Effects of armed conflicts on teaching and learning: Perspectives of secondary school teachers in Cameroon

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Abstract

The ongoing armed conflict in Cameroon has resulted in thousands of attacks on schools, yet education cannot wait for conflict to stop. This study sought to determine the effects of the ongoing armed conflict on classroom activities in operational schools in affected areas in Cameroon. Using a mixed method sequential exploratory design, qualitative data were collected from 19 teachers through open-ended questions and analysed using thematic analysis. Qualitative findings were used to design a questionnaire, administered to 652 teachers, and analysed using multiple response and the chi-square and equality of proportion test. Findings presented indicate that attendance, content delivery, safety, discipline, and assessment have been significantly hampered. However, classroom attendance was most significantly ($p = .001$) affected, disrupting teaching and evaluation with differing effects found across locations and school types. It was concluded that teaching and learning activities are ineffective and may result in further damaging effects—requiring more practical actions on school sites.

Keywords: armed conflict, teaching, learning, schools, Cameroon

Introduction

The importance of education as a key tool to accentuate individual and national development has long been recognised, but rising conflicts in our societies today threaten the roles that educational systems play in this development process. Armed conflicts are one of the leading types of conflicts affecting education globally and sub-Saharan Africa is historically the most affected conflict area in the world. For instance, statistics presented by Palik et al. (2020) indicated that between 1946 and 2019, there have been an estimated 290 cases of armed conflicts around the world with Africa alone having a share of 101 of these armed conflicts. Recently, Cameroon joined other sub-Saharan countries (such as Congo, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire) in experiencing ongoing armed conflict. Within approximately five years, the armed conflict in Cameroon led to about 80% of the schools being closed with more than 300 teachers and children abducted (UNICEF, 2019). A recent report from Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (2020) indicated that there have been more than 8,300 attacks on students, teachers, and other school personnel between 2015 and 2019. Nonetheless, initiatives and advocacy such as Education Cannot Wait (www.educationcannotwait.org) have placed central importance on education even in crisis areas, providing impetus for schooling to persist even during armed conflicts.

These constant armed conflicts have engendered increased research interest on the causes and effects of armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa. However, earlier studies concentrated on the effects of armed conflicts on learners and children as articulated by these learners, including what happens outside the classroom. For instance, studies have focused on the educational outcomes of learners (Akresh & de Walque, 2008; Shemyakina, 2011) and children's wellbeing (Winthrop & Kirk, 2008). Most of these studies focused on basic education (Buckland, 2005), but there is need for a balance of priorities across all levels of education because they form part of the global vision and play key roles in realising this vision.

Effects of armed conflict on teaching and learning

Conflicts are prolonged or extended frictions or disagreements amongst individuals or groups of individuals and can escalate into armed conflicts. The International Committee of the Red Cross (2008) described armed conflicts as protracted armed confrontations between two or more states (international), or between governmental armed forces and those of one or more organised armed groups with a minimum level of intensity (non-international). The armed conflict in Cameroon is between an organised group of "separatist fighters" and government armed forces. Research related to armed conflicts has focused on the effects of armed conflicts on children's educational outcomes (Akresh & de Walque, 2008; Shemyakina, 2011), children's well-being (Winthrop & Kirk, 2008), enrolment, and so forth, with the process of teaching only as a secondary indicator—limiting empirical evidence about what happens in the classroom with regard to teaching during armed conflicts. Within these discourses, elements related to teachers and teaching activities in the classroom can be found. For instance, Buckland (2005) identified common problems associated with post-conflict areas such as chronic shortages of teachers because of the killings during conflicts, and an

under-supply of qualified teachers and teacher absenteeism—giving impetus for the need to study teaching processes during ongoing conflicts to alleviate the negative effects at post conflict stages. Cervantes-Duarte and Fernandez-Cano (2016) provided an underlying reason for teacher absenteeism, citing teachers' fear of going to work as one of the leading effects of armed conflicts and resulting in reduced staff and increased teacher/pupil ratio. Similarly, Jones and Naylor (2014) indicated fear, displacement, and recruitment of teachers into the armed force as effects of armed conflicts. While these results help us understand teachers' dispositions, they limit an understanding of what happens in the classrooms of schools that continue to operate in communities of ongoing conflict.

Empirical evidence from Cameroon alludes to some of these effects as well, for instance, Akame et al. (2021) reported that between 2017 and 2019, 42 schools were attacked with about 305 students, teachers, and principals being abducted and killed in the affected regions. Cameroon endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration (https://ssd.protectingeducation.org) in 2018, showing its commitment to safeguard learning during this period of crisis but many of the guidelines are yet to be put in place. Schools remain unsafe, for instance, a world report in 2020 indicated that armed forces in Cameroon had occupied school buildings (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This situation has resulted in decreased enrolment, fear, panic, and the propagation of misinformation, which hampers the functioning of the school system (Akame et al., 2021). These evidences have been able to chart the events following the crisis in Cameroon but there is a gap to be filled about how teachers experience these events daily as those who are central to the teaching and learning process. Teachers may be going through serious psychological traumas that could leave them demoralised and unproductive in the classroom; and, in worst cases, they might leave the job. In formal education, learning is inextricably linked to teaching, therefore, teachers are instrumental in the educational process even in conflict areas. Understanding what happens in the classroom during ongoing conflicts, and how teachers perceive the effects of armed conflicts on teaching and learning processes in the classroom, can paint a picture of teaching and learning during armed conflicts and indicate key areas where interventions could be introduced to support the continuation of education in conflict-affected areas. To fill that gap, our study used a mixed method approach to analyse the perceived effects of the armed conflict on teaching in the two affected regions in Cameroon with the aim of answering two questions:

1. In what ways has the crisis affected teaching in secondary schools as perceived by teachers in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon?
2. How prevalent are these effects among teachers in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon?

