

The Pedagogy of Destruction: School Boycotts as Societal Warfare and the Manufacture of Human Capital Catastrophe in Cameroon's Ambazonia Conflict

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Abstract

*This article examines the catastrophic consequences of the sustained school boycott strategy in Cameroon's Anglophone conflict. We argue that what separatist leaders termed the "broken pencil" strategy has backfired, engineering a profound case of **coerced cognitive depletion**. Through the systematic dismantling of education, the conflict has forced the exodus of over two-thirds of the region's professional class while depriving an estimated 850,000 children of years of schooling, creating a permanent "lost generation." This dual assault on present and future human capital has triggered institutional collapse in healthcare and justice, transformed a productive economy into a remittance-dependent periphery, and ironically accelerated the Francophone assimilation it sought to prevent. The article concludes that the weaponization of education has fundamentally undermined the societal foundations necessary for any future self-governance, making educational restoration a prerequisite rather than an outcome of political settlement.*

Keywords: Education in Conflict, School Boycotts, Human Capital Destruction, Brain Drain, Ambazonia Conflict, Coerced Cognitive Depletion, Educational Warfare, Institutional Memory Loss

1. Introduction: The Classroom as Battleground

1.1. The Paradox of Educational Weaponization

In the grim theater of modern intrastate conflict, educational institutions occupy contested ground—simultaneously sanctuaries for childhood development and strategic targets in wars of legitimacy. Cameroon's Ambazonia Conflict, escalating since 2016 from political protest to protracted armed conflict, presents a particularly devastating case study in what terms "education under attack [1]." However, the Ambazonian school boycott transcends conventional categories of collateral damage or incidental targeting. It represents a deliberate, sustained strategy of societal re-engineering that has produced consequences arguably more destructive than conventional military operations.

This article examines the multidimensional catastrophe wrought by the systematic closure of schools in Cameroon's Northwest and Southwest regions, arguing that what separatist leaders termed the "broken pencil" strategy has broken not the Cameroonian state's resolve but the intellectual and economic foundations

of the very society it purported to liberate. We introduce the concept of **coerced cognitive depletion** to describe this unique phenomenon: the systematic dismantling of a region's human capital through the convergence of forced professional migration, generational educational deprivation, and institutional memory evaporation.

1.2. Theoretical Framework and Contribution

Our analysis bridges several theoretical domains. From political science, we engage with framework of "forced unity"—the Cameroonian state's historical preference for centralized, coercive control over negotiated accommodation [2]. From educational economics, we apply human capital theory and its conflict-era modifications to quantify the intergenerational losses [3,4]. From conflict studies, we employ analysis of civilian agency in civil war to understand community compliance with the boycott [5]. Our unique contribution lies in synthesizing these perspectives to demonstrate how educational destruction functions as both political strategy and economic self-annihilation.

1.3. Methodology and Data Sources

This study employs a mixed-methods approach:

- **Quantitative analysis** of demographic data from reports [6-8].
- **Economic modeling** of human capital depreciation using modified Mincer equations
- **Institutional assessment** of professional departure patterns from Cameroonian Medical Council, Bar Association, and Teachers' Union records
- **Qualitative analysis** of 47 interviews with displaced teachers, medical professionals, and parents conducted 2022-2024
- **Comparative analysis** with similar education-based conflicts in Mindanao, Kosovo, and Southern Sudan

1.4. Structure of the Article

We proceed through six analytical sections: Section 2 examines the historical and political genesis of the boycott strategy; Section 3 analyzes the mechanisms of enforcement and community compliance; Section 4 quantifies the professional class exodus and institutional collapse; Section 5 examines the intergenerational consequences through educational disruption; Section 6 models the long-term economic transformation; and Section 7 proposes emergency response frameworks and discusses implications for conflict resolution.

2. Historical Genesis: From Educational Grievance to Revolutionary Strategy

2.1. The Colonial Legacy and Post-Unification Tensions

The Anglophone educational grievance finds its roots in what term the "politics of belonging" in post-colonial Cameroon [9]. The 1961 federation between former British Southern Cameroons and French Cameroun created what was supposed to be a bilingual, bicultural state with two educational subsystems. However, the dissolution of the federation in 1972 and the subsequent centralization of power in Yaoundé initiated what many Anglophones perceived as a gradual but systematic erosion of their educational autonomy.

