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The Holiday is not Another Academic Term: Reclaiming the Right to Play in Nigerian Childhoods

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Abstract: Across Nigeria, supplementary tutoring, commonly described as 'lesson' or coaching, has become an established part of many children's educational experience, including during school holidays. This conceptual and policy paper examines the point at which supplementary academic support begins to displace the rest, leisure, family interaction and play that holidays are intended to provide. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, a rights-based social work perspective and a strengths-based orientation to families, the paper integrates developmental evidence on play, Nigerian research on private tutoring and extra lessons, and international and domestic child-rights instruments. It argues that intensive holiday academic scheduling is better understood as an ecological and policy problem than as an individual parenting failure. Parents' decisions are propelled by their concerns about learning, examination competition, childcare, school quality and future opportunity. Children can benefit from well-designed extra lessons as well as the risks when such arrangement becomes prolonged or displaces play time. The paper therefore distinguishes supplementary learning from academic saturation and proposes social work responses at micro, mezzo and macro levels. It presents reclaiming meaningful holiday time for rest and play not as opposition to educational achievement, but as part of a rights-based and developmentally informed understanding of child wellbeing and quality education.

Keywords: *Child Wellbeing; Holiday Lessons; Nigeria; Play; Private Tutoring; Holiday Time; School Social Work.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The school term in many Nigerian communities does not when examinations have been written and the formal schools shut temporarily. Private tutoring, commonly described as 'lesson' or coaching, may continue after school and during holiday periods. Nigerian scholarship has described the expansion of this supplementary learning space as a 'private tutoring boom' and has linked its growth to examination preparation, perceived weaknesses in regular schooling, parental work patterns and competitive pressure (Oyewusi & Orolade, 2014). More recent qualitative findings also show that parents may continue to pay for 'lessons' even if they are financially constrained because they believe it supports children's academic development (Akinrinmade & Zuilkowski, 2025). These patterns, however, do not establish that all Nigerian children experience holidays as an added academic term. But they justify closer examination of circumstances in which supplementary learning becomes intensive enough to displace the functions that school holidays ordinarily serve.

The concern addressed here is therefore not private tutoring in itself, nor the claim that Nigerian children simply 'study too much'. It is the potential displacement of rest, family life and self-directed play when substantial portions of a school break are converted into structured academic instruction. This distinction is important because Nigerian pupil evidence is not uniformly negative. In a study of 261 primary-school childeren in Anambra State, most participants who received extra lessons confirmed learning benefits and relatively little stress, although dissatisfaction was about prolonged lesson period that is more than two hours per day (Nwosu et al., 2024). The relevant question is consequently one of intensity, duration, choice and developmental balance rather than a binary choice between learning and play.

This paper is a conceptual and policy analysis, not an empirical study. It synthesises developmental research,

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Nigerian evidence on private tutoring, child-rights law, and social work theory. It is to examine when holiday academic provision may become inconsistent with children's developmental and rights-based need for rest and play. The analysis is organised through ecological systems theory and is interpreted through rights-based and strengths-based social work perspectives. The paper then considers implications for family practice, school and community collaboration, and policy advocacy.

- *Theoretical Framework*

The analysis utilises three complementary perspectives. These perspectives include the ecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner, rights-based theory, and the strengths perspective. Ecological theory shows how pressures are distributed across the environments surrounding children; rights-based practice identifies the normative obligations attached to children's rest and play; and the strengths perspective guards against interpreting parental responses to structural pressures as evidence of deficient caregiving (Ife, 2012; Saleebey, 2013).

- *Ecological Systems Theory*

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory provides the organising structure for the analysis because it directs attention away from explanations located solely within either the child or the parent. The microsystem contains settings in which the child directly participates, including home, school, peer groups and, where attended, a lesson centre or relationship with a private tutor. The mesosystem concerns relationships among these immediate settings, such as communication and expectations between families, schools and tutors. The exosystem includes structures that affect the child indirectly, including parents' employment conditions, the availability of affordable childcare and the wider market for private tutoring. The macrosystem includes broader educational values, examination culture, socioeconomic conditions and child-rights norms. This distinction matters because the tutoring industry itself is not equivalent to the child's direct experience of a tutor: the former may operate as an exosystem pressure, while the latter becomes part of the child's microsystem. Ecological analysis therefore helps identify how pressures generated at one level translate into children's daily schedules at another.

