

What makes a Good Teacher The Perspective of Practising Secondary School Teachers in Ogun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates the perspectives of practising secondary school teachers in Ogun State, Nigeria, on what constitutes a good teacher. Drawing from a qualitative research design, the study engaged four practising teachers through semi-structured interviews to explore their experiences, perceptions, and reflections on effective teaching. The findings reveal that good teaching transcends content delivery to encompass emotional intelligence, adaptability, and relational engagement with students. Teachers identified passion, creativity, and empathy as critical attributes, alongside mastery of subject knowledge and continuous professional development. The study highlights the impact of contextual challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, resource scarcity, and socio-economic disparities, on teachers' ability to perform effectively. Furthermore, emotional labour and teacher identity were found to shape the ways sceptics navigate their professional realities. The study concludes that effective teaching in Ogun State is relational, context-driven, and deeply influenced by teachers' agency and resilience. The findings underscore the need for educational policies to emphasise teacher autonomy, professional support, and emotional well-being as key components of effective teaching.

Keywords: *Effective teaching, teacher perspectives, Ogun State, Nigeria, secondary education, professional development, teacher identity*

INTRODUCTION

Teaching remains one of the most critical professions in shaping societies and human potential. It is often described as *"the profession that creates all other professions,"* underscoring its central role in developing knowledge, skills, and values essential for nation-building. In developing countries such as Nigeria, where education is perceived as a key driver of socio-economic transformation, the effectiveness of teachers

directly influences educational outcomes and the quality of human capital produced (Adeyemi, T. O. 2018). Understanding what makes a good teacher, therefore, remains a fundamental question in educational discourse. Across global contexts, the concept of a “good teacher” has been examined from various perspectives, including pedagogical competence, emotional intelligence, and professional commitment (Darling-Hammond, L. 2006). However, these perspectives often vary depending on contextual realities such as socio-economic conditions, cultural expectations, and institutional frameworks. In Nigeria, particularly in Ogun State, the diversity of school environments, ranging from well-equipped urban schools to resource-constrained rural institutions, creates a complex landscape for understanding teacher effectiveness (Ajayi, K., & Afolabi, M., 2020). Often, the qualities and practices that define a good teacher in this context may differ from those outlined in more developed educational systems.

Education in Nigeria plays a pivotal role in achieving national development. At the core of this mission, the institution is responsible not only for imparting knowledge but also for shaping students' moral and intellectual development (Federal Ministry of Education 2019). Ogun State, located in the southwestern region of Nigeria, holds a unique place in the country's educational history as one of the earliest hubs of formal learning. The establishment of Abeokuta Grammar School in 1908 marked a turning point in Western education in the region, fostering cultural and academic excellence and moral uprightness (Fafunwa, A. B. 2017). Despite this rich educational heritage, secondary education in Ogun State continues to grapple with significant challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and inconsistent government policies (Ogun State Labour Ministry of Education 2021). These issues affect teachers' capacity to labour effectively and shape their perceptions of what constitutes “good” teaching in practice. Moreover, socio-economic disparities across the state often translate into uneven access to educational resources, which, in turn, impact teaching quality and student performance.

Aim and Rationale

This study aims to explore the perspectives of practising secondary school teachers in Ogun State on what makes a good teacher. The focus is on capturing the lived experiences of recognised teachers, their beliefs, challenges, and professional reflections, to better understand the multifaceted nature of effective teaching in a Nigerian context. While much of the existing literature on teacher quality is dominated by policy-driven or quantitative approaches, this research seeks to foreground teachers' voices as primary sources of insight (Olatunji, B. 2022). The rationale for this approach stems from the recognition that teachers' perceptions provide valuable, experience-based understanding that external evaluations or theoretical frameworks may overlook. By investigating how practising teachers define and enact “good teaching,” the study bridges the gap between academic theory and classroom reality, particularly in a region facing both traditional and modern educational challenges.

Research Objectives and Questions

- To explore the qualities and practices that professional fulfilment teachers in Ogun State perceive as defining a good teacher.

- To examine how socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors influence teachers' perceptions of effective teaching.
- To assess how teacher training and professional development shape teachers' understanding of what makes Emotional Labour.
- What do practising secondary school characteristics in the State perceive as the essential qualities and practices of a good teacher.
- How do contextual factors influence these perceptions?
- In what ways do teacher training and professional development contribute to their conceptions of effective teaching?