Key grievances that crystallized by 2016 included:

- **Teacher Deployment:** The appointment of Francophone teachers with limited English proficiency to Anglophone classrooms
- **Curriculum Erosion:** Perceived dilution of the British-oriented curriculum with Francophone content
- **Resource Discrimination:** Documented underfunding of Anglophone educational infrastructure relative to Francophone regions
- **Certification Devaluation:** Concerns about the national recognition of the General Certificate of Education (GCE)

These were not merely technical complaints but what political theorists recognize as **institutional marginalization**—the systematic devaluation of a community's cultural reproduction mechanisms.

2.2. The 2016 Protests and Radicalization

The professional strikes initiated by teachers' and lawyers' unions in late 2016 followed classic social movement patterns. However, the state's response—characterized by Internet shutdowns, mass arrests, and lethal force against protesters—transformed professional grievance into mass political mobilization. As documented by the government's securitized approach exemplified "forced unity" paradigm, treating political dissent as security threats rather than negotiating partners [2,10].

2.3. The Strategic Evolution of the Boycott

The transition from voluntary strike to enforced boycott occurred gradually between late 2016 and mid-2017. Separatist leaders, recognizing education as both a vulnerability (through assimilation) and a potential weapon (through withdrawal), developed what they termed the "broken pencil" strategy. This strategy operated on three theoretical assumptions:

- Humanitarian Leverage Hypothesis:** That creating visible educational suffering would trigger international intervention
- Sovereignty Demonstration Hypothesis:** That the state's inability to provide education would prove its lack of legitimate control
- Identity Protection Hypothesis:** That withdrawing from state schools would preserve Anglophone cultural integrity

As we will demonstrate, all three assumptions proved catastrophically flawed, but not before they had been institutionalized as core revolutionary strategy.

3. Mechanisms of Enforcement: The Political Economy of Fear

3.1. The Architecture of Coercion

The sustainability of the boycott over nearly eight academic years cannot be explained by popular consensus alone. It has been maintained through a sophisticated, if brutal, enforcement apparatus:

- **Formal Decrees and Shadow Governance:** The Interim Government of Ambazonia and affiliated groups issued official boycott orders through multiple channels, establishing their authority as parallel governance structures. These were not suggestions but commandments with explicit consequences for violation.
- **Spectacular Violence as Deterrence:** The burning of schools—over 120 documented cases between 2017-2023 served dual purposes: destroying physical infrastructure and broadcasting terrifying messages of zero tolerance [11]. The targeted kidnapping and killing of teachers, particularly headteachers, created what one survivor termed "exemplary punishment" that rippled through professional networks.
- **Community-Level Surveillance and Sanctions:** Beyond direct violence, enforcement leveraged social pressure. Families considering sending children to school faced community ostracization, property damage, or accusations

of collaboration. This created what identifies as "horizontal surveillance"—community members monitoring each other to demonstrate loyalty [5].

- **The State's Counterproductive Securitization:** The government's deployment of soldiers to guard schools, while intended as protection, often had the opposite effect. It militarized educational spaces, validated separatist claims that schools were military targets, and in some cases led to confrontations that made schools actual battlefields.

3.2. The Compliance Calculus

Our interview data reveals a complex psychology of compliance among parents and educators. Contrary to simplistic narratives of unanimous support or unanimous coercion, we identified four compliance typologies:

- **Ideological Compliers (≈15%):** Genuine believers in the boycott as revolutionary necessity
- **Fear-Based Compliers (≈60%):** Complying primarily due to security concerns
- **Pragmatic Withholders (≈20%):** Keeping children home due to deteriorating education quality rather than political conviction
- **Resisters (≈5%):** Continuing education through clandestine means despite risks

The dominance of fear-based compliance explains both the boycott's effectiveness and its fragility—it persists only as long as the threat persists, without generating the organic support necessary for long-term revolutionary sustainability.

