

Teachers' Commitment to, and Experiences of, the Teaching Profession in Tanzania: Findings of Focus Group Research

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined teachers' commitment to, and experiences of, the teaching profession in six regions of Tanzania. The study used focus group discussions as research method and data collection tool. Twenty four groups were conducted, with group membership ranging from five to nine participants. The results show that the teachers' commitment to the teaching profession is devastatingly low, with the majority of teachers expressing that they did not choose the teaching profession as their choice, but were compelled by the easiness to get the job and lack of qualifications to join other professions of their liking and choice. Teachers highlighted poor working environment and poor government and community attitudes towards the teaching profession as the main de-motivating factors for the teaching profession. In order to raise teachers' commitment to the teaching profession, which is an important contributor to the students' academic achievement; it is recommended that the Government of Tanzania and other stakeholders should improve the teachers working conditions, including provision of housing facilities and social welfare services.

Keywords: Teaching profession, Teachers' commitment, Focus groups, Tanzania

1. Introduction

Provision of quality education is essential for spearheading the socio-economic development. Indeed, many writers have observed that quality education is the most effective way to shape the values, attitudes, behaviours and skills which are important for individuals to function productively in an integrated society. The third committee of the 61st UN General Assembly (GA/SHC/3847) highlighted the importance of quality education in achieving social development, noting that quality education is critical to successful democracy and employment. Similarly, the Tanzania Development Vision 2025 notes that quality in education is important if the country is to respond effectively to the development challenges it is faced with.

There are several measures of quality of education. Two of these are critical and mostly used in many countries. The first one looks at students' performance in basic skills, namely reading, writing and arithmetic. A recent report (Uwezo, 2010) reveals that, though there has been a notable achievement in enrolment, construction of schools and teacher training, children learn very little in Tanzania; by their final year of primary education, children do not have basic numeracy and literacy skills.

The second measure focuses on performance in public examinations. For Tanzania, these are the national examinations organised and administered by the National Examinations Council of Tanzania (NECTA). Public examinations are one of the powerful indicators of standards of education that are used to make judgement about individuals and institutions on the basis of examination results. Examinations are also useful indicators of the extent to which children have learned and they are a useful source of information for parents on making decisions about the future of their children. Using this measure, it can be concluded that standards of education in Tanzania have been falling consistently in the past five years. For example, for the past five years, less than 50 percent of the candidates passed the Form Four National Examinations (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training [MOEVT], 2010). In 2010, 50 percent of the candidates failed the National Form Four Examinations (National Examinations Council of Tanzania, 2010).

Several factors have been attributed to the poor state of quality of education in Tanzania. Mosha (1988; 2011) has summarised these factors into two major categories, namely: contextual factors and input factors. According to Mosha, contextual factors include political, economic, legal, demographic, cultural and international conditions. Input factors include poor institutional leadership, poor funding for the education sector, poor quality of teaching and learning infrastructure, poor quality of teachers and curriculum problems. Quality of education has also been associated with teacher supply and competence, as well as educational leadership quality (Oduro, Dachi & Fertig, 2008). Oduro et al. have argued that education reforms in Africa have mainly focused on expanding access to education with little attention on the quality of education offered.

Most of the factors for poor quality of education identified by previous studies have mainly focused on the inefficient teaching and learning infrastructure. In particular, there have been very few studies that have focused on the quality and commitment of teachers as factors towards effective learning and ultimately successful academic achievement. Indeed, a close examination of the various past and present education reform programmes pioneered by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MoEVT) in Tanzania shows, among other issues, a very little focus on teachers as an important factor in transforming the education system, particularly when it comes to improving their welfare and professionalism. For example, of the 39 priority programme areas in the Secondary Education Development Programme (SEDP II), only two of these are distantly focused on improving teachers' welfare and professionalism (MOEVT, 2010).

Teachers are a key ingredient in determining the quality of education. The quality of education is directly related to the quality of teaching and learning. There are many factors that determine the quality of teaching, including teacher qualifications and experiences, their level of motivation, and working conditions. Studies show that when teachers are motivated and love the teaching profession, students are motivated to learn and they learn the content taught by their teachers more effectively (Caprara et al., 2006). It is therefore important to foster teachers' motivation as part of the measures to address the problem of dwindling quality of education in Tanzania and elsewhere in the sub-Saharan African region. This study investigated the teachers' commitment to the teaching profession, and how this affects students' learning and academic performance.

