
| RESEARCH ARTICLE**The Professionalization Paradox: Rising Academic Standards and Declining Real Quality in Primary Teacher Education in Cameroon and Nigeria (1995–2025)****Koffa Abdouraman***University of Garoua, Cameroon***Corresponding Author:** Koffa Abdouraman, **E-mail:** akoffaa@yahoo.co.uk**| ABSTRACT**

In a context marked by international quality mandates (SDG 4) and cross-border security crises, Cameroon and Nigeria have raised the formal academic requirements of primary teacher education. This article examines the apparent paradox between that elevation, the shift from the BEPC to the Baccalaureate in Cameroon and the generalization of the Nigeria Certificate in Education, and the persistent perception, among trainers and administrators, of a decline in the quality of those who enter and complete the programmes. The study draws on sixteen semi-structured interviews conducted in 2025 with lecturers, student teachers, ENIEG directors and trainers, pedagogic advisers and basic-education officials in the Fombina region, six at the Federal College of Education, Yola (Nigeria) and ten in Mayo Kani Division (Cameroon). Sampling followed availability rather than statistical representativeness. Thematic analysis is consistent with what can be labelled, provisionally, as adverse selection: precarious occupational status and, in Cameroon, the rupture between training and civil-service integration are said to deter stronger academic profiles. Respondents also link a shrinking pool to insecurity. At ENIEG Kaélé, which they themselves locate away from the most violently affected zones, directors reported an intake of sixteen students in a facility designed for hundreds, and a motto of survival ("we make do") that contradicts official standards. The interviews do not isolate insecurity from employment signals or from competition with other tracks. The article argues that professionalization through credentials, without revaluation of the occupation or a credible path into employment, can be counterproductive: it tightens access without securing classroom quality. The evidence is perceptual and locally bounded. It does not measure pupil learning and cannot be read as a national census of teacher competence.

| KEYWORDS

professionalization; primary teacher education; Cameroon; Nigeria; adverse selection; Fombina; ENIEG; NCE

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1. Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, education systems in sub-Saharan Africa have been asked to absorb a rapidly growing social demand for schooling while raising quality standards, first under Education for All and then under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2005). In the Fombina region, a cross-border space shared between northern Cameroon and, on the Nigerian side, mainly Adamawa State, that structural tension is compounded by chronic insecurity linked to the Boko Haram insurgency and, on the Cameroonian side, to the Anglophone crisis.

The historical Emirate of Fombina, founded by Modibbo Adama in the early nineteenth century, covered territories now split among Nigeria (chiefly Adamawa and Taraba), Cameroon (Far North, North, Adamawa), Chad and the Central African Republic.

1.1. Problem

Over the past three decades both countries have sought to professionalize primary teacher education by raising entry requirements, lengthening pre-service programmes and aligning certification with regional and international benchmarks (Federal Ministry of Education, 2013; UNESCO, 2005). In Nigeria the Grade II Certificate has given way to the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) as the minimum teaching qualification (Ogunyinka et al., 2015). In Cameroon, Decree n° 2023/434 of 4 October 2023 reorganized the “*écoles normales d’instituteurs*” and made the Baccalaureate the required entry diploma for the ENIEG, replacing a long period during which the BEPC still opened the door (République du Cameroun, 2023).

A paradox is widely asserted: formal academic standards have risen, while many observers report that the actual quality of newly trained teachers has not. Regional assessments document persistently weak literacy and numeracy at the end of primary school in francophone Africa, including Cameroon, despite higher proportions of credentialed teachers (PASEC, 2020). Classroom-oriented studies of initial training in Africa have long shown that higher formal preparation does not automatically produce stronger teaching of reading and mathematics (Akyeampong et al., 2013; Lewin & Stuart, 2003). In rural Cameroon, Wohlfahrt (2018) has described the gaps of formal ENIEG training and the informal learning through which serving teachers try to compensate.

The present study does not re-measure pupil learning. It asks how actors inside the training systems themselves explain the disjuncture between rising diplomas and what they see as declining trainee quality. The general question is therefore: how can the paradox between rising academic standards for admission and the perceived degradation of the real quality of trained teachers in Cameroon and Nigeria (1995–2025) be explained?