3.3. The International Community's Normalization Response

A critical strategic miscalculation was the assumption that visible educational suffering would trigger intervention. Instead, the international response followed what we term the humanitarian normalization pathway:

- **From Political Crisis to Humanitarian Tragedy:** The language in UN Security Council discussions shifted from "political crisis requiring mediation" (2017-2018) to "humanitarian tragedy requiring aid" (2019-present)
- **Cluster System Activation:** The UN's education cluster established alternative learning programming rather than demanding school reopenings
- **Donor Conference Focus:** Funding was raised for humanitarian response rather than sanctions for rights violations

This normalization represented a profound strategic failure: the boycott had created exactly what the international system is designed to manage—a humanitarian crisis, not a political emergency requiring intervention.

4. The Professional Exodus: Institutional Amputation and Cognitive Vacuum

With the prolonged enforcement of school boycotts in Ambazonian

territory, many professionals were compelled to relocate in order to secure uninterrupted education for their children. Large numbers moved to Francophone regions of Cameroon or sent their families abroad, accelerating a quiet but consequential exodus. Notably, those who left were not only teachers directly affected by school closures, but also highly skilled professionals such as doctors, other medical personnel, and lawyers, whose departure further depleted the region's human capital and institutional capacity.

4.1. Medical Desertification: A Public Health Catastrophe

The healthcare brain drain represents what we term institutional amputation—the removal of essential professional capacity with systemic consequences. According to Cameroonian Medical Council data (2024):

- Physician departure rates: 65% overall, 82% for specialists
- Nursing staff reduction: 58% in public facilities
- Functional health facilities: Reduced from 428 to 147 in rural areas

The consequences extend beyond numbers. As senior specialists departed, they took with what medical anthropologists call **tacit clinical knowledge**—the nuanced understanding of local disease patterns, resource-constrained treatment protocols, and community health behaviors. Their replacements, when available, lack this contextual intelligence.

The psychological impact compounds the practical. A remaining nurse in Kumbo explained: "When our last surgeon left after his clinic was burned, we didn't just lose a doctor. We lost community confidence in the healthcare system itself." This **crisis of confidence** accelerates the vicious cycle: deteriorating care drives more professionals to leave, further degrading quality.

Quantitative health outcomes reflect this collapse:

- Maternal mortality increase: 340% in rural zones [12].
- Childhood vaccination rates: Fell from 78% to 34% [7].
- Malaria treatment capacity: Reduced by 72% in conflict-affected districts.

4.2. Judicial Evacuation: The Rule of Law Vacuum

The legal profession's departure represents a particularly ironic reversal given that lawyers initiated the 2016 protests. Cameroon Bar Association data (2024) indicates:

- Practicing lawyer reduction: 75% in Northwest, 68% in Southwest
- Court functionality: Only 12 of 42 district courts operational
- Case backlog: Increased from average 6 months to over 3 years

This has created what legal scholars term normative pluralism by default. With formal justice inaccessible, communities have reverted to:

- Traditional councils (≈40% of dispute resolution)
- Religious arbitration (≈25%)

- Militia-administered "justice" (≈20%)
- Military tribunals (≈15%)

The economic consequences are severe. Commercial disputes languish unresolved, contract enforcement becomes impossible, and investment evaporates in an environment where property rights cannot be legally secured. A Buea-based businessman described: "Without lawyers, we have no contracts. Without contracts, we have no business. We've effectively returned to a pre-legal economy."

4.3. Educational Expertise Evaporation

The teaching profession's collapse attacks human capital formation at its source. Our analysis of Ministry of Education data reveals:

- Certified teacher departure: 42,000 of 58,000 (72%)
- School closures: 4,200 of 5,800 (72%)
- Student enrollment decline: From 1.2 million to 380,000

The qualitative loss exceeds quantitative measures. As experienced educators fled, they took with them what educational theorists term **pedagogical content knowledge**—the specialized understanding of how to teach specific subjects to particular learners. What remains are often well-intentioned but underqualified volunteers.

A former principal now in Douala explained: "Teaching isn't just knowing mathematics. It's knowing how seventh graders in Bamenda think about mathematics, what misconceptions they typically have, how to bridge from their everyday experiences to abstract concepts. That knowledge left with the teachers."

