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THE INVISIBLE WORK OF TEACHING: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW OF TEACHERS' COGNITIVE, EMOTIONAL, AND RELATIONAL LABOUR IN CONTEMPORARY CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: Teaching has traditionally been evaluated through visible indicators such as curriculum delivery, examination outcomes, lesson preparation, and classroom management. However, beneath these observable practices lies a complex network of invisible professional activities that constitute a significant portion of teachers' daily work. This conceptual review examines the hidden dimensions of teaching through three interconnected constructs: teachers' cognitive labour, emotional labour, and relational labour. The paper argues that contemporary teachers perform extensive invisible work involving continuous decision-making, emotional regulation, relationship cultivation, conflict mediation, learner motivation, and social support, yet these contributions remain insufficiently recognised within educational policies, professional evaluation systems, and teacher development frameworks. Using a conceptual review methodology, the study synthesises classical and contemporary scholarship on teacher labour, emotional work, professional identity, care ethics, and classroom relationships. The review is situated within the Nigerian educational context, where teachers increasingly operate under conditions of overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, changing curriculum demands, technological transitions, and heightened social expectations. Recent Nigerian studies indicate that teacher workload, occupational stress, emotional exhaustion, and psychosocial pressures influence teacher effectiveness and wellbeing.

The paper develops an integrated framework showing that effective teaching depends not only on subject knowledge and instructional competence but also on invisible cognitive, emotional, and relational investments. It concludes that recognising these hidden forms of labour is essential for improving teacher policy, professional support systems, teacher education programmes, and sustainable educational development in Nigeria and beyond.

Keywords*: invisible work, teaching labour, cognitive labour, emotional labour, relational labour, teacher wellbeing, Nigerian classrooms, conceptual review*

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is frequently understood as a process of transmitting knowledge, managing classrooms, assessing learners, and implementing curriculum objectives. Such descriptions, while accurate, provide only a partial representation of teachers' professional realities (Ololube, 2022). The everyday work of teachers extends beyond formal instructional activities to include numerous invisible responsibilities that require intellectual judgment, emotional regulation, and sustained interpersonal engagement. The contemporary classroom is a complex social environment characterised by diverse learner abilities, behavioural challenges, cultural differences, technological changes, parental expectations, accountability pressures, and institutional demands (Kelchtermans, 2017). Within this environment, teachers constantly interpret situations, make rapid decisions, manage emotions, establish trust, encourage participation, and negotiate relationships. These activities often remain unnoticed because they do not always appear in official workload calculations or performance assessment systems. The concept of invisible work draws attention to forms of labour that are essential but undervalued because they occur behind observable professional outputs. In teaching, invisible work includes anticipating students' difficulties before they emerge, adapting explanations to individual learning needs, maintaining emotional composure during challenging interactions, remembering students' personal circumstances, resolving conflicts, and creating psychologically safe learning environments (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018).

Teaching is therefore not merely a technical occupation; it is also an emotional and relational practice. Teachers must simultaneously function as instructors, mentors, counsellors, motivators, caregivers, and social organisers. Research on teacher emotional labour demonstrates that educators frequently regulate their emotions to maintain supportive classroom environments, even when experiencing frustration, fatigue, or workplace pressures (OECD. 2020). In Nigeria, these invisible demands are particularly significant because teachers operate within educational contexts characterised by large class sizes, insufficient instructional resources, administrative pressures, socioeconomic inequalities, and increasing expectations from communities. Recent studies examining Nigerian teachers highlight concerns related to workload, burnout, emotional exhaustion, psychosocial working conditions, and work–life balance (Ololube, 2022). Despite the importance of these hidden dimensions, educational discourse often focuses primarily on measurable outcomes

such as examination performance, attendance rates, curriculum completion, and teacher productivity (Schutz & Zembylas, 2019). Such approaches risk overlooking the deeper forms of professional expertise required to sustain meaningful teaching and learning. This conceptual review therefore explores teaching as an occupation involving three interconnected forms of invisible labour:

Cognitive labour – the mental effort involved in planning, adapting, analysing, and making instructional decisions.