Four more specific questions follow. What social and institutional mechanisms turn the diploma requirement into a weak filter? How do contextual crises amplify the contradiction by drying up the recruitment pool? What strategies do institutional actors adopt when faced with shortage? How do the architectures of the two systems, a unified Nigerian model and a bifocal Cameroonian one, modulate the phenomenon?

1.2. Theoretical frame

The analysis treats professionalization not as a mere technical upgrade of diplomas but as a social construction of the occupation (Perrenoud, 1994). It borrows Akerlof’s (1970) notion of adverse selection as a heuristic: when working conditions deteriorate, raising the entry barrier may select those who have fewer alternatives rather than the strongest candidates. The corpus cannot test that mechanism. It contains no applicant grades, no comparison with other post-secondary tracks, and no before-and-after measure of intake. Implementation-gap analysis then directs attention to the distance between the prescribed standard and the enacted practice. The stance is interpretive. Economic and sociological concepts are used to name what respondents describe, not to estimate a market parameter.

The contribution is modest and empirical. Comparative work that follows the teacher-production chain across the Cameroon–Nigeria border, and that treats conflict as a shock to that chain rather than only as a barrier to pupil access, remains scarce (Agbor et al., 2022). By interviewing insiders coded R1 to R16, the study documents mechanisms that official reports rarely record, in particular the Cameroonian disconnect between paid training and public integration.

2. Literature Review

The professionalization of teaching in both countries has been written into policy as a rise in credentials. Nigeria’s National Policy on Education made the NCE the minimum qualification, phasing out the Grade II Certificate from the late 1990s (Federal Ministry of Education, 2013; Ogunyinka et al., 2015). Cameroon has moved more recently, and more abruptly at the point of admission, from a mixed BEPC-Probatoire-Baccalaureate intake to a Baccalaureate-only rule (République du Cameroun, 2023). Thomas (2019) has shown that, in Cameroon, teacher identity is formed under contradictory pressures of formal professionalism and constrained institutional recognition.

The empirical literature does not support a simple equation between higher certificates and better classrooms. The MUSTER programme documented, across several African systems, weak practicum arrangements, poorly resourced colleges and a loose coupling between college assessment and classroom competence (Lewin & Stuart, 2003). Akyeampong et al. (2013), studying teacher preparation for reading and mathematics in six African countries, found that initial training often left teachers without a usable grasp of how children learn those subjects. PASEC (2020) reports that large shares of pupils in participating francophone systems, Cameroon among them, do not reach minimum proficiency at the end of primary school, and that teachers’ own academic and pedagogical knowledge is frequently fragile. Darling-Hammond (2006) reminds us, from a different context, that powerful teacher education depends on coherent clinical experience, not on credentials alone.

Two further strands matter for Fombina. Conflict studies in Cameroon have concentrated on the disruption of teaching and learning in schools (Agbor et al., 2022) and say less about the emptying of training colleges. Rural Cameroonian work, for its part, shows that informal workplace learning is already used to patch the holes of formal ENIEG preparation (Wohlfahrt, 2018). What remains thin is a comparative, actor-centred account of how credential inflation, labour-market signals and security shocks interact on both sides of the same historical region.

3. Method

3.1. Design

The study adopts an interpretive comparative case design. The aim is to grasp the meaning that strategically placed actors give to three decades of reform, not to estimate population parameters. An interview guide was prepared and sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted.

3.2. Sample

Respondents were selected according to their availability in the two sites. They are coded R1 to R16. R1 to R6 were interviewed at the Federal College of Education, Yola, and include student teachers, lecturers and staff holding administrative responsibilities. R7 to R16 were interviewed in Mayo Kani Division, Far North Region of Cameroon, among divisional officials of basic education, directors and deputy directors of the ENIEG of Kaélé, heads of administrative and finance services, and pedagogic advisers. All Cameroonian respondents were serving in Mayo Kani at the time of the research, though several had previously worked in other regions. It should be noted that some quotations are attributed to paired codes (R7/R9, R8/R13, R11/R16), which means that the idea(s) of respondent is (are) almost the same.

