeria and work towards finding solutions that address the root causes of the problems facing the sector.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study has examined the factors contributing to the high cost of private education in Nigeria, including infrastructure, teacher salaries, curriculum, and extracurricular activities. Additionally, the research has explored the impact of the age factor on the Nigerian educational system, highlighting the challenges faced by students who enter school at an older age or drop out and attempt to reintegrate into the system. The findings of this study suggest that while private schools in Nigeria offer several advantages, including better infrastructure, smaller class sizes, and a wider range of extracurricular activities, the high cost of tuition fees can be a significant barrier to access. Furthermore, the age factor can have a profound impact on students' educational outcomes, particularly those who enter school at an older age or drop out and attempt to reintegrate into the system.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following suggestions are made:

1. **Government Regulation:** The government should regulate the cost of private education in Nigeria to ensure that it is affordable for all.
2. **Scholarships and Financial Aid:** Private schools should offer scholarships and financial aid to students from low-income backgrounds to increase access to quality education.
3. **Flexible Schooling Options:** The government and private schools should provide flexible schooling options, such as part-time or online education, to cater to the needs of older students or those who have dropped out of school.

4. Adult Education Programs: The government should establish adult education programs to provide educational opportunities for older students who have dropped out of school.

5. Parental Education: Parents should be educated on the importance of enrolling their children in school at the right age and the benefits of completing primary and secondary education.

6. Improving Public Education: The government should improve the quality of public education in Nigeria to provide a viable alternative to private education. By implementing these suggestions, Nigeria can increase access to quality education, reduce the cost of private education, and improve educational outcomes for all students.

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