

**PERCEPTIONS OF POST GRADUATE DIPLOMA IN
EDUCATION (PGDE) STUDENT TEACHERS ON THE
TEACHING PROFESSION: EVIDENCE FROM TWO
UNIVERSITIES**

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ABSTRACT

Perceptions are key determinants of one's choice of a profession or career and the level of commitment to, and stay in, a given profession. Arguably, teacher educators cannot ignore teacher trainees' perceptions of the teaching profession as these shape their attitudes towards teaching since favourable perceptions cast positive effects on professional practice. Research indicates that positive teacher perceptions are fundamental to effective teacher performance. Conversely, teachers' negative perceptions can be sources of stress with a potential to undermine teacher effectiveness. We argue that different perceptions lead to different attitudes, which determines students' choices to enrol and stay in the teaching profession, their development of critical thinking, reflective practice, and motivation. It is pertinent, therefore, to explore these perceptions among Open Distance Learning post graduate student teachers. Such knowledge is significant to teacher educators in their quest to develop a teacher with positive attitudes towards the teaching profession. This study explored the perceptions of Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) students' towards the teaching profession. Underpinned by the interpretive framework, this study employed a qualitative design, which entails the interpretation of lived experiences that shape and manifest in participants' perceptions, and thus provide rich and deep data which describe phenomena in words. The participants of this study were PGDE students from two universities, purposively selected as information-rich cases that could be studied in

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depth. Data were collected through individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Data were organised around themes emerging from the data and based on recurring patterns in line with the qualitative research. Findings indicated that PGDE students perceive teaching as the only reliable employer in the face of high unemployment in the country, coupled with assurance of a job once one qualified. Furthermore, one had to respond to policy dictates that require a teaching qualification or enrolment in a PGDE programme for degree holders.

Key words: perceptions; Student teachers; teaching profession; teaching and learning; Open and Distance Learning; PGDE.

1.0 Background

A teacher plays a pivotal role in the development of quality education. Among the many factors influencing educational quality, teachers are widely recognised as critical factors (UNESCO, 2006). Research has constantly identified a link between the quality of teachers and the quality of education delivered to the students, and in order to improve quality teaching of education one should produce quality teachers (Darling and Hamond, 2005). Teacher education prepares students in knowledge and skills; it prepares them in knowledge of subject and pedagogical content. Literature on educational quality indicates a strong link between teacher professional development and quality especially in the area of teacher beliefs, practices and student learning, and on the implementation of educational reforms (UNESCO, 2006). Teachers' perceptions form teacher beliefs and eventually create teacher identities. Romawsk (1997) states that beliefs are essential in the way teachers define and understand physical and social relationships as well as content knowledge.

Teachers' professional performance cannot ignore their perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and job satisfaction. Research has indicated that positive teachers' perceptions are fundamental for effective teaching, and teachers' beliefs, perceptions and attitudes affect their classroom performance. Teacher beliefs constitute part of the context in which classroom activity occurs (Cooney, 2008). Mangal (2001) defines a perception as an individual's awareness behaviour, for it is a way each person processes raw data he or she receives from the environment into meaningful data. The perception of the teaching profession helps teachers to gain meanings and

to understand roles, responsibilities and practices from their professional activities (Eggen and Kauchak, 2001).

Pre-service teacher education provides the first step in the professional development of teachers. It exposes pre-service teachers' new perspectives as well as to prepare them for knowledge and skills (Wilke, 2004). Pre-service teachers come with different perceptions derived from their personal experiences (Pajeris, 1992). It is important for teacher education institutions to understand the perceptions of pre-service teachers as an essential step in improving their professional preparation (Eggen and Kauchak, 2001). Mahlios (2002) advocates for the need to know what images pre-service teachers bring with them, upon embarking a teacher education programme. Experiences need to be capitalized on so that they are in line with clear professional identity. Teachers' perceptions of their identity affects their efficacy and professional development as well as their ability and willingness to cope with educational change and to implement innovation (Beifaard et al., 2000). The content of teacher education should have a significant role in developing positive attitudes towards teaching as a profession (Milik, 2013). Teacher candidates should be provided with positive attitudes about the profession during their training (Ceyhan, 2003). Teacher candidates trained with positive perceptions will affect their students with their attitudes when they become a teacher. Developing positive attitudes towards the teaching profession helps pre-service teachers in developing creative thinking and motivation (Celikoz and Cetin, 2004). A teacher does not only impart knowledge but also shape the character or society. Agreeably, success in teaching field depends on the attitude towards the profession (Devi, 2005).

