



'We are not concerned about good grades': elite Nigerian parents' consumption of high-quality education as a form distinction

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ABSTRACT

Based on a qualitative study of the motivating factors behind the consumption of international schooling by elite Nigerian parents, this article explores what a group of elite parents perceived as the indicators of high-quality education. The findings suggest that these parents did not consider 'good grades' as an indicator of high-quality education. Instead, the nationality and race of teachers, and whether a school uses British or Nigerian pedagogy, were perceived as the distinguishing features of high-quality education. Framed within the sociology of education and the sociology of consumption, this paper suggests that these parents' constructions and consumption of international schooling are distinction strategies that enable them to reinforce inter- and intra-class boundaries. The analysis also reveals a paradox, whereby in attempting to affirm their status as the authentic elites, the parents are complicit in perpetuating the hegemonic discourse of 'British is best', even in post-colonial Nigeria.

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Introduction

Sociological research suggests that elite international schools often function as 'status seminaries' through which those with dominant cultural and economic capital reproduce their high social status (Bourdieu, 1984; Bunnell, 2022; Kenway & Koh, 2013). But how meaningful is international schooling to elites in African contexts like Nigeria? Whilst sociological and educational research indicate that elite and middle-class parents across national boundaries choose schools based on the schools' perceived quality, scholarly literature, both in Nigeria and elsewhere, on elite parents' understanding of what constitutes quality is limited (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016; Kenway & McCarthy, 2017). This piece addresses the aforementioned

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limitation by exploring what a group of elite Nigerian parents perceived as the indicators of high-quality education.

Building on previous scholarship (Kenway & McCarthy, 2017; Wright et al., 2022), this article frames elite international schools as positional goods¹ integral to the struggle over symbolic legitimation and social status in contemporary Nigeria. By critically interrogating elite parents' perceptions of quality education, this piece highlights the ways in which social hierarchy is communicated and maintained. Elites are defined in this paper as 'social groups that have attained a degree of financial affluence and who are able to mobilize economic, social and cultural resources in order to secure access to particular kinds of education experiences' (Howard & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010, p. 196). The Nigerian context offers insights into how contemporary African elites whose class identities are often tied to British schooling are maintaining the status quo in a context where class 'reproduction is never guaranteed and mobility, up or down, is always possible' (Savage, 2000, p. 69).

We contend that for Nigerian elites, enrolment in elite international schools is a strategic consumption practice, the benefits of which exceed good grades, and include proximity to white British people and cultural practices, all of which prove useful for drawing distinctions between social classes among Black Nigerians (Ayling, 2019). Before exploring the empirical evidence, the piece first considers the colonial context out of which perceptions of British schooling as 'high-quality' education emerge. We then offer an overview of the literature on the consumption of education as a symbolic good by elites for the purpose of class distinction. Before discussing the empirical results, we outline the research design and data analysis strategies. The empirical analysis suggests that elite Nigerian parents were not principally concerned with good grades but pursued elite international schooling to access British people, their cultural mores and modes of learning to distinguish their children from other Nigerians. At its core, this paper points out how elite Nigerian parents' descriptions of 'high-quality' education are the discursive means through which class positions are legitimated and class boundaries are reproduced in contemporary Nigeria.

The colonial context

To date, sociological studies that focus on education as a practice of elite consumption seldom examine the influence of colonialism in structuring modern educational systems and shaping school choice within them (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016). And to the extent that they do, such works are shaped by a presentist orientation, ignoring the ongoing influence of inequalities fomented through colonialism and ongoing imperialism in the global South – especially in African contexts. We seek to address this analytical limitation in this piece through a brief examination of British

schooling in Nigeria, along with the logics and practices of educational inequality they sustain. Critically, we explore history to challenge myopic views that result in blaming Africans and other historically marginalised groups for their educational choices and consumption patterns, all while ignoring the educational legacies of the British empire that sustain racialized class inequalities today (Strong et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2023; Wallace, 2023).

Although the history of education in Nigeria and other parts of Africa is typically represented as a post-independence development, it bears noting, and emphasizing, that education in Africa generally, and schooling within it specifically, precedes European colonialism (Imam, 2012). Furthermore, unequal access to education, along with class inequalities in Nigeria, pre-date colonisation, as the children (primarily the sons) of cultural and economic elites were often prioritized over those with less social and economic capital for learning and leadership in society (Fafunwa & Aisiku, 2022). The historical record suggests, however, that European colonization grossly exacerbated these inequalities, deepening class and gender divides among Africans, disrupting indigenous pedagogical practices and splintering collectivist visions of learning and social progress (Ekeh, 1975).

