

Teacher Competence is not an Option in Primary School Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Teacher competency is not an option referring to teachers who teach subjects outside of their area of specialization. This phenomenon is becoming more pronounced in Malaysian primary schools, especially in rural areas and under-pupil schools (SKM). This study aimed to examine the level of competence of non-option teachers in teaching and learning, the challenges faced, and their impact on the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews involving ten non-option teachers from five primary schools. The findings show that teachers are not an option to face challenges in terms of content knowledge, pedagogy and motivation. The implications of the study suggest that continuous professionalism training interventions to improve teacher competence are not an option to ensure that the quality of education is not affected. Furthermore, the study highlights the need for stronger administrative support and mentoring systems to help these teachers adapt effectively to subjects beyond their specialization. It also recommends that the Ministry of Education review teacher placement policies to ensure a better match between teachers' qualifications and the subjects they teach, especially in rural and under-enrolled schools.

Keywords: Teacher Competence, Non-Optional Teachers, Teaching and Learning, Primary Schools, Malaysian Education

Introduction

Malaysia's education system is constantly evolving in line with the needs of the times and national policies, especially in ensuring that every student receives a quality education regardless of location or background. However, one issue that is becoming more and more acute in primary schools is the placement of non-optional teachers, i.e. teachers who teach subjects outside their area of specialization. This phenomenon often occurs due to a shortage of option teachers, especially in rural schools, under-pupil schools (SKM) and rural areas (Hashim & Ahmad, 2022).¹ The Ministry of Education Malaysia is trying to balance teacher vacancies with the teaching needs of each subject, but the reality at the grassroots level shows that many teachers are forced to teach subjects that they do not fully master (Lim, Rahman & Tan, 2023). This situation raises questions about the level of competence,

effectiveness and impact on the teaching process and the achievement of pupils in primary schools.

The presence of teachers as not an option in the classroom not only poses challenges in terms of mastery of content, but also affects the use of appropriate pedagogical strategies. Teachers who do not have an academic background in the subject being taught face difficulties in understanding the basic concepts, thus finding it difficult to explain to students clearly and effectively (Rahman et al., 2022). As a result, the learning process becomes less meaningful and can affect students' motivation as well as exam results. In addition, work stress and lack of confidence in handling new subjects also affect the motivation and emotional well-being of the teachers themselves (Aziz & Ismail, 2023). Therefore, the issue of teacher competency is not an option and needs to be seriously examined by all parties so that the right interventions can be implemented to ensure that primary school education remains of quality and relevant to current needs.

Research Problem

The introduction of non-option teachers, i.e. teachers, who teach the subjects that they are not specialized in, has emerged as an issue of increasing concern among Malaysian primary schools, especially among the rural and under-enrolled schools. Although policies have tried to make sure that the supply of teachers is adequate, the discrepancy between the qualifications of teachers and the tasks assigned to them remains (Marín et al., 2023). This organizational collision compromises the content mastery of teachers, their capacity to implement the right model of teaching approaches, and decreases their self-esteem and motivation in the school. Students can therefore undergo inadequate surface learning, reduced interest and poor academic performance in crucial subjects like Mathematics and Science.

Simultaneously, such a phenomenon brings more general questions to the modern discourse of social science: How do teacher distribution inequalities on a systemic level influence educational justice? What does it mean to professional identity and teacher well-being when they are asked to work out of their area of specialisation? And to what extent do education policies meet the challenge of the teacher shortage and the requirement of quality teaching? Although the problem of teacher shortages and teacher development in education has been emphasized (past researches), there is no research that goes to details and investigates the competence, issue, and consequences of non-option teaching in Malaysian primary schools (Asman et al., 2023).

Significance of the Study

This paper is important in a number of ways. One, it makes a contribution to the literature on teacher competence, particularly by addressing a rather underreported category of teachers non-option teachers whose role is frequently ignored in discussion of policy and scholarly literature. The study offers empirical data to guide interventions to enhance the quality of teaching in primary schools by understanding their difficulty and how they cope with the challenges.

Second, the research can be relevant to education policy and administration. These lessons about the performance and plight of non-option teachers can inform the Ministry of

Education to develop better systems of teacher placement, specific professional development initiatives, and support systems that are flexible in their support and delivery of equity coupled with quality in education provision.

Third, the research is related to the current social science discussions of equity, professional identity, and labour distribution. It brings out the role systemic factors, including the teacher deployment policy, play in determining not only the outcome of students but also the motivation, professional legitimacy, and well-being of teachers. By so doing, the results are applicable outside the education sector which contributes to broader research on workforce management, professional specialisation, and social outcomes of policy choices.

