

Secondary School Teachers' Perceptions of their Status, Prestige, and Esteem in School Communities

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The purpose of the study was to examine secondary school teachers' perceptions of their status, prestige, and esteem in the school communities of the Elliot dale Circuit, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. Anchored in a qualitative research tradition, the study adopted a case study design. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 22 participants, which comprised 12 secondary school teachers, 5 school principals, 3 teacher union representatives, and 2 subject advisors from the Dutywa Education District. Ethical approval and permissions were granted by the Eastern Cape Department of Education and other relevant district authorities. Data were collected using an audio recording. Face-to-face, in-depth individual interviews using open-ended questions were also conducted. Responses were transcribed and analyzed manually through a deductive thematic analysis. Findings revealed that teachers' status, prestige, and esteem are uneven and context-dependent; there is a lack of teacher professional recognition and value, there is a decline of teacher respect from learners, there is a lack of parental appreciation of teachers' work and status, and there is a phenomenon of teacher turnover and attrition as a result of low status, prestige and esteem in the Circuit. Recommendations made included always ensuring that steps to improving teachers' status, prestige, and esteem are made as standing items in Parents and Teachers Associations meetings, community forums and events should be organized to showcase the importance of teachers in society and the crucial role teachers play in communities, and the respect, love, value, and recognition communities should accord teachers, the Department of Education should take steps to pay teachers competitive salaries in line with other professions, the Department of Education should assist all teachers to upgrade their teaching qualifications and all media houses should be encouraged to ensure their discourses about teachers and the teaching profession are positive enough to restore teachers' esteem in all societies.

Keywords: Esteem, occupation, Prestige, Professionalism, Perception, Status

I. Introduction

For many years, concerns have been raised by educational leaders and teacher unions about the inadequate attempt to increase teachers' status, prestige, and esteem in communities, as well as the impact this inadequate attempt has on individual teachers and those preparing to enter the teaching profession (Wang & Huang, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2017). As stated by Hargreaves (2009), one would have expected teachers to have enjoyed high status, prestige, and esteem in societies since they are entrusted with ensuring children's intellectual growth and a better future in all societies.

Teachers' status, whether high or low, can be understood from various dimensions, including their salaries, working conditions, employment procedures, and subjective viewpoints compared to other occupations (Thompson, 2021). In Belgium, Federowicz (2014) defined teacher status as encompassing teachers' knowledge, responsibility, and social utility relative to other professions. While their prestige encompasses a measure of external perceptions (Kraft & Lyon, 2024), or sometimes used interchangeably with the terms professionalism and professionalization (Ingersoll & Collins, 2018; Mehta, 2013). Typically, high-prestige occupations enjoy the public respect and influence that is associated with professionalization (Ingersoll & Collins, 2018; Mehta, 2013). Federowicz (2014) defined teacher esteem as the respect for individual teachers in the teaching profession and the satisfaction they have with their work.

The teaching profession in the mid and late 90s enjoyed a high level of status, prestige, and esteem. For example, from the 1940s to 1970s, teachers were considered highly respected professionals (Chien, 2019; Bragg, Walsh & Heyeres, 2021). In the Polish society, teachers, including university professors, occupy a high position, are most respected by the Poles, and ranked relatively high in the hierarchy of professional prestige (Fuller, Goodwyn & Francis-Brophy, 2013; Pérez-Díaz & Rodríguez, 2014; Smak & Walczak, 2017). Primary school teachers in countries such as Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, and Fiji are accorded a high status (Symeonidis, 2015).