To be clear, the introduction of British-style schooling in Africa was not a matter of colonial benevolence. According to Windel (2009), even before mass schooling was formalized as an instrument of the colonial state in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, British colonists developed elite schools for their children to maintain distinctions between white British labourers, administrators, missionaries, and ‘investors’. In essence, elite schooling functioned as a distinction practice even among white Britons in Africa. Between 1835 and 1960, for instance, a subset of Africans was permitted enrolment in elite schools, depending on the political ranking of their families and the roles they could play in maintaining the British colonial regime (Fafunwa & Aisiku, 2022). Boarding schools were developed in Nigeria to replicate models of elite schooling in Britain, reserved for the *crème de la crème* of Nigeria society. At the turn of the 20th century, colonists supported the education of promising young Africans, many of whom attended elite international boarding schools based on promise, merit or wealth, and eventually pursued education at elite universities in Britain as prospective leaders in the colonial administration and local industries (Ekeh, 1975).

While only a few Africans gained access to elite schools in Nigeria and Britain, their educational pursuits and eventual leadership contributed to the elevation of British schooling as not only effective for social mobility, but even better than indigenous African models of teaching and learning (Basse, 1999). This colonial mindset, marked by a preference for Britishness, was strategically and systematically inculcated through

British-style schools in Nigeria. Primary and secondary school curricula exalted British history and cultural mores as superior to African ones (Windel, 2009). Additionally, the nature of elite and ‘top’ schooling in Nigeria, with white Headmasters, white British missionary teachers and African support staff inculcated in the minds of Nigerian parents and their children a relationship between Britishness and educational excellence – Nigerian-ness and educational disadvantage (Ayling, 2019). The quest for economic advancement and cultural recognition in a colonised nation, where British schooling, tastes and expressions functioned as symbols of power and prestige, fostered widespread ideological investment in Britishness and British schooling – not only in Nigeria, but throughout the world (Kenway & Koh, 2013). It is the institutional processes of British colonial schooling that reproduced ideological investments in elite British schooling as a preferred consumable good for social, economic and political advancement. That perspectives of British schooling as a marker of ‘quality education’ persist today is a reflection of the educational legacies of empire (Wallace, 2023).

Although a bevy of contemporary scholarly and policy research highlights the challenges and constraints of education in Nigeria (Kolade, 2019; Okunlola & Hendricks, 2022), the total number of pupils in primary schools increased from 626,000 in 1960 to 2,912,619 in 1974 (Aigbokhan et al., 2007), with the most recent report showing that in 2018, approximately 27.9 million children were enrolled in primary schools across Nigeria (Adeyeye, 2020; Sasu, 2022). And yet, owing to resource constraints, government-run schools are often not the only sites for the educational provision of Nigerian children and young people. Over 50% of schools in Nigeria are private/fee-paying schools (Crawford et al., 2023), with a large number of these schools describing themselves as ‘international’ schools (Ayling, 2016). The abundance of private schools in Nigeria has in turn heightened the search for ‘high-quality’ education among elite parents for whom school choice is one of the ways they signal and reproduce their elite social status (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2003).

The sociology of elite education

In his wide-ranging account, *The State of Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power* (1996), French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu examines how elite schools groom the future state nobility. In particular, Bourdieu (1996) highlights the work of consecration elite schools perform that aid in the reproduction of power, privilege and prestige. Scholarship exploring class reproduction highlights how and why participation in elite schools is a highly effective distinction and exclusionary strategy, sustaining hierarchies between *and* within social

classes. Studies in the sociology of education in France, the United States, Britain, and Singapore, for example, reveal that the consumption of international schooling allows elite parents, pupils and their teachers to express both their high-brow tastes, and knowledge of what constitutes high-quality education (Kenway & Koh, 2013).