Understanding the armed conflict in Cameroon

Cameroon is a country in sub-Saharan Africa with a colonial heritage that is bilingual (English and French). For ease of understanding, there is an English Cameroon (anglophone) and a French Cameroon (francophone). However, of the 10 regions in Cameroon, English Cameroon is dominantly made up of two regions, the North West and South West regions of

Cameroon. These two regions are considered the minority group in the country and it is this perception of marginalisation which has led to a full-blown crisis (Kouega, 2018) now referred to as the Anglophone Crisis. The Anglophone Crisis started with a strike orchestrated by teachers and lawyers in October 2016. With specific emphasis on schooling activities in the area, this strike called for a complete shutdown of schools in these regions. From the teacher/lawyer strike, the demand for separation arose, creating conflicts between those who were demanding separation—the "separatist group"—and government. Over the last five years, the situation has gradually escalated into a crisis characterised by an armed conflict with schools as targets. Similarly, the initial shutdown has gradually progressed to intimidation and in some places, further complete shutdowns of schooling for primary, secondary, and tertiary learners. It is worth noting that these shutdowns of major schooling activities and incessant attacks on schools are happening only in the English-speaking regions. At present, Mondays are permanently without school activities in these regions although, in some urban areas, timorous activity can be seen.

Schooling has become problematic in this area because many schools have been burnt down, others have become avenues for kidnappers to make money from ransoms, and some are simply inaccessible due to the uncertainties and high degree of insecurity. This is the situation today in the anglophone regions where schools have been closed due to constant shootings, kidnapping, and killing of school children and teachers as well as parents and civilians in the affected areas. To further explain these realities, it is worth noting that wearing a school uniform, identifying one's self as a teacher, going to school buildings, or attending planning meetings, target one for death. This burden has been felt by the educational community and all stakeholders of the schools. Our study aims to provide an understanding of the effects of armed conflict on teaching as perceived by teachers in these affected regions.

Research methods

Research design

Our study employed a mixed method sequential exploratory design consisting of two distinct phases: a qualitative phase followed by a quantitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). In Phase 1, qualitative data were collected from 19 teachers through open-ended questions regarding the perceived effects of the conflict (Anglophone Crisis) on their teaching. In Phase 2, recurrent themes from the qualitative findings were used to develop a survey that was administered to 652 teachers across the North West (287) and South West (365) regions of Cameroon. This approach was used because of the limited empirical data on the effects of the crisis on teaching in the context of Cameroon, which made it difficult for researchers to ascertain what constructs were the most important to study. Using mixed method sequential exploratory design therefore allowed us to identify key effects of the crisis that could be generalised to teachers in the affected regions.

Sample

The teachers in the study comprised 671 secondary school teachers drawn from an overall population of about 19,000 teachers; they participated in a qualitative phase (19) and in a quantitative phase (652). Teachers were selected through a multistage sampling method that employed purposive and snowballing sampling techniques to select them for the qualitative phase. In the quantitative phase, random sampling was employed to select teachers from a list of operational secondary schools obtained from the representatives of secondary education in the affected areas. For both phases, teachers were drawn from the two affected regions in Cameroon; all teachers therefore included those who worked in one of these two regions only. All school types (public, confessional, and lay private) were taken into consideration.

Instruments

Interviews and questionnaires were the principal instruments used for data collection, respectively, for both phases. Questionnaire items were developed from a thematic analysis of the qualitative data and were pilot-tested with 30 teachers who did not participate in the final study. The questionnaire was in the form of a Likert scale instrument and measured six themes (emanating from the qualitative data) including teachers' safety, delivery of content, classroom discipline, assessment, attendance, and professional development. Before final administration of the questionnaire, reliability quotient had a Cronbach Alpha index of 0.806— considered satisfactory given that the internal consistency assumption was not violated.

Data analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. Responses to the open-ended questions were transcribed into text, and the text was categorised and labelled. Each category was further grouped and regrouped into themes and sub-themes along with relevant quotes. This process allowed us to develop themes that became constructs representing the perceived effects of the armed conflict. These themes and sub-themes were used to develop a Likert scale quantitative instrument that ascertained the prevalence of these effects across teachers in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon. Quantitative data were analysed through SPSS 21.0 software where data were entered, sorted, and missing entries set as missing values. Descriptive statistics were acquired through frequencies and multiple response analysis. The chi-square test of independence and equality of proportion was also used to measure the extent to which perceptions depended on demographic characteristics, and to find significant differences across teachers in the North West and South West regions, respectively.

Findings

The study employed an exploratory sequential mixed method approach. Data were collected from 671 teachers to explore the perceived effects of the armed conflict and the prevalence of its effects on classroom teaching practices in Cameroon. Findings are presented for both