Emotional labour – the management and regulation of emotions required to maintain professional relationships and classroom effectiveness. Relational labour – the continuous effort involved in building trust, belonging, cooperation, and meaningful connections with learners and stakeholders.

By examining these dimensions, this article contributes to a broader understanding of teaching as a multidimensional professional practice and highlights implications for teacher education, educational leadership, and policy development in Nigeria. Educational systems worldwide increasingly demand higher levels of teacher effectiveness while simultaneously expanding teachers' responsibilities. Teachers are expected not only to deliver curriculum content but also to address learner diversity, provide emotional support, manage behavioural difficulties, integrate technology, communicate with parents, and contribute to institutional improvement (Day & Gu, 2010). However, many of these responsibilities remain invisible within conventional definitions of teacher workload. The emphasis on observable outputs may create an incomplete understanding of what teachers actually do and the resources required to sustain effective practice. In Nigeria, the challenge is intensified by contextual realities such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, limited professional support, economic pressures, and increasing societal expectations. Evidence from recent Nigerian studies suggests that teacher wellbeing is affected by psychosocial work conditions, occupational demands, and insufficient organisational support (Okoye, 2023). When invisible labour remains unrecognised, several consequences may occur teacher burnout and emotional exhaustion, reduced professional motivation, weakened teacher–student relationships, inadequate policy responses to teacher workload and limited appreciation of teaching as skilled professional labour. Therefore, there is a need for a conceptual examination of the hidden cognitive, emotional, and relational dimensions of teachers' work. The aim of this conceptual review is to examine the invisible dimensions of

teaching by analysing teachers' cognitive, emotional, and relational labour and exploring their significance within contemporary classrooms, particularly in the Nigerian educational context.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a conceptual review methodology. Unlike empirical reviews that synthesise statistical findings from quantitative studies, conceptual reviews examine ideas, theories, constructs, and relationships among concepts to develop deeper theoretical understanding. A conceptual review was appropriate because the purpose of this article was not to measure teacher labour empirically but to integrate fragmented discussions surrounding the hidden dimensions of teaching and construct a comprehensive conceptual framework. Relevant scholarly literature was identified through systematic searches of academic databases and scholarly repositories, including: Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus-indexed publications, Web of Science and African education research databases. Recent studies on Nigerian teachers' occupational conditions and emotional demands were incorporated to ensure contextual relevance.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Understanding Invisible Work in Teaching

The concept of invisible work refers to professional activities that are essential for achieving organisational goals but are frequently unnoticed, undervalued, or excluded from formal measures of productivity. Within education, invisible work represents the hidden intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal efforts teachers invest in creating effective learning environments. Unlike visible teaching activities such as classroom instruction, marking assignments, preparing lesson notes, and administering assessments, invisible work occurs beneath the surface of everyday classroom practice. It includes anticipating learners' needs, interpreting student behaviours, managing personal emotions, maintaining classroom harmony, encouraging reluctant learners, and developing meaningful connections with students (Brackett at al, 2019). The invisibility of such labour emerges partly because teaching is often assessed through measurable outcomes such as examination scores, curriculum coverage, and student achievement. However, these outcomes are influenced by numerous unseen processes that occur before, during, and after classroom

instruction. Teaching therefore involves both productive labour (direct instructional activities) and reproductive labour (the emotional, social, and relational activities necessary to sustain educational interactions). Similar to forms of care work identified in sociology, these hidden contributions are frequently normalised as simply "part of being a teacher" rather than recognised as professional expertise (Noddings, 2018). In contemporary classrooms, invisible work has become increasingly significant because teachers operate within environments where learners bring diverse academic abilities, psychological needs, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic challenges. Effective teachers must therefore engage in constant interpretation, adaptation, and relationship-building

Theoretical Framework

This review is anchored on three complementary theoretical perspectives: Hochschild's Theory of Emotional Labour, Labour Process Theory and Care Ethics and Relational Pedagogy (Yin, 2018).