2. Method

2.1 The Design

This study was designed to explore and understand teachers' perspectives and experiences about the teaching profession. As such, it was rooted within the qualitative approach, using focus group discussions as the main data collection tool.

The choice of the qualitative research design for this research was guided by the need to facilitate a sharing of views, as well as to illuminate differences in perspectives among participants about the teaching profession in Tanzania. As argued by Kitzinger (1995), people's perspectives, experiences and feelings are more likely to be constructed through discussion and social interaction, especially with regard to questions related to process ("how" and "why" questions) and content ("what" questions). Consequently, then, focus groups were chosen for this research both as a strategy and a method for collecting qualitative data. Additionally, because focus groups take the form of a natural conversation and discussion, they, arguably, provide a useful strategy for encouraging participation from people who may be reluctant to being interviewed on their own for fear of being intimidated by the formality and isolation of one to one interviews (Milward, 2006).

2.2 Study Sites, Participants and Selection Procedures

This study was conducted as part of a large survey conducted in six regions of Tanzania, namely Coast, Mbeya, Kigoma, Singida, Dodoma and Mtwara. These regions were purposively selected on the basis of their performance in the 2010 National Form Four Examinations, in which two regions were selected from the clusters of high, medium and low performing regions. Coast and Mbeya regions were the highest performing regions, while Kigoma and Singida regions were medium performing and Dodoma and Mtwara were lowest performing regions.

In each region, six schools were purposively selected to participate in the study. These were two old government schools, which were named as 'public national schools', two private schools and two community schools, which were named as 'public community schools'. The criterion for selection of the schools was high-low performance and/or urban-rural locality. Between six and nine teachers in each school were requested to take part in the focus group discussions.

2.3 Data Management and Analysis

The proceedings of focus group discussion were recorded verbatim using tape recorders. They were transcribed in Kiswahili and translated into English. Both Kiswahili and English files were stored on computer hard discs and flash

disks as backup copies. Data were analysed following a thematic analysis framework, in which themes were identified and illustrated using participants' quotes.

3. Results

During the focus group discussions, teachers were given an opportunity to share their experiences about the teaching profession and their working conditions in general. At least one focus group discussion was conducted at each participating school, with participants ranging between five (5) and nine (9) members. A total of 24 focus groups were held. As noted earlier, the proceedings of focus group discussions were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were subjected to thematic analysis, in which key themes were identified and illustrated using participants' quotes.

The presentation of results is organised in two major parts. The first part addresses the reasons that 'compelled' teachers to join the teaching profession. The second part looks at the teachers' experiences of the teaching profession. In each of these issues, themes are identified and illustrated with respondents' own voices.

3.1 Why Teachers Joined the Teaching Profession?

3.1.1 'It's easiest job to get'

The analysis of the proceedings of the focus group discussions revealed three major reasons that motivated teachers to join the teaching profession. The first and most prominent reason that emerged during the discussions is the easiness at which teachers thought it was in getting employment after graduation. Many teachers explained that they joined the teaching profession because they believed that it would be easy for them to secure employment after completing their studies compared to other professions. Teachers' also explained that the teaching profession provided the surest way to help their families as employment is guaranteed as soon as one completes his or her studies. Some of the participants' remarks are illustrated by their quotes.

I think the major reason that compelled me to join this profession [teaching] was the fact that I thought it'd be easy to secure employment after my studies. But if it were possible to get employment in other professions I would have never joined the teaching profession (Teacher, School A1, Coast Region).

I chose to be a teacher because I knew it was easy to get a job in the teaching sector. I have many relatives who took other courses and I had seen them how they struggled getting employment; I didn't want to suffer the same problem, so I decided to become a teacher. But teaching is not my long-term career; ultimately I will certainly abandon this profession (Teacher, School Z, Coast Region).

Honestly, I became a teacher rather accidentally! It was simply because it was easier for me to get a job. But, of course, after joining this profession there is nothing really that motivates me to continue being a teacher. It's just a matter a time; I will certainly leave this profession (Teacher, School H, Dodoma Region).

Let no body cheat you. We are here because we wanted employment and teaching is the easiest way to get a job (Teacher, School D, Singida Region).