qualitative and quantitative data. Demographic information relating to the respondents is shown in Figure 1.
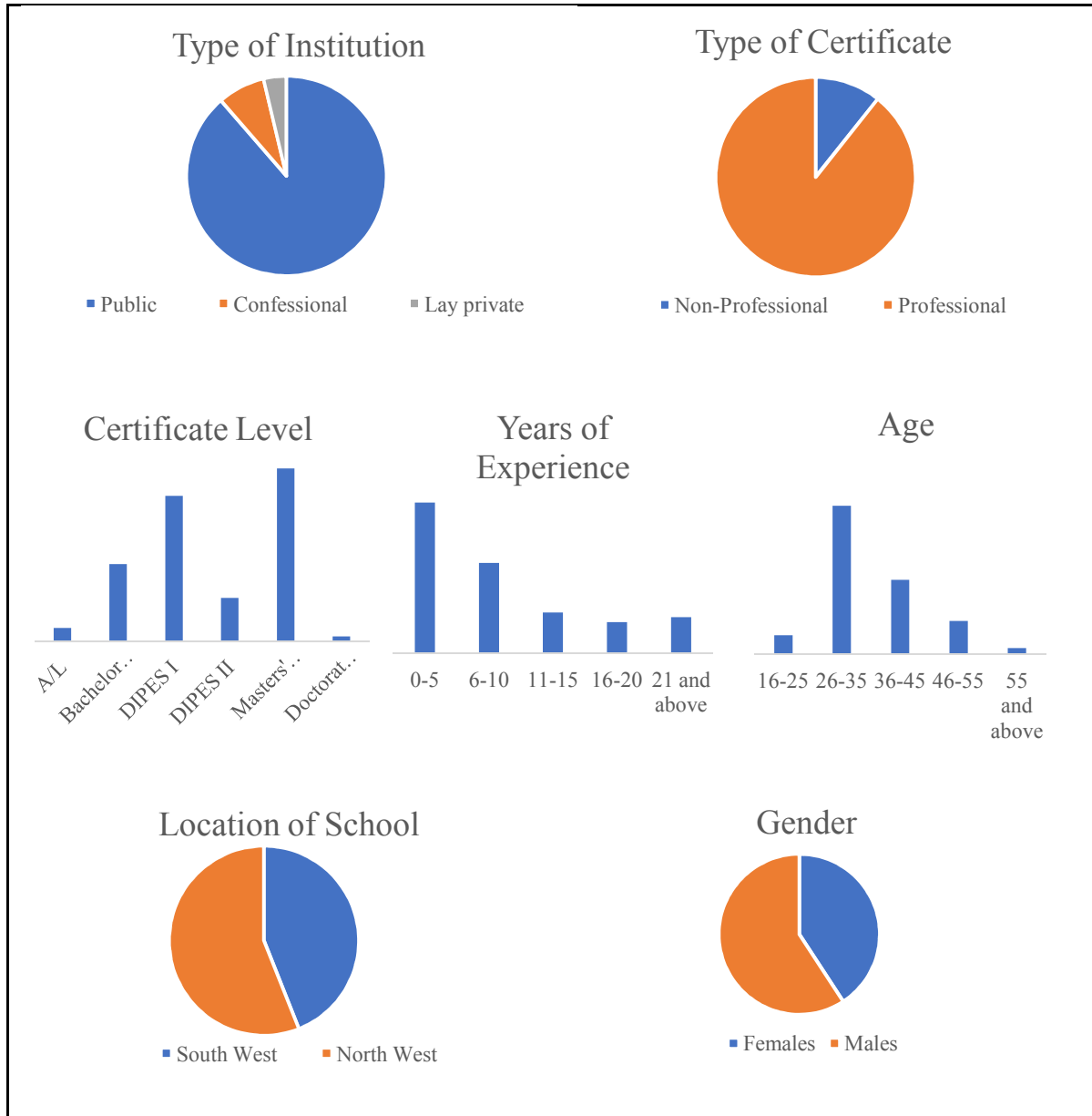
Figure 1

Demographic data of respondents

Figure 1 indicates that teachers' demographics were representative of school types, age groups, certificate levels, and both affected regions. Specifically, the study was dominantly characterised by teachers from public schools (87.48%) with professional certificates (89.3%), and experienced (above 5 years of teaching experience—56.3%). The majority of the teachers were male (59.2%) and aged between 26 and 35 years (52.9%). Similarly, schools from both affected regions were represented with proportions of 44.0% of schools in the North West region and 56.0% of schools in the South West region.

In terms of teachers' regions of origin, findings indicated that most of the teachers came from the affected regions with 61.7% from North West, 28.8% from South West and 9.5% from other regions in Cameroon.

Table 1

Joint display of the effects of the armed conflict on teaching in affected areas

Main qualitative findings		Main quantitative findings
Themes	**Codes**	**Scale = Likert Scale**
Teachers' safety	Tensed work environment	
	Fear of identity	
	Increased harassment and threats	
Content delivery	An incomplete syllabus coverage	
	Limited follow-up of students	
	Limited classroom interactions	
Classroom attendance	Irregularity in student/teacher attendance	
	Increase/decrease in class sizes	
	Students/teachers are unpunctual	
Classroom discipline	Increased disruptive behaviour	
	Fear of harassment	
	Increased student anonymity	
Classroom assessment	Dominant use of summative assessments	
	Poor performances	
	Too little content for evaluation	
Professional development	Decreased professional development activities	Meta-interpretation
		The effects of the armed conflict on teaching in the affected regions are high and negatively affecting the process of teaching and this view is prevalent amongst teachers across different institutions and locations.
	Technical leave	
	Lost a permanent job	
	Internally displaced	

OVERALL SATISFACTION OF TEACHING ACTIVITIES AS A RESULT OF THE ARMED CONFLICT

Figure 2

Satisfaction of teaching during the crisis

When teachers were asked about how the armed conflict was affecting their roles of teaching in the classroom, qualitative findings revealed six core themes along with sub-categories that were used to develop a Likert scale questionnaire. Consequently, it was hypothesised that safety, content delivery, classroom attendance, discipline, assessment, and professional development will not be significantly affected by the armed conflict in the affected regions. Findings revealed that teaching is indeed negatively and significantly affected as can be seen in the joint display in Table 1 (incorporating Figure 2).

Qualitative findings revealed six themes (Table 1) that captured teachers' responses about how the armed conflict has affected their teaching. Teachers viewed these effects as negative and these perceived effects were prevalent amongst teachers in both affected regions. Of the six themes, classroom attendance, delivery of content, safety, and classroom discipline were dominantly indicated by teachers as aspects of teaching most affected (see Figure 2 incorporated into Table 1). These qualitative findings were consistent with the quantitative findings. However, teachers' levels of dissatisfaction were higher on the measurements of classroom attendance, content delivery, safety, discipline, professional development, and assessment as elaborated in the next six sections.

Classroom attendance

Qualitative findings revealed that respondents perceived poor classroom attendance as a major effect of the crisis. Poor classroom attendance was characterised by learners and teachers' irregularity, increased or decreased class sizes, and lateness, amongst others that frequently emerged from teachers' responses. For instance, three of the teachers expressing irregularity in classroom attendance said:

> No matter how prepared, I am for my lesson, it still does not suffice because those I teach today, I might not meet in class the next day. The uncertainties are too high.

> Neither the teachers nor students have been consistently present, on my part, I do not go to school regularly.

> Frequent ghost towns, killings and kidnappings make students to delay in registering so students start school late, it just makes one weak.

