



## CLASS RELATIONS IN EDUCATIONAL DYNAMICS: A DIALECTICAL MATERIALIST INQUIRY INTO EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE WITHIN NIGERIA'S CAPITALIST FORMATION

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### ABSTRACT

*This dialectical materialist study examines class relations and internal contradictions in Nigeria's educational dynamics within its peripheral capitalist formation, analysing secondary evidence across three questions: dialectical stratification by class; material interactions reproducing antagonisms; and historical political-economic shaping of relations and future contradictions. Analysis of policy documents, national statistics, international reports, and scholarly studies (1960–2026) paints a picture that is chiefly defined by persistent paradoxes. Despite formal universalisation (UBE Act 2004), ≈10.5–18 million children remain out of school, with private schools growing 39% (2017–2022) while public provision stagnates, in the process deepening commodification. Almajiri exclusion (≈9.5 million children), graduate informalisation (e.g., commercial motorcycling) and post-2023 subsidy shocks are all factors that have accentuated class-mediated absenteeism and marginalisation. Historically, gains have repeatedly been repeatedly negated. The negated gains include, but are not limited to, post-independence expansion entrenched disparities; structural adjustment retrenched funding; neoliberal reforms marketised access; post-UBE enrolment rose amid quality decline; and the contemporary crisis (2016–2026)-induced acceleration of youth exclusion amid capitalist volatility. The study, grounded in Marxist reproduction theories and dependency perspectives, argues an important point: incremental, access-focused reforms are insufficient and highlights the need for equitable public investment, strengthened regulation of private provision, targeted household support, closer alignment between education and labour markets, and the integration of education policy with broader poverty reduction and social protection strategies.*

**Keywords:** Dialectical Materialism; Class Relations; Social Relation; Education, Capitalist Formation; and Historical Political Economy

### Introduction

Nigeria exemplifies the contradictions of postcolonial capitalist development in sub-Saharan Africa, where daily operations in society – both by individuals and by collective actors – stand at the confluence of a resource-dependent economy and a stratified system of education. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria's political economy has relied on petroleum as the main lubricant for its operations, integrating the country into global capitalism as a resource-dependent formation. When Nigeria received substantial accruals from the oil boom of the 1970s, there was a temporary expansion of state expenditure, including public education. However, the expansion was neither evenly distributed nor structurally transformative. When the country subsequently adopted the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986, it marked a decisive reorganisation of social relations, prioritising market liberalisation,



privatisation and fiscal austerity. according to Falola & Heaton (2008) and the World Bank (2023), these reforms reconfigured the role of the state, subordinated social provisioning to capital accumulation and intensified class differentiation within Nigerian society.

These material and class realities have been further accentuated by recent reforms in the political economy having chiefly to do with the removal of fuel subsidies in May 2023 and successive naira devaluations. These neo-liberal reforms acted as accelerants for inflationary pressures, generating rates that spiralled beyond 30% at peak periods between 2024 and 2025. The cost of food, transport and basic necessities have significantly increased on the back of these developments with the unfortunate result of heightened strain placed on the household reproduction process. With deteriorations in material conditions, poverty deepens and vulnerabilities widen, with multidimensional child poverty affecting a substantial proportion of Nigerian households (UNICEF, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025). These dynamics are not external shocks. They are expressions of the tensions inherent in a capitalist economy that is characterised by dependency, volatility and uneven development.

Education in contemporary Nigeria both reflects and reinforces these strained class relations. This it does in the most tangible ways. An estimated 10.5 million children of primary school age, for example, remain out of school. This is notwithstanding the nominal declaration that basic education is free (UNICEF, 2024). Broader estimates, however, place the total number across age groups between 18 and 20 million (UNICEF, 2024; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023). As indicated by empirical data, heightened fuel prices and resultant fare increases have contributed to higher absenteeism and dropout rates, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas where commuting distances compound economic pressures (Alanamu et al., 2025; Faruk, 2025).

