

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF INFORMAL GROUP
MEMBERSHIP AND ITS PERCEIVED BENEFITS AND
CHALLENGES AMONG PRIVATE SCHOOL TEACHERS IN
UYO METROPOLIS**

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ABSTRACT: This study examined private school teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges associated with informal group membership in Uyo Metropolis. Informal groups—spontaneous, unofficial associations that emerge from personal relationships, shared interests, or professional needs—play a significant role in shaping workplace dynamics within schools, yet they are often overlooked in educational research. Anchored on Social Exchange Theory, Group Dynamics Theory, and Systems Theory, the study adopted a mixed-methods exploratory design. The population comprised private school teachers in Uyo Metropolis, from which a purposive-random sample of 120 respondents was drawn across 10 private schools. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire (quantitative) and semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (qualitative). Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were examined through thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teachers perceive informal groups as beneficial for emotional support, professional advice, stress reduction, and fostering a sense of belonging. These groups also facilitated collaboration in instructional practices, serving as informal professional learning communities. However, the study also identified notable challenges, including favouritism, exclusion, interpersonal conflict, gossip, and occasional undermining of school authority. These dual outcomes suggest that while informal groups positively impact teacher morale and collaboration, they can simultaneously create managerial and organisational challenges. The study concludes that informal groups are integral yet complex components of school life. It recommends that school administrators recognise and engage with these groups constructively, promoting inclusivity, encouraging their professional potential, and mitigating their negative tendencies. Policymakers and education stakeholders are urged to strengthen teacher welfare and capacity-building programs to balance the influence of informal networks. The study contributes to the limited body of knowledge on teacher workplace dynamics in Nigeria and provides a foundation for further comparative and longitudinal studies.

Keywords: Informal Group Membership, Private School Teachers, Workplace Relationships, Teacher Collaboration, Organisational Dynamics

INTRODUCTION

In every organisational setting, both formal and informal structures exist simultaneously, shaping how individuals interact, collaborate, and perform their roles. While formal structures are clearly defined with established hierarchies, policies, and responsibilities, informal structures are more fluid, evolving naturally through social interactions, shared experiences, and personal affinities (Robbins & Judge, 2019). Informal groups typically form around common interests, cultural ties, friendships, or shared professional values. Although unofficial, they exert a significant influence on workplace dynamics, including those in educational institutions.

Within the school environment, informal group membership among teachers plays a particularly important role in shaping communication patterns, staff morale, and even instructional practices (Mullins, 2016). Teachers often depend on these networks for emotional support, exchange of pedagogical ideas, and assistance in coping with professional challenges. Such groups foster a sense of belonging, professional identity, and resilience, which are especially vital in high-pressure contexts such as private schools where resources are often limited, and expectations remain high (Okon, 2018).

Private schools in Nigeria, and specifically those in Uyo Metropolis, operate under unique administrative conditions that differ from the public sector. Owner-driven management styles, limited bureaucratic oversight, and heightened accountability to parents and proprietors create work environments that can be both flexible and demanding (Eze, 2021). In such contexts, informal groups often emerge as coping mechanisms or platforms for professional and social exchange. These groups may function as informal professional learning communities, enabling teachers to collaborate, exchange lesson plans, provide peer feedback, and share classroom management strategies (Adeyemi & Akpotu, 2017).

Despite their positive contributions, informal groups are not without drawbacks. They can foster cliques, exclusionary behaviours, and unhealthy competition, sometimes challenging formal authority. In cases where loyalty to an informal group outweighs allegiance to the institution, issues such as favouritism, resistance to change, and conflict may arise, undermining school leadership and cohesion (Aina & Oladunjoye, 2020). Informal groups can also perpetuate gossip, marginalise non-members, and encourage unproductive habits that compromise workplace harmony (Katz & Kahn, 2015). These dual outcomes highlight the complex role informal groups play in schools.

In Nigeria, research on teachers has primarily focused on formal organisational structures and professional development initiatives, with limited attention given to the nuanced, everyday interactions that take place outside these formal systems (Egwunyenga, 2009). Furthermore, much of the literature on teacher collaboration emphasises structured approaches such as workshops and government-led capacity building, overlooking organically formed teacher networks. This gap leaves the role of informal groups underexplored, particularly in private schools where such networks may be most influential due to weaker institutional support systems and greater job-related challenges (Okonkwo, 2020).