Lastly, the research is aligned with the overall educational objectives in Malaysia as per the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) and the worldwide requirement in sustainable development goal 4 (Quality Education). This study highlights that sustainable solutions that help to balance the supply of teachers with the delivery of equitable and high-quality education to all students are needed by shedding light on the challenges of non-option teachers.

Literature Highlights

Various studies have examined the issue of non-option teacher placement and its impact on teaching and learning in primary schools. Teacher competence is not limited to content knowledge alone but also encompasses pedagogical skills and strong professional values (Mohd Noor & Sulaiman, 2021). Teachers who are assigned to teach subjects outside their area of specialisation often face limitations in understanding core concepts, which makes it difficult for them to explain subject matter clearly and accurately to pupils. This situation is supported by findings which indicate that non-option teachers tend to rely on general teaching approaches without adapting strategies to suit the specific subject requirements or students' ability levels (Hashim & Ahmad, 2022). Consequently, teaching effectiveness is reduced, and pupils' learning experiences are negatively affected, particularly in core subjects such as Mathematics and Science.

In addition, several studies have highlighted issues related to motivation and well-being among non-option teachers. Teachers who teach outside their specialisation are more likely to experience stress and reduced self-confidence due to limited exposure and insufficient training in unfamiliar subjects (Rahman et al., 2022). Weak pedagogical skills and a lack of appropriate instructional materials further contribute to declining motivation and may lead to emotional exhaustion. However, existing literature suggests that continuous professional development and collaboration among teachers can help improve confidence and subject mastery. For example, structured coaching programmes and short-term professional courses have been found to positively influence the teaching effectiveness of non-option teachers (Lim, Rahman & Tan, 2023). Overall, the literature emphasises the importance of sustained support and professional development to enable non-option teachers to perform their duties effectively and to enhance pupils' academic achievement in primary schools.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine in depth the experiences and challenges of non-optional teachers in teaching and learning in primary schools. The study sample consisted of ten non-option teachers who were selected by a sample from five primary schools in the Hulu Selangor district. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews that provided an opportunity for respondents to share their views, experiences and challenges openly. In addition to interviews, class observations were also conducted to see firsthand the teacher's teaching practices which were not an option during the learning session. To improve the reliability of the data, document analysis such as daily lesson plans and teaching aids was also carried out. The data obtained were analysed using thematic analysis methods to identify key patterns and themes related to competency levels, teaching strategies, as well as the need for professional support among non-optional teachers. This qualitative approach was chosen because it is able to provide a more comprehensive and holistic picture of the issues studied.

Study Findings

Content Knowledge Constraints (CK)

Analysis of the findings of the study shows that the main constraint of teachers is not an option is the mastery of the content knowledge of the subject being taught. Teachers interviewed admitted that they often had difficulty understanding basic and in-depth concepts of subjects such as Science and Mathematics, compared to teachers with elective credentials. This situation makes it difficult for them to answer students' questions accurately and provide thorough explanations, especially when complex topics need to be taught. Teachers are not an option and often rely on textbooks and reference materials without a deep understanding, causing students' learning to become more superficial and less critical thinking centric (Hashim & Ahmad, 2022).

In addition, non-option teachers also state that they often need extra time to prepare before the teaching session to ensure that they truly understand the topic to be taught. However, time constraints and workload make this effort unable to be carried out consistently. As a result, students receive less exposure to the application of concepts in real life because the teachers themselves are not confident in relating the content to daily situations. Therefore, the issue of lack of content knowledge among teachers is not an option and one of the main factors that affect the effectiveness of teaching and student achievement in primary schools.

Less Effective Teaching Strategies

The findings of the study also showed that the teaching strategies used by non-optional teachers tended to be general and less effective. Most teachers do not have the option to apply basic teaching methods such as lectures, joint readings and written exercises, without variations in techniques or innovations in delivery. This happens because they lack exposure to pedagogical approaches that are specific to the subject being taught, resulting in them not being able to adapt the methods according to the learning needs of the students.

Furthermore, the results of a study found that non-option teachers are less able to plan collaborative and student-centred learning activities (Mohd Noor & Sulaiman, 2021). They are more comfortable using passive teaching methods because they lack the confidence

to manage learning that is interactive or experimental in nature, especially for Science subjects. As a result, the teaching process is not able to stimulate students' interest and deep understanding, instead making the learning atmosphere static and boring (Hashim & Ahmad, 2022). Therefore, specific pedagogical training is needed to empower teachers who are not an option to be able to apply more effective teaching strategies.

