



ISSN: 0975-833X

Available online at <http://www.journalcra.com>

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF CURRENT RESEARCH

International Journal of Current Research
Vol. 15, Issue, 12, pp.26627-26629, December, 2023
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24941/ijcr.46354.12.2023>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

PARADIGM SHIFT IN THE PERCEPTIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS ON TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 20th September, 2023

Received in revised form

27th October, 2023

Accepted 15th November, 2023

Published online 20th December, 2023

Key words:

Paradigm Shift, Perceptions of Stakeholders, Technical and Vocational Education.

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Citation Agi Livinus Aloho, Efuet Simon Akem and George Fonkeng Epah. 2023. "Paradigm Shift in the Perceptions of Stakeholders on Technical and Vocational Education in Secondary Schools in Cross River State, Nigeria". *International Journal of Current Research*, 15, (12), 26627-26629.

ABSTRACT

This article endeavours to promote a transformative shift towards integrated technical and vocational education with a focus on enhancing employability within the secondary school system of Cross River State, Nigeria. The evolving perceptions of various stakeholders concerning Technical and Vocational Education (TVE) in Cross River State can help to enhance this shift. The views held by stakeholders in the realm of technical and vocational education exhibit a range of perspectives, encompassing students' outlooks, teachers' viewpoints, parents' stances, and employers' impressions. These perceptions collectively shed light on the current landscape of technical and vocational education in Cross River State. Data was collected through observation and in-depth interviewing. Results indicate that the Prevailing Perceptions Regarding Technical And Vocational Education In Cross River State include limited Access To Technical Education, students' less interest in Tve, Influence Of Parents And Lack Of Awareness, Diminished Prestige Of Technical Education.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a pivotal role in nurturing individuals into well-rounded human beings who, armed with knowledge and skills, can contribute meaningfully to their immediate communities and society at large. The significance of education cannot be overstated, particularly in today's rapidly changing world driven by technology. This technological revolution has reshaped various aspects of daily life, spanning household chores to office tasks, and permeating nearly every professional field. As the world continually evolves, the ability to meet future technological demands should be a primary concern for policymakers in the education sector. Technology, alongside skills, attitudes, and competencies, now forms the bedrock of economic, social, and political progress within any community. Consequently, embracing vocational and technical education (TVE) in an underdeveloped region like Cross River State becomes crucial. TVE has the potential to cultivate the skilled workforce needed to propel development, generate ample employment across various job tiers, and, concurrently, provide economic engagement opportunities for the burgeoning youth population. Becker (2002) underscores the crucial relationship between new knowledge and human capital in a nation's economic growth. He notes that countries achieving significant economic growth have concurrently invested in education and training, aligning with technological advancements.

Stevens (1999) underscores the cost-effectiveness of investing in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), as it equips individuals with skills directly applicable in the labor market. Becker (2002) further highlights the link between education, training, and economic growth, emphasizing the role of knowledge and skills in a country's development. These ideas have spurred many countries, including Nigeria, to revisit their educational policies to harness their human resources for productivity, social development, and economic growth. As reported by The Guardian Newspaper on March 10, 2022, stakeholders in the education sector have emphasized the need for a paradigm shift in Nigeria's education system to drive progress. Regrettably, Cross River State finds itself with a paucity of technical and vocational schools, which are marred by standard infrastructure and a shortage of teaching staff. The perceptions held by stakeholders, coupled with the dismal state of these technical and vocational institutions, as well as the influence of ignorance and parental guidance, further discourage prospective students from considering enrollment in such educational avenues within the region.

METHODS

Qualitative methods were used to gain an understanding of experiences and perspectives related to TVET in Cross River State.

To achieve the objective of this paper, data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered through interviews, in-depth interviews, and observations while the secondary data were searched from published documents. The research targeted various stakeholders involved in the TVET system of education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' perceptions of technical and vocational education in cross river state: The attitudes of students toward technical and vocational education in Cross River State exert a profound impact on the nature of TVE in the state. This influence is evident in various aspects, including student enrollment figures, academic performance, and the selection of specific trades. Findings indicate that more than 50% of students in Cross River State associate technical and vocational education with lower intelligence levels, while others believe it is intended for more obstinate individuals in society. Another group, of students, views technical and vocational education as primarily for the underprivileged. Furthermore, some students perceive technical education as a domain exclusively designed for those who are unintelligent, stubborn, and underprivileged. These perceptions have been significantly influenced by the behavior and conduct of many students within technical and vocational schools. Most students in technical schools in Cross River State are frequently spotted outside the school premises during regular school hours. This behaviour has led students from other institutions to perceive them as unruly and non-compliant with school regulations. A notable proportion of students hailing from poor backgrounds in Cross River State gravitate toward technical and vocational education. For them, this path offers the opportunity to master a trade and secure employment upon completing secondary education. Their preference for technical and vocational education stems from financial constraints, as they lack the resources to pursue further academic studies.