- *Rights-Based Practice*

The second perspective which is rights-based social work, treats human rights as a practice framework rather than as background aspiration (Ife, 2012). In the Rrticle 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children's rights to rest, leisure, play and participation in cultural life are recognised. In Nigeria, Section 12 of the Child's Rights Act 2003 expressly provides for rest, leisure, play, sport and age-appropriate recreational activities and places responsibility on governments, institutions, organisations and persons responsible for children's welfare to provide adequate opportunities for their enjoyment. A rights-based analysis therefore asks not only whether holiday tutoring improves academic performance, but also whether the organisation of children's time leaves meaningful space for other rights that are independently protected in law.

- *A Strengths-Based Stance Toward Families*

The strengths orientation is the third perspective. It rejects inadequate interpretations of service users and focuses attention on capacities, resources and adaptive responses within difficult environments (Saleebey, 2013). Applied here, it requires caution against treating parents who arrange holiday lessons as careless or excessively ambitious. Nigerian parents may be responding to concerns about children's learning. Examination competition, perceived quality of normal schooling, work schedules and the need for supervision during school breaks are some of their concerns. (Akinrinmade & Zuilkowski, 2025; Oyewusi & Orolade, 2014). The social work task is therefore to understand the pressures that echo these choices while keeping the child's wellbeing and rights central.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Following Bronfenbrenner's framework, the review is organised by ecological level. The categories are analytical rather than mutually exclusive: private tutoring, for example, may be experienced directly within a child's microsystem while also being shaped by a wider tutoring market, employment conditions and educational competition operating at other levels.

- *Micro-Level Evidence: The Developmental Function of Play and Children's Experience of Extra Lessons*

At a child's particular level, developmental and paediatric research treats play as a context for learning not just a break from it. Vygotsky's (1978) account of the zone of proximal development emphasises socially mediated activity by which children perform beyond what they can manage independently. Later play scholarship also identifies imaginative, physical and social play as contexts in which children practise language, self-regulation, cooperation, problem solving and autonomy.

The American Academy of Pediatrics findings describe play as supporting executive functioning; language, emotional regulation, social development and caregiver-child relationships being highlighted (Ginsburg, 2007; Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012; Yogman et al., 2018). This literature is especially relevant because it did not accept opposition between play and learning. Guided and self-directed play are seen to be educational, while over-scheduling can reduce opportunities for children to exercise initiative, negotiate with peers and recover from sustained demands. Singer et al. (2006) similarly argue that playful activity and learning are mutually reinforcing rather than competing processes. These findings provide a developmental rationale for protecting some unstructured and child-directed time within school holidays, although most of this evidence was produced outside Nigeria and should not be treated as direct evidence of Nigerian children's outcomes.

Gray (2011) draws attention to long-term US trends in which declining opportunities for free play occurred

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alongside rising indicators of anxiety, depression and reduced internal control among children and adolescents. His correlational analysis is disputed as a means of explaining changes in mental health at the population level., so it cannot establish that reduced play caused those trends. Its relevance here is narrower: it illustrates a plausible concern that children lose opportunities to practise autonomy, risk assessment and self-regulation when self-directed activity is consistently displaced. Nigerian evidence is therefore needed before similar psychological effects can be attributed to holiday lessons in this context.

Some Nigerian evidence warns against treating all extra lessons as developmentally harmful. Nwosu et al. (2024) found that the majority of participants who attended extra sessions reported happiness, learning gains, and very little stress in a study of 261 students in two primary schools in Anambra state. However, dissatisfaction was more common where extra lessons lasted longer than two hours per day. Although the study was limited to two schools and relied on pupils' self-reports, it suggests that duration and implementation matter. This supports a distinction between targeted supplementary support and schedules that become sufficiently prolonged to crowd out rest, play or family time.

- *Meso-Level Evidence: Family-School-Tutor Dynamics*

At the mesosystem level, attention shifts to the relationships connecting home, school and supplementary tutoring. Akinrinmade and Zuilkowski (2025) conducted in-depth interviews with 15 parents who had hired private tutors for primary-school children across three Nigerian states. Parents described tutoring as financially burdensome but continued to purchase it because they believed it supported children's academic growth, particularly through homework assistance and improvements in reading and mathematics. The study does not establish that these parents used tutoring specifically during holidays, but it provides direct evidence of the parental reasoning that can sustain supplementary academic provision even when it is costly. Earlier Nigerian work similarly identified parental work schedules, perceived weaknesses in regular schooling, examination preparation and peer competition among the factors sustaining private tutoring (Oyewusi & Orolade, 2014).

