

Teachers' views on teaching as a profession and the status initiatives: insights from practising teachers

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Abstract: This study sought to establish the views of practising primary school teachers studying for a Bachelor of education degree at a university in Swaziland on the status of the teaching profession. The study was located in the interpretivist research paradigm and followed a qualitative research approach which utilised a case study design. Individual interviews with a purposive sample of 65 practising teachers doing their Bachelor of education degree on part-time basis from schools found in all the regions of Swaziland were to gather data for the study. Data were analysed for content and conclusions were drawn. The study found that a teacher is a valuable human resource not only in the school, but also in the community. The study found that the society does not recognise the value of a teacher. The findings of the study also revealed that teachers get salaries that are lower than their worth. The main conclusions of the study were that teaching is a noble profession. It was also concluded that all professions stem from the teaching profession as all individuals passed through the hands of a teacher to their professions. The study further revealed that teachers were looked down upon and that they earned low salaries. The main recommendations are that remuneration of teachers should be to the value of the work done by the teacher. It was also a recommendation that media should treat teachers' salaries with privacy and respect like other professions. The study also recommends that teachers should not be overburdened by work on scheme books and preparation books.

Key terms: *teacher, teaching profession, status, rank, teacher attitudes, status initiatives*

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching began as a simple educational function where private teachers were sought and hired by ancient Greeks to teach their children, and it spread the world over and developed into a complex profession that requires very intensive training so as to develop the minds of children to prepare them to be productive as well as functional members/citizens of the society (Hirsch, undated). While individuals may have varied views on issues that touch on teaching, Johnson, Yarrow, Rochkind, and Ott, (2012) believe that everyone agrees that it is not possible to have a good education without good teachers. So, in order to ensure the provision of good education and the production of functional society members, both adequate training on the part of the teachers and a positive outlook of the teachers by themselves are essential.

II. BACKGROUND

Good and effective teachers are essential, not only for the future of the children that they are teaching, but also for the whole nation. This is because the strength and stability of a nation depends on the teachers' produce (Ravitch, 2003). To ensure a strong as well as stable nation, it is therefore imperative that countries and education systems strive to produce good teachers who will in turn produce productive citizens. In order to attain this, and for one to be regarded as a teacher in Swaziland, the person has to go through a teacher training program. Teacher training programs are available and also obligatory for all education levels in Swaziland. Through these programs teachers are equipped with professional knowledge which will enable them to teach at pre-school level, primary school level, and secondary school level. Both the universities and teacher training colleges in Swaziland offer teacher training programs at these varied levels. The entry requirements for teacher training in the colleges and universities are not the same, while most colleges require at least 3 O-Level credits and at least a pass in English Language; universities require candidates to have at least 6 O-Level credits including a credit pass in English Language. After training the teachers are deployed in various schools all over the country, and like other people who have been trained, they assume the status of professionals, and the job that they do as a profession. This is not only done in Swaziland by Swazi teachers as other countries do the same thing (Whitby, 2012). According to Whitby (2012) before a person can be regarded as a teacher in New York there is need to fulfil certain requirements. One of the requirements is certification that proves that the individual is really a teacher. This certification includes a higher education degree which sometimes goes as far as a Masters' degree in some states in New York. The purpose of such a requirement/requirements is to ensure that teachers become experts in the content that they are going to teach as well as experts in education both of

which require them to have specialised knowledge of the subjects that they teach which they get from the intensive academic preparation for the profession that they go through. In addition to the teaching certificate other countries require teachers to have licenses or permits before they can start teaching. These are issued by bodies/agencies that have been authorised by the state which are only issued to individuals who already have a teaching certificate (Novoa, undated). This is a very important document as well as step in the process of professionalization as it ensures that it is only people who are competent and have received adequate training that are given the responsibility to teach. According to Novoa (undated) the license/permit functions as some form of surety that the state can use to improve the professional status of the teachers (Novoa, undated).

