

Support Gap for Teachers in Nigerian Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT: *Earlier research showed that no matter the level of pre-service training in preparation, most teachers need support for proper functioning in the classroom and school. However, the extent and areas of support for teachers varied from place to place. This article investigates the gaps in the support for teachers in Nigeria. Survey data for the study were collected from 2000 secondary school teachers in 3 states in Nigeria. A self-designed research instrument tagged "Teachers' Support Gap Questionnaire" was administered to the respondents. The instrument was subjected to the usual validation procedure, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.78. Findings from the study showed that Nigerian teachers faced challenges in the areas of students' discipline in the classrooms and student-parent-related issues; hence, they indicated the need for support. It was therefore recommended, among others, that staff meetings are held more regularly, and discussions focus on professional matters. It was also suggested that teachers' improvement programmes in the form of workshops should be more regular. Such programmes should focus on areas where teachers indicated the need for support.*

KEYWORDS: teachers' support, teachers' preparation, teachers' mentoring and professional development

INTRODUCTION

The emphasis worldwide for students to do well in school has always been placed on the quality of teachers. Cochram-Smith and Power (2016), among others, have emphasised that students' achievement is enhanced when they are continually exposed to competent teachers. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2013) and Luschai and Rew (2013) identified several criteria for identifying and ensuring teacher quality. While Johnson, Kardos, Kauffman, Liu and Donaldson (2004) indicated that teachers, especially new ones, have little access to the support they need to do their jobs well, this lack of or inadequate support for teachers has been acknowledged in many places. For example, the U.S. Department of Education (2010), in recognition of the inadequate

support for teachers in the country, documented an attempt by U.S. authorities to address the issue. The attempts consist of putting a plan in place to treat teachers as professionals, reward excellence in teaching, and adequately support them to develop themselves and their lessons. The work of Lavy and Sand (2015), whose focus was on support for teachers in overcoming stereotypical biases in their attitude to male and female students concerning the subject taught in the schools in Israel, indicated that teachers need support for the achievement of diverse objectives in education.

Importance of Support for Teachers

While U.S. studies have concentrated on support for teachers for closing achievement gaps among students in rich and poor school districts, several more reasons have been established through research showing why teachers' support is essential. First among these reasons is the controversy surrounding the issue of how adequate teachers' preparation is? In a comprehensive review of the literature on teachers' preparation, Wilson, Floden and Ferrini-Mindy (2001) raised five areas of teacher preparation that are controversial and which are still relevant in today's teacher preparation programmes. Three of these questions which are considered pertinent to this study are;

'What kinds of subject matter preparation, and how much of it do prospective teachers need'?

'What pedagogical preparation and how much of it do prospective teachers need'?

'What kinds, timing and amount of clinical training (student teaching) best equip prospective teachers for classroom practice'?

On the subject matter content knowledge required by prospective teachers, the situation is that while some systems require rigorous subject content knowledge preparation for teachers, others emphasise just a proficiency in the subject matter. However, studies have not been unanimous on the amount of subject matter content a teacher should have. While many studies found a positive relationship between teachers' subject matter preparations and students' achievement (Daling-Hammond (2000), Gold-Lalie and Breiver (2000) and Monk (1994)), others did not (Shulman, 1986). One inference which can be drawn from these researches is that there is no agreement on the amount of content knowledge preparation a teacher should have. Hence, teachers are either ill-equipped or overqualified for their jobs. In either case, the teacher may find it hard to perform well if not assisted. In the case of Nigeria, Popoola and Ayodele (2011) found out that NCE teachers trained in the country's colleges of education are overqualified in terms of the subject matter content of their preparation. These overqualified teachers, while demonstrating knowledge of advanced topics in their subject areas, usually found it difficult to perform in elementary areas of their subjects. Hence, many of them found it challenging to pass examinations for their pupils. Some studies even found that while many mathematics teachers had relatively good procedural or rule-dominated knowledge of basic mathematics, they had problems when asked to explain why an algorithm or procedure works. (Adam 1988, Wilson 1994).