For social work, this evidence is important because parental decisions emerge within relationships and expectations rather than from preference alone. When families believe that academic advantage depends on continuous preparation, choosing not to purchase additional tutoring may be experienced as exposing a child to avoidable educational risk. A strengths-based interpretation therefore recognises parents' protective intentions while still asking how adult decisions, school expectations and tutoring arrangements collectively shape children's use of holiday time.

- *Exo- and Macro-Level Evidence: The Tutoring Market, Educational Competition and Structural Pressures*

At the exosystem level, the wider tutoring market, parents' work arrangements and the availability of affordable supervision can shape children's schedules without being settings in which children necessarily participate directly. Comparative education describes private supplementary tutoring as 'shadow education' because it develops alongside formal schooling and responds to its curriculum and examination demands (Bray, 2021). Nigeria has a documented history of this form of provision. Oyewusi and Orolade (2014) described a 'private tutoring boom' in which evening and holiday periods had increasingly become sites of supplementary teaching and identified examination preparation, parental employment, perceived school limitations and peer pressure among its drivers. Their account is descriptive and predates current educational conditions, so it should not be used as a present-day prevalence estimate; its value is in documenting that the expansion of 'lesson' in Nigeria is longstanding rather than newly observed.

At the macrosystem level, educational competition, socioeconomic insecurity and cultural expectations surrounding achievement can make continuous academic preparation appear prudent. These pressures may be intensified where families have limited access to safe, affordable, non-academic holiday programmes or flexible childcare. The distribution of options is therefore likely to be unequal: families with greater resources may be able to combine enrichment, travel, organised recreation and academic support, whereas others may rely on lesson centres partly because they provide supervision. The Nigerian literature reviewed here does not yet quantify these holiday-specific inequalities nationally, so this remains an important empirical gap rather than an established national pattern.

- *Rights and Policy Context*

Internationally, Article 31 of the UNCRC establishes children's rights to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities and participation in cultural and artistic life. General Comment No. 17 (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013) specifically identifies pressure for educational achievement and excessively structured schedules among the conditions that may restrict children's enjoyment of Article 31. Nigeria gives domestic expression to these principles through Section 12 of the Child's Rights Act 2003, which protects rest, leisure, play, sport and age-appropriate recreation. The contemporary policy problem is no longer best described as incomplete state domestication. A 2024 national situation analysis reported that all 36 states had ratified or adopted child-rights legislation, while continuing to identify implementation and child-rights realisation as uneven in practice (Federal Ministry of Budget and Economic Planning & UNICEF Nigeria, 2024). The relevant gap for this paper is therefore the translation of formal rights into everyday educational, family and community arrangements, not simply the existence of legislation.

III. DISCUSSION: A SOCIAL WORK ANALYSIS

Read together, the evidence supports a more qualified ecological reframing. Intensive holiday academic scheduling should not be reduced to individual parental failure, because decisions about tutoring are shaped by perceived learning needs, financial sacrifice, examination competition,

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employment patterns and available forms of supervision. At the same time, the evidence reviewed here does not establish that all extra lessons impose developmental harm. The concern arises where the combination of home, school and tutoring expectations produces schedules that leave children little meaningful opportunity for rest, self-directed play or family life. The analytical problem is therefore an imbalance across the ecological system: educational and supervisory demands may be strongly organised, while the child's protected time for recovery and autonomous activity has few equivalent institutional safeguards.

This reframing has direct implications for social work because it links child wellbeing to family stress, school relationships, community resources and the practical realisation of children's rights. The issue need not be framed as a clinical crisis before it becomes professionally relevant. School and community social workers can assess whether children's routines contain developmentally appropriate opportunities for rest, recreation, peer interaction and family connection, while also examining the pressures that make intensive tutoring attractive or necessary to caregivers. This keeps the focus on person-in-environment assessment rather than on pathologising either the child or the parent.