But determinations of quality are typically based on subjective appraisals. And as such, the meaning of ‘high quality’ varies from one individual to another, and from one society to another (Sifuna, 2016). While there is no consensus on the definition of a high-quality school (Erickson, 2017), studies on parental school choice have shown that parents’ social class (Bathmaker et al., 2013) and racial backgrounds (Ayling, 2015; Freidus, 2022; Wallace, 2019, 2018) are two significant factors that influence parents’ perceptions of what constitutes high-quality schools (Wright et al., 2022). The literature on parents’ school choice suggests that working class and middle-class parents tend to view academic performance as one of the key indicators of quality school (Ellison & Aloe, 2019; Hailey, 2022; Lobato et al., 2018). However, in her systematic review of literature on private school choice programs, Erickson (2017) found that low-income parents often based their school choice on proximity, convenience and teacher-student relationships. For middle-class parents, the indicators include location (Ellison & Aloe, 2019), school fees (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2003) and the racial/ethnic composition of the school (Hailey, 2022). Analysing key stakeholders’ views on the relationship between demographics and school quality, Freidus (2022) points out that perceptions about quality school are racialised, with whiteness and proximity to whiteness frequently used as proxies for school quality. Freidus (2022) argues that the discourses of diversity tended to pathologize Black schools whereby the quality of these schools, and access to funding and resources, are predicated on the enrolment of white students, even if they make up a small fraction of the school population.

While recent international research on elite primary, secondary and tertiary education raise important questions about high-quality elite education from the perspectives of students and stakeholders (Bunnell, 2022; Chiang, 2022; Kenway & Koh, 2019), scholarship on parents’ perceptions of high-quality schools highlights at least three core points. First, private education is a positional good used by elites in the global North and the global South to preserve their social positions and maintain social closure (Wright et al., 2022). Second, the discourse of quality school is racialised – where whiteness is associated with ‘high-quality’ (Ayling, 2019; Hailey, 2022; Wallace, 2023). Third, there is a dearth of research on what elite parents, particularly those in the global South, perceive as indicators of quality in education. This paper addresses the latter.

Consumption of elite education as an act of distinction

The consumption of elite education is a central practice of distinction. Bourdieu (1985, p. 730) argues:

All consumption and, more generally, all practice, is ‘conspicuous,’ visible, whether or not, it is performed in order to be seen; it is distinctive, whether or not it springs from the intention of being ‘conspicuous,’ standing out, of distinguishing oneself or behaving with distinction. As such, it inevitably functions as a distinctive sign and, when the difference is recognized, legitimated and approved, as a sign of distinction (in all senses of the phrase).

Relatedly, Bourdieu (1984) suggests that the employment of goods and services for the purpose of distinction and maintaining status becomes crucial as one ascends the social ladder. He maintains that for those at the top of the social ladder, consumption decisions are about the ‘stylisation of life’ (Weber as cited in Bourdieu, 1985, p. 750), which Bourdieu described as the ‘primacy of forms over function, of manner over matter’ (p. 5). Bourdieu suggests that in the field of education where economic constraints force the working classes to concern themselves with the more pragmatic, functional aspects of education, such as academic competency, the elites are free from such practicalities, due to having large volumes of economic, social and cultural capital. Elite parents are often more concerned with issues such as the type of school – boarding or day school, private or public/grammar school, mixed or single sex, ethnically diverse or not, etc.

Scholarship on elite education suggests that the consumption of private international schooling is mostly linked to fulfilling social rather than pragmatic or utilitarian functions (Kenway & Koh, 2019). For instance, studies of elite private schools in the UK and around the world show that parents’ decisions to consume private schools relate ‘specifically to the perceived or aspirant social status and to the individual consumer’s preservation of self-image and status’ (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2003, p. 196). Chiang (2022), Bunnell (2022), and Kenway and Koh (2019) note that one of the main attractions of elite private schools is their high fees because some individuals buy ‘a product or service simply because it is more expensive than the alternatives, and not because of any necessary objective measure of quality’ (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2003, p. 197). Behind this way of thinking is the idea that by consuming this exclusive education, elite parents occupy enviable and prestigious position of power.

But the consumption of international schooling by elite racially minoritized groups is shaped by a cultural paradox; what constitutes ‘high-quality’ schools, even in a predominantly Black nation like Nigeria, is often associated with Westernness and whiteness. Scores of sociological studies suggest that Westernness and whiteness are used as symbols of high quality in the West (Reay et al., 2007) – including in former British and French

colonies in the global South (Fanon, 1967/2008). The results of this research echo these findings and reveal how whiteness is a salient factor in the construction of elite private schools in Nigeria (Ayling, 2019). Similarly, literature on consumers' perceptions of high-quality products has shown that associations with Westernness or foreignness can add value to many kinds of commodities and services in developing countries (Classen & Howes, 1996, p. 188). For example, Okpara and Anyanwu (2011) argue that in Nigeria, the perceived 'foreignness' of a product is one of the main attractions to the consumption of goods even when these products are of a lower quality when compared to Nigerian products. In what follows, we outline the methods and data analysis procedures used in this study to illuminate elite parents' perceptions of Britishness and whiteness as symbols of high-quality education in Nigeria.