The study is based on the premise that studying how PGDE students perceive the teaching profession would provide a comprehensive understanding of how teacher education institutions can reshape their teacher preparation programmes. Examining teachers' perceptions on the teaching profession could contribute to the development of more positive perceptions to the teaching profession and also expand the knowledge base on the issue of the teaching profession.

2.0 Review of related literature

2.1 General perceptions on the teaching profession

People have divergent views about the teaching profession. Several researches indicate the teaching profession suffers a negative image as a result of lack of social prestige in many places. There is growing evidence that many people chose to teach because of lack of other employment options. Individuals with more employment opportunities are less likely to join teaching (Gaurino et al., 2006). Financial constraints in many countries mean that teaching is one of the areas of white collar work in the state available for non-graduates (Towse et al., 2002). The status and motivation in the teaching profession have been declining worldwide while the expectations of parents and employers are steadily increasing. Teachers suffer from a decline of professional image (IIEP, 2001). Teachers constantly cite poor social status, heavy workloads, large class sizes, and limited aspects for professional development as major reasons why a career of teaching is not attractive (MOE, 2006). There is evidence that teacher practitioners do not want their children to choose the teaching profession due to low self-esteem, unattractive reward system among other factors attached to teaching (Viaton, 1991). Black (2001) also indicates that worldwide teachers feel burdened by time constraints, excessive workloads and low salaries. Researches also report that key issues as lack of support, disruptive student behaviour, dissatisfaction with administration and stress (Dowling, 2008) as contributing in making teaching an unattractive career. Despite the adverse factors raised about the teaching profession, people have continued to join the teaching profession. McKenzie et al. (2014) cited the following reasons for choosing a teaching career;

- personal fulfilment;
- practical consideration; and
- passion and desire to contribute to the society.

Negative perceptions of the teaching profession by society are detrimental to the overall functioning of the teaching profession. Currently the PGDE programme has attracted a lot of students who wish to acquire teaching skills and become part of the controversial teaching profession. This raised the researchers' interest and it became imperative for the researchers to establish the perceptions the PGDE students have on the teaching profession. This evidence would feed into teacher development programmes, the education sector and the society at large in an endeavour to come up with teachers with positive attitudes towards the profession.

3 Statement of the problem

The education of teachers is germane. Teachers' daily work is impacted by the attitudes and perceptions the teachers have towards the teaching profession. Teacher educators need to be aware of the perceptions of the student teachers so that they can be addressed during teacher education. Currently, it has been observed that the number of students who register for the PGDE programme has increased in both universities. In light of the negative attitudes society has on teaching it became pertinent to illuminate the perceptions the PGDE students teachers have on the teaching profession.

4.0 Objectives of the study

Perceptions play a pivotal role in education of teachers. The objectives of the study were;

- 4.1 To establish student teacher perceived influences for choosing the teaching career.
- 4.2 To explore factors that would make student teachers' leave the teaching career.

5.0 Research questions.

The research is tasked to find answers to the following research questions.

- 5.1 What are the perceived influences for the PGDE student teachers to choose the teaching career?
- 5.2 What would influence the PGDE student teachers to leave the teaching career?

