

# A critical Examination of the Professional Status of Teachers in Kenya

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**Abstract:** *Many students nowadays would not want to become teachers once they are done with school. This is attributed to not only the incessant strikes by teachers that have demeaned the value of the profession in the eyes of the students but also the value the society attaches to the teaching profession. Indeed, even the parents have been discouraging their sons and daughters from joining the teaching profession. It is against this backdrop that this paper attempts to examine the status of teaching profession in Kenya especially in the wake of apathy towards the profession. Based on desktop research and leveraging on Dalen and Brittell model of a profession, the paper attempts to examine the reasons that have contributed to demeaning the teaching profession in the past five decades since Kenya got independence. The paper concludes by providing suggestions on how the professional status of teaching can be restored in the wake of this apathy by potential teacher trainees.*

**Key words:** *Profession, Teachers, Status*

## 1. Introduction.

The teaching profession is considered one of the most revered and noblest of all the professions in human history. Earliest civilizations the world over held the teaching profession with the highest esteem. For example, in some Indian societies, spiritual and socio-cultural leaders had more respect for the teacher than to God (Sharma, 2005, p. 74). Accordingly therefore, throughout man's civilization, a teacher continued to hold a special place in the society's transformation. Scholars holding this view contend that "no people can rise above the level of its teachers" (Sharma, 2005). This in effect implies that a society is shaped by its teachers who can be equated as social engineers or architects capable of designing the superstructure of that society. Analogously, it can be inferred to mean that a failed society is a reflection of who its teachers are. It has been rightfully argued that the status of the teacher reflects the socio-cultural ethos of the society (Sharma, 2005). Essentially, teachers have ever been

looked upon by the society as the wisest of men of the community thus enjoying a respectable status. It is perhaps in this regard that entry to the teaching profession in the earlier times was restricted to only the elite few individuals of the society (Ssekamwa, 1969). Teaching was so lucrative in the sense that that the so called Greek sophists who are considered to be the earliest teachers used to charge a fee for their service (Kombo, 2005; Otiende, 1992)

Teaching in Kenya was a respected component of education during the formative years of the country's independence (Bogonko, 1992; Kafu, 2011). This is the reason why almost every education commission that was established after independence underscored the importance of the teacher in educational development. Notably, the Kamunge report (1988: 58) as cited in Bogonko (1992, p. 171), held that it was the teachers who could foster a sense of nationhood and serve as agents of social and economic change at both the individual and societal levels. However, in nearly five decades after Kenya's independence, a number of developments have been witnessed in the field of education which tends to compromise the status of teaching profession. First and foremost, at the onset of independence, there was more demand for education and teachers. This development saw untrained and under qualified teachers gain entry into the teaching profession. Besides, the admission requirements into teacher training colleges were lower than those required to join other professions. This eventually implied that more teachers had to be trained with a lower entry qualification hence leading to the problem of under qualified teachers. Consequently, with the introduction of free primary and secondary education, the teacher education programmes have since been relegated to the periphery. This is so because most of the educational resources are channeled to the two former programmes as aforementioned at the expense of the teacher education programmes (Kafu, 2011). As observed by Bogonko (1992), Teaching has become a big industry employing thousands of people throughout the country. According to the teachers' service commission, there are nearly 300,000 teachers employed in Kenya's public schools while scores of

other trained teachers are unemployed. However, with the large number of the educated joining the teaching profession, poor pay and lack of motivation, the teaching profession does not enjoy high status in the society as it did before (Ngesu & Ndege, 2011).

## 2. Is Teaching a Profession?

Educators are nowadays grappling with the question: is teaching real a profession? What is the status of the teacher in the society? How can the waning glory of teaching profession be resuscitated in the wake of public apathy towards the profession? To help answer the underlying questions, I examine the following characteristics of a profession. According to Dalen and Brittell in Mangla (2001), a profession differs from other occupations in view of the following characteristics: caliber of candidates, professional training of members, member certification, service to society, in-service growth & continuous professional development, professional organizations, continuous careers and set of ethical standards. The following paragraphs explain each of these characteristics in detail:

**Caliber of Candidates:** A profession must admit and recruit the best qualified caliber of candidates. Admittedly, in the formative years of Kenya's independence, the caliber of teachers entering teaching profession was low compared to other professions and was unrestricted. This unrestricted entry has led to people loathing the profession accusing it of attracting people who are not serious in pursuing it as a career (The Standard, 2012), others argue that based on the presence of untrained teachers in the profession, anyone with a fair command of the subject can as well be a teacher and as such it doesn't require one to be highly qualified (Bogonko, 1992). There are a number of teachers in the teaching service who are untrained who in essence contribute to the lowering of the professional status of a teachers in this context.