On how professional prestige, status, and esteem of a given occupation are related to how individuals with talents are attracted, in Singapore and South Korea, there is a high perception of teaching as having a high status and prestige; as such, teaching attracts a large number of highly talented individuals (Darling-Hammond, 2017). On the other hand, Klimeks (2019) and Wang and Huang (2016) mentioned that occupations with low status and prestige attract fewer talented and quality individuals (Klimeks, 2019; Wang & Huang, 2016). For example, in Belgium, Federowicz (2014) opined that compared with other professions, the knowledge and prestige of teachers are rated slightly lower because of their lower status and prestige levels. Chien (2019) observed that the public perception of teachers' status is relative. This is because, in rural areas, teachers are held in high esteem, while in urban areas, they are held in low esteem because there are other competing professions with high prestige and status (Chien, 2019). On low teacher status, in Poland, teachers are convinced of the declining status of the teaching profession (Fuller, Goodwyn & Francis-Brophy, 2013; Pérez-Díaz & Rodríguez, 2014). Also, from the late 1990s, teachers in European countries had a sense that the teaching profession had low status, and it was underestimated by the public (Smak & Walczak, 2017). This low teacher status is a result of the career ambiguities of the teacher profession and its intermediacy (Klimek, 2019). Also in Zambia, Mwanakatwe (2013) and Hofmeyr (2017) claimed there is a declining status of teachers in Zambia, teaching is no longer held in high esteem in societies, society looks down upon teaching, and perceives the occupation as poor, lowly paid, and generally working under poor conditions of service.

There is also a great relation between the income earned by individuals in a particular occupation and the status, value, and prestige society bestows upon them. For example, Reilly (2018), and Zhan (2015) opined that a society places high prestige and status on the image of a career based on the high compensation received by the individual employees. In South Africa, the measure of teacher professional prestige by the income they receive has been noted by Armstrong (2014), and Ingersoll and Collins (2018), who claimed teachers have low prestige because they have not been compensated well and because they have not been provided with comparatively high salaries and benefit levels like in other professions. According to Mabaya (2013), this is a recurring phenomenon in which South African teachers consistently complain about their low salaries. Also, in Nigeria, Hamaimbo et al (2015) explained how teachers' professional prestige has been eroded because of low salaries as compared to those of other professions. Because of low salaries, teachers engage in private lessons to supplement their low income, which also erodes their professional status (Hargreaves, 2009; Hargreaves & Flutter, 2019).

In contemporary Western societies, the promotion of values that are focused on financial success and material goods to judge other professions influences the perception of the teaching profession as not particularly prestigious (Smak & Walczak, 2017). Federowicz et al (2013) mentioned how teachers in Poland have not been provided with prestige or satisfactory remuneration. As highlighted by Hargreaves and Flutter (2013), a reduction in teacher salaries has affected the status, prestige, and esteem that society should have accorded them.

Despite the significance of teacher status, prestige, and esteem in societies and in the education system, sections of secondary school teachers in the Elliotdal Circuit have mixed feelings about their societal value, recognition, and ranking among other occupations. This paper, therefore, examined the teachers' perceptions of their status, prestige, and esteem in the school communities they serve. The paper is organized as follows: Section One deals with the theoretical framework, the study methodology is discussed in Section Two, Section Three presents the results and discussions, and Section Four discusses the recommendations and conclusion.

II. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the paper is centered around the general hypotheses and perceptions on occupational status, prestige, and esteem held by scholars. These are:

Prestige

Societies' perceptions of the skills, knowledge, ability, and attitude needed within various trades, occupations, and professions have influenced their decisions in comparing and placing these occupations in hierarchical order based on their levels of prestige (Treiman, 1977). A place or spot occupied by a given occupation in the hierarchy determines its value and ability in attracting a qualified workforce (Scott, 2019). According to

Hoyle (2001), based on the social ranking of occupations' prestige, careers that support the common good of societies are deemed to lack tangible rewards, are unworthy, sometimes overlooked, and have less ranking (Scott, 2019; Hoyle, 2001; Treiman, 1977).

It is perceived that teaching as an occupation has less social standing; teachers receive low remuneration as compared to other occupations with higher remuneration (Scott, 2019; Zhan, 2015; Hoyle, 2001). The general perception is that occupations with higher income have higher prestige and are also valued by society (Zhan, 2015; Hoyle, 2001). For example, in the United States of America, it is reported that in 2015, teachers earned nearly 30% less than others in different careers requiring similar degrees (Startz, 2016; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2015). Similarly, in the Veteran, teachers with 15 years earned 9% less than others with similar training (Startz, 2016; OECD, 2015).