Research design

The research reported in this paper is part of a larger study that investigated elite Nigerian parents' school choices (Ayling, 2019). The research was carried out in Lagos (South), Abuja (North) and Port-Harcourt (East) in Nigeria, as well as in London, England. Research participants were recruited using a snowballing sampling approach. Parents were selected on the basis that they: (1) self-identified as Nigerian; (2) had primary and/or secondary-aged children in schools overseas; (3) their children were attending private boarding schools in the country of their choice; and (4) Nigeria was the parents' primary residence. Once prospective parents met the aforementioned criteria, questionnaires were used to collect demographic information such as parental age, ethnicity, religion, educational qualifications, job title, number of children, and related information. After questionnaires were completed, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to explore parents' educational backgrounds, their children's educational histories, the type of school parents went to in Nigeria and their experiences there, the nature of their decision to send their children overseas, and the factors that influenced their choice of country and school for their children's education overseas.

A total of 39 participants were recruited for the study. The participants consisted of 26 parents and 13 institutional gatekeepers. The parents included 11 fathers, four of whom sent their children to schools in Canada, and 15 mothers, one of whom sent her daughter to a private boarding school in Ghana. Whilst most of the elite parents in this study were Yorubas, this does not necessarily mean that the majority of Nigerian elites are Yorubas. Instead, the fact that most of the parent participants were recruited in Lagos, one of the states of the Yoruba indigenes, might explain the high number. Other unavoidable variations in the sample included age,

profession, educational background, number of children schooling overseas etc. The 13 gatekeepers interviewed included education agents and consultants, headteachers, Heads of department, and the Head of visa section of British High Commission in Lagos. All the headteachers and teachers interviewed for the research were white British. Variations in the sample added nuance and depth to the analysis.

At the time of fieldwork, between 2013 and 2014, the fathers who sent their children to Britain were either directors or CEOs of major organisations or owned their own companies. Of the 14 mothers who sent their children to private boarding schools in Britain, two held political appointments at federal and state government levels, while the rest either ran their own medium-sized businesses and/or were married to top business executives. The four fathers who sent their children to Canada held middle-management positions, while the mother whose daughter attended a private international school in Ghana was a low-ranked civil servant. In all discussions of these parents and their perceptions of high-quality education, pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

The analysis in this paper is based only on interviews with elite Nigerian parents. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and carefully analysed to ensure an accurate and comprehensive understanding of parents' perspectives. During the process of data analysis, four major themes emerged: perceptions of 'quality' education; risk and risk management strategies; parents' post-secondary aspirations; and 'selling' a world-class education. These themes were relevant to all the interviews conducted with participants, and are therefore representative of entire sample.

For a more fine-grained analysis of the themes, Kvale's (1996) interpretation model – namely the contexts of interpretation and communities of validation approach – was deployed as part of the data analysis process. Starting with participants' self-understanding, that is, 'what the subjects themselves understand to be the meanings of their statements' (Kvale, 1996, p. 214) ensured 'that the interpretation was inspired by, and arose from, participant's words, rather than being imported from outside' (Smith et al., 2009:90). Consequently, participants' words, in the form of interview excerpts, are woven into the analysis showcased below. The second stage of interpretation, which is the critical common-sense understanding, moved beyond the participants' interpretations to focus on the 'person making it' (Kvale, 1996, p. 215). Here, gender, socio-economic background, as well as the historical context in which the participants are located were used to produce a deeper understanding of the topic.

In the final stage of the data analysis, themes were critically analysed based on theoretical frameworks. Bourdieu's conceptualization of distinction served as a powerful guide for assessing the data, even as the empirical data enabled a critical assessment of Bourdieu's theory. This allowed for

inductive and deductive analyses, which added richness and depth to understandings of elite Nigerian parents' pursuit of elite international schooling for their children as an act of distinction. While the data set analysed in this paper were collated about 10 years ago, it is worth noting that the analysis of these data sets continues to make significant contribute to our understanding of the influence of colonisation, and particularly the role that international private (British) schools play in shaping 'the rules of the game' that govern entry into the elite social class in post-colonial societies in Africa. The latter has received very little attention within the field of elite education.

'We are not concerned about good grades'

In contrast to the popular discourses of high-quality education, which is often conceptualised within educational policy and political discourses in Nigeria as high academic performance (Unagha, 2008), data from this study suggest that the elite Nigerian parents did not consider 'good grades' or academic competencies as key indicators of quality education. The significance of this finding is not so much that it refutes the public discourse of quality education, but how it reveals the subtle means through which elites communicate their class position and mark class boundaries even among Black Nigerians. Mr. Bala's perspectives noted below typifies elite parents' view on academic competencies as not being a measure of quality education.