These teachers indicated that attendance is irregular, thus, limiting consistency in classroom activities.

Problems of classroom attendance were also seen from the angle of class sizes. For some teachers, class sizes were increased and for others, there was a decrease because of the crisis. Indicating an increase in class sizes, some teachers said:

> The classes are now so populated making teaching and assessment very tedious.

> Class sizes are increasing and thereby increasing workload for teachers whose schools are operational.

However, others indicated that their problem was rather one of the limited class sizes as indicated in the following quote:

> Our numbers are quite low and many available are hardly consistent in their attendance

In summary, the qualitative findings indicated that classroom attendance is irregular and inconsistent because both teachers and students are variously absent, irregular, or unpunctual. When these effects were further tested to determine the prevalence, quantitative findings revealed that teachers were significantly ($p = .001$) more dissatisfied with the state of classroom attendance during this crisis period, with a weight of unsatisfactory of 76.8% as against 23.2% for satisfactory. These findings remained the same even when teachers' demographics were taken into consideration (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Classroom attendance is characterised by teachers and students' irregularity and inconsistency
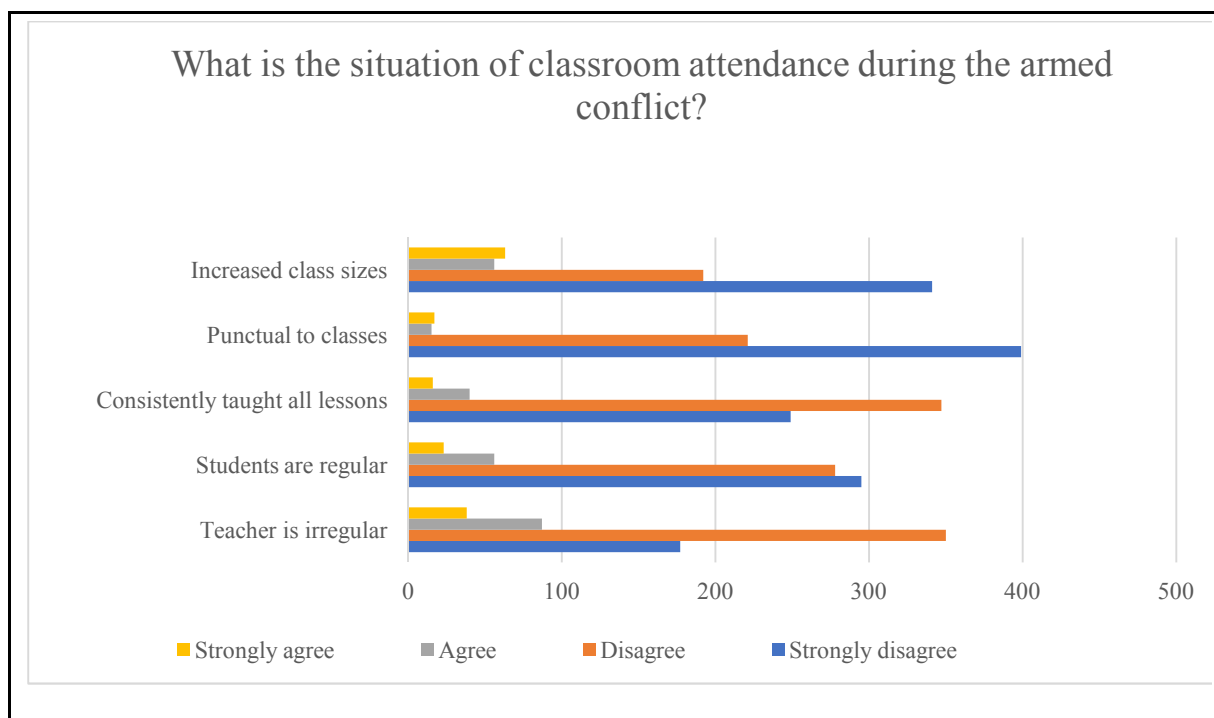
Specifically, when the results were collapsed, findings indicated that majority of the teachers complained of the fact that punctuality had dropped during the crisis 95.1% (620). And they themselves have not been consistently present to teach their lessons through the crisis 91.4% (596). Teachers also indicated that majority of the students have been irregular for classes, 87.9% (573), and 80.8% (527) acknowledged that they have equally been irregular. However, when the differences in class sizes were considered, findings rather indicated that class sizes have reduced as 81.7% (533) disagreed with the view that their class sizes have increased during the crisis.

Content delivery

Another component of armed conflict effects captured from the qualitative findings was content delivery, and the teachers indicated incomplete syllabus coverage, limited follow-up, and classroom interactions, amongst others. For instance, a teacher expressing incomplete syllabus coverage indicated the following:

> Since the start of the crisis, every year I don't succeed to complete my syllabus, I have hardly been able due to the on/off nature of the schooling period.

Another participant expressing limited follow-up said:

> One is always in a rush to leave class because of the fear of the unknown so it's difficult to really follow up students and doing so out of school as before is too risky.
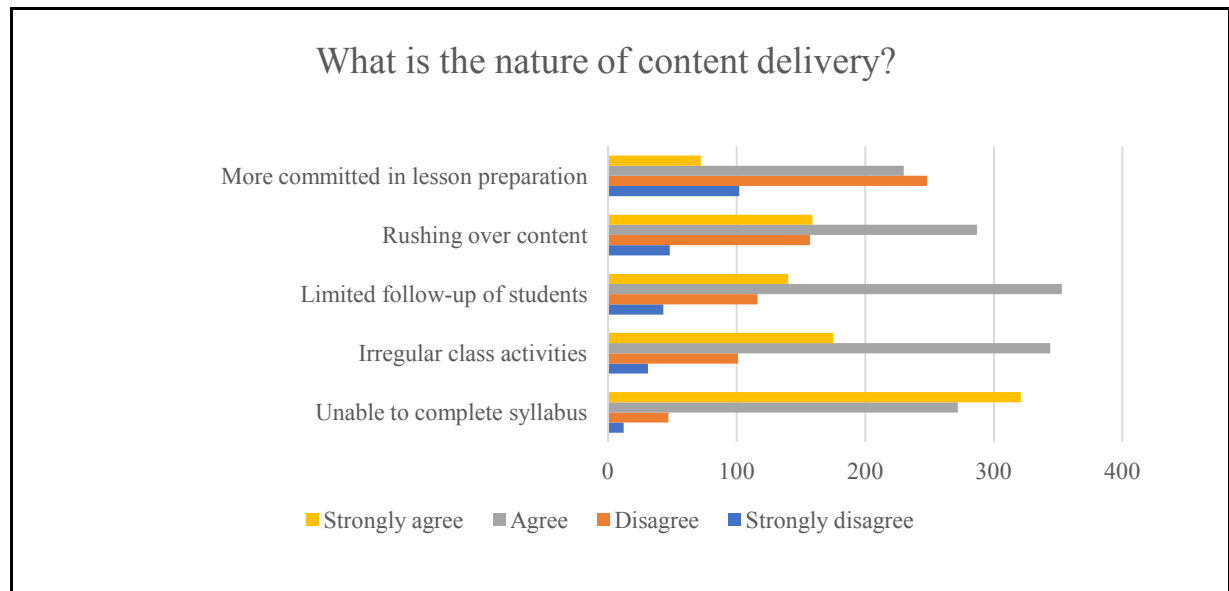
Others indicated that there was a rush to complete the syllabus as indicated in these quotes:

> Teaching has been less effective because we have to hasten studies due to frequent ghost towns, killings and kidnappings.

> Teaching now is all about rushing to cover as much material as possible in the shortest time.

Figure 4

Content delivery is ineffective

In summary, the qualitative findings indicated that content delivery is poor, characterised by uncompleted syllabi associated with irregularity in classroom attendance as well as limited follow-up associated with fear. When these effects were further tested quantitatively, findings revealed that, in aggregate, teachers were significantly dissatisfied ($p = .001$) with their content delivery during the crisis with a weight of 76.2%. This finding was not dependent on any demographic factor, thus implying that the dissatisfaction was unanimously perceived.

Teachers dominantly agreed that since the start of the crisis, they have been unable to complete their syllabus, class activities have been irregular, and there have been limited classroom interactions as shown in Figure 4.

When the results were collapsed, findings indicated that the majority of teachers agreed that, since the start of the crisis, they have been unable to complete their syllabus 91.0% (593), class activities have been irregular 88.8% (578), there have been limited classroom interactions 79.7% (519), and with little follow-up of students during the crisis 75.6% (493). They have been rushing through their content to ensure completion 68.5% (446) and 53.7% (350) of teachers have been less committed in preparing their lessons.

Safety

Teachers also raised issues of safety as effects of the crisis. The most recurring challenges here included increased fear, anxiety, harassment, and threats (see Table 1). Some of the teachers expressing fear of teacher identity indicated the following:

> I teach in fear of the unknown and cannot allow myself to be identified as a teacher in my community because it is not safe.

> I am not proud of being a teacher in [region withheld] region because I work in fear and under tensed teaching environments.

> The least awkward sound leads to panic amongst us, especially when inside a class because shooting can happen at any time; school grounds are unsafe.

Expressing fear of harassment and threats, some teachers indicated:

> I am not motivated to teach because of constant threats I have faced.

> I am not really focused when teaching because those boys don't want to catch one in school.

Quantitative findings revealed that teachers generally felt unsafe teaching, and this finding was significant ($p = .001$). However, when teachers' demographics were considered, a slight significant difference ($p = .035$) was found between locations of schools; teachers from the North West felt more unsafe than those from the South West regions. Teachers were less satisfied with safety during this crisis period, with a weight of 68.9% as against 31.1% for satisfied. A more detailed view of these findings is presented in Figure 5.

Specifically, teachers complained of the working environment being too tense 95.5% (611), they were in fear of being identified as a teacher within the community 95.2% (621), they teach in fear 95.1% (620), and have been harassed because they are teaching during the crisis 60.9% (397). Many were more anxious due to teaching during the crisis 36.3% (237) and 30.9% (201) experienced increased threats from their students.

Figure 5

Teachers do not feel safe while teaching in the crisis
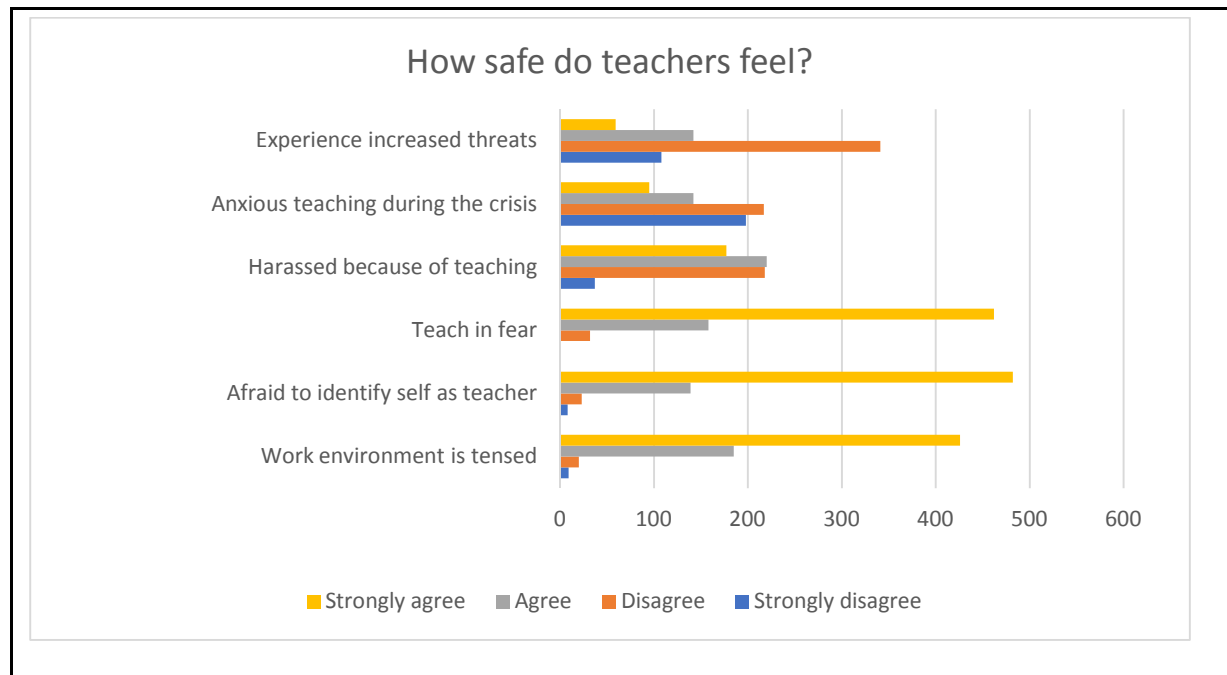
Classroom discipline