Research findings are again mixed on the number of pedagogical requirements of prospective teachers. While some studies concluded that teachers without pedagogical training had a reduced

ability to educate students (Hollingsworth, 1989), others found no significant difference in performance between certified and noncertified teachers (Adams & Krockover, 1997). Associated with the issue of pedagogical requirements that have been inconclusive are also the weaknesses observed around teaching practice or what Smith and Larsen (2022) called clinical or field experience. The authors referred to studies which reported that field experience for teachers in training is often limited, disconnected from university courses work and inconsistent. When we combine the reported inadequacies in teacher preparation in most of the areas required for competent job performance in the classroom, it becomes evident that teachers must be supported to be able to perform well.

Another area where teachers need support is in the area of their attitude and classroom behaviour. Specifically, teachers need to be assisted in overcoming prejudices which may negatively manifest in their consideration of male versus female student subject abilities, ethnic origins and religious or cultural backgrounds of students. The importance of supporting or assisting teachers to overcome such prejudices is underpinned by the study of Lavy and Sand (2015) where he found that teachers' prejudices affected the scores they awarded among male and female students in certain subject areas, subsequently resulted in gender gaps in the human capital development in Israel. Nigeria's classrooms have become highly diversified especially in terms of ethnic and religion/cultural backgrounds of students more so in urban schools.

Teachers also require support in the area that has to do with building their confidence in seeking assistance when their skills and knowledge become inadequate. An excellent example of such a situation is in the case of a classroom where there are students with special educational needs. Hartley (2001) study concluded that teachers should confidently be able to identify when their skills and knowledge are insufficient to provide for a child and, at this point, should have easy access within their schools to 'advanced' knowledge'.

Professional development which aids teachers' personal development as well as increasing students' academic performance is equally a vital reason that necessitates teachers' support because education is a learning circle without an end. Hence, teachers' knowledge need to be updated on a regular basis. In the words of Gimba (2015) professional development aims at upgrading, renovating and acquiring skills, abilities and strategies that ,must increase consistently over time in order to enable teachers react appropriately to academic dynamics like lesson delivery, effective use of instructional materials, teachers communication skills, enhanced quality classroom management among others. It could be inferred from Gimba's submission that the ultimate aim of professional development is to 're-bake' teachers so that they would be more professionally sound in addition to assisting their students in attaining increased level of understanding which could in turn enhance their performance. To achieve this, professional development programme should be designed along the three continuum outlined by Berliner (1994) vis a vis content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and student learning knowledge.

Researchers have mixed findings on the dimension of teachers' professional development. Some argue that professional development is most effective when it is long-term, school-based,

collaborative, focused on student learning, and linked to curricula (Darling-Hammond & Skye, 1999; Loucks-Horsley, Stiles, Mundy, Love, and Hewson, 2010). Though Michael (2005) agreed to long-term, school-based, collaborative, focused on student learning, and linked to curricula. He however opposed the generic professional development programme, explaining that the "one-size fits all" approach to professional development limits individual teachers' pathways to meet their professional development needs. Be it as may be, the fact remains that teachers need to be developed professionally, be it collaboratively or individually, to be able to do their best.

Another prominent reason that makes teachers' support important is the benefits emanating from mentoring and collaborative work. Studies have shown that mentoring increases recruit pedagogical practices and encourage teachers to work in groups. Berry, Daughtrey and Weider (2009) and Vicdero (2009) emphasised the need to support teachers in working collaboratively, for example, establishing the scope and sequence of instruction in a particular subject area for a particular grade level in an entire school. This would be a radical departure from the situation where a single teacher plans lessons for a whole year. In the case of group work, teachers learn high levels of technical skills not generally applicable in individual classrooms. Such skills might include textbook assessment, curriculum alignment and student assessment, and these are skills which are usually not part of teacher preparation programmes.