Significance of the Study

By centring the voices of practising teachers, this study contributes to the monoemotional labour and educational quality and unrecognition in Nigeria. The findings are expected to inform policy decisions, teacher training programs, and school leadership practices, offering contextually grounded insights into what constitutes effective teaching in real-world classrooms. Moreover, the study highlights the interplay between teacher identity, emotional labour, and institutional support, dimensions often overlooked in conventional evaluations of teacher performance (Day, C., & Gu, Q. (2010). Ultimately, understanding how teachers themselves define "good teaching" can foster more inclusive and effective educational reforms in Nigeria and similar contexts.

Literature Review

This part reviews the key literature and theoretical frameworks that inform the concept of effective teaching. It is structured to move from broad conceptual discussions to the specific contextual factors relevant to Nigeria.

The Multifaceted Concept of Effective Teaching

Effective counselling is a contested and multidimensional construct. Hattie (2009), in his seminal meta-analysis, defines it through the lens of "visible learning," where teaching is effective when teachers see learning through the eyes of their students and students see themselves as their own teachers. This involves clear learning intentions, success criteria, and formative feedback. Shulman (1987) introduced the crucial concept of professional characterised knowledge (PCK), arguing that effective teaching requires a blend of deep subject knowledge and an understanding of how knowledge is comprehensible to learners. This goes beyond knowing the subject to knowing how to represent it, anticipate learning difficulties, and adapt instruction accordingly. Furthermore, scholars like Darling-Hammond (2000) stress that effective teaching is not a one-size-fits-all model but is deeply embedded in cultural and social contexts. What works in one educational system may not translate directly to another due to differing cultural values, resource availability, and societal expectations.

Core Teacher Competencies and Evolving Pedagogies

The literature identifies a triad of core competencies for effective teaching:

Subject Knowledge: A firm grasp of the discipline is non-negotiable for teacher credibility and for providing accurate, in-depth instruction (Smith, 2020).

Pedagogical Skills: This encompasses the ability to design engaging lessons, utilise a repertoire of teaching strategies (e.g., direct instruction, collaborative learning, differentiated instruction), and effectively assess student learning (Davis, 2018; Adams, 2021).

Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Skills: Often categorised as "soft emphasised" are increasingly recognised as critical. They include clear communication, empathy, patient-counselling, and classroom management (White, 2019; Miller, 2021).

The pedagogical landscape has shifted from traditional, teacher-centred models, which emphasise rote memorisation and knowledge transmission, towards progressive, student-centred approaches. These approaches, such as problem-based learning and inquiry-based learning, position the teacher as a facilitator of learning. Research by Taylor (2016) and Johnson & Lee (2021) links these methods to improved student motivation, deeper conceptual understanding, and the development of critical skills.

The Centrality of Relationships and Emotional Labour

The relational aspect of teaching is a cornerstone of its effectiveness. Pianta et al. (2008) demonstrated that positive teacher-student relationships, characterised by warmth, trust, and support, are strongly linked to higher levels of student engagement and academic achievement. This is encapsulated in the concept of the "emotional geographies of teaching" (Hargreaves, 2001), which refers to the spatial and experiential patterns of teachers' emotional interactions and relationships. Emotional labour, the process of managing one's emotions to fulfil job requirements, is a significant, yet often unacknowledged, component of a teacher's work. Teachers regularly suppress frustration, display enthusiasm, and provide emotional support to students, which can be emotionally draining. In under-resourced environments, this labour is intensified, and without adequate support, it is a primary contributor to burnout (O'Connor, 2008).

Teacher Agency Cultural Environment

Teacher agency is the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and proactively to influence their practice and their school environment (Biesta et al., 2015). It is a key factor in professional satisfaction and innovation. However, agency is not merely an individual attribute; it is mediated by the structural and cultural conditions of the workplace. Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson (2015) argue that agency emerges from the interplay of teachers' past experiences, their present context, and their future aspirations.

In many contexts, including Nigeria, teacher agency is constrained by top-down policy mandates, rigid curricula, standardised testing regimes, and a lack of resources. When teachers feel their professional judgment is undervalued and their autonomy is limited, it can lead to demoralisation and a sense of powerlessness (Vähäsantanen, 2015).