Moreover, instances of school dropouts from general education who transitioned into technical schools and found success have contributed to the perception that technical and vocational education is primarily a refuge for those who have abandoned conventional schooling. Despite the limited interest displayed by a minority of students in technical and vocational education in Cross River State, such institutions remain sparse and inadequately equipped to enhance the image of technical education within the state. In Cross River State, grammar schools stand out for their well-constructed campuses with secure perimeters, complete with fences. In stark contrast, technical and vocational education institutions are notably less structured and often lack school fences. This open environment allows students to move in and out of the premises freely and at any time. Such lax attitudes of students significantly impact their overall performance, leading their counterparts in grammar schools to perceive them as obstinate and academically challenged. While many students in Cross River State possess the willingness and capability to pursue higher education, the unfortunate reality is that technical and vocational schools in the state are severely lacking. These institutions suffer from inadequate equipment, subpar infrastructure, and a glaring absence of technical universities for graduates of technical secondary schools to advance their studies. The ardent desire for higher education combined with the absence of a dedicated technical university has dissuaded many students from pursuing technical and vocational education. Instead, they tend to gravitate toward general education, which offers a broader array of educational opportunities at the university level for secondary school graduates.

Influence of Parents and Lack of Awareness: Field analyses have illuminated the key factors driving students' avoidance of technical and vocational education in Cross River State. A significant number of students cited parental influence as the primary reason for their reluctance while some professed ignorance regarding the various technical and vocational training programs and trades offered across different schools. Others voiced concerns about the high cost of school fees and practical expenses while a small number lamented the

extended distances to technical and vocational schools, coupled with the absence of such institutions in many areas. The adverse perception of technical and vocational education among students can be traced back to the influence of their parents. Parents tend to favour grammar schools over technical and vocational institutions for their children. This preference stems from the widespread availability and affordability of grammar schools, which offer a clearer path to higher education. In contrast, graduates of technical schools often lack access to technical universities within Cross River State, perpetuating the perception that technical education is the domain of those unable to afford a traditional university education. Wealthier parents harbor aspirations of their children becoming influential politicians, lawyers, or administrators. Compounding this issue, parents in Cross River State have not adequately oriented their children regarding the programs and benefits of technical and vocational education. Consequently, students remain unaware of the diverse programmes and trades offered within this educational framework. Equally obscure to them are the career prospects that follow, as they perceive graduates of technical and vocational education solely as carpenters and builders within their communities. These misconceptions have collectively fostered a negative attitude towards technical and vocational education. Furthermore, students contend that the overall cost of attending technical and vocational schools is exorbitant, encompassing school fees, workshop or laboratory expenses, and tool procurement. When combined, these financial burdens prove insurmountable for the average student in Cross River State. This issue is exacerbated by the scarcity of technical and vocational schools and the substantial distances that students must traverse, incurring transportation costs along the way. In totality, technical and vocational education emerges as an unaffordable choice for most students.

The Diminished Prestige of Technical Education: Presently, technical and vocational education does not command the prestige it once did. Instead, it is frequently associated with academic disciplines considered suitable for less academically inclined students, dropouts, or individuals of lesser intellectual prowess. The diminished status of technical education has led parents and elites to favour alternative academic pursuits, with technical and vocational education being relegated to a last-resort option. Parents tend to steer their children towards more prestigious courses such as medicine, administration, and law.

Teachers' Perception of Technical and Vocational Education: The commitment and attitude of vocational teachers significantly influence students' interest in technical and vocational education. In Cross River State, the prevailing disparities in remuneration and working conditions between vocational teachers and their counterparts in other sectors have led to a lack of motivation and dedication among these educators. Unfavorable conditions often result in negative work attitudes, pushing some teachers toward private business endeavors to align with societal norms, while students are left neglected. The perception of teachers in technical and vocational education has contributed to the weakening of the technical and vocational education system in Cross River State.