Put together, findings from these studies have shown that even the best-prepared teacher still requires support in several areas and at one point in his/her working life. The goal of the support may vary from place to place. For example, in the United States, support is aimed at closing achievement gaps between students from wealthy and poor school districts; in Israel, one goal of teacher support is to change teachers' attitudes against stereotypical tendencies. Nigerian teachers require assistance in various areas, including mastering basic skills, subject content, curriculum alignment, and collaborative skills. Although the federal government has been working to improve teacher professional development by floating periodic workshops and seminars, the World Bank has also assisted state governments in encouraging teachers to stay in rural areas. Nevertheless, it is believed that there are still gaps in teacher support in the country. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the support gaps for teachers in Nigerian secondary schools.

Research Questions

These questions were raised as a guide to the study:

1. What challenges do teachers face requiring support to deal with?
2. How well do current support mechanisms address teachers' perceived challenges?
3. Do teachers consider support necessary?

METHODOLOGY

The survey type of the descriptive research design was used for the study. The population comprised all secondary school teachers in Nigeria. 2,000 teachers from Ondo, Osun and Ekiti States were selected through random, proportionate and stratified sampling techniques. A self-designed instrument tagged "Teachers' support Gap Questionnaire" (TSGQ) was used to elicit information from the respondents. The instrument was subjected to the usual validation procedure. The instrument's reliability was ascertained through the test-retest method. This was achieved by administering the instrument twice to randomly selected 100 teachers in four schools within an interval of two weeks. The two sets of responses were correlated with Pearson's Product Moment Correlation, and an index of 0.78 was obtained. Data collected were analysed descriptively using frequency count, percentage, mean and standard deviation.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What challenges do teachers face requiring support?

Tables 1 and 2 show the areas teachers consider as challenges on which they would love to be provided support to better cope with their jobs. The areas in which the instrument sought data cover adequacy of training/teacher preparation, further professional development, teaching material assistance/provision on the job and general mentoring .

Table 1: Teaching challenges usually encountered

Area/Challenges	Frequency	%
Subject matter related	125	6.25
Student discipline in the classroom	611	30.55
Time scheduling during teaching	608	30.40
Parent related	536	26.80
Interpreting the syllabus	120	6.00

Table 2: Distribution of teachers who reported professional development issues

	Yes (%)	No (%)
Workshop attendance in the last 30 days	36	64
Desirability of attendance	100	-

Table 3: Teacher's opinion on adequacy of provision of teaching materials

	Frequency	%
Adequacy	1120	56
Inadequacy	880	44

Tables 1-3 indicate the various challenges teachers encounter in carrying out their assignments. Some inferences could be drawn from the data shown in the tables. For example, table 1 shows

that 6.25% of teachers face subject-matter obstacles, 31% face classroom discipline concerns, 30% struggle with time management when teaching their courses, 27% believe parents/households are a challenge, and 6% have difficulty reading the syllabus. One inference based on these data would be that only a few (6%) of the teachers have subject matter mastery problems indicating a good level of teacher preparation in this area.

Here, challenges in student classroom discipline (30.55 %) and teaching time scheduling (30.40%) could indicate some weaknesses in practical teaching while undergoing teacher preparation. This inference would be valid on the issue of syllabus interpretation on the part of those teachers who consider this an area of challenge. The challenges relating to parents could be related to school policies and handling parent/school relations. It is clear, therefore, that most teachers have challenges in hands-on activities in their teaching tasks. Figures shown in table 2 indicated that while a good number of the teacher considers the provision of teaching materials adequate, only 36% indicated having attended teaching/professional-related workshops in the last 3 years. Meanwhile, all respondents considered the attendance of such workshops as necessary for upgrading their job performance.

Research Question 2: How well do current support mechanisms address teachers' perceived challenges?

Three central mechanisms by which teachers can be assisted in addressing challenges are: Interactions among themselves, both formally and informally, attendance of workshops and mentoring.