Uyo Metropolis, as a rapidly developing urban centre in Akwa Ibom State, is home to a growing number of private schools with diverse ownership and management structures. Teachers in these schools navigate distinct organisational realities that make informal group membership particularly salient to their professional and social lives. Understanding how these teachers perceive the benefits and challenges of informal groups provides an opportunity to enrich the discourse on school organisational behaviour, workplace relationships, and teacher well-being in the Nigerian context

In organisational research, much attention has been paid to formal structures such as administrative hierarchies, policies, and professional development initiatives, while the informal networks that employees create for themselves are often overlooked. Yet, as the literature indicates, informal groups exert a powerful influence on workplace dynamics, shaping communication, morale, and cooperation (Robbins & Judge, 2019; Mullins, 2016). In school environments, teachers frequently rely on such groups for emotional support, professional collaboration, and coping with workplace challenges, especially in high-pressure contexts such as private schools where job insecurity, limited welfare provisions, and resource constraints are common (Okonkwo, 2020).

Globally and across Africa, studies have shown that informal groups can function as professional learning communities, stress-relief networks, and collaborative platforms (Kelchtermans, 2005; Chikoko, 2007). At the same time, these groups may generate negative outcomes such as favouritism, cliques, resistance to authority, and the marginalisation of non-members (Katz & Kahn, 2015; Osei, 2006). Thus, informal groups are a double-edged phenomenon—providing essential psychosocial and professional benefits while also creating organisational tension.

In Nigeria, however, limited empirical work has directly examined informal group membership in schools. Most studies have focused on formal administrative structures, teacher unions, or structured professional development, leaving the subtle but influential role of everyday informal networks underexplored (Egwunyenga, 2009). Even fewer studies have focused on private school contexts, where teachers face distinctive challenges, such as owner-driven management styles, salary-related concerns, and limited job security. Within such settings, informal groups may play an especially important role in shaping teachers' survival strategies, morale, and workplace relationships.

Specifically, in Uyo Metropolis—an urban hub with a high concentration of private schools—there is little empirical evidence on how teachers perceive the benefits and challenges of informal group membership. This lack of knowledge limits administrators' ability to harness the positive contributions of such groups while mitigating their negative effects.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by conducting an exploratory, mixed-methods investigation into private school teachers' perceptions of informal group membership in Uyo Metropolis. It examines both the perceived benefits—such as emotional support, collaboration, and a sense of belonging—and the perceived challenges—such as favouritism, exclusion, and conflict. By doing so, the study aims to generate insights that can inform school administration, policy, and teacher welfare strategies.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore private school teachers' perceptions of informal group membership in Uyo Metropolis. Specifically, it examines both the benefits—such as emotional support, professional guidance, stress reduction, and sense of belonging—and the challenges, including favouritism, exclusion, interpersonal conflict, and interference with formal school policies. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study aims to provide nuanced insights that can guide administrators in recognising the dual nature of informal groups and developing inclusive strategies that harness their benefits while mitigating potential negative consequences. Ultimately, this research intends to contribute to policy discussions and school management practices by highlighting the often-overlooked but powerful dynamics of informal groups in private school environments.

Theoretical Framework

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964)

Social Exchange Theory posits that the principles of reciprocity, mutual benefit, and the expectation of rewards guide human relationships. Within the school setting, teachers often join informal groups because of the perceived benefits they can gain — such as emotional support, professional advice, access to information, and a sense of belonging. At the same time, members are expected to contribute by offering their own knowledge, resources, or social support.

In the context of private schools in Uyo Metropolis, where teachers frequently face challenges such as job insecurity, limited professional development opportunities, and inadequate welfare packages, informal groups may serve as a vital coping mechanism. Teachers perceive these groups as avenues to receive encouragement, share lesson resources, and collectively navigate workplace challenges. The reciprocity principle explains why teachers remain committed to such groups: membership is maintained as long as the benefits outweigh the costs. Thus, Social Exchange Theory is valuable for understanding the *perceived benefits* of informal group membership among private school teachers.

Group Dynamics Theory (Lewin, 1947)

Group Dynamics Theory emphasises the processes that shape how groups are formed, maintained, and function over time. It explores group cohesion, the creation of norms, conformity pressures, leadership patterns, and conflict resolution. Informal groups, though unofficial, exhibit these same dynamics.