The crisis has also affected classroom discipline, and our qualitative findings revealed that there was increased disruptive behaviour, threats, and student anonymity. For instance, expressing low levels of discipline, one of the teachers noted:

> For fear of the unknown, I have hardly disciplined students despite the rise of deviant behaviours like drug abuse.

Similarly, expressing the difficulty associated with discipline due to increased anonymity, another said the following:

> We face problems on daily basis in classroom management as we don't know who is who and you can risk it by instilling discipline

Increased threats were also recorded by teachers indicating:

> I can't discipline students because they threaten teachers. Discipline now is risky for a teacher

> I don't know, maybe it is better in private schools but public schools, it is difficult as I cannot adequately discipline a student because students' threaten teachers

> I apply a lot of caution because disciplining students leads to confrontations and they say: I will see you in the quarter.

Quantitative findings equally revealed that teachers were not satisfied with the state of discipline in the current situation, and this finding was significant ($p = .001$). Similarly, significant differences were across institutions and school locations. Indiscipline was more evident in the North West ($p = .019$) than in the South West region and in public schools ($p = .035$) than in confessional and lay private schools. Specific findings are presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Teachers do not ensure adequate discipline
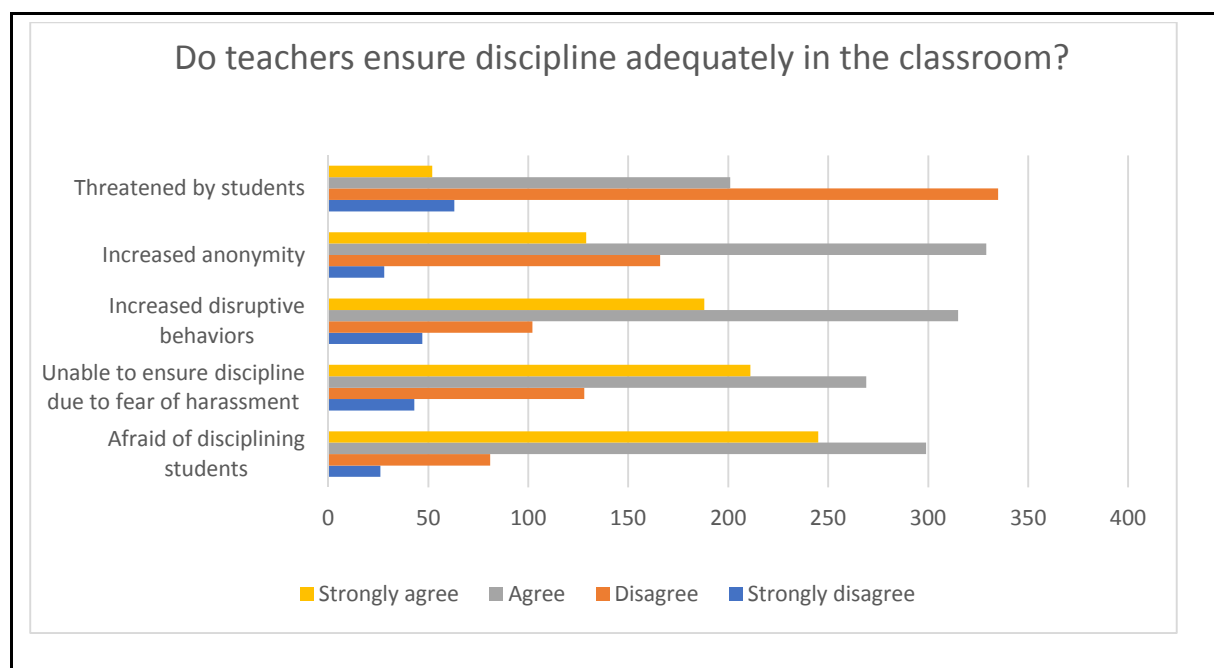
Teachers agreed that during this crisis, they have been afraid of disciplining students in their classrooms 83.6% (544), and some were unable to ensure discipline in their classroom due to the fear of harassment 73.7% (480). Some 77.1% (503) of respondents complained of increased disruptive behaviour and about an increased rate of anonymity distorting discipline 70.2% (458). Also, 38.9% (253) teachers had been threatened by students because they were disciplined.

Compared to classroom attendance, content delivery, safety and discipline, teachers perceived lower negative effects of the armed conflict on professional development and assessment.

Professional development

Qualitative findings revealed that teachers' professional development was affected because some lost their jobs or were placed on a technical leave, while others have been internally displaced, for instance, a teacher said:

> I had to relocate and find another job because for the past two years, my school has not been functional.

Similarly, teachers reported participating in limited professional activities during this period. Some teachers said the following:

> I have not attended any seminar or workshop during this time.

> I do not see any growth in my professional development as I have not attended any seminar all through this period.

Our quantitative findings also revealed the prevalence of these effects of the armed conflict, and indicated that compared to attendance, safety, discipline and content delivery, teachers were significantly ($p = .001$) more satisfied with their professional development during this crisis period with a weight of satisfactory of 55.1% against 44.9% for unsatisfactory. However, slight differences were found between the location of schools, and teachers in the South West were more satisfied than were those in the North West region.