Low Motivation and Self-Confidence

One of the significant issues found among non-option teachers is low levels of motivation and self-confidence when teaching subjects outside of their area of specialization. Teachers report that they often feel doubtful about their own ability to handle teaching, especially when faced with students who are intelligent and ask a lot of questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).²This situation causes some teachers to become less enthusiastic and less active in seeking additional teaching aids to enrich the learning process.

Work stress experienced by teachers is not an option, such as having to teach a new subject without adequate training, has a negative impact on their emotional well-being (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Uncertainty and lack of confidence also cause the relationship between teacher and pupil to become strained, as teachers are more likely to take a cautious approach and less spontaneous interaction in class. This is in line with the findings pointed out that low motivation can affect the quality of teaching, which in turn affects student achievement and the overall learning environment (Samad et al., 2022).

Support and Training Requirements

The findings of the study also showed that almost all non-option teachers voiced the need for continuous support and training to improve their competence in teaching non-optional subjects. Teachers are of the view that short courses, pedagogical workshops and guidance from experienced teachers are very important to help them master the content and appropriate teaching strategies (Cheong et al., 2023). Focused and hands-on training can provide teachers with an opportunity not an option to adopt new teaching methods and increase self-confidence.

Mentor-mentee programs between option and non-option teachers can improve professional collaboration and speed up the adaptation process (Lee et al., 2024). In addition, support from school administrators in the form of flexible teaching time scheduling and the provision of teaching aids can also help reduce the workload of teachers is not an option. In conclusion, the provision of systematic support and training is the key to ensuring that teachers are not an option to carry out teaching duties effectively and professionally in primary schools.

Discussion

The issue of teacher competence is not an option in primary school teaching and learning is indeed a major challenge in the context of education in Malaysia in this era. Recent research findings show that non-option teachers face various constraints in mastering the content of the subjects, especially core subjects such as Science and Mathematics, which demand an in-depth understanding of concepts and effective pedagogical mastery. This lack

of knowledge not only affects the effectiveness of the delivery of knowledge to students, but also makes it difficult for them to reach the level of high-level thinking expected by the current curriculum. This reality is also reinforced by the findings stated that non-optional teachers tend to use teaching methods that are too general and less innovative due to knowledge constraints and lack of self-confidence when faced with students who actively ask questions (Wong & Abdullah, 2021).

Teacher motivation and well-being are not an option as well, where stress due to the workload outside the field leads to a decrease in morale and work productivity (Tan & Chong, 2022). This issue of emotional distress can have a long-term impact on teacher performance as well as student personality development if not addressed systematically. Studies have also shown that non-option teachers who receive continuous professionalism training show significant improvements in pedagogical mastery and self-confidence, thus improving the quality of their teaching (Nguyen & Wong, 2023). This proves that investment in teacher professional development is a critical factor to curb the negative impact of teacher placement is not an option.

Not only that, professional collaboration between option and non-option teachers has been proven to be able to strengthen teaching strategies, where the sharing of knowledge and experience results in a more conducive and inclusive learning ecosystem (Ali et al., 2021). Efforts to build professional learning communities are also seen to reduce work stress and increase teachers' resilience to changes and challenges in primary schools. School administrators, on the other hand, play an important role in supporting training needs, providing access to relevant teaching resources, and ensuring that non-option teachers are not overburdened to the detriment of their mental health and motivation (Goh et al., 2021).

In addition, improvements in teacher placement policies should be considered so that any vacancies do not necessarily fill without taking into account the background and capabilities of teachers. The implementation of a more comprehensive monitoring system and flexible teaching time scheduling can help teachers not an option to adapt to new subjects (Ong et al., 2023). The study also recommended that ministries provide self-paced learning modules and interactive e-learning platforms to help non-optional teachers improve their content knowledge on their own (Loke et al., 2023). These findings show the need for continuous support from various parties including ministries, school administrators, and the education community so that the issue of teacher competency is not an option can be addressed thoroughly and effectively, to ensure that every student gets equal educational benefits.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the issue of teacher competence is not an option in teaching and learning in primary schools is a critical challenge that needs to be addressed thoroughly to ensure the effectiveness of the country's education system. The findings of the study prove that content knowledge constraints, the use of ineffective teaching strategies, and low motivation and self-confidence are the main barriers to the effectiveness of teacher teaching are not an option. The need for continuous professionalism training, school administrative support, and the implementation of more strategic teacher placement policies are critical in empowering teachers are not an option. Professional collaboration between option and non-

option teachers, the provision of self-study modules and flexibility in task scheduling can help teachers adapt to the challenges of teaching subjects outside their area of expertise. Therefore, all parties including the Ministry of Education Malaysia, school administrators and the education community need to work together to provide an inclusive and sustainable support ecosystem so that every student can receive quality education, regardless of who is the teacher who teaches them.

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