Applied to teachers in private schools, this theory helps explain both the positive and negative aspects of informal group membership. For instance, cohesion among teachers may enhance morale, foster collaboration in lesson planning, and build a sense of solidarity. At the same time, strong in-group loyalty may give rise to cliques, favoritism, and subtle resistance to school policies or administrators. In Uyo Metropolis, where private schools often have fluid administrative structures, informal groups may significantly influence communication channels, teacher cooperation, and even resistance to managerial decisions. Group Dynamics Theory, therefore,

provides insight into *why informal groups can be both supportive and problematic* within school settings.

Systems Theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968)

Systems Theory views organisations as complex, interconnected systems where different subsystems interact to influence the whole. In schools, the formal organisational structure (administration, policies, and procedures) represents one subsystem, while informal groups represent another. These subsystems are interdependent: the functioning of one affects the other.

In private schools, particularly in Uyo Metropolis, informal groups of teachers function as social subsystems that shape the broader school environment. They affect communication patterns, the flow of information, teacher satisfaction, and overall school climate. For instance, when informal groups promote collaboration, they strengthen the school system; but when they foster gossip or resistance to change, they disrupt formal administrative efforts. Systems Theory is therefore relevant because it demonstrates that administrators cannot ignore the presence of informal groups. Instead, they must recognise them as integral parts of the school system that can either facilitate or hinder organisational effectiveness.

Together, these three theories provide a comprehensive framework for analysing informal group membership among private school teachers in Uyo Metropolis.

Empirical Review

Global Studies

Globally, research has shown that informal groups are potent forces in organisations. Robbins and Judge (2019) note that informal groups serve as unofficial communication channels, enhancing the speed of information flow, promoting innovation, and fostering collaboration. Within educational settings, these groups often serve as peer-support networks, where teachers exchange teaching strategies, share resources, and offer emotional support. For example, studies in the United States and Europe suggest that informal professional learning communities strengthen instructional practices, reduce burnout, and create an atmosphere of collegiality (Kelchtermans, 2005). At the same time, research warns that informal groups may generate organisational tensions by forming cliques, challenging formal authority, or perpetuating exclusivity (Katz & Kahn, 2015). These findings highlight the dual nature of informal groups as both beneficial and potentially disruptive.

African Context

In African contexts, empirical studies indicate that informal groupings often emerge as survival strategies for teachers working in resource-constrained environments. In South Africa, for instance, informal networks among teachers have been found to facilitate collaboration in lesson planning and coping with classroom stress, particularly in underfunded schools (Chikoko, 2007). Similarly, in Ghana, informal teacher groups provide platforms for mutual support and professional exchange, but they are also noted for occasionally resisting administrative directives and policy changes (Osei,

2006). These studies reveal that informal groups are not merely social associations but also strategic responses to difficult working conditions. They serve as spaces where teachers find solidarity and professional identity, though they sometimes challenge the authority of school management.

Nigerian Context

In Nigeria, studies examining informal group dynamics in schools are limited, with most research focusing on the formal structures of school management, professional development initiatives, or teacher unionism. Egwunyenga (2009) emphasised the role of social interactions in effective school administration, noting that neglecting informal dynamics can weaken communication and cooperation. Okonkwo (2020) observed that private school teachers, in particular, rely heavily on peer support networks due to the precarious nature of their employment, low job security, and poor welfare conditions compared to their public-school counterparts. These informal groups often provide psychosocial support and facilitate collaboration, but may also contribute to favouritism and resistance to administrative control. Despite these insights, the literature has paid little attention to systematically examining how teachers themselves perceive the benefits and challenges of informal group membership within Nigerian private schools.

From the reviewed studies, it is evident that while informal groups play a crucial role in shaping teacher experiences both globally and across Africa, a notable gap remains in Nigerian research. Very few empirical studies have directly examined informal group membership within Nigerian schools, leaving much of the discourse underexplored. Existing research tends to emphasise formal organisational structures, professional development initiatives, and union activities, while paying limited attention to the informal, everyday networks that teachers form and rely upon. Furthermore, no empirical work to date has specifically investigated teachers' perceptions of informal groups in Uyo Metropolis, a region with a high concentration of private schools and a distinctive administrative context. This study, therefore, seeks to address these gaps by undertaking an exploratory, mixed-methods analysis of private school teachers' perceptions regarding the benefits and challenges of informal group membership in Uyo Metropolis. In doing so, it contributes fresh empirical evidence to the field of organisational behaviour within Nigerian education and underscores the need to acknowledge the influence of informal group dynamics in school administration.