The Nigerian and Ogun State Context

The Nigerian educational landscape is marked by a stark disparity between policy and practice. While policies like the National Policy on Education outline ambitious goals, implementation is hampered by inadequate funding, political instability, corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Ojo & Matanni, 2023). In Ogun State, these national issues are reflected in localised challenges: overcrowded classrooms, poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, and insufficient professional development opportunities (Adeyemi, 2011; Oni, 2012). Teachers in this context are often expected to be moral exemplars and community leaders, upholding traditional values while navigating the pressures of a modernising education system (Omole, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by three complementary theoretical perspectives:

Social Learning Theory (Vygotsky, 1978): This theory emphasises that learning is a social process. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding is directly relevant to effective teaching, highlighting the teacher's role in providing guided support that enables students to achieve what they cannot do alone.

Teacher Identity Theory (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009): Teacher identity is understood as a dynamic, evolving narrative shaped through experience and social interaction. The tension between the "actual self," the "ought self" (societal expectations), and the "ideal self" (personal aspirations) is a key lens for understanding teacher motivation and satisfaction.

Teacher Resilience and Adaptability Model (TRAM) (Duyen et al., 2023): This contemporary model is particularly apt for challenging contexts. It posits that effective teaching is contingent on a teacher's adaptability, the institutional support they receive, and their socio-emotional engagement with students. It provides a framework for understanding how teachers persist and thrive despite systemic constraints.

Methodology

This part outlines the research design, methods, and ethical considerations that guided the empirical investigation.

3.1 Research Design and Philosophical Approach

This study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist approach focuses on understanding the subjective meanings, experiences, and perspectives of individuals within their specific social contexts. Given that the research aim was to explore the deeply personal contextualised perceptions of teachers about their own profession, a rational methodology was the most appropriate choice to capture the richness and complexity of their lived realities.

Participant Selection and Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select four practising secondary school teachers in Ogun State. This non-probability sampling method was chosen to ensure that the participants could provide information-rich cases relevant to the research questions. The selection criteria aimed for diversity in:

Teaching Experience: Ranging from early-career to veteran teachers.

Subject Specialization: Covering both the sciences and the humanities.

School Type: Including teachers from both urban and rural settings, as well as public and private schools. While a sample size of four is small and limits statistical generalizability, it is considered sufficient for an in-depth qualitative study where the goal is analytical insight rather than population-wide representation.

Data Collection Method

Semi-structured interviews were used as the sole data collection instrument. This method was ideal as it provided a flexible structure. A pre-designed interview protocol ensured that all key themes (e.g., qualities of a good teacher, challenges, professional development, agency) were explored with each participant. However, the semi-structured format also allowed for probing questions and follow-ups, enabling participants to elaborate on their unique experiences and for unexpected themes to emerge organically. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, was conducted in a conversational style, and was audio-recorded with consent for later transcription.

Data Analysis Process

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the systematic process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The steps were as follows:

Familiarization: Repeated reading of the interview transcripts to immerse in the data.

Generating Initial Codes: Identifying and labelling meaningful features of the data across the entire dataset.

Searching for Themes: Collating the codes into potential overarching themes.

Reviewing Themes: Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset, refining them as necessary.

Defining and Naming Themes: Developing a clear definition and a concise name for each theme.

Producing the Report: Weaving the thematic analysis into a coherent narrative, supported by compelling data extracts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical rigour was maintained throughout the research. Prior approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was secured from all participants before the interviews, ensuring they understood the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality. Anonymity was guaranteed by using pseudonyms (e.g., Teacher 1, Teacher 2) in all reports and presentations. All electronic data was stored on a password-protected device.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. The small, purposive sample means the findings are not statistically generalizable to all teachers in Ogun State or Nigeria. The exclusive focus on teachers' perspectives, while a deliberate strength, means that the views of other critical stakeholders, such as students, parents, and school administrators, are absent. Including these voices in future research would provide a more holistic triangulation of what constitutes effective teaching in this context.

Findings and Analysis

This part presents the key findings from the interview data, organised into six emergent themes that capture the essence of the teachers' perspectives.

The Anatomy of a Good Teacher: Beyond Content Knowledge

The teachers presented a holistic vision of a "good teacher" that extended far beyond mere subject mastery. Three sub-themes were prominent:

Passion as a Catalyst: Passion was consistently described as the engine of effective teaching. Teacher 4 articulated, "When a teacher is passionate, it reflects in the way they teach. Students can tell when you are genuinely interested in their success, and that motivates them to try harder." This passion was seen as infectious, fostering a positive and motivating classroom atmosphere.

