

MISPLACED PRIORITIES IN THE TEACHING PROFESSION AND THE INCREASE IN SPECIALIZATION MISMATCH IN NIGERIA

Agbovu, Daniel and Chukwuma, Charity Mgbeodichinma
Department of Educational Management
Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State Nigeria

Email: daniel.agbovu@uniport.edu.ng, charitychukwuma88@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The teaching profession in Nigeria is grappling with a significant issue of misplaced priorities. In comparison with other professions like medicine, law, and engineering, teaching is often undervalued and not given the recognition it deserves. This lack of respect has resulted in a decrease in motivation among teachers and an increase in the number of teachers leaving the profession. The lack of incentives and societal respect associated with teaching has caused talented individuals who would have excelled as teachers to pursue other careers. This has led to a mismatch between the skills required for teaching and the skills of those who fill the vacancies, resulting in a decline in the quality of education. Thus, the paper explored the misplaced priorities in the teaching profession and the increase in specialization mismatch in Nigeria. Base on extensive review of literature, the paper identified areas where the teaching profession has misplaced its priorities, including salaries and work performance incentive policies, policies on technology utilisation for teaching and learning, teachers' pedagogical training, administrative efficiency of the school head, and political nepotism. This mismatch has led to a decline in the quality of education. Therefore, there is a pressing need for comprehensive reforms in the education sector to address the issue of misplaced priorities in the teaching profession. The paper suggests that financial incentives or rewards can be given to teachers who specialise in high-demand or understaffed subjects to increase their availability. Educators can also enhance the relevance and engagement of their profession for students by incorporating technology into their curriculum, and quality professional training programmes can equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to improve their specialisation.

Keywords: Misplaced Priorities, Teaching, Profession, Specialisation, Mismatch.

INTRODUCTION

Education is the backbone of any society, and teachers play a crucial role in shaping the future. However, in Nigeria, it appears that the education system's priorities are misplaced, which has led to a significant mismatch in the teaching profession. The Nigerian education system has long overlooked the importance of ensuring that teachers are adequately trained and qualified. As a result, unqualified and poorly trained individuals are allowed to become teachers, leading to a decline in the quality of education. The doom already looms over the education system as unqualified teachers struggle to effectively impart knowledge and meet the demands of the curriculum. This not only hampers students' learning experience but also undermines the future of the nation, as a strong educational foundation is crucial for societal development and progress.

Ejima (2012) noted that a teacher's quality depends on their preparation for a professional role as a distinct practitioner. This implies that proper training and education are paramount for teachers to be effective in their roles. Unfortunately, not all teacher education and training programs aspire to the same high-quality standard, leading to a significant variation in the quality of teachers. This variation can significantly impact the overall effectiveness of teachers in the classroom if not addressed and improved. Ololube (2012) also observed that not all teacher education and training programmes aspire to the same high-quality standard. In other words, there is a possibility that some teacher education and training programs may not adequately prepare teachers for their professional roles. This variation in the quality of teacher education and training programs can have

a significant impact on the overall effectiveness of teachers in the classroom if not addressed and improved.

Teachers are often seen as having a less prestigious and financially rewarding profession compared to other professions such as medicine or law. This perception is based on several factors, including relatively lower salaries and lack of social recognition for teachers, the absence of teaching standards, poor working conditions and facilities, inadequate quality pedagogical training, ineffective leadership and performance, and political nepotism (Alexis & Erica 2018; Khalid et al., 2022).

Despite significant developments in policy creation, programs, and workshops in the Nigerian education system, there has been a misplacement of priorities. This has resulted in an inequitable distribution of resources, inadequate funding, and a focus on quantity rather than quality of education. Additionally, there is a lack of accountability and monitoring mechanisms in place to ensure that educational policies are effectively implemented and evaluated (Ogunjemilua & Adegboye, 2014).

