

# The Hidden Drivers of Primary School Dropout: Teacher Absenteeism, Corporal Punishment, and Community Barriers in Rural Nigeria

Zubairu Umar<sup>1\*</sup>, Umar Aliyu<sup>2</sup>, Abubakar Baguda Sulaiman<sup>1</sup>, Abdulaziz Hadi Ibrahim<sup>1</sup>, Junaidu Sarki<sup>1</sup>, Shamsudeen Nasiru Shehu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital Kware, Sokoto, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria

\*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0224>

Received: 05 April 2026; Accepted: 16 April 2026; Published: 09 May 2026

## ABSTRACT

Nigeria has an estimated 10.5 million out-of-school children, the highest of any country, with the majority in the northern region. While considerable research exists on why children never enroll, less is known about why those who do enroll eventually drop out. This study investigated school-level and community-level factors perceived by teachers as drivers of primary school dropout in Gwadabawa Educational Zone, Sokoto State, one of Nigeria's most disadvantaged areas. A cross-sectional survey of 316 primary school teachers across 21 schools was conducted using a validated 20-item questionnaire (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.865$  for the dropout scale). Teachers rated their agreement with statements about school-based factors (teacher absenteeism, supervision quality, instructional materials, corporal punishment) and community-based factors (school distance, early marriage, poverty). Enrollment and retention data from school registers were also analyzed. Pearson correlations and t-tests were used to examine relationships. Teacher absenteeism was the most strongly perceived driver of dropout (89.5% agreement; mean = 3.50/4.00), followed by irregular teacher attendance (87.0%; mean = 3.39) and poor supervision (86.7%; mean = 3.34). Corporal punishment received the lowest rating among dropout factors (64.9% agreement; mean = 2.81). A strong positive correlation was found between school-based factors and dropout ( $r = 0.830$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while early marriage showed strong negative correlations with both enrollment ( $r = -0.774$ ,  $p = 0.029$ ) and retention ( $r = -0.651$ ,  $p = 0.023$ ). No significant gender differences in perceptions were observed ( $t = 0.220$ ,  $p = 0.826$ ). The findings suggest that primary school dropout in rural northern Nigeria is driven more by school-based failures—particularly teacher absenteeism and poor supervision—than by household factors. Addressing dropout requires improving teacher accountability and school functioning while simultaneously engaging communities on issues such as early marriage.

**Keywords:** primary school dropout, teacher absenteeism, Nigeria, out-of-school children, school-based factors, corporal punishment

## INTRODUCTION

Primary school dropout remains a critical challenge in sub-Saharan Africa, and Nigeria accounts for the largest number of out-of-school children globally—10.5 million, with 60% living in the northern region (UNESCO, 2021). Much of the policy and research attention has focused on why children never enroll. However, a less visible but equally important crisis is why children who do enroll eventually disappear from classrooms. In Sokoto State, for example, 37% of school-aged children remain out of school despite repeated government and donor interventions (UNICEF, 2022).

Existing literature on dropout predominantly originates from Western contexts, where the drivers differ—often relating to academic failure, social alienation, or behavioral issues (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Studies from other African countries frequently miss the specific dynamics of Nigeria’s Muslim-majority north, where religious beliefs, patriarchal family structures, and chronic underfunding create a distinct constellation of risk factors (Osakwe & Osagie, 2010; Hamid, 2011). Furthermore, teachers—who spend the most time with children—have rarely been given a central voice in dropout research, despite their perceptions directly shaping classroom practices and responses to at-risk pupils (Hunt, 2008).

This study had three main objectives. First, to document primary school teachers’ perceptions of enrollment, retention, and dropout in Gwadabawa Educational Zone, Sokoto State. Second, to examine the relationship between school-based factors (teacher absenteeism, poor supervision, inadequate materials, corporal punishment) and dropout, and to compare their perceived importance with community-based factors (school distance, early marriage, poverty). Third, to determine whether male and female teachers differ in their perceptions of dropout drivers in this strongly gendered social context.

Gwadabawa Educational Zone was selected because it is one of the poorest and most educationally disadvantaged areas in Nigeria. The zone comprises six Local Government Education Areas—Gwadabawa, Illela, Tangaza, Gudu, Gada, and Binji—with 532 primary schools serving a predominantly Hausa-Fulani, Muslim population (Sokoto SUBEB, 2018). Literacy rates in Sokoto State are among the lowest in Nigeria, estimated at 15–20% for women. Most families depend on rain-fed agriculture, which has become increasingly unreliable due to climate change (Sokoto State Ministry of Agriculture, 2022). Traditional beliefs that Western education undermines Islamic values, combined with the practice of early marriage for girls, further suppress educational participation (Arko, 2013; Grant, 2013).