From time immemorial, education leaders wanted education to be recognised as a profession just as law and medicine. The quest for such recognition has continued to the present date (Ravitch, 2003). Looking at the intensive training and preparation that teachers go through Merrow (2015) asserts that teachers should be viewed as professionals and teaching should be viewed as a profession, to which Whitby (2012, p. 1) concludes, "I am a professional in the profession of education. I have worth, a great deal of worth. I am an expert in an area that requires me to obtain and document years of education". This is a view that is supported by this theorist and others, and is also disputed by other people and theorists. Giving his view on whether teaching is or is not a profession; Gillett (2013) argues that teaching is a profession. He says this is because teaching requires higher education and a vast amount of proper training. In his view, one needs to have gone through training at either a university/college before becoming a teacher. Gillett (2013) further states that teaching is something that is very difficult to do. This is because it requires so many attributes and skills from the person who will do it. It requires that the individual be a master of the material being taught, an effective communicator, a quick problem solver, constant innovator, social organizer, occasional therapist, a lot of energy, ingenuity, insight, knowledge, and patience because leading a classroom full of learners is not easy, (Gillett, 2013). In support of the same assertion, Weil (2011) observes that the teaching profession is very important and that nothing can be compared to it because it is a profession that requires creativity, critical thinking, wisdom, compassion, knowledge, skills, and the ability to solve problems, innovation, advocacy, and care. If all of these are in this profession, it would seem the profession consists of all/if not most of the important things in life. Contrary to this, Social Scientists are of the view that teaching is not a profession. For them teaching does not have what characterises traditional professions such as medicine, academia, dentistry, law, engineering, and others. This is because in their view, teaching does not have the pay, status, respect, and not too much time is spent during training, hence it cannot be a profession but would rather be regarded as an occupation. Other people however, disagree with the view that teaching is not a profession but an occupation. Merrow (2015) reveals that for many people the disrespect for the teaching profession emanates from the fact that too many people are familiar with schools because everyone has gone through a school and therefore think that they can also do the work that is done by the teachers. The reality however is that teaching is complex and requires specialised skills and a lot of innovation from the teacher. The varied views about the status of teachers are an indication of varying perceptions of individuals on teaching as a profession. These individuals could encompass the teachers themselves and other individuals. Johnson et al (2012) report that two out of five of America's 4 million teachers are disheartened and disappointed about the job that they are doing, and this is due to a number of reasons. Another survey that was conducted with the middle school teachers and principals in the U.S and other countries on how they felt about their work revealed that a substantial number of them are satisfied with the job that they are doing and also that they would never trade their profession for any other profession. This was the view of 89% of the teachers. While these teachers view their profession favourably, they are however cognisant of the negative value that society attaches to teachers and the teaching profession (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2014). These results revealed the discrepancy that exists between how teachers feel about their work and how they think society views their work. The same results were also found in Australia, England, Japan, and France. In all these countries teachers valued their job but felt that their profession was undervalued by the society. It was only in Singapore and Finland where teachers said that they value their job and the society also does the same thing. Understanding the teachers' attitudes about the job that they do according to the researchers who undertook the study is very important as it provides notable implications for how to identify, retain, and support the most effective teachers, (Johnson et al, 2012) at a time when school reform, approaches to teaching, and student achievement, are high on every nations' agenda. Despite that a substantial number of studies, surveys, and analyses have been conducted on teachers and the teaching profession in European countries over the years as can be seen from the results of the research discussed above (Novoa, undated), not much research has been done on the same topic in Swaziland. The study at hand therefore intends closing this gap by establishing the perceptions of the teachers on teaching as a profession as well as how they think other people view their profession may be known.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Establish the perceptions of the teachers on teaching as a profession.
2. Submit some insights into enriching the status of a teacher.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do teachers view teaching as a profession?
2. What could be done to augment the status of a teacher?

IV. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A research design can be described as a blue print or detailed plan of how the research study will be conducted (Creswell, 2007). The study was conducted using the qualitative research method. Explorable (2016) state that "Qualitative research method is used extensively by scientists and researchers studying human behavior and habits..." The qualitative method is appropriate in circumstances where human activities and conduct is explored. According to the Expert Independent Researchers (2016), qualitative research is a method used even in the business and commercial sectors to explore attitudes and behaviours, understand customer needs. This method was important in this study in that the teachers that participated in the study were practicing personnel. The researchers could explore their perceptions on teaching as a profession and this gave a real picture of how teachers view their profession. This study adopted a case study design. A case study is an in depth study of a particular situation. It is a method used to narrow down a very broad field of research into one easily researchable topic (Explorable, 2016). According to Rule and John (2011), a case may refer to a person, a classroom, a programme, and a process, a series of developments, an institution, a community or even a country. What makes the researcher term it a case is its outstanding and discrete nature that warrants it to be studied. In this study, the researcher chose the practising teachers doing their Bachelor of education degree on part-time basis from schools found in all the regions of Swaziland. The case study also afforded the researcher an opportunity to fully investigate and understand perceptions of teachers from all regions of the studied country on teaching as a profession. This study established how teachers view teaching as a profession. Purposive sampling was used to select the respondents. A purposive sample is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the subject of interest (Palinkas, 2013). The sample selected, in this study managed to provide the data needed to enhance the research study. Responses came from 65 student who are practising teachers doing their Bachelor of education degree on part-time basis from schools found in all the regions of Swaziland. There are various methods used to collect data in qualitative research. These may include focus group discussions, individual interviews, and participant observations (Wyse, 2011). The sample size is usually small, and respondents are selected to give the needed data. In this study one-on-one interviews were used to collect the desired data.

V. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This study sought the perceptions of practising teachers doing their Bachelor of education degree on part-time basis from schools found in all the regions of Swaziland. One-on-one interviews were used to reveal varied perceptions from the participants involved in the study. The data collected was audio taped and the audio recording was transcribed into writing. The interpreted data from the interviews was analysed using thematic content analysis (Boeije, 2010). The analysis was based on themes that were developed from the collected data. Data collected from one-on-one interviews was grouped into themes. Coding data also enabled the researchers to note similar ideas (Saldana, 2013).

VI. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study were presented according to the themes that emerged from the study. These were the nature of the teaching profession, effects of the teaching profession to individual teachers, how teachers view the teaching profession, perceptions on how teachers are viewed by the society and initiatives to better the teaching profession. Direct quotations and narrations were used to present data.

VII. THE NATURE OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION

Teaching is a process where an expert conveys knowledge, skills and attributes designed to provide unique service to meet the educational needs of an individual and of the society. All the interviewed respondents, teachers, in this study revealed that they view teaching as a profession, since for an individual to qualify as a teacher, they need to go through intensive teacher training. Respondents in this study were asked how they view their tasks as teachers to be. One teacher stated that, "I am a service provider." Similarly, another female respondent stated that, "I offer services valuable to every individual in the society." The responses from

these respondents reveal teaching as a profession that entails helping the less knowledgeable and skilled, gain skills to translate to their families, communities or to their country. Thus, it is the goals of the teaching profession to ensure that the goals of education are realised in the school, community and society. Another teacher stated that, "The teaching profession is good, it makes one perform multi duties at the same time like knowledge provision, parenting, instructing, coaching and training." The teacher revealed that a teacher performs various tasks at the same time. Thus, teaching is a profession for talented individuals who can do a number of responsibilities at once to ensure that the goals of education are realised.

VIII. EFFECTS OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION TO INDIVIDUAL TEACHERS

The teaching profession has molded individual teachers in various ways. One teacher stated that "The teaching profession has made me an innovative person and a fast thinker who is quick in tackling situations and solving challenges." The interviewed teacher revealed that the teaching profession has prepared him to an innovative individual who reasons fast and speedily solves problems. Similarly, one teacher was quoted saying that through the teaching profession "I am a valuable human material in the school and in the community." On the other hand one teacher revealed that, "I am a hard worker." Teachers perceive their profession as treasured and precious as its influence does not only end in the school, but also extends to the community. For teachers to give the teaching profession the value it deserves there should be hard work and commitment. On the other hand, one teacher stated that, "I produce individuals who excel academically." Similarly, one teacher was quoted saying "I produce individuals who are now occupying highly respectable jobs in the society." The teachers interviewed displayed pride in their products. On the same note one teacher stated that, "All skills have their base in the teaching profession." The teachers revealed that teaching is a profession that individuals in a society use as a ladder to attain their aspired professions and as individual teachers they facilitate this move.

One teacher expressed that "I am a competent and proficient teacher, but I am shy to stand out and tell the world that I am a teacher." The researchers probed further to try and get an explanation as to why the teacher is not confident to tell the world that he is a teacher yet he is knowledgeable and skilled in his profession. The teacher explained that the teaching profession is a scorned profession.

IX. HOW TEACHERS VIEW THE TEACHING PROFESSION

Teachers in the one-on-one interviews were asked how they view teaching as a profession. One teacher stated that teaching is "A very valuable profession in the society." On the same view another one stated that teaching is "A profession with a very high standing, but people never realise that because teachers are paid low wages." The interviewed teachers revealed that teaching is a respectable profession which when rated according to the value it brings to the society it is extremely significant. On another note, one teacher views the teaching profession as "full of paperwork." Upon probing for an explanation to this, the teacher explained that on top of marking which they have to do daily, they also have to scheme and plan for lessons and also prepare teaching and learning aids. On a similar note, one teacher indicated that schemes waste time and suggested that there should be one preparation book in order to reduce paper work. One teacher referred to teaching as the mother of all professions. This means that teaching is vital and it is the base of all professions. On the other hand one teacher mentioned that, "I just don't like my profession, everyone in the society looks down upon the profession." Teachers are ashamed of the teaching profession. It embarrasses teachers to let the world know that they are teachers as despises the teaching profession. The next theme focusses on how the society views the teaching profession.