In other instances of these contradictions, street hawking, a prevalent form of child labour driven by household poverty, directly competes with schooling. This forces children to prioritise immediate survival over education, thereby perpetuating cycles of marginalisation. Similarly, the almajiri system that affects millions predominantly in northern regions exemplifies structural exclusion, with children vulnerable to exploitation and denied secular education amid ongoing socioeconomic strains (Hoechner, 2025).

Public schools in low-income urban and rural areas often tell a story of severely overcrowded classrooms where pupil-teacher ratios exceed 1:100 in some states. These schools also feature dilapidated infrastructure, inadequate materials and frequent disruptions arising from teacher absences or industrial actions. Millions of other children who come from poorer households are quite often reported to engage in street hawking or participate in the almajiri system where young boys are sent away for Qur'anic education only to end up begging or labouring on streets rather than attending formal schools (UNICEF, 2024; World Bank, 2024). These factors create substantial obstacles to meaningful learning (Härmä & Moscoviz, 2025). In upscale areas of cities such as Lagos and Abuja, by contrast, children from wealthy families attend well-resourced private schools that feature modern infrastructure, small class sizes and advanced curricula positioning them for higher education and for access to professional opportunities (Obiakor, 2025).



Higher education in the country demonstrates parallel contradictions. Happily, long-standing disputes between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) reached a resolution in late 2025. This was achieved through a renegotiated agreement billed to take effect from January 2026 (Suleiman, 2025; Idoko, 2026). Sadly, however, prior disruptions in academic calendars arising from the disputes had delayed graduations, thereby diminishing educational quality. Underemployment is a persistent lot for graduates in an informal economy that has been burdened by inflation – an economy that offers limited formal opportunities as a result. Faced with this grim reality, graduates are compelled to resort to informal survival and precarious strategies such as commercial motorcycle (*okada*) riding and petty trading. This is a disjuncture of a nature akin to a contradiction between the expansion of educational certification and the limited capacity of Nigeria’s capitalist economy to generate corresponding opportunities for secure employment.

Public investment in education remains persistently low – as it averages approximately 6–7 per cent of the national budget in recent years – well below international benchmarks. Debt servicing obligations, fiscal constraints and competing priorities are all entrenched realities operating as significant constraints on social spending while initiatives such as the Universal Basic Education Act of 2004 have been unevenly implemented due to governance failures and resource disparities (World Bank, 2023; ICIR Nigeria, 2026). All these are patterns that underscore how policy interventions, while rhetorically oriented towards equity, operate within structural limits imposed by the broader political economy.

Collectively, these historical and routine realities demonstrate that education in Nigeria is far from a neutral institutional domain; rather, it operates as a social relation deeply intertwined with, and influenced by, the nation's capitalist framework. Access to education, its quality, and resulting outcomes are persistently shaped by material circumstances, state reforms, and class conflicts that have escalated amid recent economic challenges. However, a significant body of educational discourse continues to address access, quality and learning outcomes as largely technical or institutional problems quite often to the exclusion of recourse to the political-economic structures and class relations that generate and sustain them (World Bank, 2018; UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). This justifies the need for the current study which, grounded in secondary empirical evidence, is, therefore, well-positioned to examine these dynamics in order to clarify how historically constituted material conditions and class relations interact dialectically to shape educational processes and outcomes in Nigeria.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite sustained policy efforts to expand educational service delivery, education in Nigeria still reflects a deeply stratified system as persistent inequalities are evident across basic, secondary, and tertiary levels. Empirical indicators such as high out-of-school numbers, the rapid expansion of private schooling amid public sector decline, and widespread graduate underemployment demonstrate the reality of structural patterns that disproportionately disadvantage working-class households (UNICEF, 2024; Härmä & Moscoviz, 2025; National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Quite often, these outcomes are analysed as isolated educational or labour-market failures rather than as an outworking of historically constituted class relations within Nigeria’s capitalist formation. This tendency fundamentally renders the structural



mechanisms through which material conditions, state restructuring and market forces shape educational dynamics under-researched. Consequently, there are significant theoretical and empirical gaps prevalent in the understanding of education as a social relation implicated in the reproduction and contestation of class structures – hence the need for a systematic analysis grounded in secondary empirical evidence and informed by a dialectical materialist perspective to address the gaps.