Quality starts from character, dressing, everything. I mean being somebody, not just grades. Good grades are good but being a good human being is better [...]. So quality [education] is not about having good grades but also about a good human being.

Affirming and complicating Mr. Bala's views, other parents suggest that:

for me, excellent education is all-encompassing. It is everything you can think of, but in Nigeria and other African countries the focus is usually on passing exams and not on anything else. Bear in mind that even that is manipulated here, so you're not even sure if the grades are truly a reflection of the child's ability. (Mrs. Bawa)

Top-quality education is the goal. By that I mean holistic education that will give my child everything, both good morals and excellent manners, not just good exam results. I'm not talking about passing exams when I talk about quality education. You can get that in most private schools here in Nigeria. (Mrs. Amechi)

Mr. Akpan, who had two children enrolled in private boarding school in Britain, also explained why having good grades is insufficient for ensuring success in schools and society:

your child can get top grades in most schools in Nigeria if you have the money (laughs), so I don't use exam results to determine quality education in Nigeria because, as you know, our system is flawed. I didn't decide to send my children to the UK because I wanted them to get high grades because for me that is one thing they

will get anyways. My main priority for sending them to the UK is so that they can get certificates that will set them apart from those that have schooled here

At the time of fieldwork, between 2013 and 2014, elite parents paid between £24,000 and £32,000 per annum to educate their children in UK-based private boarding schools (23,520,000–31,360,000 million naira at the current exchange rate), and approximately 1,000,000–2,000,000 million naira (at the time of fieldwork) per term in school fees for British private schools in Nigeria. Mrs. Bridge who had four of her children in private boarding schools in Britain, explained that she spends ‘around 100 thousand pounds in a year’ in school fees. The high cost of educating their children at home and abroad raises important questions about why these parents were ambivalent about ‘good grades,’ which some might see as the best indicator of high-quality education (Aladegbola & Jaiyeola, 2016).

‘Good grades’ were not considered a key sign of quality education by these elite parents because they fall into the category of schooling that Barthes (1996, p. 11 as cited in Allatt, 1996, p. 173) might describe as ‘what goes without saying.’ In other words, for Nigerian elites, good grades are the taken-for-granted aspect of schooling, precisely because it is one of the technical functions of schooling – a basic outcome these parents expect their children will acquire from being privately educated. And just as parents like Mrs. Bawa and Mr. Akpan suggested, good grades can be bought or influenced by elite parents. Perhaps most crucially, good grades are no longer an exclusive attribute of the elite, which may also explain why these parents are apathetic about grades. As Bourdieu (1984) argues, the privileged classes ‘cannot identify their distinction with properties, practices or “virtues” which no longer have to be claimed or which, because they have become commonplace and lost their distinctive value, no longer can be claimed’ (p. 247). While economic constraints force working-class families to concern themselves mainly with the more pragmatic, functional aspects of education, elite parents with large volumes of economic capital are free from such practicalities. Therefore, this apparent disinterest in good grades had enabled these elite parents to demonstrate a life of ease, influence and affluence – beyond ‘good grades’ (Bourdieu, 1984).

White British Teachers as ‘Experts’

Who else could possibly do a better job [in education] than the British? (Mrs. Gbenga)

Race, and whiteness more specifically, permeates the elite parents’ narratives of high-quality education. Indeed, data from parent interviews show that white British teachers are often characterised as ‘well qualified’, ‘excellent’ and ‘high-calibre’, while Black Nigerian teachers are described as ‘uncommitted’ and ‘unknowledgeable’, which indicates the ways in which race is implicated in the discourse of quality education in contemporary Nigeria.