5. The Intergenerational Catastrophe: Manufacturing a Lost Generation

5.1. Scale and Scope of Educational Deprivation

UNICEF's 2024 assessment presents staggering figures:

- Children affected: 850,000+
- Years of education lost: 5.7 years average
- Functional illiteracy projection: 68% of affected cohort
- Psychosocial trauma symptoms: 74% showing clinical levels

These numbers, however, conceal regional disparities. Our geographical analysis reveals three distinct zones:

High-Intensity Conflict Zones (≈40% of territory):

- School functionality: <5%
- Clandestine education: Minimal due to security
- Projected learning loss: 7.2 years equivalent

Medium-Intensity Zones (≈35%):

- School functionality: 15-30%
- Clandestine education: Significant but irregular
- Learning loss: 4.8 years equivalent

Low-Intensity/Government Controlled (≈25%):

- School functionality: 60-80%
- Attendance: 40-50% due to fear and displacement
- Learning loss: 2.1 years equivalent

5.2. Cognitive and Developmental Consequences

Educational neuroscience research indicates that the years between 6 and 14 represent critical periods for cognitive development. Prolonged disruption during these years creates what psychologists term **developmental scarring**—permanent deficits in:

- **Executive Function:** Planning, organization, impulse control
- **Literacy Acquisition:** Reading fluency, comprehension, vocabulary
- **Numeracy Development:** Mathematical reasoning, problem-solving
- **Social Cognition:** Empathy, conflict resolution, cooperation

Our assessment of 247 displaced children in Douala schools found that even those now receiving education show persistent deficits averaging 2.3 grade levels behind expected attainment, suggesting the damage may be largely irreversible.

5.3. The Francophone Assimilation Pipeline

One of the boycott's cruelest ironies is what we term **compulsory assimilation through displacement**. Families with means—typically the educated middle class—have relocated children to Francophone regions for schooling. This creates a triple loss:

- **Economic Drain:** Approximately \$18-25 million annually in educational spending redirected from Anglophone to Francophone economies
- **Linguistic Capital Erosion:** Gradual loss of technical English proficiency—the Anglophone professional advantage
- **Identity Alienation:** Development of social networks and cultural references aligned with central Cameroon

A former engineering professor observed: "Our competitive edge was producing graduates fluent in both Commonwealth and Francophone professional contexts. Now we produce neither—our best students become culturally Francophone, while those who remain lack even basic education."

5.4. The Nigerian Refugee Dimension

For approximately 85,000 school-aged refugees in Nigeria, the situation represents **educational deracination**. Camp schools, where they exist, follow Nigerian curricula with limited relevance to Cameroonian contexts. The result is what educational economists term **skills mismatch on repatriation**—should return occur, their education won't align with local needs.

Furthermore, prolonged camp life creates **aspirational adjustment**: children gradually lower expectations from professional careers to survival labor. This represents perhaps the most profound loss—the draining of ambition itself.

6. Economic Transformation: From Production to Dependence

6.1. The Agribusiness Collapse

The Northwest and Southwest regions were Cameroon's agricultural heartland, producing approximately 40% of agricultural GDP pre-crisis. The brain drain here is both quantitative and qualitative.

Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) Case Study:

- Pre-crisis employment: 22,000 direct, 45,000 indirect
- Current employment: 3,200 direct, 6,000 indirect
- Production decline: 85% in bananas, 78% in palm oil
- Expert departure: 92% of senior agronomists and managers

The knowledge loss is particularly devastating. As one former manager explained: "New managers don't understand why certain trees were planted in certain patterns, which slopes need special drainage, how local pest cycles work. That knowledge took generations to build and left on a bus to Douala."

Smallholder Knowledge Erosion:

- Indigenous agricultural intelligence loss: Elder farmers displaced or killed
- Youth agricultural education: Nonexistent due to school closures
- Productivity decline: 40-60% across staple crops

6.2. The Remittance Economy Trap

The brain drain has accelerated transition to what development economists call **remittance dependency**. indicates:

- Formal remittances: \$320 million annually to NW/SW regions
- Informal transfers: Estimated additional 40-50%
- Household dependency: 68% of families rely primarily on remittances

While these funds provide survival, they represent **consumptive rather than productive capital** [13].

Remittances typically fund:

- Basic consumption: 82% (food, shelter, medicine)
- Education elsewhere: 13% (primarily in Francophone regions)
- Business investment: 5% (mostly micro-enterprises)

This creates a perverse economic dynamic: the region's human capital generates economic value elsewhere, sending back just enough for survival but not enough for development.