Conceptual Review

Informal Groups in Organisations

Informal groups are spontaneous and unofficial associations that emerge naturally within organisational settings. Unlike formal structures that are deliberately designed with defined hierarchies, roles, and rules, informal groups are formed through social interactions, personal relationships, and shared experiences (Robbins & Judge, 2019). Their existence is often invisible in organisational charts, yet they exert a strong influence on workplace dynamics. Informal groups are typically voluntary, flexible, trust-based, and socially driven. They enable employees to develop bonds that go beyond official responsibilities, thereby shaping communication, cooperation, and morale within the workplace.

Types of Informal Groups

Scholars have identified different types of informal groups, each serving unique purposes within organisations (Katz & Kahn, 2015).

- **Interest-based groups:** These are formed around shared professional or organisational concerns. In schools, teachers may form groups to exchange lesson plans, discuss curriculum challenges, or share pedagogical strategies.
- **Friendship-based groups:** These emerge from personal bonds, cultural ties, or shared values. Teachers may form associations based on language, ethnic background, religious affiliation, or shared social interests.
- **Support groups:** These are centred on coping mechanisms, where members provide each other with emotional support, advice, or survival strategies in response to stress or difficult working conditions. For teachers, such groups may serve as outlets for stress relief, encouragement, or managing job insecurity.

These categories often overlap, as many informal groups combine professional and social functions simultaneously.

Functions of Informal Groups

The functions of informal groups can be both positive and negative, highlighting their dual role within organisations.

Positive functions include:

- **Emotional support and belonging:** Informal groups provide members with a sense of acceptance, encouragement, and solidarity, reducing feelings of isolation.
- **Professional collaboration:** Teachers can share resources, advice, and feedback, enhancing instructional quality and professional growth.
- **Enhanced communication and morale:** Informal channels often accelerate the flow of information and foster a supportive workplace climate (Mullins, 2016).

Negative functions include:

- **Cliques, favouritism, and exclusion:** Groups may create divisions within the workforce, leading to marginalisation of non-members.
- **Gossip and conflict:** Informal communication may spread misinformation, fuel rumours, and create mistrust.
- **Resistance to change and undermining authority:** Strong group loyalties can lead to subtle opposition against management decisions or policies (Aina & Oladunjoye, 2020).

Thus, informal groups can simultaneously enhance and threaten organisational effectiveness, depending on how they are managed.

Informal Groups in Educational Settings

In educational environments, informal groups among teachers have been shown to play a crucial role in shaping the workplace experience. Teachers often use such groups as platforms for pedagogical exchange, peer mentoring, and stress relief. These groups often serve as informal professional learning communities, where teachers collaborate to enhance instructional practices, offer mutual feedback, and address classroom challenges (Adeyemi & Akpotu, 2017).

In contexts where resources are limited, such as private schools in Nigeria, informal groups take on added importance. They provide psychosocial support, help teachers adapt to high workloads, and foster solidarity in the absence of strong institutional support systems (Eze, 2021). However, they can also reproduce exclusion, favouritism, and conflict, particularly when group interests conflict with administrative goals. This duality highlights the importance of carefully examining teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges associated with informal group membership.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of private school teachers' perceptions of informal group membership. The quantitative aspect was used to identify general trends and patterns among a larger sample, while the qualitative component (interviews and focus group discussions) provided deeper insights into teachers' lived experiences. The mixed-methods design was considered appropriate because the phenomenon under investigation—informal group membership—requires both measurable indicators and subjective interpretation.

Population of the Study

The population of this study comprised private school teachers in Uyo Metropolis, Akwa Ibom State. Uyo Metropolis was selected because of its large concentration of private schools, which vary in size, ownership, and management practices, making it a representative context for exploring informal group dynamics among teachers.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A total of 10 private secondary schools were purposively selected from Uyo Metropolis to capture diversity in ownership style, academic reputation, and teacher population. From each school, a proportionate number of teachers were randomly selected, resulting in a total of 120 respondents.