Regardless of the situation, teachers confirmed that they have developed professional competencies through online training during this period 57.5% (375), despite many of them having been internally displaced 50.9% (331). Contrary to the qualitative findings, the loss of a permanent job or being placed on technical leave were not prevalent effects noted by teachers. These results are presented in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Professional development conditions during the crisis
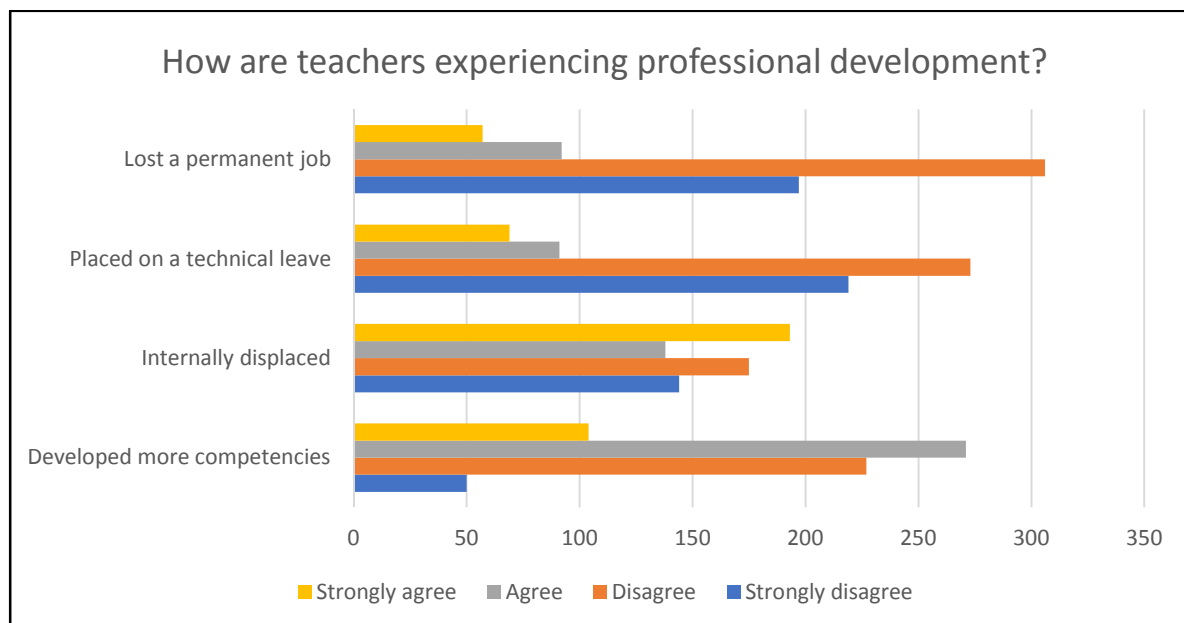
Classroom assessment

Qualitative findings indicated that classroom assessment relied predominantly on summative rather than formative assessments because too little content was covered to adequately evaluate students. Some of the teachers indicated the following:

> Most at times, I use only summative assessments because of limited time.

I evaluate in consideration of prevailing problems since we don't cover much and students don't read much as well.

We sometimes join second and third term assessment test to give results and promote students to the next class.
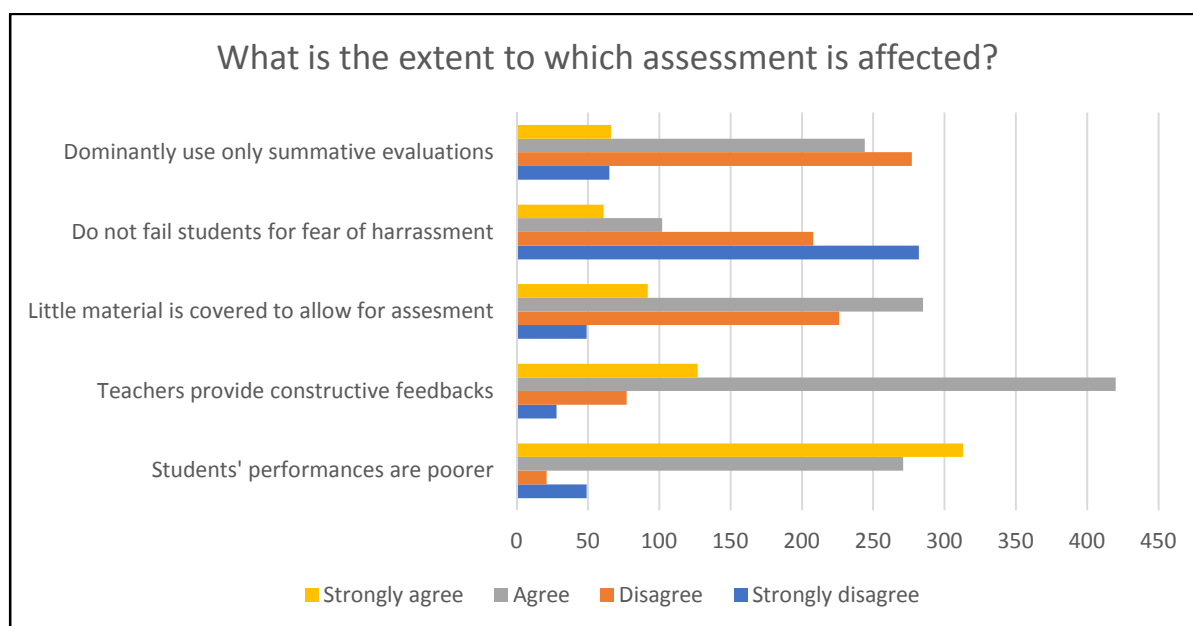
Assessing students is quite a challenge because little has been taught

Expressing fear in assessment, another indicated that:

When students fail, it's risky because they can attack you.