According to Goyder (2005), Scott (2019), Mensah (2011), Hargreaves and Hoyle (2001), the image of the teaching profession impacts the level of prestige the society grants teachers. It has been hypothesized that what erodes and subdues teachers' prestige is the image children acquire from their interaction with the teachers in schools (Scott, 2019; Hoyle, 2001). As claimed by Lankford et al (2014), prestige is gained as a result of the images clients gain from the interaction with professionals. For example, some hypotheses are that (1) what shapes the image of teachers is the belief that the school is a place of disorder; as such, the need for teachers to maintain order in schools, failure to do so will reduce their prestige, (2) the image of teaching has been stimulated by its intermediate position where a male teacher has been depicted in a perception manner as "a man among boys and a boy among men" and (3) the teacher is been perceived as someone who prepares students for the world, however the teacher remains between the world of school and the real world, while their students move forward; all the mentioned hypotheses erode and subdue teachers level of prestige in societies (Scott, 2019; Hoyle, 2001).

Status

The workforce of a given profession is a measure that determines its professional status; also, the meaning of status is found within the perception of a knowledgeable group (Fuller et al., 2013; Hargreaves, 2009; Hoyle, 2001). This is because a highly educated workforce that possesses specific abilities, talents, and aptitudes is deemed to be professionals and also has higher social standing because other professional groups have recognized their status (Hargreaves, 2009; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011; Lankford et al., 2014). Higher social standing and status are acquired by a profession that undergoes rigorous career training; each professional is licensed, has positive working conditions, is given autonomy, is highly compensated, and has higher prestige (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011). For teaching, the perception is that teachers have low status and social standing because of the lack of highly educated individuals among themselves, the lack of professional autonomy, and the training received by members is also less rigorous (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011; Hargreaves, 2009; Hoyle, 2001). Additionally, policymakers' decisions to initiate additional accountability measures, including the implementation of rigid standards to be adhered to by all teachers, the standardization of education, tighter control over teachers, and the removal of teachers' autonomy and responsibilities, have further eroded and diminished the professional status of teachers (Scott, 2019; Fuller, Goodwyn, & Francis-Brophy, 2013).

Esteem

Esteem is often, in the real sense, related to prestige and status, though an occupation can be esteemed but lack prestige and status (Scott, 2019; Hoyle, 2001). For example, in Portugal, teachers are deemed to be esteemed, but it does not translate into greater status and prestige. (Klimek, 2019; Dolton & Marcenaro-Guiterrez, 2013; Hoyle, 2001). Again, in India, a child described his teacher as someone he respects a lot, though the teacher is a poor man (Hoyle, 2001). When an occupation enjoys prestige, status, and esteem from the public, we say it has achieved semantic status because it is highly regarded and also is able to recruit a larger number of qualified applicants (Scott, 2019; Hoyle, 2001).

Also, in Belgium, Federowicz (2014) opined that despite the high esteem of teachers, their social status is low. In South Africa, Armstrong (2015), and Wilkinson (2015) find that teaching is held in low esteem and teachers are often blamed for the national crisis. Reasons for teachers' low professional esteem include being held hostage by political bashing and blaming teachers for social ills (Kastberg et al., 2017; Mensah, 2011; Klimek, 2018; Fuller et al., 2013). Teachers' professional esteem is often eroded by films and the media that inaccurately stereotype and produce negative images of the teaching profession when few teachers stray away from standards related to esteem (OECD, 2005; Hoyle, 2001; Mackenzie, 2007; Mensah, 2011).

Furthermore, without proper knowledge of schools and teachers, people form attitudes about teachers as irresponsible, untrustworthy, and less than professional simply because of films and media misrepresentation of teachers and the career (Swetnam, 1992; Mackenzie, 2007; Mensah, 2011). What also erodes and holds teachers'

esteem hostage is political bashing and blaming teachers for society's social ills (Scott, 2019; Auguste et al., 2010; Goldstein, 2011).