Table 3.1: Sampled Private Schools in Uyo Metropolis

S/N	Name of School	Location (District/Area)	Estimated Population	Teacher Sample Drawn
1	Monef High School, Uyo	Ewet Housing	48	15
2	King Solomon Secondary School, Uyo	Uyo Urban	35	13
3	Bright Stars Model Secondary School, Uyo	Aka Itiam	30	12
4	Bright Future College, Uyo	Osomgoma	28	10
5	Christian Secondary School, Uyo	Nsukara Offot	25	8
6	Tower of Ivory Secondary School, Uyo	Ibiaku	45	16
7	Sureway Secondary School, Uyo	Abak Road	26	9
8	Nobles Secondary School, Uyo	Atana offot	47	14
9	Fortune High School, Uyo	Effiat Offot	31	12
10	Divine Grace High School, Uyo	Use Offot	30	11
Total			307	120

A total of 120 teachers, drawn from 15 private schools within Uyo Metropolis, constituted the study sample. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed:

1. Purposive sampling was first used to select 15 private schools that had at least 10 teaching staff and were willing to participate in the study.
2. Within each school, simple random sampling was applied to select 8 teachers, ensuring a fair representation across gender, years of experience, and subject specialisation.
3. For the qualitative component, 10 teachers were purposively selected for in-depth interviews based on their active participation in informal groups, while two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, each with 6 participants.

Research Instruments

Two major instruments were employed for data collection:

1. **Structured Questionnaire:** This consisted of both closed-ended and Likert-scale items designed to measure teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of informal group membership. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: demographic information, perceived benefits, and perceived challenges of informal groups.

2. **Interview/Focus Group Guide:** Semi-structured interview questions and FGD prompts were developed to explore teachers' experiences, perceptions, and narratives concerning informal group membership in greater detail.

Validity and Reliability of Instruments

To ensure validity, the questionnaire and interview guide were reviewed by two experts in educational psychology and organisational behaviour. A pilot study was conducted with 25 teachers from a private school not included in the main study. Feedback from the pilot led to minor revisions in wording and structure. Reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.81, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher obtained formal permission from school authorities before administering the instruments. Questionnaires were distributed and collected directly by the researcher with the assistance of trained research assistants to ensure a high response rate. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in neutral locations within the schools at agreed times, recorded (with participants' consent), and transcribed verbatim. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed.

Method of Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. For the quantitative aspect, responses gathered through questionnaires were systematically coded and analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. In cases where further insights were required, simple inferential tests, such as the chi-square test, were employed to examine possible relationships between demographic variables and teachers' perceptions of informal group membership. On the qualitative side, transcripts obtained from interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were subjected to thematic analysis. Through this process, emerging themes were carefully identified, organised into categories of benefits and challenges, and interpreted in line with existing literature and the theoretical frameworks guiding the study. This dual analytical strategy ensured that both numerical trends and in-depth personal experiences were captured, thereby enriching the overall findings of the research.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results of the study based on data collected from private school teachers in Uyo Metropolis. Findings are presented in line with the research objectives, beginning with descriptive statistical analysis of questionnaire responses, followed by qualitative themes from interviews and focus group discussions. The integration of both approaches provides a comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of informal group membership.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 4.1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 120)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	48	40.0
	Female	72	60.0
Age	20–29	35	29.2
	30–39	50	41.7
	40 and above	35	29.2
Teaching Experience	1–5 years	40	33.3
	6–10 years	55	45.8
	Above 10 years	25	20.8

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Perceived Benefits of Informal Group Membership

Teachers' responses to items measuring perceived benefits are summarised in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: Perceived Benefits of Informal Groups

Benefit Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean	SD
Provides emotional support	55.0	35.0	5.0	3.0	2.0	4.38	0.79
Helps in professional advice/exchange	45.0	40.0	8.0	5.0	2.0	4.21	0.84
Reduces stress and work-related frustration	50.0	30.0	10.0	8.0	2.0	4.18	0.91
Enhances sense of belonging and teamwork	48.0	35.0	9.0	6.0	2.0	4.21	0.87

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Interpretation: The results indicate that most teachers strongly agree that informal groups provide emotional support, professional advice, stress reduction, and a sense of belonging.