The comparison is asymmetric. Ten voices are Cameroonian, six Nigerian. The Cameroonian side is thicker and more internally differentiated by administrative role; the Nigerian side is a single college and contains the only student-teacher voices. That imbalance is a limit of availability sampling, not a finding about the two systems. Diversity of roles lets the same themes be heard from management, supervision, training and, in Yola, from trainees. It is not methodological triangulation: there is no classroom observation, no analysis of marked scripts, and no pupil assessment attached to this corpus.

Table 1. Sample characteristics (N = 16).

Codes	Functions / roles	Institutions	Countries
R1–R6	Trainers, researchers, student teachers	Federal College of Education, Yola	Nigeria (unified federal system)
R7, R9	Divisional delegates	Divisional Delegation of Basic Education, Mayo Kani (Kaélé)	Cameroon (administration)
R8, R10, R13	Heads of administration / finance	ENIEG of Kaélé, Mayo Kani	Cameroon (training institution)
R11, R16	Directors of teacher training colleges	ENIEG of Kaélé, Mayo Kani	Cameroon (management)
R12, R14	Pedagogic advisers	Inspectorate, Divisional Delegation of Basic Education, Kaélé	Cameroon (supervision)
R15	Deputy director	ENIEG of Kaélé, Mayo Kani	Cameroon (administration)

3.3. Analysis

Interviews were submitted to a thematic content analysis organized around four axes: the evolution of admission criteria, the perception of quality, the impact of crises, and adaptation strategies. Occurrences were not counted. Quantifiers in section 4 name recurrences in the discourse, not frequencies in a population.

3.4. Ethics and limits

Respondents are identified only by codes. Citations are used analytically. Several Cameroonian functions, however, are scarce in Mayo Kani: a local reader may still recognize a divisional delegate or an ENIEG director. Institutional names are those given in the source manuscript.

The author is affiliated with the University of Garoua, in the same northern Cameroonian space as Mayo Kani. The source manuscript does not state whether any respondent was a colleague, former student or administrative counterpart. That

proximity, if it exists, would shape what could be said in the interview. It is recorded here as an open question, not as a demonstrated bias.

The design has four structural limits. Sampling by availability produces a 10/6 Cameroonian–Nigerian split and concentrates each side on one site; neither Yola nor Mayo Kani stands for a national system. The corpus records perceptions of trainee quality, not measured classroom practice or pupil learning. The thirty-year frame (1995–2025) is a retrospective reconstruction: respondents speak from a present in which the 2024 Cameroonian reform is already in force, and what they say about the mid-1990s is memory, institutional lore and contrast with today, not a panel. The fieldwork for this study was conducted during the 2025 calendar year, although the precise months are not retained in the source records.

4. Results

Four axes structure the findings: the formal elevation of standards, the perceived decline of trainee level, the institutional mechanisms that produce the paradox, and the structural divergences of the two systems.

4.1. Formal elevation of standards: an apparent convergence

4.1.1. Nigeria: towards NCE hegemony

Historical accounts in the Nigerian interviews mark a break with the era of primary-level teachers. The Grade II Certificate has given way to the NCE, a tertiary qualification. R2 states that candidates must now present five credits at Ordinary Level, including English and Mathematics, a significant academic filter.

4.1.2. Cameroon: the credential race

The Cameroonian trajectory is described as academic inflation. The entrance examination, once open to BEPC holders, now requires the Baccalaureate.

"In 2024, the academic level moved from 03 to 01, solely Baccalaureate only." (R7/R9, divisional delegate, Cameroon)

Table 2. Evolution of admission criteria (1995–2025), as reconstructed from interviews and official texts

Criterion	Nigeria (1995)	Nigeria (2025)	Cameroon (1995)	Cameroon (2025)
Entry diploma	Primary school / JSS	SSCE (5 credits) / JAMB	BEPC / Probatoire / Baccalaureate	Baccalaureate only
Certification	Grade II Certificate	NCE	CAPIEMP	CAPIEMP
Selection	Internal examination	UTME (national) and screening	Written, then oral	Written only

The 2025 Cameroonian cell is consistent with Decree n° 2023/434. The 1995 cells summarize what respondents and secondary sources present as the earlier regime; they are not an archival reconstruction of every ministerial text issued that year.