III. Methodology

The qualitative research tradition was employed while a case study was used to understand the participants' lived experiences on their professional status, prestige, and esteem in the Elliotdal Circuit (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024; Creswell, 2024; Mohammed, 2018; Eunjung, Faye & Sara, 2010). A sample size of twenty-two (22) participants was selected through the use of a purposive sampling strategy. The composition of the sample size was twelve (12) secondary school teachers, five (5) secondary school principals, three (3) secondary school teacher union representatives, and two (2) subject advisors from the Dutywa Education District. The Eastern Cape Provincial Department of Education and the Dutywa District Education authorities permitted the study to be conducted. Face-to-face in-depth individual interviews were conducted using audio (Delve & Limpaecher, 2024). The questions asked were open-ended. Collected data were transcribed and analysed manually using a deductive thematic analytical method.

Results

The results and discussions based on the study objective are: (i) Teachers' Status, Prestige, and Esteem are uneven and context-dependent, (ii) Lack of teacher professional recognition and value, (iii) Decline in teacher respect from learners, (iv) Lack of parental appreciation of teachers' work and status (v) Teacher turnover and attrition in the Circuit

Discussions

The discussions based on the results are presented below:

Teachers' Status, Prestige, and Esteem are Uneven and Context-Dependent

The study revealed that there is variation in how teachers are perceived across different areas and communities within the Elliotdale circuit. For example, a voice from a teacher was: *Actually, it varies from school to school. In this community, teachers are respected and have a higher status.* These uneven and mixed feelings about the professional status of teachers have been highlighted by Kraft & Lyon (2024) that our social history reveals attitudes that are persistently equivocal towards teachers and mixed messages about the status and value of the teaching profession. It was found that community respect and recognition for teachers is often linked to specific demographics, such as elders or rural vs. town-based communities. A teacher expressed that: *The community does respect teachers, but generally it is not like the respect those teachers in cities enjoy.* Responses presented by a union member were that: *Teachers who are based in the Elliotdale town have no respect from the people, but those of us who teach down in the rural areas enjoy a high status and respect from the community.* In support of these findings, in Belgium, Federowicz (2014) mentioned a common opinion about the lack of public respect for teachers and the profession. In South Africa, Hofmeyr (2017) claimed society's respect for teachers depended on different geographical areas.

While some rural communities and elders respect and recognize teachers as professionals, there is an overarching sentiment of declining status and esteem, particularly from younger generations and in urbanized areas. A teacher union member expressed that: *In this community, most people respect us, but the problem is that they do not value the role we play in the schools. It is not a matter of respect but a matter of recognition and a value the community attaches to us.* To concur with these findings, Kraft and Lyon (2024) have revealed how changes over time in young Americans' interest in the teaching profession, but their concerns were the declining status, prestige, and popularity of teaching as a profession.

The study also revealed that teachers' high status and prestige are respected and honoured based on the kind of school teachers teach, measures put by the Department of Education, and the effectiveness of the school governing bodies. A teacher mentioned that: *Actually, it varies from school to school. In this community, teachers are respected and have a higher status.* Views presented by a school principal were that: *Yes, but it depends on the area in the Elliotdale Circuit. In this school, all teachers enjoy a high status because of the current school governing body's intervention.* Another school principal mentioned that *the Department of Education puts up measures to ensure teachers are respected and also have a high status and prestige.* To corroborate this finding, Burns and Darling-Hammond (2014) revealed how less than a third of secondary school teachers indicated that the teaching profession is respected and valued in society.

Lack of Teacher Professional Recognition and Value

The study also found that secondary school teachers in the Elliotdale circuit lack professional recognition and value in the communities, and also do not enjoy any professional status. Sentiments from school principals were that: *I should say some of the people respect teachers, but teachers in the circuit are not valued as high-standard*

people; people do not see teachers as professionals, they just see them as people who teach their children, but they do not accord the teachers the value or respect they deserve. In relation to this finding and the general concerns over low teacher compensation, Ingersoll and Collins (2018), and Mehta (2013) have revealed that professions with low compensation have low prestige and status, while those professions with relatively high compensation have higher professional recognition, status, and prestige in the communities. Also in Belgium, Federowicz (2014) opined that despite the high esteem of teachers, their social status was perceived to be the same.