### **Research Objectives**

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine empirical evidence on how class relations and their internal contradictions dialectically structure the stratification of education within Nigeria's capitalist formation.
2. To analyse how empirical indicators of material conditions interact dialectically with educational dynamics to reproduce and reinforce antagonisms in class relations in Nigeria's capitalist formation.
3. To investigate how historical patterns in Nigeria's political economy have shaped class relations in educational dynamics and identify the contradictions these patterns generate for the future of education.

### **Research Questions**

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What empirical evidence demonstrates that class relations and their internal contradictions dialectically structure the stratified operation of education within Nigeria's capitalist formation?
2. How do empirical indicators of material conditions dialectically interact with educational dynamics to reproduce and reinforce antagonisms in class relations within Nigeria's capitalist formation?
3. How have empirical patterns in Nigeria's historical political economy dialectically shaped class relations in educational dynamics, and what contradictions do they generate for Nigeria's educational future?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts dialectical materialism as its core philosophical orientation, viewing social reality as materially constituted and developing through the internal contradictions within processes and relations of production (Marx & Engels, 1848/1967; Engels, 1883/1972). Dialectics emphasises the unity and struggle of opposites where stability coexists with tendencies towards negation and transformation, generating pressures for qualitative shifts. Historical materialism extends this to society as it posits that the economic base comprising forces and relations of production fundamentally shapes social institutions, while the superstructure reacts upon the base in mediated ways. Social development unfolds through antagonistic relations inherent to modes of production, with capitalism marked by the contradiction between socialised production and private appropriation.

Education, under capitalist conditions, functions as a key superstructural force. Louis Althusser (1970/2014) theorises it as the primary Ideological State Apparatus, interpellating individuals



into subject positions that support dominant relations. Through ideological practices, schooling tends to reproduce dispositions and skills associated with the hierarchical outworking of class realities, while meritocratic narratives obscure exploitation. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976/2011) elaborate this via the correspondence principle in which school structures parallel capitalist workplace relations, cultivating attitudes suited to alienated labour and tending to reproduce unequal social relations. Antonio Gramsci (1971) introduces hegemony, whereby ruling classes secure consent through cultural leadership, with education playing a pivotal role.

In peripheral formations, dependency and uneven development mediate and often intensify contradictions between local accumulation and global subordination (Amin, 1974; Ake, 1981). This framework conceptualises social phenomena as dialectically structured: to be reproductive yet contradictory, stable yet harbouring transformative potentials.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Class Relations in Capitalist Societies***

Contemporary scholarship consistently demonstrates that class relations remain central to capitalist social organisation despite transformations in labour markets and production. Class is widely conceptualised as a relational position within systems of ownership, authority, and labour control rather than solely income stratification (Wright, 2015). Empirical evidence points to intensified polarisation, with wealth and asset concentration among dominant classes alongside growing precarity and insecurity among subordinate groups (Piketty & Goldhammer, 2020). Drawing on Palier & Thelen (2010) and Emmenegger et al. (2025), labour market dualisation has deepened since the global financial crisis. As a result, a division of secure insiders from precarious outsiders has ensued, reinforcing segmented life chances. Research shows that transnational and semi-peripheral class formations play a central role in linking global wealth accumulation with the exploitation of local labour (Roth, 2023). In many capitalist societies, opportunities for intergenerational mobility have stagnated or declined, as economic, social, and cultural resources continue to perpetuate inherited advantages (Jackson, 2013; World Inequality Lab, 2022). Together, these patterns reveal class as a dynamic, relational phenomenon – one that, despite its fluidity, consistently reinforces advantages tied to ownership and control.