Perceived Challenges of Informal Group Membership

Teachers also reported challenges associated with informal groups, as shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Perceived Challenges of Informal Groups

Challenge Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean	SD
Leads to favouritism and bias	40.0	35.0	12.0	9.0	4.0	3.98	0.96
Excludes some teachers from participation	42.0	33.0	10.0	10.0	5.0	3.97	1.02
Causes interpersonal conflicts	38.0	32.0	15.0	10.0	5.0	3.88	0.95
Undermines school authority	30.0	28.0	20.0	15.0	7.0	3.59	1.12

Interpretation: The findings suggest that while informal groups are beneficial, they are also perceived as sources of favouritism, exclusion, conflict, and occasional tension with school policies.

Qualitative Findings (Interviews & FGDs)

Analysis of interviews and FGDs yielded four major themes:

Theme 1: Emotional and Social Support

Whenever I feel frustrated, my colleagues in our group encourage me. It feels like family.” (Interviewee 3)

Theme 2: Professional Learning and Collaboration

We share teaching materials and strategies, especially when preparing for external exams.” (FGD Participant 5)

Theme 3: Favouritism and Exclusion

“Sometimes, certain groups leave others out, and this creates division among staff.” (Interviewee 7)

Theme 4: Resistance and Conflict

There are times when groups oppose management decisions, which causes tension.” (FGD Participant 2)

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

Both strands of data confirm that informal groups provide psychosocial and professional benefits, but also pose challenges of exclusion, favouritism, and conflict. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings strengthens the validity of the results and provides a holistic understanding of informal group dynamics among private school teachers in Uyo Metropolis.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section presents a detailed discussion of the results outlined in Chapter Four. The findings are interpreted in relation to the study objectives, the theoretical framework adopted (Social Exchange Theory, Group Dynamics Theory, and Systems Theory), and relevant literature. The chapter further highlights the implications of the findings for practice, policy, and future research. The conclusion synthesises the key insights from the study, while recommendations provide actionable strategies for stakeholders within the education sector.

Perceived Benefits of Informal Group Membership

The study revealed that private school teachers in Uyo Metropolis perceive informal groups as sources of emotional support, stress relief, professional guidance, and a sense of belonging. This suggests that teachers depend on these networks not only for personal encouragement but also for professional collaboration, such as sharing lesson notes, preparing teaching materials, and offering classroom management advice.

This aligns strongly with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), which explains that individuals join and sustain group membership because they expect to receive benefits (emotional, informational, or material) in return for their contributions. In this context, teachers willingly participate in informal groups because they perceive the rewards—mutual encouragement, solidarity, and professional enrichment—as outweighing the costs.

Findings are consistent with Adeyemi and Akpotu (2017), who highlighted that informal peer interactions act as professional learning communities that enrich instructional practices. Similarly, Eze (2021) emphasised that in resource-constrained school environments, informal networks are essential coping mechanisms that enable teachers to overcome challenges such as low pay, inadequate teaching resources, and administrative pressure. At the global level, Robbins & Judge (2019) also affirm that informal groups enhance communication and foster innovation within organisations, making them an indispensable part of workplace dynamics.

Thus, the benefits found in this study reinforce the argument that informal groups should not be dismissed as irrelevant but rather recognised as essential support systems within schools.

Perceived Challenges of Informal Group Membership

Despite the benefits, the study also identified several challenges associated with informal groups, including favouritism, exclusion, interpersonal conflict, gossip, and occasional undermining of

formal authority. Teachers are unacknowledged and are creating feelings of isolation. This confirms the dual nature of informal groups, as they can be both supportive and divisive.

This finding aligns with the principles of Group Dynamics Theory (Lewin, 1947), which posits that groups, once formed, establish their own norms and internal dynamics. While these norms promote cohesion and solidarity among members, they may simultaneously foster negative behaviours such as discrimination, gossip, and resistance to authority. For example, when informal groups value loyalty to the group above institutional goals, they may challenge or resist school policies, creating tension between teachers and management.

This finding resonates with Aina and Oladunjoye (2020), who observed that informal groups in schools can generate division and undermine administrative authority. Similarly, Katz & Kahn (2015) cautioned that informal groups may spread unproductive habits and hinder organisational effectiveness if not properly managed.