The misplaced priority in the teaching profession has led to a decline in the number of highly qualified individuals pursuing careers in education. As a result, the education system suffers from a shortage of skilled and dedicated teachers, impacting the quality of education provided to students. Instead, the profession is often filled with individuals who may not have the necessary qualifications or passion for teaching, further exacerbating the issues faced by the education system (Eduwen & Osagie-Obazee, 2016). This lack of highly qualified teachers can lead to a lack of effective instruction and support for students, hindering their academic growth and overall development (Kolo, 2013).

To prevent a further decline in the quality of education and the future of the nation, it is crucial that the misplaced priorities in the education system are addressed. This paper explores the misplaced priorities in the teaching profession and the increase in specialization mismatch in Nigeria.

Teaching: A profession or occupation?

The argument and lack of agreement as to what teaching is among scholars is the reason why there is no generally accepted definition of teaching. Different scholars have different perspectives on what teaching entails, leading to a lack of consensus in the academic community. Additionally, the diverse nature of educational contexts and approaches further complicates the task of defining teaching in a universally applicable manner. Teaching is a deliberate and purposeful act of imparting knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to learners to facilitate their intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development (Akinduyo, 2014). Samuel and Adekunle (2019) define teaching as the act of facilitating learning while promoting the holistic development of students, including fostering social, emotional, and physical growth. Based on the foregoing, it can be deduced that teaching involves imparting knowledge, skills, or information to others through various instructional methods. It requires guiding and facilitating learning experiences, fostering critical thinking, and promoting personal growth and development.

The debate over whether teaching is a profession or occupation has been ongoing for many years. Some argue that teaching is a profession due to the specialized knowledge and skills required, while others view it as an occupation because it lacks certain characteristics typically associated with professions, such as autonomy and high levels of prestige. As stated by Amaele and Amaele (2003), a profession is defined as an occupation that provides a valuable service by utilising a structured set of knowledge to solve issues that are pertinent to the wants and requirements of the community. Yahyah (2004) described a profession as an occupation that is based on specialized and organized skills, knowledge, and intellectual competence. He further explained that professionals obtain raw materials from society and use them to achieve specific objectives. As a result, professionals typically have clients who seek their services and can terminate the relationship at any time.

Realistically, teaching does not fit the bill for what Samuel and Adekunle (2019) define as a profession. They listed eight characteristics of a profession, including (1) professional knowledge and competence, (2) professional code of ethics, (3) professional organization, (4) controlled entrance, (5) freedom of practice, (6) professional and in-service growth, (7) legal recognition, and (8) period of internship or apprenticeship. From the foregoing, it is clear that teaching does not

meet all of these criteria. While teachers possess professional knowledge and competence, they may not have a specific professional code of ethics or a unified professional organization. Additionally, the entrance into the teaching profession is not always controlled, and there may be limitations on freedom of practice depending on educational policies and regulations.

Consequently, teaching shares some similarities with other professions, such as the need for competence and continuous growth, but it also has distinct challenges and characteristics. Teachers often need to adapt their teaching methods to cater to diverse learning styles and individual student needs. Furthermore, they play a significant role in shaping young minds and creating a positive learning environment. These elements add to the complexity and importance of the teaching profession. However, since teaching cannot be standardized or measured in the same way as other professions, such as medicine, engineering, or law, it cannot be classified as a profession. Instead, it is an occupation that still requires a certain level of skill and expertise, though not the same level of specialized training or certification as a profession. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the impact that teachers have on society and the valuable contributions they make to education.

Specialisation Mismatch in the Teaching Profession

The term "mismatch" refers to a situation where there is a discrepancy or misalignment between an individual's skills and qualifications and the requirements of a particular job or profession (Musau & Migosi, 2015). According to Pitan, and Adedeji (2012), a mismatch can occur if individuals possess either too few or too many skills for a specific job, which can result in inefficiency, decreased productivity, and job dissatisfaction for both the employee and the employer. Additionally, a mismatch can lead to higher turnover rates and increased costs for organisations due to the need for additional training or recruitment efforts to address the skills gap.