### ***Educational Dynamics in Capitalist Societies***

Educational systems in capitalist societies exhibit persistent stratification in access, quality, and outcomes. Cross-national evidence demonstrates strong associations between socioeconomic background and educational attainment, even where formal equality is institutionalised (OECD, 2023). These disparities persist across educational stages and they shape differentials in transitions into labour markets. Market-oriented reforms have intensified educational inequality. Privatisation, cost-sharing and performance-based funding shift financial risk to households, disproportionately burdening lower-income groups (Verger et al., 2024). Higher education expansion has coincided with credential inflation, producing diminishing returns for many graduates amid increasingly polarised labour markets (Marginson, 2022; Brown et al., 2011). Empirical syntheses confirm that disadvantage continues to structure enrolment, completion, and learning outcomes despite equity-oriented policy interventions (Reay, 2017).



### ***Capitalist Formation and Its Variations***

Capitalist formation refers to historically specific configurations of accumulation, state regulation, labour regimes, and social reproduction. Comparative political economy demonstrates that capitalism assumes diverse institutional forms, and is therefore not a single model (Hall & Soskice, 2001). Highlighted in subsequent research are hybrid and financialised variants, particularly in peripheral and semi-peripheral contexts (Nölke & Vliegenthart, 2009; Bohle & Regan, 2021). Historical analyses link contemporary crises to enduring tendencies towards overaccumulation, financialisation and uneven development (Harvey, 2014). In postcolonial and dependent formations, the factors that intensify these dynamics are linked to external vulnerability and limited redistributive capacity, producing fragile welfare systems and segmented labour markets (Amin, 1974; Ake, 1981).

### ***Empirical Interrelations Among Class Relations, Educational Dynamics, and Capitalist Formation***

A substantial empirical literature documents reciprocal relationships among class structure, education and capitalist organisation. Class position strongly predicts educational access and returns, while capitalist restructuring shapes resource allocation and labour market absorption (Torche, 2023; Verger et al., 2024). Education expansion often generates contradictory outcomes in that increased participation coexists with qualitative differentiation and credential devaluation (Marginson, 2022; ILO, 2025). In peripheral contexts, global integration exacerbates these tensions, enabling elite capture of high-value educational pathways while limiting mobility for subordinate groups (Roth, 2023). Education thus functions as both a mechanism of allocation and a site of strain under changing material conditions, while registering strains from fiscal constraints and skill obsolescence.

### ***Gaps in the Broader Literature***

Despite extensive empirical documentation, there are significant gaps. While functionalist and human-capital frameworks predominate, they describe inequalities without structural links to capitalist accumulation (Reay, 2017). Analyses remain fragmented and lack longitudinal integration (McKenzie & Nölke, 2025). The co-existence of reproductive stability and contradiction is underexplored (Verger et al., 2024), while political-economy syntheses stay marginal (Novelli et al., 2021) – all of which are gaps addressed in the current study.

### ***Methodology***

This study employed a dialectical materialist paradigm, informed by critical sociology and African political economy perspectives, for the critical analysis of class relations and contradictions in educational dynamics within Nigeria's peripheral capitalist formation. Foregrounded in this approach are historical development, material conditions and structural antagonisms with a view to revealing education's dual role in empowerment and class reproduction (Sawchuk, 2020; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Ake, 1981; Amin, 1974).

A secondary data analysis technique, incorporating document analysis as a qualitative method, was employed for the synthesis of empirical evidence – an approach appropriate to macro-structural and historical inquiry, enabling broad engagement with patterns of stratification,



reproduction, and contradiction across periods (Bowen, 2009; Johnston, 2017). The corpus of documents encompassed a broad universe of empirical sources on education and class in Nigeria, including national statistics and governmental reports (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], Education Management Information Systems [EMIS], Federal Ministry of Education), international organisation reports (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, ILO, OECD), scholarly literature, and policy and historical documents such as the UBE Act (2004) and revisions of the National Policy on Education. Sources were systematically selected (primary focus: 2000–2026, with historical extensions) for empirical relevance credibility, and demonstrated links to material conditions shaped by post-1980s structural adjustment and neoliberal restructuring.

Data analysis relied on iterative thematic-structural mapping technique – cataloguing patterns in access, quality, funding, and outcomes – with historical-dialectical interpretation, organising evidence around core contradictions: unity of opposites (e.g. meritocratic claims versus class reproduction), negation of negation (post-independence educational expansion undermined by neoliberal retrenchment) and quantity-quality transformations (where cumulative economic crises precipitate qualitative exclusions). Triangulation across sources, systematic documentation and critical interrogation of institutional and ideological biases was carried out to ensure analytical rigour.