The feeling presented by a teacher was that: *In this community, most people respect us, but the problem is that they actually do not value the role we play in the schools. It is not a matter of respect but a matter of recognition and a value the community attaches to us.* To confirm the vital role teachers play that should have given them a high status and prestige in communities as expressed by the respondent, Chetty et al., (2014), Jackson (2018), and Kraft (2019) stated despite the central role teachers play in our society in impacting positively on students' academic, socioemotional, and life outcomes and the manner they collectively shape the democratic ideals, social cohesion, and economic competitiveness of the nation as a whole, they have long struggled to gain and maintain the status of a prestigious profession.

It was again revealed that while teachers may be respected to some extent in the communities, their role and contributions are not fully valued by the community members. A Principal's views were that: *It seems there is no such recognition; most teachers want to leave the teaching profession because they have no high status in the communities.* What a teacher said was: *In this circuit, we, the teachers, are trying our best, but there is much the Department can do to improve or upgrade our professional status and prestige, which is lacking.* Another teacher claimed that: *We do not have any status here because the community people lack education and are ignorant about the crucial role we play.* Because of the societal history of mixed feelings about teaching as a profession, Mehta (2013) opined that there is an increase in top-down management of teachers, a diminishing of teachers' autonomy, and disregard for their expertise.

Decline in Teacher Respect from Learners

The study found a decline in teacher status and prestige as a result of a lack of respect from learners and youth. Responses presented by a teacher were that: *The elders in the community here are very positive about teachers. I do not understand why the youth here choose to be so negative towards teachers and even toward education.* A union member stated: *Things have changed from how they were in the olden days. These day's learners do not respect the teaching profession as well as the parents who do not value us because of the way their children also do not respect us.* To confirm these findings, Hernik (2015) claimed that more than 80% of Polish teachers believed the teaching profession lacks prestige and low authority when dealing with students.

It was found that teachers do not enjoy any professional status and prestige, as a result of negative attitudes from the youth in the communities. Claims made by a Union member were that: *These days, learners do not respect teachers and the teaching profession.* A subject advisor expressed that: *Not really, the professional status of the teachers is diminishing day by day as there is no respect from learners to the teachers. In those days of the Bantu education where corporal punishment was used to instill fear in the learners, these days there is nothing like that, making learners not fear or respect teachers since they have righter than the right to do so.*

Again, the study revealed a shift in social dynamics and a lack of discipline and respect from learners, which has eroded the professional status and prestige of teachers. A Subject Advisor was seen saying that: *The professional status of the teachers is diminishing day by day as there is no respect for the teachers.* A Union member mentioned that: *Parents do not value us because of the way their children also do not respect us.* A teacher claimed that: *Only the children do not respect or value us, but the elders respect us a lot as people who want the best for their children.*

Lack of Parental Appreciation of Teachers' Work and Status

The study revealed a lack of parental appreciation of teachers' work and high status in the communities. Subject Advisor claimed that: *Parents do not value us, and they do not recognize our contribution in the community.* To corroborate this finding, in France, Chavalier (2012) explained how teachers' professional status is eroded and how respect and consideration were absent for teachers. The study further found a diminishing professional status of teachers in the circuit as a result of a lack of parental recognition and appreciation of teachers' status and prestige in the communities. A Teacher lamented that: *Few parents from the community come to the school to appreciate the work done by the teachers, as they only visit the schools when there is a problem or crisis.* A Union member highlighted that: *Those community people do respect us because we are teachers to their children, but they forget that we are also policemen and women, social workers, pastors, doctors to their children.* To confirm these findings, in Nigeria, Hamaimbo et al (2015) revealed how teachers' respect and prestige have been eroded considerably. Again, Smak and Walczak (2017) highlighted that among the factors that lower the prestige of teachers is the parent

who does not respect the work of the teachers and comes to the school any time and any how to initiate a conversation with the teacher about the progress or problems of his or her child without looking for more conducive atmosphere or making appointment to discuss on matters concerning the pupil.