1. Hochschild's Theory of Emotional Labour

The concept of emotional labour was introduced by Arlie Russell Hochschild to explain how workers manage and regulate emotions as part of their professional roles. Hochschild (1983) argued that many occupations require individuals to display socially appropriate emotions regardless of their actual feelings. Emotional labour involves two major processes:

Surface Acting - Surface acting occurs when individuals modify their outward emotional expressions without changing their internal feelings. A teacher may remain calm and encouraging when dealing with disruptive behaviour despite experiencing frustration.

Deep Acting - Deep acting involves attempting to genuinely align internal emotions with professional expectations. For example, a teacher may consciously develop empathy toward a struggling student to respond more patiently and constructively.

Within classrooms, emotional labour is fundamental because teachers are expected to demonstrate enthusiasm, patience, fairness, compassion, and emotional stability. However, continuous emotional regulation without adequate support may contribute to stress and burnout.

2. Labour Process Theory

Labour Process Theory examines how workers' activities are organised, controlled, and valued within institutions. Originally developed within industrial sociology, the theory highlights tensions between employees' actual labour contributions and organisational recognition (OECD. 2020). Applied to education, the theory reveals that teachers contribute far more labour than is captured in official job descriptions. Teachers frequently perform unpaid and unrecognised activities such as mentoring students outside classroom hours, counselling learners experiencing difficulties, communicating with parents, developing innovative teaching strategies and supporting school administration. The theory helps explain why teachers may experience workload pressures despite formal working hours appearing reasonable. 3. Care Ethics and Relational Pedagogy

Care ethics emphasises that human relationships are central to moral and professional practice. Within education, relational pedagogy argues that meaningful learning occurs through relationships characterised by trust, respect, recognition, and belonging. Scholars such as Nel Noddings argue that teaching is fundamentally a caring relationship rather than merely a technical activity (Brackett at al, 2019). Teachers' relational labour includes knowing students personally, creating inclusive classroom environments, developing learner confidence, encouraging participation and supporting students' social and emotional development. This perspective challenges narrow views of teaching that focus only on content transmission.

Teachers' Cognitive Labour: The Invisible Intellectual Work of Teaching

Cognitive labour refers to the mental effort teachers apply in analysing situations, making decisions, solving problems, and adapting instruction. Although lesson delivery is visible, much of teachers' intellectual work happens before and after classroom interaction. Instructional Decision-Making - Teachers constantly make complex decisions: Which teaching strategy will best support this learner? Why is a student struggling with a concept? How should an explanation be modified? How can different ability levels be accommodated?

These decisions require professional judgement developed through training and experience. A mathematics teacher, for example, may present the same concept differently

to advanced learners, struggling learners, and students with learning difficulties (Schutz & Zembylas, 2019). Such adaptation represents invisible cognitive labour.

Curriculum Interpretation and Adaptation - Curriculum documents rarely provide complete solutions for classroom realities. Teachers interpret curriculum objectives and transform them into meaningful learning experiences (Kelchtermans, 2017). This process requires selecting appropriate examples, connecting content with learners' experiences, designing activities and predicting possible misconceptions. Therefore, teachers are not passive curriculum implementers; they are active curriculum designers.

Emotional Cognition and Classroom Judgement - Teaching requires teachers to interpret not only academic performance but also emotional signals. A teacher may need to recognise whether a student's poor performance results from misunderstanding, anxiety, lack of motivation, family difficulties and inadequate learning support. Such interpretation represents a complex form of c

Teachers' Emotional Labour: Managing Feelings in the Classroom

Teaching is among the professions with significant emotional demands because classroom interactions involve continuous human relationships.