Figure 8

Assessment conditions during the crisis

However, quantitative findings revealed that teachers were most satisfied with the state of classroom assessment as chi-square analysis revealed that there was a significant ($p = .001$) level of satisfaction with a weight of satisfactory of 57.4% as against 42.6% for unsatisfactory. This finding was unanimous even when demographic factors were considered. Specifically, even though teachers predominantly agreed that students' performances are poorer 89.7% (584), and very little material is covered to allow for assessment 57.8% (377), most felt that they were able to give constructive feedback 83.9% (547). Teachers largely disagreed with the view that they predominantly use summative assessments, and most disagreed that they do not fail students for fear of harrassment or that their class sizes have become too large for adequate evaluation (Figure 3).

Discussion of findings

The teachers perceived six key indicators (classroom attendance, content delivery, safety, classroom discipline, professional development, and classroom assessment) as being

significantly hampered in the continuation of schooling during the ongoing armed conflict. While these effects are prevalent and teachers from both regions were dissatisfied with the teaching process in the classroom, teachers from the North West region are more significantly affected by safety issues, problems associated with managing discipline in the classroom, and professional development. This finding can be related to the fact that the North West region has suffered more attacks than the South West region. Further and continual attacks on schools therefore have the potential of increasing disruptive behaviour that can become pervasive among students and hinder the goals of education. Public schools experience greater problems of indiscipline compared to private schools. It is worth noting that all classroom practices identified are interrelated and critical to the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process, therefore, effects on any will detrimentally affect the others.

The most significant effects of the conflict are on classroom attendance in terms of irregularity in attendance of both teachers and students, together with a decrease in punctuality. Our findings confirm those of Cervantes-Duarte and Fernandez-Cano (2016), which indicated that teacher absenteeism was a leading consequence of armed conflicts. Class attendance can foster interactions that could support students' well-being. The situation of threats and fear is the underlying cause of teachers' and students' irregular attendance; if schools must be operational during these periods then everything should be done to ensure that teachers and students can safely reach their classrooms and remain safe therein. It is worth noting that teachers were admitting their own absences, irregularity, and inconsistency in teaching as well as those of students. Absenteeism and punctuality issues are common problems in schools but in armed conflict situations, they become more troubling because they may be fertile ground for the recruitment of unidentified armed men. Absenteeism also affects the productivity of the teachers and student outcomes, hampering the quality of education during conflict periods.

Content delivery is at the heart of the teaching and learning process yet findings show that content delivery is grossly ineffective. Syllabuses are left uncompleted due to frequent classroom boycotts and some teachers rush through their content. Over and above attendance, these teachers struggle to fulfil their duties perfunctorily when they are available. This seriously compromises the quality of education provided and received under armed conflict conditions, and was evident in the responses on assessment; many of these teachers overrate final assessments to cover the lapses in content delivery. This practice becomes the only alternative when one must report to hierarchy and yet also stay safe in a disruptive situation.

Teachers' safety is also a key issue of concern and it is dominantly related to fear. These findings are in line with those of Jones and Naylor (2014), which indicated that fear, displacement, and recruitment of teachers into the armed force are resulting effects of armed conflicts. No one can be at their best when they work in fear and in tense environments. It is therefore, necessary to pay close attention to what happens in the classroom in times of conflict because the way classroom activities are managed can further exacerbate the long-term effects. When teachers do not feel a sense of safety and teach in fear, they unconsciously direct such anxieties towards the learners. Even more troubling, is the issue of classroom

discipline in which fear and teachers' sense of caution prevents them from ensuring adequate discipline in the classroom. Disruptive behaviour further challenges the delivery of lessons and, more importantly, places the teacher at risk of attacks. Teachers are at risk from gunmen outside the school building but there are also "silent gunmen" within the classroom who directly or indirectly threaten and harass them, leveraging fertile ground for extensive attacks. As perceived by teachers, this situation is worsened by student anonymity in the classroom, heightened by the fact that students in some of these areas attend school wearing a variety of outfits.

Teachers are probably stagnated if they are not undergoing any professional development. Learning is inextricably linked to teaching, and professional development is an opportunity for teachers to learn and innovate their practices—critical in a time of unprecedented societal changes. When these opportunities are lacking, it is obvious that the training is limited too. Overall, our findings show that learning is inadequate because teaching is inadequate and while it is not feasible to stop schooling under conflict conditions, a lot needs to be done to ensure that conditions are improved and the schools are actually achieving the purpose for which they are allowed to be operational. Solving the conflict is a lasting solution to this problem, but experiences from other countries such as Rwanda, Nigeria, Congo, and Sudan indicate that the effects are long-lasting.

Conclusion

The benefits of secondary education cannot be denied, even in armed conflict areas. However, education goes beyond opening the doors of the classroom and it is important that we pay attention to attendance, content delivery, safety, discipline, and assessment that are largely ineffective and may become damaging to the educational sector and society as a whole. Beyond solving the ongoing armed conflict in Cameroon, we recommend the following for education to continue in such situations.

- Online learning can be one of the safest ways of continuing education in these areas because it limits physical interactions. It is important that the government and other stakeholders put facilities in place such as internet access, data, upskilling, and learning management systems to ensure the smooth functioning of online learning.
- School providers, including the government and private proprietors, should structure campuses to allow teachers to live on the premises. If teachers live on the school premises, then security (preferably trained civilians and not any of the groups of the armed forces) can be deployed to campuses to curb issues of attendance. When security is provided to campuses that teachers live away from, teachers become targets after leaving the school premises. Additionally, school campuses should be fenced to improve security.
- Irrespective of how much is done at community level, individual safety is key. Therefore, teachers should be engaged in formal and short programmes that allow them to gain self-defence and safety skills that would build their confidence to work

under such conditions. Teachers' confidence will go a long way to enhance that of learners.

- Teachers must continue with their learning and professional development to curb the loss of skills and, to this end, they must be introduced to many online learning opportunities. Schools could implement short certification and training courses that would support teacher development.
- Stakeholders in the community should encourage and carry off campaigns that maintain schools as being no-go areas for combatants.

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