Teacher Turnover and Attrition in the Circuit

As a result of a decline in teacher professional status, prestige, and esteem, the study found the existence of teacher turnover and attrition in the circuit; a phenomenon of teachers leaving the Elliotdale circuit to teach in other big towns or cities, and a phenomenon of those teachers who just leave the teaching profession permanently to join other professions. Sentiments from a teacher were that: Teacher's status here is low because of that, immediately they are employed; they count years, and immediately they get their teacher registration numbers, they move to schools that are nearer to the big cities like Mthatha. To concur with these findings, Francis, Effah and Osei-Owusu (2014), and Kain (2011) opined that in the United States of America and Ghana, teacher turnover is getting out of control, as it has grown by 50% over the last fifteen years in the United States of America and about 10, 000 teachers who leave the classroom every year for other professions in Ghana. Feelings from another teacher were that: *What I can also say is that all the good teachers are taken away from this circuit by the big cities because of the lack of teacher professional status and prestige, and because some of the community people disrespect teachers sometimes.* To confirm these findings, Mohammed (2024) and the Alliance for Excellence Education (AEE) (2005) mentioned nearly a thousand (1000) teachers leave the teaching field in pursuit of better working conditions in the United States of America.

It was also found that most teachers want to leave the teaching profession because they have no high status in the communities. A school principal said the following: *It seems there is no such; most teachers are preparing to leave the teaching profession for other professions as a result of low professional status in the communities.* Mohammed (2024), Bengfort (2023), and Mpundu et al. (2023) have concurred with the above findings by mentioning that when teachers are not valued, respected, and recognised, and when they have inadequate professional status and prestige, the best for them is to leave their current schools to other new schools or professions.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are mixed feelings and reactions about the professional status, prestige, and esteem of secondary school teachers in the Elliotdale Circuit. The adequacy of teacher professional status, prestige, and esteem in the circuit depended on the type of school, community, and the specific demographics, such as elders or rural vs. town-based communities. While some rural communities and elders respect and recognize teachers as professionals with high status and prestige, there is an overarching sentiment of declining status, particularly from younger generations and in urbanized areas. The lack of parental appreciation of teachers' work and the critical roles they play in the schools and communities has led to a diminishing professional status and prestige of teachers in the circuit. There are phenomena of teacher turnover and attrition in the Elliotdale circuit as a result of a decline in teacher professional status and prestige, and as a result of inadequate respect, value, and recognition accorded to teachers.

V. Recommendations

The attainment of higher professional status, prestige, and esteem by all teachers in all the communities will mean a significant increase in teacher job satisfaction, as well as high self-esteem, respectability, and self-worth. Therefore, the following recommendations need to be considered:

Issues of teachers' status and prestige should be a standing item in Parents and Teachers Associations meetings. In these meetings, the need for positive attitudes from the youth, the elders, and other stakeholders in the communities towards the teachers and the teaching profession should be discussed. Community forums and events should also be organised to showcase the importance of teachers in society and the crucial role teachers play in the community, and the respect, love, value, and recognition communities should accord them. Workshops also need to be organised where teachers are educated on how to change their perceptions of who they are to ensure societal respect for them as valuable professionals whose knowledge, competence, and commitment make a difference in ensuring the success of a nation's educational development.

To ensure a higher teacher professional standing among other professions in the communities, the Department of Education should look into the salaries of teachers and should also take steps to pay these teachers competitive salaries in line with other professions. Teachers' salaries should reflect the importance to society; also, their salaries should be compared favorably with salaries paid in other occupations requiring similar or equivalent qualifications. The Department of Education should provide teachers with the means to ensure a reasonable standard

of living for themselves and their families. The Department of Education should assist all teachers to upgrade their teaching qualifications in order to increase their status, prestige, and relative standings within the profession in society.

The South African Council of Education should strengthen its responsibility of establishing a code of professional ethics that shall apply to all registered or provisionally registered educators. Teacher unions should also devote quality attention to both the conditions of teachers in terms of teachers' welfare and conditions of teaching, and in terms of personal and professional development issues, so as to ensure respectability and self-worth for their members in society. The South African Council of Education, the teacher unions, and the Department of Education should work hand-in-hand to plead and to encourage all media houses to ensure their discourses about teachers and the teaching profession are positive enough to restore teachers' esteem in all societies.

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