4.2. The paradox: "the level of the learners has considerably declined"

The interviews converge on a judgement about the quality of those now entering the colleges, not about a new test of primary pupils. The formal diploma is said no longer to guarantee fundamental competence.

"Note also that the level of the learners has considerably declined." (R8/R13, ENIEG Kaélé)

"Many NCE students are low-performing candidates who could not gain university admission or scored poorly in JAMB." (R1, student teacher, Nigeria)

R10, also at Kaélé, adds that there is "no quality improvement because the baseline quality level is deficient."

Respondents describe ENIEGs and colleges of education as catch-all pathways. In Nigeria, teaching is perceived as a default choice for those who fail university entrance. In Cameroon, sitting the entrance examination is portrayed as a strategy of social survival rather than as a vocational choice, attracting Baccalaureate holders whose competencies remain fragile. That is how the filter is narrated. The corpus contains no applicant transcripts, no comparison with other post-secondary tracks, and no before-and-after measure of intake quality. Adverse selection is a label fitted to these accounts, not a demonstrated labour-market fact.

4.3. Institutional mechanisms producing the paradox

4.3.1. An impossible quantity–quality trade-off

Institutions are caught between numerical recruitment targets, needed to fill rural deficits, and the weakness of the candidate pool. R14 summarizes this management of scarcity:

The motto: we make do." (R14, pedagogic adviser)

R12 speaks of a "resilience based on conformity to realities imported by the hierarchy," a formula that suggests quality standards are adjusted to administrative statistics rather than the reverse.

4.3.2. Security crises and the drying of the pool

Insecurity is named by respondents as a major source of disaffection. The most concrete figure comes from ENIEG Kaélé, which they locate at some distance from the most violently affected zones:

"The reduced number in selections, like for this year we received 16 students." (R11/R16, ENIEG director)

With sixteen students in a facility designed for hundreds, selectivity becomes impossible and the institution accepts those who present themselves. The interviews do not, however, isolate Boko Haram or the Anglophone crisis as the cause of that number. Kaélé is not on the front line. Plausible concurrent paths, several of which appear elsewhere in the same corpus, include the employment disconnect (section 4.3.3), the low relative attractiveness of the occupation, competition from other faculties, and national recruitment policy. Insecurity may act indirectly, through fear of later posting or through a general drying of rural candidate pools. The data cannot rank these paths.

Table 3. What the local corpus documents about recruitment under constraint.

Sites	Documented in the interviews	Also evoked, without a local interview
FCE Yola (Nigeria)	Displacement in the North-East; lowered requirements for local candidates, as described from Yola	Counts of closed colleges (none given)
ENIEG Kaélé (Cameroon)	Intake of 16 students; non-selective admission	Closures or candidate flight in the North-West and South-West

The North-West / South-West line is hearsay within the Mayo Kani corpus. It is not a finding about those regions' ENIEGs.

4.3.3. The training–employment disconnect (Cameroon)

A Cameroon-specific issue runs through the Mayo Kani interviews: the rupture between paid training and recruitment into the civil service. Unlike in an earlier period evoked by respondents, the ENIEG diploma no longer guarantees integration.

"The integration of trained personnel is a fundamental indicator for education quality." (R7/R9, divisional delegate)

"Emphasis on teacher integration, a central motivational factor." (R11/R16)

This professional uncertainty is said to deter stronger academic profiles, who choose other paths and leave the ENIEGs with candidates who have fewer options. The cycle then reinforces itself.

4.4. Structural divergences and equity

Nigeria's unified system favours theoretical standardization but, according to the Yola respondents, suffers from unequal implementation across states. Cameroon's bifocal system manages two subsystems. R7 notes that this duality is a "constraint because the Anglophone system is not accessible to all," producing pockets of linguistic exclusion.

Gender equity is described as having progressed through quotas. Socioeconomic equity is described as regressing. R14 formulates the change as a restriction of access by means:

"No longer whoever wants, but whoever can." (R14)

In Nigeria, the nine-month NTI programme is criticized by R1 as favouring "candidates who can afford accelerated study," to the detriment of quality and equal opportunity. That judgement is a trainee's; the corpus contains no independent evaluation of NTI.