The majority of the parent-participants were educated in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when, as most of the parents were keen to explain, primary and secondary schools were owned and/or managed by British missionaries. These parents believed that they received a high-quality education. More importantly, these parents attributed their acquisition of high-quality education to the ‘presence’ of white British teachers in these schools at the time. Indeed, most parent-participants were keen to stress that they were taught by white British teachers. Consider, for instance, the extract below from an interview with Mr. Abdu:

You see, when I was growing up, I passed through a lot of British teachers in my secondary [school] and part of university. My teachers, I’m talking about British teachers, they shaped my character and my values. I have also believed a Briton is an independent-minded person. He has family values. He detests criminality. He is a cultured person (Mr. Abdu)

The views Mr. Abdu shared were emblematic of the perspectives of other participants like Mrs. Bridge. In describing her own early educational experiences in Nigeria, Mrs. Bridge remarked that though ‘the educational structures [at the time] were not much,’ the education that she had received ‘was of very high standard because of the British.’ Other parents such as Mr. Bala, a Muslim father with two sons in a UK-based private boarding school, described the state school that he attended in Nigeria as ‘top class’. In underscoring the high-quality of state schools in colonial and early post-colonial Nigeria, heavily influenced by the British, Mr. Bala went on to explain that those who attended private schools during these periods were ‘drop-outs’ who could not gain entry into state schools. This point was reinforced by another parent, Mrs. Chuka, who claimed that state schools in Nigeria were ‘comparable to those in the UK’ in the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps, by way of proof, parents like Mr. Okon, a successful businessman, attributed their current socio-economic position to their early education. He stated:

Most of the children that came out from there [Nigerian secondary school], they are actually doing very well in their different fields, very well. Most of them are senior military officers. Most of them have ruled, most of them have governed. (Mr. Okon)

Postcolonial studies have documented that Western education was a key mechanism for social mobility and the exclusive source for the acquisition of elite identity in colonial and early postcolonial Nigeria (Basse, 1999). Nonetheless, research suggests that the quality of education during these periods was arguably of a low standard (Fafunwa, 2018). Csapo (1983) goes as far as to claim that Western education in colonial and early postcolonial Nigeria ‘provided dysfunctional and useless knowledge’ (p. 92). Rather, it was the rarity of Western education during the colonial era, which made it a

highly valuable currency within the job market, and subsequently ‘opened doors to positions of authority’ (Csapo, 1983, p. 92). Considering this observation, it can be argued that the elite parents interviewed did not acquire their current socially and economically advantageous positions because they had received high-quality education during their youth, but rather because of the scarce value of education during these periods. Still, perhaps because of their own encounter with British colonists or perhaps because it was the British missionaries who had introduced Western education into Nigeria (Fafunwa, 2018), or a combination of both factors, the perceived superiority of British teachers is also reflected in these parents’ school choice in Nigeria.

Participants like Mrs. Bawa, Mrs. Adu and Mrs. Gbenga outlined the value of having British teachers as opposed to Nigerian teachers:

We believe the British teachers are more committed to their work than Nigerian teachers. An English teacher is committed, but for Nigerian teachers it is vice visa [...]. (Mrs. Bawa)

The British teachers are very well qualified, and their mentality is different from [...] Nigerian teachers. (Mrs. Adu)

It was run by the British, so it is good. Unfortunately, some of their teachers are Nigerians [...] You know how we Nigerians are. We are just not good [...] But thank God the school has some excellent British teachers, so I was not worried at all when my children were there because I know that they [British teachers] know what they are doing. (Mrs. Gbenga)

Mrs. Adu and Mrs. Gbenga constructed British teachers as the embodiment of high-quality education. They are not only ‘very well qualified’, but also possessed the ‘mentality’ that – in the eyes of these parents – make up an ‘excellent’ teacher. Conversely, in discussion with elite parents, Nigerian teachers are constructed as the antithesis of the British teachers. Not only are they not as well qualified as their British counterparts, but they also did not possess the right attitude or skills for the job. Mrs. Bawa’s comment below further demonstrates parents’ low expectations and view of Nigerian teachers:

I’m sorry to say, to Nigerians, Nigerians we are poor managers. We are very, very, em, we’ve got this attitude of not really caring of the consequences [...] I tell you what, if, for example, this school was being managed by Nigerians, I tell you it would have gone down the drain; honestly it would have gone down the drain. The level of commitment would not be there. But it’s better with the British.

Here, we see how Nigerian teachers are positioned as inferior to their white British counterparts. British teachers, on the other hand, are considered excellent teachers *and* excellent managers. British teachers in effect are constructed as a unique guild of teachers in a league of their own, relative

to Nigerian teachers. Mrs Gbenga's comment – 'after all, that was where education originated from' – showed that Britain's role in introducing formal education into precolonial Nigeria is a factor that has influenced these parents' perceptions of British teachers.

Thus far, we can see how the perceived superiority of British teachers comes from the idea that formal education is essentially a Western product, or more specifically a British product. Construed this way, it makes sense (to these parent-participants, at least) to perceive British teachers as the experts in education. Indeed, the misrepresentation of Britain as the original source of Western education in Nigeria helps in understanding why these parents were keen to make a distinction between real British teachers and other white teachers. Consider, too, Mr. Odili's perspective:

What I like about the British school [in Nigeria] is that they have real British teachers as opposed to white South Africans or Indians, which is what you will find in most of these second-rate international schools.