6.0 Research Methodology

The research was situated in the interpretive qualitative research paradigm where data were collected by asking participants to recollect their perceptions. Qualitative research approach helped to obtain in-depth information from student teachers in so far as their teaching profession is concerned. Individual in-depth interviews with 30 student teachers and 2 focus groups of 8 students were conducted until data reached saturation point. The interview was chosen because it allows detailed information about personal feelings; perceptions and opinions (Cohen & Manion, 2011). Focus groups were believed to increase quality and richness' of data more than a one to one interview could have done (McMillan and Schumer, 2010). Arguably, an interpretive researcher encourages varieties of data and different sources of analysis methods in order to strive for validity (Henning, Ransburg and Smith, 2004). Triangulation of data sources helped

the researchers to be confident that data generated were not artefacts of one specific method of collection (Borg and Gall, 2002) Participants of the study were selected through purposive sampling, which seeks to select individuals and sites that best supply relevant answers to the research question (Creswell, 2008). Data were analysed through the use of analytic techniques derived from qualitative research, primarily thematic analysis. Data analysis involved the breaking of data into manageable themes, patterns, trends and relationships, as Manning and Lust (2011) inform. Themes emerged from the data.

7.0 Research findings

The study focussed on PGDE students' perceptions on the teaching profession. A plethora of perceptions emerged and were categorised under the following themes; Influences for choosing a teaching career were subdivided into intrinsic and extrinsic factors while Influences for leaving the career included poor salaries, low status of the teaching profession, stress due to work loads, too much paper work, poor infrastructure and negative perceptions of the teaching profession by the society.

7.1 Influences for choosing the teaching profession.

Data from individual interviews and focus group discussion indicated that students joined the teaching profession for extrinsic and intrinsic reasons. It is however disturbing that 30% of the interviewed students joined the teaching career for intrinsic reasons.

7.1.1 Intrinsic reasons

30% of interviewed student teachers indicated that they joined the teaching profession for passion and personal fulfilment. They also revealed that they were best suited for the profession which enabled them to make an impact to the society. Furthermore some students also indicated that they found the teaching profession rewarding while others indicated that they enjoyed working with students. The following comments were made by the students,

I have always liked teaching.

I like teaching my subject area where I exhibit my expertise.

I have the desire to make a meaningful contribution to the society.

Teaching will allow me to advance my career until I get into lectureship.

I enjoy my results .Every year I receive prizes at prize giving days for producing good results.

In light of the views advanced by students, there is a high possibility that such students will develop into teachers who are committed to the teaching profession. It is also possible that teacher educators will find such students cooperative in being moulded into professionals because of the inner drive which motivated them into the teaching career.

7.2 Extrinsic influences.

7.2.1 Enjoying long holidays

The findings also indicate that student teachers were attracted by the availability of long holidays in the teaching career. Some student teachers had this to say about holidays;

I have a family and holidays afford me the opportunity to be with my family.

I can run my business during the holidays and augment my salary.

Many such comments were echoed by students. Such comments tend to suggest that holidays were perceived to be an attraction to the teaching career by some student teachers.

7.2.2 Job security and a constant salary.

Some students perceived conditions of service such as job security and stable incomes which are safe and secure as the reason for joining the teaching profession. Students indicated that teaching gives them a steady income hence the motivation to choose a teaching career. One student commented, “Considering the current economic environment, surely teaching offers a steady income every month” This concurs with Chambers (2000)findings that personal gains such as intellectual growth and employment security play a role in choosing a career.

7.2.3 Teaching the only option

The study indicated that the majority of the students chose the teaching career because they were unable to secure other jobs. Further findings were that these student teachers had different degrees which suited for the different economic sectors and where their preferences lay. Arguably, because the students failed to secure their preferred jobs, they were left with no option

but to have a teaching certificate and join a teaching career. The following sentiments were postulated by the students;

I have a degree in accountancy, and it has always been my wish to work in the banking sector.

I have joined teaching, but once other opportunities arise, I will definitely leave.

Since 2008 I found no other alternative job. Only teaching helps me to survive.

These findings tend to suggest that students were left with no choice but were compelled by prevailing economic environment to join the teaching career. Such students may not be committed to the teaching profession.

7.2.4 Meet policy requirement or you are out

Evidence from interviews and focus discussion groups indicated that students' enrolment in PGDE programme was in response to a new policy from Ministry of Primary Education that only those with a teaching qualification or were enrolled in teacher education programme would be eligible for employment as teachers. This is captured in the words of two participants;

With teaching as the only viable employer, and I want to stay employed so I have to train as a teacher or else I get terminated.