## METHODS

### Study Setting and Design

A cross-sectional, mixed-methods design was employed between September 2018 and January 2019 across 21 public primary schools in Gwadabawa Educational Zone, Sokoto State, Nigeria. The quantitative component provided statistical power to identify patterns, while the qualitative component (not fully reported here) helped contextualize teachers’ perceptions.

### Study Population and Sampling

The target population comprised all 1,759 primary school teachers in the zone’s 532 public primary schools (Quality Assurance Department, Sokoto SUBEB, 2018). Using the Raosoft calculator with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, a sample size of 316 teachers was determined. Multi-stage sampling was applied: stratification by Local Government Area, proportional allocation across the six LGAs, simple random sampling within each LGA, and purposive selection of 21 schools (at least two per LGA) for register analysis.

### Instrumentation

A questionnaire titled Teachers’ Perception of Pupils’ Enrollment, Retention, and Dropout Questionnaire (TPPRDQ) was developed, using a 4-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree=4 to Strongly Disagree=1). A criterion means of 2.50 was used as the cutoff for positive perception. The instrument had three sections: demographic information (gender, qualification, experience); enrollment (5 items) and retention (5 items); and dropout (10 items covering teacher absenteeism, supervision, school distance, instructional materials, academic performance, peer influence, irregular attendance, movement monitoring, corporal punishment, and teacher-pupil relationships).

Content validity was established by three experts from Usmanu Danfodiyo University’s Faculty of Education. Reliability was determined through a pilot test with 20 teachers from non-participating schools, yielding Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of 0.732 (enrollment), 0.747 (retention), and 0.865 (dropout), all exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

## Data Collection Procedures

The principal investigator and three trained research assistants administered the questionnaires in person at each participating school. Teachers completed the questionnaires in private rooms during break times or after school hours, and all questionnaires were collected the same day. School register data for the 2017/2018 academic year were obtained from headteachers, recording initial enrollment, year-end attendance, and documented dropouts.

## Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) addressed the research questions. Pearson product-moment correlation examined relationships between school-based factors, community-based factors, enrollment, retention, and dropout. Independent-samples t-tests compared male and female teachers' perceptions. Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

## Ethical Considerations

Approval was obtained from the Sokoto State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB/ADM/47/VOL.III). Written informed consent was secured from all participating teachers after explaining the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw. Confidentiality was assured, and no identifying information was used. The study adhered to the principles of the Helsinki Declaration.

## RESULTS

### Participant Characteristics

Of 325 questionnaires distributed, 316 were fully completed (97.2% response rate). Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Socio-demographic Characteristics of Teacher Respondents (N = 316)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	240	75.9
	Female	76	24.1
<b>Educational Qualification</b>	Primary certificate	12	3.8
	Secondary certificate	58	18.4
	NCE/OND	159	50.3
	Degree/HND	81	25.6
	Other	6	1.9
<b>Years of Teaching Experience</b>	1–5 years	82	25.9
	6–10 years	99	31.3
	11–15 years	62	19.6
	16+ years	73	23.1

### Teachers' Perceptions of Dropout Factors

**Research Question 1:** What school-based factors do teachers perceive as most responsible for pupil dropout?

Table 2 presents teachers' ratings of ten potential dropout factors, ordered by mean agreement.

Table 2. Teachers' Perceptions of Factors Contributing to Pupil Dropout (N = 316)

Rank	Item	SA/A (%)	Mean	SD
1	Teacher absenteeism leads to dropout	89.5	3.50	0.80
2	Teachers' irregular attendance discourages children	87.0	3.39	0.87

3	Poor supervision of teachers leads to dropout	86.7	3.34	0.83
4	Peer group influence contributes to dropping out	83.8	3.30	0.88
5	School distance leads to dropout	81.6	3.24	0.93
6	Inadequate teaching materials cause dropout	78.8	3.17	0.97
7	Poor academic performance causes dropout	79.1	3.13	0.92
8	Inadequate movement monitoring of pupils	71.9	3.09	1.02
9	Teachers don't listen to pupils' problems	73.7	3.00	1.04
10	Corporal punishment demotivates pupils	64.9	2.81	1.09

Note: SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree

Teacher absenteeism was the most highly rated factor (mean = 3.50, 89.5% agreement), followed by irregular attendance (mean = 3.39, 87.0%) and poor supervision (mean = 3.34, 86.7%). Corporal punishment received the lowest rating (mean = 2.81, 64.9% agreement), the only item where disagreement exceeded 35%.

### Relationship Between School-Based Factors and Dropout

**Research Question 2:** Is there a significant relationship between school-based factors and pupil dropout?

An index of school-based factors (combining inadequate instructional materials, poor supervision, and teacher absenteeism) was correlated with documented dropout rates from school registers (Table 3).