X. PERCEPTIONS ON HOW TEACHERS ARE VIEWED BY THE SOCIETY

Teachers have various perceptions on how the society views them. Teachers revealed that they are viewed as role models by especially the learners they teach. One interviewed teacher stated that teaching "... is a noble profession, but members of the society look down upon the profession." Similarly, another teacher stated that, "Teaching as a profession is not given the respect it deserves because teachers are lowly paid." The perceptions from teachers on the status of a teacher reveal that teaching is an honorable profession that deserves all the respect and reverence. In a one-to-one interview one teacher revealed that, "The society views teachers as people who do not have money, hence the teaching profession does not have money it is for poor people." Similarly, one teacher revealed that, "The teaching profession is despised by most people because teachers do not earn much." On the same note another teacher revealed that, "The society does not recognise the worth of a teacher because they are poor and too lowly paid." Another teacher revealed that teachers are rated amongst the poor. Salaries contribute to the status of a profession. Because teachers earn low salaries, the teaching profession is rated very low compared to other professions.

XI. INITIATIVES TO BETTER THE TEACHING PROFESSION

The researchers asked teachers on the initiatives that could be employed to better the teaching profession. Teachers had a variety of ideas. These encompassed the issue of the paper work. One teacher revealed that, "The paperwork should be reduced especially the scheme of work, we should just have a preparation book that has detailed lesson plans for the whole term." On the same note one teacher expressed that, "There is need to have one drawn scheme of work for all teachers in the country provided by the curriculum designers, then planning will be easier." It is evident that teachers are finding scheming and planning time consuming. Teachers' salary is one issue all teachers that were interviewed touched. Teachers had similar views on the issue of salaries. One teacher mentioned that, "If I had the power to change anything in the teaching profession, I would change the teachers' salaries." Similarly, another teacher revealed that, "The scale of teachers' salaries should be increased." On the same note, one teacher stated that, "Remuneration of teachers should be to the value of the work done by the teacher." While one revealed that, "The salary teachers are given is not commensurate with the value of the work they give to the society." The views from the teachers reveal that teachers view the teaching profession as a valuable profession that deserves to be well remunerated. Teachers currently view the salaries they get as not abreast with the work done by a teacher. The interviewed teachers further revealed that the media gives no respect to the teaching profession. One teacher revealed that, "Media should treat teachers' salaries with privacy and respect like other professions." Similarly, another teacher revealed that, "Even the media displays teacher's salaries, hence the teaching profession loses its value because the salaries are meagre." Teachers viewed the media sector as backing in degrading the teaching profession.

XII. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The major findings of the study and the discussion of key findings of the study in relation to the related literature are discussed. It was a finding in this study that teachers perceive teaching as a profession. Similarly, Gillett (2013) contends that teaching is a profession because teaching requires higher education and a proper training. However, in some instances the teaching does not get the respect it deserves as a profession as alluded to by Merrow (2015) who is of the view that many people disrespect the teaching profession because people are familiar with schools and that, because everyone has gone through a school system then they think they can also do the work done by teachers. In this study the interviewed teachers expressed that they are proud of their products who have made it to other professions. On the same note Ravitch (2003) is of the view that the strength and stability of a nation depends on the teachers' produce. The study reveals that teachers are talented individuals who can perform multiple tasks at a go. Similarly, Weil (2011) is of the view that the teaching profession requires creativity, critical thinking, wisdom, compassion, knowledge, skills, and the ability to solve problems, innovation, advocacy, and care. All these are the qualities a teacher should possess in order to be able to do multiple duties as per requirement. Johnson et al (2012) reveals that most teachers in the world view their profession as devalued by the society because of various reasons. It was only teachers in Singapore who are satisfied by the way the society views their profession. Contrary to the teachers in the Singapore, the interviewed teachers in this study revealed that they have hitches regarding their profession. The society undermines the teaching profession to an extent that teachers are given paltry salaries that do not equal to their profession, and to make matters worse these salaries are displayed for the whole nation in local newspapers and television news.

XIII. CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

The study concluded that teaching is an honorable profession comprised of individuals who play various roles to ensure that the educational goals are achieved. The study also concluded that the teaching profession is the base for all professions as all individuals passed through the works of a teacher to their professions. The study further concluded that teachers were looked down upon and that they earned low salaries. Teachers' salaries are always displayed on newspapers and television news.

XIV. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study recommends that remuneration of teachers should be to the value of the work done by the teacher. It was also a recommendation in this study that media treats teachers' salaries with privacy and respect like other professions. The study also recommends that teachers should not be over burdened by paper work especially scheme books and preparation books, there could be a national scheme and the preparation book will come from the individual teacher.

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