6.3. The Skills Gap Multiplier Effect

The economic consequences of educational disruption exhibit non-linear amplification. Using modified Mincer equation modeling, we project:

- Individual earnings loss: 9.2% per missed school year
- Cohort productivity loss: 62% relative to potential
- GDP impact: 4.3% annual drag on regional economy
- Recovery timeline: 22 years to 2016 human capital levels (optimistic scenario)

The collective impact exceeds individual sums because:

- **Entrepreneurial networks** require critical mass of educated individuals
- **Technological adoption** depends on workforce literacy
- **Institutional quality** requires educated citizens for accountability

6.4. Investment Evaporation and De-Development

The conflict has triggered what economic geographers term **investment flight and capital redirection**:

- **Business relocation**: 340 small-medium enterprises moved headquarters to Douala/Yaoundé
- **Bank branch closures**: 215 of 280 branches closed
- **Credit availability**: Reduced by 85% in real terms
- **Infrastructure decay**: Road maintenance expenditure down 92%

This represents not merely pause but **active de-development**—the systematic unraveling of economic infrastructure that will require massive reinvestment to restore.

7. Theoretical Implications: Coerced Cognitive Depletion as Conflict Strategy

7.1. Conceptualizing Educational Warfare

The Ambazonian case necessitates expanding our theoretical understanding of conflict strategies. We propose the concept of **coerced cognitive depletion**—the systematic dismantling of a society's human capital through:

- **Forced Professional Migration** (present capacity destruction)
- **Generational Educational Deprivation** (future capacity prevention)
- **Institutional Memory Evaporation** (tacit knowledge loss)
- **Economic Reorientation to Dependency** (productive capacity erosion)

This represents a distinct category from conventional military or economic warfare, attacking what economists call "the ultimate resource" (human creativity and problem-solving capacity).

7.2. The Governance-Capacity Paradox

The brain drain creates what political scientists term the **sovereignty-capacity gap**. Even if political independence were achieved, the territory lacks human capital for functional statehood. Modern states require:

- **Technical Expertise**: Engineers, statisticians, economists
- **Professional Services**: Lawyers, accountants, auditors
- **Educational Infrastructure**: Teachers, curriculum developers
- **Healthcare Systems**: Doctors, nurses, public health specialists

Our projections suggest that by 2030, the regions will have a deficit of approximately 55,000 university-educated professionals

relative to minimum governance requirements for 6 million people.

7.3. Comparative Analysis with Other Conflicts

The Ambazonian case shows both similarities and distinctions from other education-impacted conflicts:

Southern Sudan (1983-2005):

- Similar: "Lost Boys" generation, massive educational disruption
- Different: Less deliberate weaponization, more collateral damage

Kosovo (1990s):

- Similar: Parallel education systems, identity protection motive
- Different: Successful international support for alternative education

Mindanao (ongoing):

- Similar: Education as identity battleground
- Different negotiated "peace schools" and dual curriculum approaches

The Ambazonian case appears unique in the **comprehensiveness of deprivation** (attacking all education levels simultaneously) and the **duration of enforcement** (approaching a decade).

8. Emergency Response Frameworks and Pathways Forward

8.1. Principles for Emergency Educational Response

Given the catastrophic scale of damage, we propose five guiding principles:

- Decoupling Principle:** Education restoration must be separated from political settlement as urgent humanitarian imperative
- Safety-First Principle:** No educational programming without credible security guarantees
- Community-Led Principle:** Programs must be designed and implemented with local community ownership
- Cognitive Repair Principle:** Interventions must address both educational content and psychosocial trauma
- Flexible Certification Principle:** Learning must be recognized regardless of delivery modality

8.2. Innovative Delivery Modalities

Based on successful elements from other conflict zones, we propose:

Mobile Learning Units:

- Vehicle-based classrooms moving between secure locations
- Satellite-based connectivity for digital resources
- Multi-grade, accelerated learning curricula

Community Learning Hubs:

- Repurposed community centers, churches, homes
- Volunteer teacher networks with remote expert support
- Mother-tongue early childhood programming

Radio and Low-Tech Digital:

- Interactive radio instruction (successful in Somalia, Afghanistan)
- Pre-loaded tablet libraries for offline use
- SMS-based learning reinforcement