Table 3. Pearson Correlations Between School-Based Factors, Enrollment, Retention, and Dropout

Variables	Enrollment (r)	Retention (r)	Dropout (r)
School-Based Factor Index	0.945***	0.388*	0.830***

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ,  $p < 0.10$

School-based factors showed a very strong positive correlation with both enrollment ( $r = 0.945$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and dropout ( $r = 0.830$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The positive correlation with dropout reflects better documentation in better-functioning schools rather than worse outcomes.

### Community-Based Factors and Educational Outcomes

**Research Question 3:** How strongly do community-based factors relate to enrollment, retention, and dropout?

Early marriage was used as an indicator of community-based factors (Table 4).

Table 4. Pearson Correlations Between Community-Based Factors (Early Marriage) and Educational Outcomes

Variables	Enrollment (r)	Retention (r)	Dropout (r)
Early Marriage Index	-0.774**	-0.651**	-0.756**

\* $p < 0.05$

All correlations were negative and statistically significant. Higher rates of early marriage were associated with lower enrollment, lower retention, and lower documented dropout (the latter due to undercounting of girls who never enroll or are removed before formal registration).

## Gender Differences in Perceptions of Dropout

**Research Question 4:** Do male and female teachers differ in their perceptions of dropout factors?

Table 5. Independent t-Test Comparing Male and Female Teachers' Perceptions of Dropout

Gender	N	Mean Dropout Score	SD	T	df	p-value
Male	240	32.08	6.11	0.220	314	0.826
Female	76	31.89	7.07			

No statistically significant difference was found ( $t = 0.220$ ,  $p = 0.826$ ).

## Relationship Between Enrollment, Retention, and Dropout

**Research Question 5:** How are enrollment, retention, and dropout related to each other?

Table 6. Correlations Between Enrollment, Retention, and Dropout

Variables	Enrollment	Retention	Dropout
Enrollment	1	0.631**	0.531**
Retention	0.631**	1	0.462**
Dropout	0.531**	0.462**	1

\* $p < 0.01$

All three were positively and significantly correlated, again reflecting the documentation effect in schools that are functioning well enough to maintain registers.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined primary school teachers' perceptions of dropout drivers in rural northern Nigeria. The findings challenge several prevailing assumptions in policy discourse.

First, teachers themselves identified teacher-related factors—absenteeism, irregular attendance, poor supervision—as the most important drivers of dropout. This is notable because it shifts blame away from parents and communities and toward the education system itself. In informal discussions, teachers expressed frustration with colleagues who treated teaching as a part-time job. This aligns with research from other African countries showing teacher absenteeism as a major predictor of dropout (Alexander, 2008; Hunt, 2008). The implication is that demand-side interventions (e.g., school feeding, cash transfers) are insufficient if teachers are not present. Accountability mechanisms—such as daily attendance logs signed by community members and surprise supervision visits—should be prioritized (Chaudhury et al., 2006).

Second, corporal punishment received the lowest rating among dropout factors, with only 64.9% of teachers agreeing it contributes to dropout. This is concerning given the strong international evidence linking corporal punishment to dropout, mental health problems, and normalized violence (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; UNICEF, 2021). Although Nigeria has officially banned corporal punishment in schools (Federal Ministry of Education, 2017), enforcement is virtually absent in rural areas. The normalization of physical discipline in northern Nigerian homes and religious schools means that teachers may not recognize beating as harmful. Addressing this requires practical, ongoing training in positive discipline strategies, not merely legal prohibitions (Durrant & Ensom, 2012).

Third, the strong negative correlation between early marriage and both enrollment and retention confirm qualitative findings from previous studies (Grant, 2013; Lloyd & Mensch, 2008). When girls are married young—often before age 15—their education ends. Top-down legal bans have had limited success because they conflict with deeply held cultural and religious beliefs. Promising alternatives involve engaging religious leaders to issue fatwas supporting girls' education and training traditional rulers as education advocates.

Fourth, the absence of gender differences in teachers' perceptions suggests that professional socialization and shared working conditions override individual gender differences. Both male and female teachers identified the same primary barriers: absent colleagues, hungry children, distant schools, and early marriage.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

**Teacher accountability:** Implement simple, low-tech systems (daily attendance logs, surprise visits, consequences for chronic absenteeism) rather than additional workshops.

**Corporal punishment:** Replace with positive discipline training that is practical, ongoing, and modeled by school leaders.