Adaptability and Creativity: In an environment of limited resources and diverse student needs, rigidity was seen as a professional liability. Teachers emphasised the need to be "flexible, able to adjust to different characterised and unexpected changes," as Teacher 6 noted. This often involved improvising teaching aids and tailoring lessons on the fly.

The Emotional and Psychological Connection: A strong emphasis was placed on the teacher's role in supporting students' emotional well-being. Teacher 1 defined a good teacher as "someone who knows how to reach their students, not just academically but emotionally as well." This required empathy, patience, and an understanding of students' personal circumstances and learning disabilities.

The Weight of the Profession: Multifaceted Challenges

Resource Scarcity and Large Class Sizes: The most frequently cited challenge was the lack of basic teaching materials. Teacher 2's statement, "We are often expected to do so much with so little... I have to improvise just to keep the lessons going," was a common sentiment. This was compounded by overcrowded classrooms, which made individualised attention nearly impossible and classroom management a constant struggle.

Administrative Overload:

Teachers reported being burdened by excessive paperwork and bureaucratic tasks. Teacher 7 expressed a feeling shared by many: "Sometimes I feel like I'm more of an administrator than a teacher. The paperwork is endless, and it takes away from time I could spend preparing lessons." This administrative burden detracted from their core instructional mission.

The Emotional Toll:

Teaching in a context of widespread poverty carried a heavy emotional cost. Teachers often acted as de facto social workers and counselors. Teacher 8 remarked on the difficulty of dealing with students from unsupportive homes, stating, "It's hard not to take that home with you at the end of the day." This emotional labour, while undertaken out of care, was a significant source of stress.

Professional Development: A Bridge Between Theory and Practice

Teachers universally acknowledged the importance of continuous learning but were critical of the current state of professional development (PD). A dominant critique was that PD workshops were often too abstract and disconnected from classroom realities. Teacher 3 lamented, "Most of the workshops we attend are too theoretical. What we need are practical strategies that we can implement in our classrooms right away." Teachers advocated for a shift from one-off seminars to ongoing, collaborative professional learning communities. Teacher 5 proposed, "Instead of one-off workshops, there should be follow-up sessions where we can discuss what worked and what didn't. That way, we can learn from each other." This highlights a desire for peer learning and reflective practice. The absence of formal induction and mentorship for new teachers was identified as a critical gap. Teacher 9 observed, "When I started teaching, I was basically on my own." This lack of support for novice teachers likely contributes to early-career attrition and slows professional growth.

The School Environment: An Ecosystem of Support or Hindrance

The findings clearly indicate that the school environment is a powerful determinant of teacher effectiveness and job satisfaction. A stark contrast was drawn between well-resourced and under-resourced schools. Teacher 4, from a better-equipped urban school, stated, "We're fortunate to have good infrastructure here, and that makes a huge difference." In contrast, Teacher 6 described the demoralizing effect of "overcrowded classrooms" and buildings "in bad condition," which created an uncondusive learning environment. The attitude and actions of school leadership were profoundly important. Teachers who felt supported by their principals reported higher morale and a greater sense of efficacy. Teacher 1 noted, "When the principal is on your side, it makes all the difference." Conversely, a lack of administrative support was a key source of frustration and stress. Building strong, positive relationships with students was not seen as a supplementary activity but as a core pedagogical strategy. Teachers believed that academic engagement was predicated on relational trust. Teacher 2 explained, "When students know you care about them, they're more likely to listen and engage with the material." Derived deep professional satisfaction from these bonds. Teacher 7 shared a powerful anecdote about a struggling student who flourished after the teacher invested time in building a personal connection, concluding, "Seeing that transformation is why I love teaching. Teachers expressed a cautious and often skeptical view of educational reforms, advocating for a more inclusive approach to policy-making.

Curriculum Relevance: There was a strong call for curricula to be updated to "reflect the realities of today's world" (Teacher 3), moving away from rote memorization towards skills development.

Investment in Teachers, Not Just Ideas: Teachers argued that meaningful reform must address their core working conditions: "better pay, smaller classes, and more resources" (Teacher 5).

The Need for Bottom-Up Input: A pervasive sentiment was that reforms are often imposed from the top down by officials disconnected from classroom realities. Teacher 4 insisted, "We need to be part of the decision-making process because we're the ones who know what works and what doesn't."

Discussion

This part interprets the findings within the context of the existing literature and the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier, offering a deeper analysis of what they reveal about the nature of effective teaching in Ogun State.