Parents' perception of technical and vocational education: Parents wield significant influence over their children's educational choices, especially during their secondary school years when children remain highly dependent on their parents for their educational needs. Consequently, parents often make decisions about their children's educational paths not solely based on the children's preferences but rather influenced by the parents' perceptions of different educational options. In the context of Cross River State, parents generally hold negative views regarding technical and vocational education. These negative perceptions encompass various aspects, including the low societal status assigned to graduates of technical and vocational education, inadequate teacher salaries, poorly equipped workshops, unqualified instructors, substandard school infrastructure, high training costs, and insufficient state funding. The findings unveiled a range of parental perceptions regarding technical and vocational education in Cross River State. Parents held the belief that graduates

from technical and vocational education programs held a low status within their communities. They expressed concerns about the apparent lack of meaning in pursuing technical and vocational education in the state. Their argument rested on the absence of suitable industries to provide students with internships and post-graduation employment opportunities. In many instances, parents viewed jobs within the technical and vocational education sector as low-paying, while institutions themselves grappled with good technology and infrastructure, hindering effective student training. Consequently, graduates from these institutions often emerged with inadequate training, struggled to secure suitable employment, and earned meager incomes.

Employers' Perceptions of Technical and Vocational Education:

Technical and vocational education helps to reduce the rate of drop outs or unemployment in the society. Technical and vocational education could be used to developed marketable skills in students and youths so that they can become easily employable. It makes an individual to become an asset to him or herself and the nation, and also prevent him from being a liability to the society. Besides, technical and vocational education helps a nation develop technologically and industrially by producing people competent and capable of developing and utilizing technologies for industrial and economic development. It is a tool that can be used to develop and sustain the manpower needs of any nation. Furthermore, technical and vocational education offers the beneficiary the ability to be self-reliant, to be job creators and employers of labour.

People who are fortunate to graduate from a regular school system and excel in various fields of learning fall back to the skills acquired in technical and vocational institutions in time of employment crisis. This has been proven right in recent time when workers of various categories were retrenched in both public and private sectors due to the deteriorating state of economy. Such workers who possessed skills other than that for which they were previously employed had something else to fall back on and better off financially than those who had no other skills. Despite its importance, technical and vocational education in Cross River State is still backward and employers' perceptions show that they cannot find the right quality of workers to employ. Some employers were of the perception that the technical and vocational training centres do not have enough workshops for practical training programmes. Some employers were of the perception that the technical and vocational schools do not have experienced teachers while others were of the perception that technical and vocational schools are poorly constructed without fences, potable water and electricity facilities which are discouraging to students especially female students. As a result, the quality of trained personnel from these schools does not meet the demands of the job market. Other employers also stated that even if parents were willing to send their children to technical and vocational schools, the schools are limited in number, are far off for some students which limit the number of trainees in technical and vocational schools in cross river state. It is safe to conclude that employers in Cross River State are not satisfied with Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system in Cross River State. They maintain that the present Technical and Vocational Education and Training programmes have not prepared sufficient skilled and semi-skilled workers to satisfy the needs of workforce. The employers believed that the state of technical and vocational training in Cross River State is inadequate to train students effectively for the changing demands of the work place.

CONCLUSION

Despite the potential of technical and vocational education to address skill gaps and reduce unemployment, it remains a lesser-preferred choice among students, parents, and the broader society when compared to conventional education. Even though some secondary schools offer technical and vocational trades, enrollment rates remain modest.

Observations indicate that a significant proportion of students in TVE programs did not opt for these trades as their first choice but rather joined them after failing to secure admission in their preferred fields within general education. Furthermore, there exists either a poor perception of or complete ignorance about the advantages of vocational and technical education within the general public. Some individuals mistakenly regard it as an educational path intended for the less fortunate, dropouts, and those considered less academically inclined. It is sometimes viewed as not leading to prestigious jobs in society and only offering "dead-end" positions with no potential for further personal development. Additionally, vocational and technical education is perceived as not imparting substantial managerial skills for higher-level employment. Parents in Cross River State fail to orient their children about technical and vocational programs, leaving them ignorant about the trades and job opportunities. Students perceive technical graduates as mere carpenters and builders. High costs, including school fees, workshop charges, and tool expenses, further discourage students, exacerbated by the scarcity of schools and long commutes. Parental expectations also play a significant role in shaping the perception of technical and vocational education. Many parents desire technical and vocational education teachers who can inspire their children and emphasize the value of vocational skills. However, they often find that technical and vocational education teachers predominantly focus on theory in the classroom, diminishing the perceived value of practical lessons due to teachers' inexperience and lack of expertise in the field. While these educators possess strong academic knowledge, their practical skills often fall short, leading to a disconnect between the curriculum and the demands of the labour market. To promote student interest and enrollment in technical and vocational education, adequate resources, qualified trainers, modern equipment, and a quality curriculum are essential. Students' perceptions can be improved through advocacy programs, research grants, scholarships, bursaries, and mentorship opportunities.

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