5. Discussion

The interviews describe a drift towards credentialism: a race for diplomas disconnected from the competencies that trainers say they observe. The state raises the entry barrier, to the Baccalaureate in Cameroon, to the NCE in Nigeria, in order to display a political will for quality, without a matching revaluation of the teaching status. The signal is contradictory. Elite paper qualifications are demanded for an occupation that respondents experience as proletarianized. Candidates who are overqualified on paper are then described as underqualified in motivation and in usable pedagogical skill.

This reading is consistent with Akerlof's (1970) heuristic and with Perrenoud's (1994) warning that professionalization fails when it is reduced to a formal elevation. It is also consistent with what PASEC (2020) and Akyeampong et al. (2013) have shown at

other levels of the system: credentials and learning do not move in lockstep. The present corpus adds a local interpretation, not a causal estimate. In Cameroon, respondents place the missing lock on employment. On both sides they also name a thin candidate pool. Insecurity is one of the names they give that thinness; it is not a variable the design can partial out.

Donor-supported programmes such as PAREC in Cameroon, and UN agencies mentioned by Nigerian respondents, keep parts of the system afloat through infrastructure, contractual recruitment or in-service training. The interviews do not evaluate those programmes. They do show that a college can report an intake of sixteen students in the same years during which national discourse continues to count "teachers trained." Quantitative indicators and local scarcity can coexist.

The security crisis is not only an exogenous shock. It also reveals the fragility of a long, costly, residential model of initial training. The drop in enrolment at Kaélé, which respondents do not present as a front-line college, shows that a campus can empty without being under direct attack. Whether the sixteen students are best explained by distant insecurity, by the employment disconnect, or by both together, the residential model still looks poorly suited to a region where filling a campus can no longer be assumed.

Three clarifications bound these claims. "Declining real quality" means the quality of trainees as judged by those who train and supervise them; it is not a new estimate of learning poverty. Yola is not Nigeria, and Mayo Kani is not Cameroon: the comparison is between two situated segments of the Fombina chain, and it is weighted 10 to 6 toward the Cameroonian administrative voice. The thirty-year title names a historical problem reconstructed in interviews, not a longitudinal survey.

6. Recommendations

Three orientations follow from the corpus, not from a full policy appraisal.

In Cameroon, reconnecting training and employment is the condition most often named by respondents for interrupting the cycle they describe. Guaranteed integration for graduates who accept posts in deficit zones is the concrete form that demand takes. The study cannot cost that measure; it can only record that, without it, the Baccalaureate filter is expected to remain decorative.

In Nigeria, respondents ask that admission look beyond JAMB scores to motivation and pedagogical aptitude, so that the college ceases to function as a residual destination. That request would need instruments the present study does not design.

Across the border, R12's suggestion of an ad hoc commission between the two countries points to a modest regional agenda: pooling scarce trainer expertise in Fombina and exploring distance or modular formats where campuses are unsafe. Digitalization is invoked as a way around physical insecurity. The corpus gives no evidence that the necessary connectivity already exists.

7. Conclusion

Thirty years of rising admission standards in Cameroon and Nigeria have not, in the eyes of the actors interviewed here, produced the expected quality. Professionalization conceived as an administrative elevation of recruitment levels has met an economic and security wall. It has produced, at least in these two sites, teachers who hold higher diplomas and whom their trainers describe as demotivated or poorly prepared.

The motto reported by a pedagogic adviser, "we make do," reads as an admission of powerlessness. Raising the diploma again will not, on this evidence, be enough. What the interviews ask for is a reconstruction of the teaching social pact: an assurance that investment in training leads to a dignified and reasonably secure professional integration. Without that, the raising of standards remains an administrative fiction, and the primary school a receptacle for a youth that teaches by default.

These conclusions hold for sixteen interviews conducted in Yola and Mayo Kani. They would need to be tested against classroom observation, against the actual careers of ENIEG and NCE graduates, and against sites less marked by the Fombina security complex.

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