You know the current policy. You are either trained or in training or else you are out. ... I mean out of a job as a teacher. This is why I took up this PGDE programme.

The implication is that meeting policy requirements would ensure continued employment as a teacher regardless of whether one's perception of the teaching profession was positive or negative.

7.3 Reasons for leaving the teaching career

The study indicated some negative perceptions on the teaching profession which might militate against effective delivery of education. Following are some of the influences which make teaching unattractive as viewed by participants.

7.3.1 Poor salaries and low status

The students indicated that teachers worked very hard but the salaries were low. Low salaries was the most common reason that PGDE student teachers perceived teaching to be unattractive. Further findings revealed that students felt that the low salaries levels have led to the diminishing status of the teacher. Teachers felt that there is a status gap between teaching and other profession. The students had this to say;

Teachers are seen as people with no money, even by para-professionals.
I feel a sense of lack of respect of the teaching profession from all corners.
I want a job with benefits. I want to drive big cars but in teaching this remains a dream.
We work hard but we are not appreciated. Sometimes the appreciation comes when good results are out but it's short-lived.

Ekhafe (2007) concurs and reported low status and poor salaries of the teaching profession in Africa. Wokecha (2002) also observed that students in other faculties regard their counterparts in the faculties of education as pursuing careers that lead them to poverty.

7.3.2 Stress

It also emerged from this study that stress in the teaching profession contributed to the perception that teaching was an unattractive career. Teachers reported that they were frustrated by heavy workloads which included teacher/pupil ratios and school records/documents, poor infrastructure, living conditions in some schools, and school leadership in others cases. Most participants interrogated had the following to say;

The environment in rural schools is dull and lacks facilities.
In the school, there are too many records to maintain and I feel reduced to a clerk.
Our classes are too big.
I feel oppressed by the school head who gives me no chance to make any contribution.
My value is only seen when I produce results and this is short-lived.
Teachers' status is at all time low and we are mocked by para-professionals.
We have big classes ranging from 45-55 pupils.

From the sentiments proffered by teachers indications are that the teachers' standards of living were poor leading to a perception of a low status in society .Furthermore teachers felt that they played a significant role in society but their efforts were not recognised. While teachers worked hard to shape the society, they felt that they were overworked by big class sizes and too many records in the school. Notably, the perceived low status, poor salaries, work over load and poor working environments for some teachers culminated to the perception that teaching was a stressful career. These perceptions confirm Gonzolez's et al. (2008) findings that attrition of teachers can be caused by disrespect from administrators, low salaries, and lack of student discipline.

8.0 Conclusion.

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of PGDE students on the teaching profession. Based on the findings of the study, it is evident that PGDE student teachers had a plethora of negative and positive perceptions on the teaching profession. However the majority of PGDE student teachers have joined the profession because no other options were available in the job market and policy required that they acquire a teaching qualification. Arguably, in light of all the negative perceptions of the teaching profession, it would appear students had no choice but to join the teaching career which offered them a stable income and job security. Such attitudes and perceptions may be detrimental to the manner student teachers commit themselves to the teaching profession. On completion of the programme, such perceptions may lead to high attrition rates in the teaching profession if not attended to.

9.0 Recommendations.

Based on the findings of the study, this study comes up with the following recommendations;

- Improving the status of the teachers by improving working conditions.
- Advocating for the need for respect and positive representation of teachers.
- Reducing workload especially on teacher/ pupil ratios.
- Introduce assistant teachers to reduce the workload for practising teachers.
- Teacher educators to inculcate professional ethics as well as positive attitudes to the students.
- Criteria for the selection of student teachers should include the passion for the profession.

Further research

The perceptions of the PGDE students did not take into consideration gender related perceptions. Further researches may bring this aspect to light. Furthermore, follow up studies may be helpful to shed light on the attitudes and behaviours these teachers exhibit when they are fully developed professionals.

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