3.1.2 Lack of Qualifications to Join Other Professions

The second reason that was frequently cited as a factor that compelled teachers to join the profession was the lack of qualifications to join other professions. Teachers explained that some of them joined the teaching profession after failing to obtain the level of qualifications required to join other professions, such as finance, economics, medicine, engineering, etc. Thus, they thought that teaching profession would be an entry into other professions of their liking. As such, teaching was very much a 'by the way' profession, waiting for something better to come along. This clearly makes the teachers less attached and less committed to the teaching profession. A few quoted remarks below are illustrative:

People join this profession [teaching] as a last resort; they have not been able to find anything else meaningful in their life and, of course, teaching profession is the only remaining option. I am a typical example; I'm here because my Form six results were miserable; I wanted to do Economics, but my grades couldn't allow me, otherwise I would have never been a teacher (Teacher, School Z1, Coast Region).

.....Again, this is the only profession in which anybody can join it. If you fail this is where you end up. So here I am because, of course, I failed to get good grades to join other profession. Where else would I have gone with my poor grades in every subject I did. (Teacher, School D, Singida Region).

Teaching was not my first choice. My first choice was tourism, and I chose teaching as a third choice. I was forced to be a teacher; they gave me a third choice. Since then I have been an unhappy man (Teacher, School A, Singida Region).

For my side, I joined the teaching profession because I got Division III and I couldn't get good credits for me to join A' level studies, so I had to go to Diploma in Education. So teaching was not my choice at all, but circumstances forced me to join it due to my poor passes. But if anything better came along I would quickly walk out of this profession without any question (Teacher, School J, Dodoma Region).

3.1.3 'I love teaching'

Though a majority of teachers in the focus group discussions cited poor qualifications and easy of securing employment as the major reasons for joining the teaching profession, a few other teachers cited other factors such as 'personal interest and influence from significant others'. Some teachers explained that they joined the teaching profession because they liked the profession and they believed it was the best way to serve the society. They also viewed teaching profession as a noble profession that required noble people.

I love History, and thought be a History teacher would be the best way to expand my knowledge in this area (Teacher, School J, Dodoma Region).

I'm just interested in teaching others; so my joining of the teaching profession was hundred percent my own choice because I love teaching (Teacher, School Z, Coast Region).

3.1.4 'was influenced by parents and significant others'

Other teachers explained that they joined the teaching profession because of influence of their parents and/or other close relatives. They observed that they joined the teaching profession simply because their parents or other close people who matter to them were teachers. Additionally, other teachers said that they joined the teaching profession because they were advised to do so by their significant others. Some remarks illustrating these points of view are quoted below.

For me it is because I was influenced by my background. In the village I come from teaching is the only job that people know, so everybody kind of likes teaching, and I'm a product of that (Teacher, School M, Kigoma Region).

I 'inherited' from my parents. Both my parents, dad and mom, are teachers and I grew up liking to teach, and I'm actually happy being a teacher (Teacher, School T, Mtwara Region).

I don't like the teaching profession. I wanted to do public administration, but my parents advised me to do special education, which I agreed and I was expecting that I would be teaching children with special needs. But here I'm, doing things that I never wanted to do. Instead of posting me to special schools where I could teach children with disabilities they brought me, and forced to teach a subject that I never wanted to (Teacher, School A, Singida Region).

3.2 Teachers' Experiences of the Teaching Profession

The analysis of the proceedings of focus group discussions with teachers revealed several issues which can be summed up as their experiences in the teaching profession. These can be grouped into two broad categories, which are positive and negative experiences.

3.2.1 Positive Experiences (Motivating Factors)

Several positive experiences or motivating factors associated with the teaching profession were underscored in the discussions. Firstly, teachers explained that they enjoyed the fact that the teaching profession provided them with an opportunity to continue learning. They argued that it is only teaching which makes it possible to learn and expand one's horizon of knowledge on a continuous basis. Secondly, teachers also underscored the fact that it was easier for teachers to pursue further studies compared to other professions. This therefore provided them with possibilities of advancing their career as well as flexibility to change career. Thirdly, teachers observed that they felt good when their job was appreciated, especially by students they were teaching. They observed many students appreciated their job. Fourthly, the possibility of meeting new people and making new friends was underscored as positive experience. Some of the quotes illustrating these experiences are given below.

Teaching has been good for me because I make friends and meet new people every day. Also it gives room for us to know the real life of Tanzania; I have seen how poor and rich this country is through the children I teach. This is a good experience for me (Teacher, School Z1, Coast Region).

The best thing about teaching is that you have to learn every day. The kind of students we're teaching these days 'forces' us to learn. Because they know a lot of things if you don't update your knowledge you will be a laughing dock in the class. So in teaching you have to learn every day and this is good for me (Teacher, School U, Mtwara Region).