**Presentation and Discussion of Results**

**Research Question One:** What empirical evidence demonstrates that class relations and their internal contradictions dialectically structure the stratified operation of education within Nigeria’s capitalist formation?

**Table 1: Empirical evidence of class-structured stratification in Nigerian education (2000–2026)**

Source / Instrument	Policy	Year(s)	Key Assumptions	Empirically Observed Contradictions
Universal Education Act	Basic (UBE)	2004	Legal universalisation ensures equal access	Despite statutory provision, 10.5 million primary-age children remain out of school (UNICEF, 2024), with broader estimates of ≈18 million across age cohorts (World Bank, 2024), reflecting class-mediated exclusion driven by poverty, insecurity, and uneven sub-national funding
National Policy on Education (Revisions)		2004–2013	Formal access yields meritocratic outcomes	Expansion coincides with sharp quality differentiation, as middle- and upper-class households exit deteriorating public schools into fee-charging private provision
UNICEF Education Reports	Nigeria	2020–2025	Targeted interventions reduce exclusion	Persistent poverty and post-2023 inflationary pressures constrain participation among working-class households, sustaining absenteeism and dropout despite programme proliferation
Hoechner, (Almajiri system)	H.	2025	Cultural reforms integration resolve vulnerability	Empirical evidence indicates ≈9.5 million almajiri children, many experiencing chronic deprivation and exclusion from formal schooling, revealing material rather than cultural contradiction



Obiakor, T. (Low-cost private schools)	2025	Private expansion promotes access and choice	Number of private schools increased by ≈39% between 2017–2022, compared with ≈3–4% growth in public schools, deepening commodification and class-dependent quality
Graduate market (NBS-linked)	2024–2025	Credentials enable upward mobility	Degree holders increasingly absorbed into informal survival (e.g., commercial motorcycling), exposing contradiction between educational promise and capitalist labour absorption

**Sources:** Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004); Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004–2013); UNICEF Nigeria & Federal Government of Nigeria (2020–2025); Hoechner (2025); Obiakor (2025); National Bureau of Statistics (2024–2025 labour force data).

**Discussion:** Across policy and empirical sources, Nigerian education is formally universalised yet material stratification persists. Access, quality and post-school outcomes remain profoundly shaped by class position. There is a profound acceleration in longstanding contradictions between egalitarian policy discourse and capitalist reproduction of inequality by recent economic shocks

**Research Question Two:** How do empirical indicators of material conditions dialectically interact with educational dynamics to reproduce and reinforce antagonisms in class relations within Nigeria’s capitalist formation?

**Table 2: Material conditions and educational reproduction of class antagonisms (2018–2026)**

Empirical Source	Year(s)	Key Assumptions	Empirically Observed Contradictions
National Bureau of Statistics (Labour Force & Poverty Data)	2019–2024	Education improves employability	Rising graduate underemployment and informalisation persist despite credential expansion, undermining education’s mobility function
UNICEF / World Bank Poverty–Education Reports	2020–2025	Participation responds mainly to school supply	Household poverty, child labour, and street trading continue to constrain attendance, especially in northern and rural regions
Alanamu et al.; Faruk (Fuel subsidy removal)	2025	Economic shocks are temporary and correctable	Post-2023 fuel subsidy removal sharply increased transport and schooling costs, producing absenteeism and learning decline among working-class pupils
Hoechner, H. (Almajiri deprivation)	2025	Reformist integration mitigates vulnerability	High deprivation and nutritional stress displace schooling, reproducing surplus labour rather than educational inclusion
Private provision analyses	2024–2025	Market alternatives fill public gaps	Private schooling buffers middle-class households while intensifying exclusion for poorer families, reinforcing antagonistic class outcomes

**Sources:** National Bureau of Statistics (2019–2024); UNICEF Nigeria & Federal Government of Nigeria / World Bank (2020–2025); Alanamu et al. (2025); Faruk (2025); Hoechner (2025); Obiakor (2025) and related private education analyses.