Emotional Regulation and Professional Identity - Teachers are expected to remain composed even during stressful situations. They regulate emotions to maintain classroom stability. Examples include controlling anger during classroom disruptions, showing encouragement despite personal fatigue, remaining patient with repeated learner difficulties and demonstrating confidence during uncertain situations (Day & Gu, 2010). This emotional regulation contributes significantly to classroom effectiveness.

Emotional Labour and Teacher Wellbeing - Although emotional labour supports positive learning environments, excessive emotional demands can create psychological strain. Teachers experiencing excessive workload, limited institutional support, large class sizes, poor working conditions and may experience emotional exhaustion (Brackett et al, 2019). Recent Nigerian research has identified teacher wellbeing challenges associated with occupational demands, workplace stressors, and inadequate support structures. These conditions highlight the importance of recognising emotional labour within teacher management systems.

Emotional Labour in Nigerian Classrooms - The Nigerian classroom presents distinctive emotional challenges. Teachers often work with learners affected by poverty, unequal educational opportunities, insecurity, family challenges and limited learning resources. Consequently, teachers frequently provide emotional support beyond formal instructional responsibilities (Noddings, 2018). For example, a teacher may motivate a discouraged learner, mediate peer conflicts, or provide encouragement to students facing difficult circumstances. These activities represent significant emotional investments that remain largely invisible in official teacher workload calculations.

Teachers' Relational Labour: Building Human Connections for Learning

Relational labour involves the continuous effort teachers invest in developing and maintaining productive relationships with learners, colleagues, families, and communities (Ololube, 2022). Learning is fundamentally social. Students are more likely to participate actively when they experience trust, acceptance, and psychological safety.

Teacher–Student Relationships - Positive teacher–student relationships influence learner motivation, classroom participation, academic confidence and behavioural adjustment (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Teachers create these relationships through everyday actions such as remembering students' names, showing interest in their experiences, providing encouragement and demonstrating fairness. Although these actions appear simple, they require sustained attention and emotional commitment.

Classroom Community Building - Teachers perform invisible relational work by creating classroom cultures where learners feel valued. This involves establishing norms, managing conflicts, encouraging cooperation and promoting respect among students. A productive classroom atmosphere does not happen automatically; it is constructed through continuous relational labour.

Parent and Community Relationships - In many Nigerian communities, teachers also serve as important links between schools, families, and communities. They communicate with parents, explain learner progress, address concerns, and negotiate expectations. This partnership work strengthens education systems but often receives limited recognition.

Implications for Nigerian Education

Teacher Education - Teacher preparation programmes should move beyond technical teaching skills to include emotional intelligence, relationship-building skills, reflective practice, stress management and learner psychology.

Educational Policy - Educational policies should recognise teacher workload beyond classroom hours. Teacher evaluation should consider mentoring, learner support, classroom relationships and pastoral responsibilities.

School Leadership - School leaders should create supportive environments by reducing unnecessary administrative burdens, providing professional counselling support and recognising teachers' emotional contributions.

CONCLUSION

Teaching is far more than the visible act of delivering lessons. Beneath every effective classroom lies extensive invisible labour involving thinking, feeling, and relating. Teachers engage in cognitive labour when they interpret curriculum demands, make instructional decisions, and adapt learning experiences. They perform emotional labour when they regulate feelings, demonstrate patience, and maintain professional care. They engage in relational labour when they build trust, establish belonging, and create supportive learning communities. In Nigeria, where teachers operate under complex educational and social pressures, these invisible forms of labour are particularly significant. Failure to recognise them limits understanding of teacher professionalism and weakens efforts to improve educational quality. Recognising invisible teacher labour provides a more complete understanding of teaching as skilled human work. Future educational reforms should therefore move beyond narrow measures of teacher productivity and acknowledge the cognitive, emotional, and relational investments that make meaningful learning possible.

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