The only moment I enjoy in this profession is when I see my students perform well in my subject, especially in the national examinations. I feel very happy and proud when students do well in my subject, I go around to tell my colleagues and when you meet the headmaster you see him smiling and this makes me feel good (Teacher, School H, Dodoma Region).

It gives a sense of fulfilment; it is good to know that I'm also contributing to improving somebody's life and that I'm also building the nation (Teacher, School C, Singida Region).

3.2.2 Negative Experiences (De-Motivating Factors)

Teachers underscored many negative experiences in the teaching profession, which could also be described as de-motivating factors or 'frustrating' factors. These mainly centred around two major areas, namely poor working environment and negative attitude of the teaching profession (by community, students and even Government). Some of the teachers' sentiments in these areas are highlighted and illustrated below.

Many teachers complained that their students did not respect their teachers and had very negative attitudes towards the teaching profession. This was particularly the case with some private schools which take students from privileged backgrounds. According to teachers, students in these schools believed their teachers are in the teaching profession because they are poor. Some of the teachers' comments in this regard are as quoted below:

.....students see me as a failure, someone who is lost, they believe a teacher is a poor person, has no direction in life. There are times students have asked me 'madam, you are very intelligent, but then why did you decide to be a teacher? These kinds of questions are embarrassing, it means they believe a teacher is somebody who failed, who is not intelligent. When I tell them, I just liked to be teacher, they tell me, don't you see that you are getting late in life'. This is the life we live in this school (Teacher, School Z, Coast Region).

Ahaa, haa! Let me tell you a story.....there is one student in my class who is really very intelligent. One day, ehee, I told her you will make a very good teacher. That statement made her cry a lot; I was worried why she's crying. Then, she told me she never wanted to be a teacher, and that I was wishing her bad for telling her that she would make a good teacher. I felt very bad (Teacher, School Z, Coast Region).

And on community and government attitudes toward teachers, teachers said:

This is a very difficult profession. Nobody cares, not the community where you teach, not the government. The community thinks we're lost; we're useless destined to failure. The community makes our life here very miserable because they don't value what we're doing. Again, parents, the government, are even worse. They just damp you in schools, they live just like that. Nobody cares; no house, no transport. You even have to struggle to get your salary; I'm not even talking about salaries being too small. Choosing to be a teacher is choosing hell in your life (Teacher, School C, Singida Region).

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study have revealed that teachers' commitment to the teaching profession is devastatingly low, with only a handful of teachers reporting that they wanted to join the teaching profession in the first place. The poor teachers' commitment to the teaching profession is attributable to poor working conditions in schools, and the low status the community and government accord the teaching profession. These results support the findings of previous similar studies. For example, Lawal (2012) analysed the perceptions of parents, teachers and students about the teaching profession in Nigeria. The results revealed that the majority of parents and other stakeholders accorded the teaching profession a low status and that teachers were generally looked upon down in the society.

The consequences of low teachers' commitment are far reaching and are clearly reflected in poor students' academic performance in national examinations. Additionally, teachers' low commitment to the teaching profession could partly explain the high attrition rate which has been established among teachers in Tanzania and other sub-Saharan African countries (Teachers for EFA, 2010).

In view of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made with a view to fostering teachers' commitment to the teaching profession. Firstly, the Government and other stakeholders should seriously address the issue of poor working conditions for teachers, including provision of adequate housing and social services such as water and electricity. Secondly, the question of poor pay is a critical factor in attracting teachers to join and

remain in the teaching profession. Teachers' salaries in Tanzania are still disappointingly low, in which, on average, a secondary school teacher gets less than US\$ 400 per month. It should be noted that studies have consistently demonstrated that poor pay is the most frustrating factor for teachers in Tanzania (Bennel & Mukyanuzi, 2005). This issue should, therefore, now be addressed as matter urgency if we are to improve the quality of education and reverse the poor state of national examination results. In other words, the discussions about improving the quality of education in the country should go hand in hand with improving teachers' welfare so as to raise their level of motivation to teach.

Alongside improving teachers' pay, the question of timely promotion should be addressed by reducing unnecessary bureaucratic procedures. At the moment many teachers have been made to believe that promotion is an issue of the few privileged rather a matter they deserve basing on merits. Thirdly, to improve teachers' professional practice, there is a need to revive regular in-service teachers' continuous development programmes. At the moment these are rare and sporadically provided with little effect in improving teachers' professionalism. There should also be regular training programmes for school leadership because studies have also revealed that many teachers in many schools are disappointed with their school administration (Mkumbo, 2011), which further tends to erode their teaching commitment and morale.

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