**Discussion:** Educational participation for subordinate classes is dialectically negated by material conditions like inflation, transport costs and household poverty. Educational disadvantage then feeds back into labour-market marginalisation, reproducing class antagonisms rather than resolving them.

**Research Question Three:** How have empirical patterns in Nigeria’s historical political economy dialectically shaped class relations in educational dynamics, and what contradictions do they generate for Nigeria’s educational future?

**Table 3: Historical political economy and educational contradictions (1960–2026)**

Historical Phase	Period	Developmental Assumptions	Contradictions Generated	Key Empirical Sources
Post-independence expansion	1960s–1970s	Education drives nation-building and national integration	Expansion without productive transformation, entrenching regional and class inequalities in access and outcomes	Ake (1981); Amin (1974); Falola & Heaton (2008)
Structural Adjustment Programme	Mid-1980s	Market discipline improves efficiency and fiscal sustainability	Public retrenchment reduced education funding, shifted costs to households, and widened class-based exclusion	Ake (1981); Amin (1974); World Bank (2018); Wright (2015)
Neoliberal reforms	1990s–2000s	Private provision compensates for state withdrawal	Marketisation expanded access unevenly, tying quality to ability to pay and deepening stratification	Härmä & Moscoviz (2025); Obiakor (2025); OECD (2023); World Bank (2023)
Post-UBE expansion	2004–2015	Legal universalisation ensures equity	Enrolment gains accompanied by declining quality, overcrowding, and persistent out-of-school populations	Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004); UNICEF (2024, 2025); World Bank (2023)
Contemporary crisis period	2016–2026	Reform and competitiveness ensure inclusion	Rising out-of-school numbers (10.5–18m), persistent almajiri exclusion, graduate informalisation, and post-2023 subsidy shocks intensify youth marginalisation	Alanamu et al. (2025); Faruk (2025); Hoechner (2025); UNICEF (2024, 2025); World Bank (2023); ICIR Nigeria (2026); Idoko (2026)

**Sources:** Ake (1981); Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004); Hoechner (2025); NBS (2024); Ricart-Huguet (2022); UNESCO (2015); UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2023); UNICEF (2024–2025); World Bank (1988, 2018).

**Discussion:** Educational gains are repeatedly negated by Nigeria’s political economy through capitalist crises and market restructuring. Without structural transformation, current trends



point towards credential inflation, deepened exclusion and an acceleration of contradictions in class relations with particular reference to education.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings demonstrate that Nigeria's education system is deeply paradoxical. While policies proclaim universal access, a different story is told by participation, quality and outcomes as they remain structured by class relations, regional disparities and economic volatility. Historical and contemporary disruptions ranging from colonial legacies and structural adjustment retrenchment to private sector expansion and post-2023 subsidy shocks demonstrate how enrolment gains are repeatedly undermined by material constraints, reinforcing inequalities rather than alleviating them. Education is thus contradictory in the performance of its role. This is evident in the fact that education raises aspirations of mobility while simultaneously reproducing disadvantage, particularly for working-class and northern communities. Incremental reforms fail to address the underlying capitalist imperatives that fuel public neglect and private commodification. The need for meaningful equity directs that the following recommendations be implemented to address resource distribution, market pressures and household vulnerabilities:

1. Federal and State Governments should increase equitable public investment in infrastructure, teaching and learning materials with priority accorded to disadvantaged regions.
2. Federal and State Governments should also deepen implementation of targeted support programmes like school feeding, transport subsidies and conditional cash transfers. This would reduce household barriers to meaningful education.
3. National and state regulatory bodies should scale up regulatory oversight for private schooling. This would ensure quality standards and reduce class-based variations.
4. Ministry of Education and employers' associations should always operate in close collaboration to align curriculum and training with labour market needs to enhance the prospects of employment for graduates.
5. Federal Government and Social Protection Agencies should integrate long-term poverty reduction and social protection strategies with educational planning to address structural inequalities.



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