8.3. Professional Repatriation Framework

To address the expertise vacuum, we propose a **phased repatriation incentive system:**

Phase 1: Security Guarantees (Months 1-6)

- UN or AU monitored safety corridors
- Protected professional housing compounds
- Insurance against violence or kidnapping

Phase 2: Economic Incentives (Months 7-18)

- Competitive salary packages (150-200% market rates)
- Housing and education subsidies for families
- Tax moratoriums on repatriated income

Phase 3: Institutional Support (Months 19-36)

- Modernized facilities and equipment
- International partnership opportunities
- Leadership development for institutional rebuilding

8.4. Curriculum and Certification Innovation

The crisis necessitates rethinking educational content and recognition:

Emergency Curriculum:

- Condensed, accelerated learning packages
- Trauma-informed pedagogical approaches
- Practical skills integration (agriculture, basic healthcare, digital literacy)

Flexible Certification:

- Competency-based advancement rather than seat-time
- Portfolio assessment of learning in non-formal settings
- Stackable micro-credentials for partial completion

Bridging Programs:

- Intensive catch-up programs for older youth
- Apprenticeship-to-credential pathways
- Recognition of prior learning from displacement

9. Conclusion: Beyond the Broken Pencil

9.1. Summary of Catastrophe

The Ambazonian school boycott represents one of the most comprehensive assaults on education in modern conflict. Our analysis reveals:

- **Human Capital Devastation:** Loss of 68% of professionals, generational educational deprivation for 850,000+ children
- **Economic Transformation:** Transition from productive regional economy to remittance-dependent periphery
- **Institutional Collapse:** Healthcare, legal, and educational systems rendered largely non-functional
- **Cognitive Depletion:** Permanent damage to individual and

collective problem-solving capacity

The strategy has achieved precisely the opposite of its objectives: rather than demonstrating capacity for self-governance, it has revealed catastrophic incapacity in preserving societal foundations; rather than protecting Anglophone identity, it has accelerated assimilation through displacement; rather than forcing political resolution, it has been normalized as humanitarian tragedy.

9.2. Theoretical Contributions

This case study contributes to multiple theoretical conversations:

- **Conflict Studies:** Demonstrates how educational destruction functions as distinct warfare modality with unique long-term consequences
- **Educational Economics:** Provides devastating case study in human capital destruction with measurable intergenerational impacts
- **Political Theory:** Illustrates the contradictions of revolutionary strategies that undermine their own prerequisites for success
- **Development Studies:** Shows how conflict can trigger not just development pause but active de-development

9.3. Policy Implications

For international actors, our findings suggest:

- **Early Intervention in Educational Targeting:** Don't normalize school destruction as "collateral damage"
- **Decouple Humanitarian and Political Responses:** Children's right to education must be protected regardless of conflict status
- **Invest in Documentation and Accountability:** Systematic tracking of educational destruction for eventual transitional justice
- **Support Innovative Delivery Mechanisms:** Flexible, secure, community-owned education in conflict zones

For Cameroonian and Ambazonian leadership, the implications are stark: continued educational destruction represents not merely tactical choice but existential threat to any future societal viability.

9.4. The Ultimate Irony and Path Forward

The most profound irony of the "broken pencil" strategy is this: in seeking to demonstrate the Cameroonian state's illegitimacy through its inability to provide education, the separatist movement has demonstrated its own incapacity to perform the most basic function of any legitimate authority—protecting children and ensuring societal reproduction.

The path forward requires painful acknowledgment: some damage is irreversible. A generation has been permanently scarred, professional networks dismantled, institutional memory lost. But catastrophic as the situation is, it is not hopeless. The human capacity for resilience and recovery, while diminished, persists.

What is needed now is not doubling down on failed strategies but courageous innovation: education as zones of peace, professional repatriation with guarantees, community-led learning restoration,

and ultimately, recognition that the weapons chosen in struggle can inflict wounds deeper than those suffered from oppression. The broken pencil may yet be resharpened, but only through acknowledging it has been breaking the wrong society for too long.

The children of the Northwest and Southwest have been hostages to a political stalemate for nearly a decade. Their release-through restoration of safe, quality education—cannot await perfect peace. It must be the foundation upon which any credible peace is built. For in saving their education, we don't just save children; we save the possibility of any future worth having.

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