**Professional Training of Members:** Professional members must be trained to meet the established requirements of the profession. It is during the training that members acquire a broad cultural education, a thorough indoctrination in the principles on which the profession is based and a mastery of the requisite competencies adjudged necessary for practicing the profession (Mangla, 2001). Practitioners command a body of specialized, esoteric knowledge which is not available to the general public (Bogonko, 1992); which in essence the teachers in Kenya lack owing to the fact that even untrained teachers are allowed to teach in schools. This is unlike medicine, law and other professions where one cannot be allowed to practice without the requisite competencies.

**Certification of Members:** professional members must be licensed to practice in the

profession in order to protect the public against incompetent and unqualified practitioners (Mangla, 2001). This is clearly unheard of in Kenya's teaching profession. The teachers' service commission only registers those teachers who work in public schools but it does not have the mandate to reign in on those rogue teachers practicing in the private sector. This means that the teaching profession in Kenya does not enjoy similar status like other professions such as medicine and accounting. These professions require that their members register with them before they start practicing which is contrary to the practice in teaching. Anybody can practice as a teacher without having a practicing license thus putting the teaching profession in jeopardy.

**Service to society:** Members of a profession have a professional desire to serve mankind thus placing the duties of their calling above the thoughts of personal comfort or financial reward (Mangla, 2001). However in many instances, because of the poor remuneration, teachers do leave the children unattended so that they engage in moonlighting activities in order to supplement their little and meager incomes. This goes against the public officer code of professional ethics and conduct and therefore this criterion falls short of classifying teaching in Kenya as a profession. Issues of poor pay have seen teachers being mobilized by their unions to demand for a better pay so that they can restore integrity and equity in pay (The Standard, 2012).

**In-service growth and continuous professional development:** Professional growth of members through in-service training and continuous professional development is necessary for a profession so that members can be kept abreast of the emerging trends in the profession and the strides made in search for knowledge in their respective fields. In this regard, deliberate initiatives have been undertaken by the government with the aim of removing the backlog of untrained and under qualified teachers from the profession. A recent initiative by the government to phase out P2 teachers should be viewed in this light. Equally worth mentioning is the establishment of a number of government agencies involved in the continuous professional development of teachers. Among such bodies include the Kenya education Management institute (KEMI), CEMASTEIA for capacity building of science teachers and the encouragement of teachers to further their studies through study leaves and scholarships among other initiatives.

**Continuous career:** Professional members should undertake to make their profession a life time career (Bogonko, 1992; Mangla, 2001). This means that teaching as a profession should not be seen as a means to achieve an end. It should not be a stopping point to other greener pastures. However, the profession of teaching has been found to be one such

that attracts people who are on transit. In fact as the Koech commission (1999) observed, majority of teacher trainees in universities “joined teaching as because of lack of vacancy in other fields and as such they joined as a last resort”. To most people therefore it is not a life time career. They hold it as a pass time as they are looking for other opportunities elsewhere. (Republic of Kenya, 1998; Kamuri, 2012)

**Ethical standards and professional code of ethics:** A profession is one with established ethical and professional standards which are different from national laws but are group imposed and enforced with acceptable standards of behavior for all members of the profession to observe in relationship with the associates and members of the public (Mangla, 2001). The teaching profession in Kenya lacks a professional code of ethics for the teachers. There is the absence of codes of conduct for members, terms, and conditions of service for teachers and ethics of teaching in Kenya (Kafu, 2011). The code of conduct which teachers are subscribing to was formulated by the employer in which case it does not fall under the purview of the aforementioned description. According to Bogonko (1992), this code ought to have been formulated by the Kenya national union of teachers (KNUT) but it instead embarked on union politics to agitate for the salary demands of the teachers thus leaving a professional void.

### 3. Suggestions to improve the Professional Status of Teachers.

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that the status of a teacher and teaching in Kenya is in limbo. A profession which allows unrestricted entry, does not have a professional code for its members, is not attracting members to permanently stay due to poor remuneration and other conditions of service in essence lowers the morale and status of members. In the current circumstances, teaching can no longer be said to enjoy the status that it used to enjoy unless there is a paradigm shift to transform the profession so that it can occupy its rightful place in the society. While doing this, it behoves on the teachers to know that the respect which they used to get from the society has now to be earned rather than being given. Therefore, if the lost glory is to be attained, the following should be done within the Kenyan context to help restore its status:

**Admission:** the admission bar or eligibility criteria to enter the teaching profession must be raised so that only the best can be able to gain entry to the profession. In the process of admission, an examination to test the interest and aptitude of one to enter the profession must be done so as to have only those who have an inner desire and calling to be teachers, get admitted into teaching. This will ensure

that teachers are seriously committed in developing their careers instead of having a scenario of people joining the profession as a last resort.