Tables 4 and 5 present data on the regularity of official staff meetings and issues which dominate discussions at staff meetings

Table 4: Regularity of staff meetings

	Frequency	%
Daily	120	6
Weekly	300	15
Monthly	380	19
Once in a term	1180	59
Twice in a term	20	1

With 59% of respondents reporting once in a term staff meeting, it could be inferred that opportunity for group discussions at the whole school level was limited. This was confirmed by the further report of only 6% of the teachers reporting daily meetings of teachers and management. The monthly meeting was reported by 19%, and 15% reported weekly meetings.

Table 5: Issues dominating staff meetings

Issues	Frequency	%
Classroom issues	510	25.5
Teacher late coming/ regularity	60	3
Student late coming/ regularity	200	10
Staff welfare	480	24
Student discipline	210	10.5
Test, assignments and examination results	280	14
Instruction from government	260	13

It can be deduced from Table 5 that issues relating to the efficient discharge of duties predominate staff meetings in most schools. The teachers reported classroom instruction matters were reported by 25% of the teachers and added to the 14% reporting consideration of tests, assignments and examination results; it can be inferred that the authority in most schools considers students' performance matter seriously.

On mentoring as a mechanism for teacher support, teachers were asked whether anyone was assigned to help them deal with challenges in the school. Table 6 shows the response to the question.

Table 6: Anyone assigned to help teachers deal with school challenges?

Yes	%	No	%
1140	57	860	43

57% of the respondents reported that someone is on the ground to assist teachers in coping with challenges as they arise. At the same time, 43% indicated that teachers have to cope as best when challenges arise, especially in the classroom. The teachers who reported assistance mentioned principals, heads of departments and senior colleagues as people assigned to assist in coping with challenges.

DISCUSSION

It is evident from this study that gaps exist in the support needed by teachers to carry out their school assignments efficiently. It was shown in the literature that teachers, no matter the level of preparation, require additional support to be efficient. This situation is actual for Nigerian teachers. While the support may specifically vary from place to place across countries, one thing is that pre-service training seems insufficient to cover what experiences/challenges the teacher

may face when in employment. In the United States, teachers require support in closing achievement gaps among students of differing social-economic backgrounds and cultivating a positive attitude towards students irrespective of gender in Israel. This study has, however, shown that Nigerian teachers require support in several areas, including; assistance in classroom instructions; provision of teaching materials; coping with handling student discipline; and parent/household-related matters.

The study revealed the insufficient opportunity for teachers to attend professional improvement programmes. The subsisting practice is for teacher management authorities to float periodic workshops for selected teachers. The workshops are floated not only when funding is allowed; the number of teachers selected for attendance is usually few and may not cover the specific areas where teachers have challenges. For instance, workshops are subject matter-related and hardly touch areas such as teacher-teacher cooperation in sharing experience in teaching methods, coping with student behaviour in the classroom and textbook selection. The existing mechanism for providing support for teachers is not sufficiently robust. Staff meetings are not regular enough and, in some cases, outrightly insufficient. Teachers need constant sharing of experience in areas such as the method of instruction, coping with student classroom behaviour and handling of non-classroom chores assigned to them. Such teacher-teacher and teacher-mentor interactions are essential because teachers function alone in the classroom and because they usually widely disperse once the daily school hours are over. Most times, discussions among teachers centre on social and welfare matters. Given this circumstance, it is vital that opportunities are constantly created for teachers to interact, discuss and brainstorm on issues affecting their professional performances.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have led to the conclusion that a gap exists in the support for secondary school teachers in Nigeria. Based on the conclusion, the following recommendations were made:

1. Teachers' improvement programmes in the form of workshops should be more regular;
2. Such programmes should focus on areas where teachers indicate the need for support.
3. Teacher-teacher interaction should be encouraged and deepened to discuss professional issues daily in school.
4. Staff meetings should hold more regularly, and discussions should focus on professional matters.
5. Attendance at professional workshops should be so scheduled that all teachers, not only those nominated, have opportunities to attend at least once in three years.

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