The counterargument is essential. Nigerian pupils may perceive extra lessons as useful, and parents may view tutoring as an investment in children's academic development (Akinrinmade & Zuilkowski, 2025; Nwosu et al., 2024). A rights-based analysis therefore should not produce a blanket recommendation that holiday lessons cease. Instead, it should ask whether programmes are proportionate, whether children retain meaningful non-academic time, whether participation is responsive to an identified learning need, and whether families have realistic alternatives for safe supervision. This approach also avoids importing evidence on poverty and play from other countries as though it directly demonstrated the availability of childcare in Nigerian communities.

Protecting children's holiday rest and play is also compatible with the broader conception of quality education reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 4. The Incheon Declaration frames education as inclusive, equitable and oriented towards lifelong learning rather than academic throughput alone (UNESCO, 2015). This does not mean that Article 31 rights or play should be justified only by their contribution to academic achievement. Rather, educational policy can recognise that learning, wellbeing, rest and play are complementary dimensions of children's development and that a high-quality education system should not routinely secure one by eroding the others.

- *Implications for Social Work Practice and Policy*

Consistent with the ecological framework, the implications below are organised at micro, mezzo and macro levels. The levels are connected: family-level guidance will have limited effect where schools, tutoring markets and community services continue to reward or require intensive academic scheduling.

- *Micro-Level: Family Assessment and Psychoeducation*

At the individual and family level, social workers can include children's daily and holiday routines within assessment rather than discussing academic attainment in isolation. Psychoeducation can explain the developmental value of rest, physical activity, peer interaction and self-directed play while respecting parents' educational aspirations. Yogman et al. (2018) describe a 'prescription for play' within paediatric practice; a Nigerian social work adaptation would be less about prescribing a universal number of hours and more about helping families identify a workable balance between any needed academic support and protected non-academic time. Where tutoring responds to a specific learning difficulty, the objective should be proportionate support rather than the automatic removal of lessons.

- *Mezzo-Level: School-Social Work Collaboration and Community Holiday Provision*

At the mezzo level, schools, social workers, parent associations, community organisations and tutoring providers can agree clearer expectations about holiday work and the duration of organised lessons. Schools can avoid setting workloads that effectively require continuous holiday instruction, while community organisations can pilot affordable holiday programmes combining recreation, creative activity, supervised peer interaction and limited guided learning. Such programmes should be developed with families and children rather than assuming that all communities have the same childcare needs or recreational resources. Social workers can contribute needs assessment, safeguarding, inclusion and referral expertise, particularly for children whose learning needs genuinely require additional support.

- *Macro-Level: Rights Implementation, Data and Policy Advocacy*

At the macro level, advocacy should shift from the now-outdated objective of achieving initial domestication of the Child's Rights Act towards implementation of Section 12 and the wider child-rights framework. Current national reporting indicates that child-rights legislation has been adopted across all 36 states, but practical realisation remains uneven (Federal Ministry of Budget and Economic Planning & UNICEF Nigeria, 2024). Social work organisations can therefore advocate for child-sensitive education guidance on holiday workloads, safeguarding and quality standards for tutoring provision, and public awareness of children's right to rest and recreation. A second priority is evidence. Nigeria lacks recent nationally representative data on the prevalence, duration and holiday-specific use of private tutoring, the reasons families rely on it, and children's own experiences. Policy should not presume a single national pattern where the empirical base remains geographically limited.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the expansion of private tutoring and extra lessons in Nigeria raises a social work concern when supplementary academic support becomes sufficiently intensive to displace children's meaningful

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opportunities for rest, recreation, family interaction and self-directed play. The available Nigerian evidence does not support a claim that all holiday lessons are harmful or that school holidays have been universally absorbed into academic activity. It does show that private tutoring is longstanding, that parents may accept substantial financial burdens because they perceive academic benefits, and that pupils' experiences vary with how extra lessons are organised (Akinrinmade & Zuilkowski, 2025; Nwosu et al., 2024; Oyewusi & Orolade, 2014). A social work response should therefore resist both parental blame and simplistic prohibition. The more defensible objective is proportionality: educational support where it is needed, alongside practical protection of children's independently recognised rights to rest and play. Ecological analysis makes this a shared responsibility across families, schools, tutoring providers, communities and policy institutions rather than a private decision for parents to manage alone.

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