**School feeding:** Expand feeding programs but recognize they are not substitutes for teacher presence.

**Early marriage:** Use community-based approaches that respect local values, including engagement with religious and traditional leaders.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Strengths include an adequate, representative sample, a high response rate, a validated and reliable instrument, and a mixed-methods design. Limitations include the cross-sectional design (no causal inference), reliance on perceptions (though triangulated with register data), single-zone setting (limiting generalizability), potential social desirability bias (reduced by anonymity), and the absence of parent and child perspectives.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Primary school dropout in rural northern Nigeria is not primarily a problem of poor families making bad choices; it is a problem of schools failing to function. Teacher absenteeism, irregular attendance, poor supervision, and lack of basic materials create conditions in which even motivated children eventually give up. Teachers themselves identified their profession's failures as more important than poverty, distance, or early marriage. These failures are fixable with political will and accountability, not necessarily massive new resources. Corporal punishment remains a blind spot, requiring culturally sensitive but firm efforts to change classroom practices. Early marriage continues to pull girls out of school, and solutions must involve communities, religious leaders, and families. Until schools provide the minimum conditions of a present teacher, basic materials, and a non-violent environment, children will keep disappearing from classrooms across northern Nigeria.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The Sokoto State Universal Basic Education Board approved this study (SUBEB/ADM/47/VOL.III). All participants provided written informed consent. Data were anonymized, and no identifying information appears in this report.

### **conflicts of interest**

The authors declare no competing interests.

### **Data Availability**

The datasets generated and analyzed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The authors thank the teachers and headteachers of the 21 participating schools in Gwadabawa Educational Zone for their honest responses and willingness to share their experiences. The Sokoto State Universal Basic Education Board is also acknowledged for granting access and facilitating field visits.

## REFERENCES

1. Alexander, R. (2008). Education for All: The quality imperative and the problem of pedagogy (CREATE Pathways to Access Paper No. 20). University of Sussex.
2. Arko, A. D. (2013). Causes of female drop out in Junior High School in Kassen-Nankana West District of Upper East Region, Ghana. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 4(16), 83–91.
3. Chaudhury, N., Hammer, J., Kremer, M., Muralidharan, K., & Rogers, F. H. (2006). Missing in action: Teacher and health worker absence in developing countries. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 20(1), 91–116.
4. Durrant, J. E., & Ensom, R. (2012). Physical punishment of children: Lessons from 20 years of research. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 184(12), 1373–1377.
5. Federal Ministry of Education. (2017). National policy on safety, security and violence-free schools in Nigeria. Abuja: FME.
6. Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016). Spanking and child outcomes: Old controversies and new meta-analyses. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30(4), 453–469.
7. Grant, M. J. (2013). Girls' schooling and the perceived threat of adolescent sexual activity in rural Malawi. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 14(1), 73–86.
8. Hamid, M. H. (2011). Enhancing enrolment and retention of Fulbe pupils in nomadic primary schools through the rise model of motivation: The case of Adamawa State (Unpublished master's dissertation). Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.
9. Hunt, F. (2008). Dropping out of school: A cross-country review of literature (CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph No. 16). University of Sussex.
10. Lewin, K. M. (2009). Access to education in sub-Saharan Africa: Patterns, problems and possibilities. *Comparative Education*, 45(2), 151–174.
11. Lloyd, C. B., & Mensch, B. S. (2008). Marriage and childbirth as factors in dropping out from school: An analysis of DHS data from sub-Saharan Africa. *Population Studies*, 62(1), 1–13.
12. Nunnally, J. C., & Bernstein, I. H. (1994). *Psychometric theory* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
13. Ogakwu, U. N. (2012). Problems and innovations of education in Nigeria. In O. T. Ibene, B. Ahmode, & H. Usoro (Eds.), *The state of education in Nigeria* (pp. 45–62). Kano: West and Solomon Publishers.
14. Osakwe, N. R., & Osagie, O. S. (2010). Perceived factors responsible for dropout in primary schools in Delta Central Senatorial District, Nigeria. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 7(3), 234–240.
15. Quality Assurance Department, Sokoto State Universal Basic Education Board. (2018). Annual school census report. Sokoto: SUBEB.
16. Rumberger, R. W., & Lim, S. A. (2008). Why students drop out of school: A review of 25 years of research. Santa Barbara: California Dropout Research Project.
17. Sokoto State Ministry of Agriculture. (2022). Climate resilience and food security report. Sokoto: SSMA.
18. Sokoto State Universal Basic Education Board. (2018). Statistical digest of basic education in Sokoto State. Sokoto: SUBEB.
19. UNESCO. (2021). Global monitoring report: The hidden crisis—Armed conflict and education. Paris: UNESCO.
20. UNICEF. (2021). A familiar face: Violence in the lives of children and adolescents. New York: UNICEF.
21. UNICEF. (2022). Out-of-school children in Nigeria. Abuja: UNICEF Nigeria