When it comes to the teaching profession, Pitan, and Adedeji (2012), explained that a specialisation mismatch occurs when teachers are assigned to teach subjects or grade levels that are outside their area of expertise. This can have significant implications for both teachers and students. A specialisation mismatch can result in lower-quality instruction, and a lack of depth in the curriculum, and ultimately hinder students' learning outcomes and overall academic performance. Additionally, a mismatch in specialisation can also lead to decreased job satisfaction for teachers, as they may feel ill-equipped to effectively teach subjects outside their expertise.

In Nigeria, the teaching profession suffers from a significant specialisation mismatch, with many teachers being assigned to teach subjects they have little to no training or experience in. This not only affects the quality of education provided to students but also impacts the overall development of the education system in the country. Okebukola (2015) emphasised that, unlike other professions such as medicine, law, or engineering, where professionals work within their expertise, the teaching profession lacks a proper system for matching teachers with their areas of expertise, resulting in a mismatch that hinders the effectiveness of education delivery.

Misplaced Educational Priorities and their Impact on the increase in Specialisation Mismatch in Nigeria

The misplacement of the educational system's priorities in Nigeria is a pressing issue that needs to be addressed. Akinyemi et al. (2012) think that there is a disconnect between policy and practice in the educational system, leading to ineffective implementation of educational programmes. Akinyemi et al. (2012) further argues that the policy statements in the Nigerian educational system are considered mere rhetoric with little to no practical application in the classroom. For instance, this misalignment between policy and practice has resulted in a lack of emphasis on crucial subjects such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), which are essential for the country's development. Consequently, some areas where the Nigerian educational system can be said to have misplaced its priorities, which has led to an increase in the prevalence of specialisation mismatch in the teaching profession include:

i. Salaries and work performance incentive policies

An efficiently designed educational policy should give utmost importance to a well-structured compensation system that provides teachers with motivating incentives. Research has shown that implementing pay programmes that are tied to performance can effectively enhance the work efforts, job satisfaction, determination, and retention rates of teachers (Gius, 2013; Imberman, 2015; Cai et al., 2018). Research has also shown that the implementation of performance incentives has a beneficial effect on professional dedication and instructional practises, resulting in noteworthy alterations in teaching methodologies (Vigdor, 2008; Lavy, 2009).

Studies conducted by Aydin et al. (2015) and Mutluer & Yüksel (2019) have shown that higher financial earnings play a significant role in preserving one's social standing. Conversely, individuals with lower incomes often experience stress, disappointment, and dissatisfaction, as highlighted by Spiegelman (2018). Earning less hurts teachers' well-being, which is why incentives based on performance are crucial to maintaining their motivation and dedication (Britton & Propper, 2016). The lack of incentives affects the social well-being of teachers, making it difficult for them to maintain a certain social status. Focus group participants have claimed that low pay results in lower social well-being and a negative image in society. Therefore, it is essential to incentivize hard-working teachers to ensure that they feel valued and motivated.

In Nigeria, many teachers struggle with financial hardships due to low salaries. This not only affects their motivation and job satisfaction but also hinders their ability to provide quality education to their students. The lack of financial stability may also discourage talented individuals from pursuing teaching as a career, further exacerbating the shortage of qualified educators in the country. These issues can be attributed to systemic problems within the education system, such as inadequate funding and a lack of support for teachers. Without addressing these underlying problems, it will be difficult to attract and retain highly skilled educators who can effectively educate the next generation of Nigerian students.

As a result, teaching is often left as a last resort for those who cannot find employment in other fields, leading to a lack of passion and dedication in the classroom. This not only hinders the quality of education provided but also perpetuates a cycle of underperformance and low educational attainment. Therefore, the government and other relevant stakeholders must recognise the importance of investing in education and prioritize initiatives that address these systemic issues. This will ensure that teaching becomes an attractive and respected profession for highly qualified individuals who can provide quality education and positively impact the future of Nigerian students.

ii. Policy on technology utilisation for teaching and learning

In 2013, the Nigerian government implemented a policy aimed at integrating information and communication technology (ICT) into secondary school education. The policy emphasized the importance of providing schools with modern technological tools and training teachers on how to effectively use them for teaching and learning. However, despite this policy, many schools in Nigeria still lack access to basic technological resources, which hinders the successful implementation of technology-based teaching methods. According to research by Bonnie and Tijani (2020), issues such as a lack of ICT skills, poor internet connectivity, and a lack of awareness and use of electronic information resources by some students are some of the factors affecting the implementation of this policy.