**Establishment of professional ethics:** There is the need of establishing a professional body so as to establish a professional code of conduct for teachers entering the profession of teaching. Alternatively, the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) and Kenya Union of Post Primary Teachers (KUPPET) must up their game and expand their mandate and develop ethical code of conduct for those desiring to enter the teaching profession. Leaving the formulation of the code to the Teachers Service Commission doesn't give members the power to enforce the laws on their own but it only limits a teachers rights and privileges which they ought to have enjoyed if they participated in the formulation of laws governing them. Besides, the TSC does not have an expanded mandate of enforcing the code to those teachers outside its service. This is why it becomes imperative for the teachers unions to formulate their own ethical code which will be enforced by their members. By leveraging on this, members will be able to monitor each other's activities and this will ensure self discipline among the members of the profession which will in turn raise their status in society.

**Improvement of the conditions of service for teachers:** In order to ensure that the teachers devote their time to serving mankind without having any misgivings, they should be well remunerated. This will also go along way to attract qualified teachers into the profession thereby improving their social image. Consequently, the career progression schemes which do not recognise qualification should be dealt a blow. It is worth noting that currently the career progression in teaching does not recognise merit in terms of qualification but age. In many instances, less qualified and aged teachers get promoted in favor of more qualified young ones in the profession. This leads to low morale among the qualified who opt to leave the profession whenever an opportunity avails itself. As more teachers continue to exit owing to non recognition and having attained higher qualification, the status of teaching profession continue to suffer. This is a trend which needs to be reversed if the teaching profession were to get a facelift in the wake of public apathy to the once noble profession.

**Licensing of teachers:** As in any other profession, teachers need to be licenced in order to practice in their respective profession. A body for licensing teachers need to be established and given legal back up in legislation so that it not only have control over teachers in public schools as is currently the case with TSC but also have control over the teachers in the private sector. This will in effect help bring the much needed order in teaching so that only those qualified to teach can be allowed to practice.

Legislative measures should prohibit private employers from recruiting those who do not have a practicing licence. Anybody to be found breaching the law must be punished accordingly in order to deter others from engaging in those vices. It should be noted that whenever unqualified teachers are let on the loose practicing as teachers, the damage they cause is unquantifiable academic genocide which in essence kills the society as a whole.

**Mainstreaming of teacher education at all levels with university education:** In order to raise the status of teachers, teacher education should be under the mainstream of university education. This will have an effect of raising the admission bar to join courses offered at the universities. Hence, certificate and diploma courses in teacher education should be abolished to pave way for degree programmes in teaching in which case one chooses an option of B.Ed primary or secondary education options. Current efforts by universities in starting the afore mentioned courses should be supported so that the professional status of the teacher is restored in the long run.

#### 4. Conclusion.

In spite of the current apathy to teaching, the profession cannot be wished away. Teachers are needed to serve and transform the society. They play an integral role in bringing about social change and transformation. In his speech during the National Campaign for learning and teaching in Soweto, 1997, Nelson Mandela said these of teachers:

*“Our message to teachers on this occasion is this: let your watchword be unqualified commitment to the interests of those whose education has been entrusted to you. Amongst other things this means meticulous punctuality; thorough preparation of every lesson; dedication to ensuring that every student learns something from each lesson. It involves keeping abreast of the developments in your subject areas and working cooperatively with both colleagues and management to ensure that our schools truly educate the nation. In short, it means upholding the highest standards so that dignity is fully restored to the teaching profession” (Mandela, 2004, p. 249).*

The above message clearly demonstrates the importance of a teacher as a nation builder whose work is to educate the nation. However in the wake of the profession losing its glory, Mandela’s wise words demonstrate that teaching should be professionalised by upholding the virtues of professionalism which among others include unconditional service to the society, continuous

professional development, ensuring cooperation and sharing of ideas through teacher’s professional organisations and having an ethical code of conduct guiding members so that the dignity of the profession can be restored. These words therefore should be upheld by any professional organisation if it has to gain honour in society be it in Kenya or anywhere in the world.

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