In the Nigerian context, where private school teachers often face job insecurity, salary delays, and limited professional development opportunities (Okonkwo, 2020), informal groups may become even more influential. Teachers turn to them for survival strategies, but at the same time, the strong loyalties within these groups may produce resistance to managerial control or create unhealthy competition among staff.

Integration of Findings

Overall, the results of this study reflect the duality of informal groups within private schools in Uyo Metropolis. On one hand, they act as support systems that improve teacher morale, reduce stress, and enhance collaboration. On the other hand, they may generate favouritism, exclusion, and resistance to school authority.

This duality can be explained through Systems Theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968), which views schools as social systems consisting of interdependent subsystems. Informal groups form one of these subsystems, influencing the overall school climate and teacher performance. The findings highlight that informal groups are an integral part of the school system and must therefore be recognised, monitored, and managed strategically by administrators.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore private school teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of informal group membership in Uyo Metropolis, employing a mixed-methods approach. The findings demonstrate that informal groups are both common and influential within private schools, emerging as natural social and professional networks among teachers. These groups play a significant role in shaping the school environment and teacher interactions.

Teachers perceive informal groups as highly beneficial, particularly in offering emotional support, reducing stress, enhancing professional collaboration, and fostering a sense of belonging among

colleagues. Through these networks, teachers build solidarity, share experiences, and create informal systems of support that complement formal organisational structures.

Nevertheless, the study also reveals that informal groups are not without challenges. Issues such as favouritism, exclusion of non-members, gossip, interpersonal conflicts, and occasional resistance to formal school policies were identified. These challenges, if left unaddressed, can undermine harmony, erode organisational authority, and foster divisions among staff.

Overall, the study demonstrates that informal groups serve as both constructive and disruptive subsystems within school environments. Their influence on teacher welfare, collaboration, and organisational outcomes cannot be overlooked in discussions of educational management and organisational behaviour. Consequently, school administrators are encouraged to acknowledge and manage these groups in a constructive manner. By harnessing their positive contributions while minimising their negative effects, administrators can foster stronger collaboration, enhance teacher well-being, and improve overall school effectiveness.

Recommendations

1. School Administrators should encourage inclusivity by creating opportunities for staff bonding that cut across group lines, such as joint workshops, retreats, or team-building exercises.
2. School Administrators should develop conflict management strategies to address favouritism, exclusion, or clique formation. This may include transparent communication channels and grievance-handling mechanisms.
3. School Administrators should integrate informal group contributions into formal decision-making processes by consulting teachers and leveraging their networks to drive school-wide initiatives.
4. Teachers should use informal groups as platforms for professional growth by focusing on peer mentoring, sharing resources, and collaborative problem-solving.
5. Teachers should promote inclusive practices by inviting colleagues to participate in group activities and discouraging exclusionary behaviours.
6. Teachers should maintain a balance between group loyalty and institutional responsibility, ensuring that group activities do not conflict with the school's mission and values.
7. Education Stakeholders should provide training for school leaders on group dynamics and organisational behaviour to equip them with the skills needed to manage both formal and informal structures.
8. Policy makers should improve the working conditions of private school teachers (salary stability, job security, professional development opportunities) to reduce the overdependence on informal groups as coping mechanisms.
9. Education Stakeholders should encourage policies that promote teacher collaboration beyond informal groups, such as structured professional learning communities (PLCs) supported by education authorities.

Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the findings of this study, several areas for further research are suggested. First, a comparative study of public and private schools could be conducted to examine possible differences in the roles and influence of informal groups in these distinct educational settings. Such a comparison would provide a deeper understanding of how organisational structures shape the dynamics of informal networks.

Secondly, a longitudinal study is recommended to examine how informal group dynamics evolve over time and how they may influence key outcomes, such as teacher retention, job satisfaction, and burnout. This approach would offer valuable insights into the long-term implications of informal group membership for both teachers and school effectiveness.

Further research could also investigate the influence of demographic factors, such as gender, age, and cultural affiliation, on the formation and participation in informal groups among teachers. Examining these variables would shed light on the inclusiveness and diversity of informal networks within school environments.

Lastly, expanding the scope of this research to include other states in Nigeria would provide broader insights into regional variations in informal group dynamics. Such studies would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon across different educational and socio-cultural contexts.

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