However, in contrast, Han et al. (2017) discovered that the utilisation of technology has notably amplified teachers' intention and self-assurance, with teachers firmly convinced that technology plays a pivotal role in upholding the teaching profession in contemporary society (Bowman et al., 2020). In his 2012 study, Kurt emphasised the importance of incorporating practicality into teaching through the use of technological tools. Teachers view technology as a means to facilitate the teaching process. According to the study participants, teachers' professional sustainability is enhanced by the presence of technical instruments.

In Nigeria, the integration of technology in teaching is insufficient. According to a study by Muhammad and Hussaini (2022), most teachers in Nigeria lack access to basic technological resources, making it difficult for them to incorporate technology into their classrooms. This not only hinders the professional development of teachers but also limits students' exposure to modern teaching methods, leading to educational inequality and a higher rate of specialization mismatch among graduates. Without access to technology, teachers are unable to keep up with the rapidly changing digital landscape, leaving them ill-equipped to prepare students for the demands of the modern workforce.

Consequently, the teaching profession often becomes stagnant and outdated as teachers struggle to adapt their instructional methods to meet the needs of 21st-century learners. As a result of these challenges, many talented individuals are drawn to other fields that offer better opportunities and resources, exacerbating the problem of a shortage of qualified and passionate educators who can effectively integrate technology into the classroom and bridge the digital divide for all students. This can result in students graduating without the necessary skills and knowledge required for success in today's technology-driven society. Furthermore, the lack of technology in classrooms perpetuates educational inequality, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds may not have access to technology outside of school, further widening the digital divide.

iii. **Teacher's pedagogical training**

Quality education requires quality teaching, and quality teaching requires quality professional training. Professional training is essential to refine the skills and competencies of teachers, which in turn improves workability and drives changes in teaching practice, attitudes, and beliefs (Avalos, 2011). Research shows that quality professional training is fundamental to sustaining and gradually improving work engagement, resulting in better educational outcomes (Postholm, 2018).

According to Kostina (2015), it is emphasised that the enhancement of teachers' professional growth plays a crucial role in guaranteeing high-quality teaching and educational success. It enhances their educational abilities, expertise, individual development, and understanding. To achieve desired outcomes, teachers must possess the necessary skills and be empowered to effectively teach in the classroom (Wang et al., 2019). A teacher needs to participate in a professional development programme to enhance their ideas, techniques, and skills, and effectively deliver subject content (Ravhuhali et al., 2015a; Wang et al., 2019). According to Ravhuhali et al. (2015b), teachers should possess desirable qualities such as pedagogical intelligence and professional artistry. Failure to provide quality professional training can lead to a lack of motivation, poor student outcomes, and decreased overall educational quality.

In Nigeria, the education system places greater value on academic qualifications than on continuous professional development for teachers. This approach, however, can hinder their ability to adjust to advancements in teaching methods and technologies, which in turn affects the quality of education provided to students. Ahmodu et al. (2015) found that the lack of emphasis on pedagogical training also contributes to a mismatch in specialisations among teachers. As a result, non-specialist teachers are often assigned to teach subjects outside their area of specialisation, leading to a lack of depth and expertise in that field. Consequently, students may not receive the necessary knowledge and understanding, which can hinder their academic growth.

iv. **Administrative efficiency of the school head**

Effective leadership is paramount in shaping school policies, implementing them, and improving the overall performance of the school system. It is widely acknowledged that the administrative environment has a significant impact on a teacher's working life, and leadership plays an instrumental role in ensuring that teachers are effective in their jobs (Toropova et al., 2021). The modern view of leadership is different from the traditional role of a principal in the school, and school leaders must adapt to this changing landscape.