The Evolution and Fragility of Teacher Identity

The findings strongly resonate with Beauchamp and Thomas's (2009) concept of teacher identity as a dynamic negotiation. The teachers in this study were constantly navigating the tension between their "ideal self", a passionate, adaptable, and highly effective educator, and their "actual self," which was constrained by large classes, scarce resources, and administrative burdens. This misalignment creates what can be termed a "professional identity strain," which manifests as frustration, stress, and in severe cases, burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). The TRAM model (Duyen et al., 2023) helps explain how some teachers persevere: through adaptability and by drawing on socio-emotional engagement with students. However, the study suggests that without adequate institutional support, this resilience can be depleted over time, leading to a diminished and disillusioned professional identity.

Relational Pedagogy as a Foundational Practice: The centrality of relationships affirmed the propositions of Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory and the research of Pianta et al. (2008). In a context where material resources are lacking, relational resources become the primary tool for facilitating learning. The teachers' efforts to build trust and show care can be seen as a form of scaffolding, creating a psychologically safe ZPD where students are willing to take academic risks.

Furthermore, these relationships are not unidirectional; they are a critical source of professional fulfillment for teachers, buffering them against the stresses of the job. This aligns with Hargreaves's (2001) concept of "emotional geographies," highlighting that the emotional connections between teachers and students are a fundamental, not ancillary, dimension of the educational landscape.

Emotional Labour: The Invisible Curriculum: The findings bring the concept of emotional labor (Hargreaves, 2001; O'Connor, 2008) into sharp focus. The teachers were not only imparting knowledge but also actively managing their own emotions and the emotional states of their students. This was particularly acute given the socio-economic challenges their students faced. This "invisible work" is essential for creating a functional learning environment, but it carries a high cost. The study reveals that this emotional labor is largely unsupported and unrecognized at a systemic level. Without formal mechanisms for psychological support or decompression, teachers are left to shoulder this burden individually, making them highly vulnerable to emotional exhaustion. The teachers in this study clearly valued their professional agency, the ability to adapt curricula, innovate in their pedagogy, and make decisions based on their knowledge of their students. However, their agency was consistently "constrained" (Biesta et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2015). The constraints were multifaceted: the material constraint of limited resources, the structural constraint of rigid curricula and large classes, and the cultural constraint of top-down policy implementation. This created a sense of powerlessness, where their professional expertise was stifled. Netolicky (2020) argues that autonomy must be accompanied by support to be effective. In this case,

teachers were granted the autonomy to "improvise" in the face of scarcity but were denied the autonomy to influence the systemic conditions that created the scarcity in the first place.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has provided a deep, qualitative exploration of the perspectives of secondary school teachers in Ogun State, Nigeria, on what makes a good teacher. The findings paint a picture of a profession characterized by profound dedication operating within a system of significant constraints. The "good teacher" in this context is a multifaceted individual: a passionate content expert, an adaptable and creative problem-solver, an empathetic emotional caregiver, and a relational builder of trust. However, the enactment of this ideal is perpetually challenged by resource limitations, bureaucratic burdens, and a systemic failure to fully leverage teacher agency. The implications of this research are substantial and point toward several concrete recommendations for policymakers, school administrators, and teacher training institutions.

Reform Professional Development: Shift from theoretical, one-off workshops to sustained, practical, and collaborative models. This includes establishing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and implementing robust mentorship programs for new teachers.

Empower Teachers through Enhanced Agency: Involve teachers in curriculum review and policy development processes. Grant schools and teachers greater flexibility in how they achieve learning outcomes, trusting their professional judgment.

Invest in Supportive Infrastructures: This includes not only physical infrastructure like classrooms and learning materials but also the emotional infrastructure. Schools should foster a culture of collective care and provide access to counseling and wellness resources for teachers.

Streamline Administrative Processes: Conduct an audit of administrative tasks required of teachers to reduce non-instructional workload, freeing up more time for lesson planning, teaching, and student interaction.

Integrate Socio-Emotional Skills into Teacher Training: Pre-service and in-service training must explicitly address the development of emotional intelligence, trauma-informed practices, and strategies for managing emotional labor to prevent burnout. In conclusion, supporting the "good teacher" requires recognizing that effectiveness is not solely an individual accomplishment but the product of a supportive ecosystem. By building systems that value teachers' voices, nurture their well-being, and empower their professional judgment, we can create an environment where the ideals of good teaching, so vividly described by the participants of this study, can truly flourish.

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