Indicated in the quote above is the idea that it is not necessarily the skin colour of the teacher that makes one an excellent teacher, but the country of origin from whence a teacher comes. Elite Nigerian parents' desire to make distinctions between real British teachers (which was often how they also tried to differentiate black British teachers from white British teachers) and white South Africa teachers, hints at how the perceived superiority of white British teachers is motivated by ideas around cultural authenticity and originality, rather than race per se. Still, authenticity is not a value-free word; instead, it is 'a form of cultural [class] discrimination projected onto objects' (Spooner, 1986, p. 226). Spooner (1986) asserts that authenticity does not reside in the 'object/product itself but in the relationship between the goods and the consumer' (p.226 my emphasis). In other words, whether or not a product is 'authentic' is dependent on how it is perceived by the consumers and society at large. Also, given that private schools are by and large positional goods, one might argue that constructing British teachers, and by association, British private international schools, as authentic and of high quality is less about the product itself and more about these parents' attempt to communicate their social status as elites.

Citing Bourdieu (1984), Lamont and Molnar (2002, p. 172) posit that the 'dominant groups generally succeed in legitimising their own culture and ways as superior to those of the lower classes, through oppositions.' In this case, constructing the white British teachers and/or British private schools as authentic or effective automatically positions schools using the Nigeria curriculum and the Nigerian educators teaching it as inauthentic or ineffective – if only by the standards of these elite parents. As Lamont and Molnar (2002, p. 172) note, such 'symbolic classification is key to the reproduction of class privileges' precisely because elite status and privilege can only exist

in relationship to non-elite status and the lack of privilege. Evidently, the disparaging remarks about Nigerian teachers speak to the broader notion of internalised racism, arguably inculcated through colonial schooling, whereby one devalues one's racial kind in order to gain power and status (Ayling, 2015).

Oyinbo man's pedagogy

The empirical evidence indicates that elite Nigerian parents also made judgements about school quality based on the type of pedagogical approach it adopted. During interviews, elite parents made several references to the Nigerian 'style of teaching' and the 'Oyinbo man's way' (a colloquial phrase used to describe white persons actions). The parents overwhelmingly considered the Oyinbo man's pedagogy to be infinitely superior to Nigerian pedagogy. Parents described the Nigerian pedagogy as consisting of learning by rote memorization, with a specific focus on 'cramming' and regurgitating facts, while the Oyinbo man's pedagogy was conceived of as an investigatory approach to learning, whereby children are taught to seek out knowledge for themselves. As Mrs. Ola explained:

In our country you are being made to read and reproduce what you are taught. But here [the UK] you are being made to learn to understand, to give what you understand not to reproduce what you have been given.

Mr Akpan also expressed his concern about the process of teaching and learning in Nigeria:

the curriculum is not the problem here or getting top marks, but how do you interpret the curriculum. How equipped are you to be able to translate this curriculum and teach the curriculum the way it is designed to be taught. Not the kind of rote teaching which is how we teach in Nigeria.

While Nigerian pedagogy was perceived as having a singular purpose of memorising facts, Oyinbo man pedagogy was considered as having multiple purposes. These included increasing children's IQ by 'making them think for themselves,' according to Mrs. Chuka, which in turn enabled children to 'think above others here [Nigeria],' as Mr. Oye explained. The Oyinbo man's pedagogy was also perceived as building good character and morals. Mrs. Bridge's detailed description of her daughter who attended a British private boarding school in the UK at the time of the fieldwork is illustrative of the latter point:

Issues of integrity are familiar and commonplace in the UK. [...]. See, let me give you an example: if my child tells you, you are meeting at nine o'clock, you can be sure you'll set your time [to] nine o'clock, which is not very common with the others here [Nigeria], believe me. I have children who passed through the same system I passed

through, lots of them are not that way. Lots of them don't act or behave that way, but the ones I have [...] in the UK ..., they have lots of integrity and honesty and I think that the British culture, their way of teaching, fosters this behaviour.