Communication is a crucial factor in effective leadership, and school leaders, teachers, and staff must communicate effectively with one another (Day & Sammons, 2016). This not only motivates and commits them to the profession but also builds a social consensus that leads to increased achievement and benefits educational development. Conversely, poor working relations and inadequate leadership support can lead to decreased satisfaction and professional determination among teachers, ultimately having a detrimental effect on the school system (Simon & Johnson, 2015).

In Nigeria, secondary school headteachers are encountering a significant hurdle in cultivating positive working relationships with their teachers. Regrettably, a lack of effective communication and collaboration between the two groups, coupled with the hierarchical nature of the education system, accounts for this. The Ministry of Education frequently enacts new policies or makes decisions without consulting headteachers or teachers, leading them to feel excluded and powerless. This lack of inclusivity is contributing to an alarming number of teachers leaving the profession, feeling undervalued and unsupported in their roles (Ismail & Mohammed, 2015). Additionally, this lack of consultation is resulting in ineffective policy implementation, as the authorities may not have a full understanding of the practical implications and challenges faced by schools on a day-to-day basis. As a result, this is impeding progress towards achieving educational objectives, and hampering the overall quality of education in Nigeria.

v. **Political Nepotism**

Nepotism is a practice where political officeholders use their power or authority to appoint their relatives or kinsmen into public offices, to the disadvantage of qualified job seekers. According to Ezumah (2018), this practice is aberrational as it exploits official privileges for personal gain. This practice is widely observed in underdeveloped countries, where politics and nepotism have a significant impact on the education sector. This has led to a decline in the quality of education provided to students and has hindered the development of a merit-based system that rewards hard work and dedication. The lack of accountability and transparency in recruitment and promotion processes within the education sector has further exacerbated this issue. According to Chukwuma et al. (2018), nepotism breeds hate, suspicion, and mutual distrust among ethnic nationalities. Unfortunately, this culture of nepotism has reduced the teaching profession and the nation's educational system to a state of mediocrity and inefficiency.

Without a fair and transparent process for hiring and promoting teachers, there is a lack of motivation and incentive for educators to strive for excellence (Onyibor, 2016; Akinyetun, 2020). This can create a negative cycle where talented teachers may become demoralised and discouraged, further perpetuating the decline in educational quality. Ultimately, addressing these issues of accountability and transparency is crucial to ensuring that students receive the education they deserve and that teachers are recognised and rewarded based on their merit. If not checked, the good brains will leave the teaching profession for unprofessionals, resulting in a significant loss of expertise and knowledge within the education system. This would have detrimental effects on the overall quality of education provided to students, hindering their academic and personal development.

CONCLUSION

The paper discusses the issue of misplaced priorities in the teaching profession and the resulting increase in specialisation mismatches in Nigeria. These problems have significant implications for the quality of education and the overall development of the country. The misplaced priorities in the teaching profession are in the following areas: salaries and work performance incentive policies; policy on technology utilisation for teaching and learning; teacher's pedagogical training; administrative efficiency of the school head; and political nepotism. These misplaced priorities have led to low motivation among teachers, resulting in a decline in the quality of education and an increase in a mismatch in specialisation among teachers. Therefore, the study concludes that there

is a need for comprehensive reforms in the education sector to address the issue of misplaced priorities in the teaching profession, which has led to an increase in specialisation mismatch among teachers.

Suggestions

Based on the discussions, the following suggestions are proffered:

- i. Financial incentives or rewards can be offered to teachers who specialize in high-demand or understaffed subjects to increase their availability.
- ii. By incorporating technology into their curriculum, educators can enhance the relevance and engagement of their profession for students.
- iii. Quality professional training programmes can equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to improve their specialisation.
- iv. Improving the leadership and communication skills of teachers can help schools address the issue of specialisation mismatch.
- v. To ensure that teachers can effectively use their specialized skills and knowledge, strict merit-based hiring practices should be implemented to select candidates based on their qualifications, not personal connections or political affiliations.

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