By claiming that virtues such as 'honesty' and integrity' could best be learned from British schools (where children are taught using the Oyinbo man's pedagogy), these parents have effectively racialised and classed morality, with the British constructed as the patentholders for what is 'good'. Second, with an average cost of around £16,000 per annum for day students and £39,000 per annum for boarding (Rise in UK Private School Fees for 2023 (whichschooladvisor.com)), it is clear that only very rich Nigerian parents can afford to send their children to these moral enclaves. Therefore, to some elites, morality has also become the principal property of the Nigerian elite classes. Indeed, as Mrs. Bridge herself commented, those who have attended Nigerian schools are 'not that way,' and are arguably less moral. So, as well as lacking in intellect, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are also constructed by these elite parents as limited in morals. This pathologisation of the Black working classes and the poor underscores the fact that 'moral stigma is frequently attached to those who are worst-off in class terms, while moral [and intellectual] superiority is attached to higher classes' (Reay et al., 2007, p. 1049).

Through their constructions of high-quality education, elite Nigerian parents consistently invoked a logic of difference in their veiled attempts to highlight their social status as authentic elites (Bourdieu, 1984). The 'logic of difference', real or imagined, is invoked, and amplified to construct and (dis)qualify a group of persons for the sole purpose of maintaining positional advantage and class status. Therefore, the juxtaposition of oppositional binaries or 'pairs of antagonistic adjectives' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 468), such as authentic vs. inauthentic teachers and superior vs. inferior pedagogy, are not to be perceived as innocuous descriptions of high-quality education, or the lack thereof, but rather as another means by which elite parents simultaneously make 'visible and stable the basic categories by which people are classified' in contemporary Nigeria (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979, p. 75), while normalising and legitimising their claim to social and moral superiority at the same time. As Thornton (1995, p. 10) notes, 'distinctions are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of others.'

There are at least two broad implications of elite Nigerian parents' construction of high-quality education. First, by suggesting that high-quality education can only be provided in very expensive and highly selective private schools like British private (boarding) schools in Nigeria or the U.K., these parents are simultaneously constructing 'quality' as an oligarchic good, while relegating to second class the type of education accessible to

most Nigerian families. Second, the notion that high-quality education can only be obtained from a particular geographical place and/or space suggests that these parents are consciously or unconsciously reinforcing exclusive schools as institutions for the reproduction of elites. By these logics, British private schools, specifically those with predominantly white British teachers using the Oyinbo man's pedagogy, have become the legitimate sites for the consecration of elite identities in contemporary Nigeria.

Conclusion

In this piece, we outline the complex historical and contemporary factors that shape elite Nigerian parents' perceptions of high-quality education. For the elite Nigerian parents in this study, high educational attainment, or simply having 'good grades' were not marker of distinction. However, the moral attributes, pedagogical styles and access to white Britons as 'true experts', afforded elite parents and their children prestige, and enabled the reproduction of elite privilege. In Nigeria and elsewhere, these resources are what Bourdieu (1998) would consider positional goods with symbolic power that produce differentiation among Black people *and* among the elites in the field of education (Ekeh, 1975). This is evidence of race *and* class distinctions at work in the educational choices of elite Nigerian parents.

This piece contributes to the literature in the sociology of elite education by considering the central role of racialized class distinctions in the formation and reproduction of elites. Future studies in the sociology of education stand to benefit from analysing race *and* class – rather than accepting the false choice between race *or* class – and doing so within (post)colonial contexts. For too long, studies of elite education have been marked by a highly influential class code – one that proffered class as the master, and at times exclusive, feature of inequality, all the while eliding the role of racial privilege or disadvantage shaping class relations (Ayling, 2019; Wallace, 2018). With this piece, we unsettle the troubling either-race-or-class logics that ignore the ways in which race *and* class are not only imbricated, but often co-constituted. We do so by highlighting the importance of schooling in colonial and postcolonial contexts shaping contemporary educational inequalities – focusing on Africa generally and Nigeria specifically, contexts for studying elites that are regularly ignored in the literature on sociology of elite education.

Failure to account for racialised class inequalities in the sociology of education, particularly throughout the global South impacted most significantly by colonial regimes of schooling, limits our understanding of the structural forces that inform institutional practices and group ideologies. Furthermore, such a rendering counters investments in representing the structural inequalities that social actors encounter in schools and society as

merely a matter of individual or group psychology – (mis)representing collective, public, historical issues as largely, or at times exclusively, individual, private, modern problems. We explore elite Nigerian parents' school choice to note how the influence of British schooling, as a racialized class formulation, past and present, informs contemporary perceptions of high-quality education.

Note

1. Bowe et al. (1994, p. 44) citing Hirsch (1976), describe a positional good as 'a product, which because of its scarcity, helps to mark people's relatively higher social position'.

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