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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, CERTIFICATIONS AND JAPA DECISION: OPPORTUNITIES FOR NIGERIAN NURSERY AND PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS AT HOME AND ABROAD

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Abstract

Researchers have explained the emigration of Nigerian teachers, popularly termed japa, mainly through low remuneration and insecurity, while giving less attention to access to professional development and career progression. This study examined the professional development and career opportunities available to Nigerian nursery and primary school teachers in Nigeria and abroad, and how these are linked to the decision to migrate. A mixed-methods design was adopted. The study analysed the quantitative responses from 384 teachers in Nigeria and 20 teachers in the diaspora using means, standard deviations, and percentages. The study also thematically analysed semi-structured interviews with eight teachers (four in Nigeria and four in the United Kingdom and Canada). Teachers in Nigeria reported some exposure to professional development, but only 44% agreed that it was sufficient and 39% that it was affordable, although they indicated that most came from private schools and external organisations rather than from government. Teachers abroad reported greater access to professional development, often free and mandatory, and 80% agreed that they did not feel limited in their career advancement. However, only 40% agreed that they had experienced better career growth, and the interviews showed that visa conditions and the absence of Qualified Teacher Status confined some teachers to support roles. Professional development and certifications also functioned as a pathway to migration: the interview revealed that two of the teachers in Nigeria were preparing to leave through courses and certification, and three of the four teachers abroad had migrated in order to study. The findings suggest that limited professional development operates as a push factor and that certifications provide the route out. It was recommended that affordable and sustainable professional development should be provided for teachers in Nigeria.

***Keywords**:* Japa; teacher migration; professional development; Qualified Teacher Status; early years education; human capital

Introduction

Teacher migration from Nigeria has intensified in recent years under the popular label japa, a term used to describe the relocation of Nigerians abroad in search of better living conditions (Okunade & Awosusi, 2023). Figures cited by Ogunode et al. (2024) indicate the scale of the outflow, with the International Organization for Migration recording requests for help to leave the country from at least 260,000 Nigerians in 2023. Explanations of teacher migration have centred on low remuneration, insecurity and economic instability. Access to professional development and opportunities for career progression has received comparatively less attention, even though these determine whether teachers can grow within the profession and be valued in it.

Professional development refers to planned learning opportunities through which teachers improve their knowledge, skills and practice over time. Structured courses, which are usually offered by higher education institutions, are one such strategy and are intended to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to implement new pedagogies (AbdulRab, 2023). Where such opportunities are scarce or costly, teachers may seek them elsewhere. Aghahowa (2023) identifies access to advanced training, scholarships and innovative pedagogy as one of the attractions that developed education systems hold for Nigerian teachers. Ejimonye (2025) likewise recommended compulsory in-service training for secondary school teachers in Nigeria to strengthen their professional knowledge and motivation.

Existing evidence suggests that professional growth matters in the decision to migrate. Ejimonye (2025) found that secondary school teachers in Nsukka agreed that the lack of opportunities for professional growth had led them to consider migration, and that providing professional development opportunities would reduce the desire to migrate. Aghahowa (2023) similarly argues that teachers are attracted to countries where scholarships, advanced training, important certifications and innovative pedagogy are available but are not obtainable in Nigeria.

The returns on a certification depend on whether the destination country recognises it and on the roles that migrants are able to occupy. Yip (2023) reports that immigrant teachers in the United States are sometimes regarded as assistants to the main teachers and are doubted by parents. Study visas are also an important channel of Nigerian migration: Okunade and Awosusi (2023) note that the United Kingdom recorded a 71% increase in student visas granted by June 2022 compared with 2019, with Nigeria ranking third behind India and China.

Most studies examine teachers' professional development in Nigeria, and/or only in secondary schools. Little is known about the professional development of nursery and primary school teachers, or about the opportunities available to teachers who have already migrated and how these compare with those they left behind. This study therefore addresses that gap by comparing the professional development and career opportunities reported by Nigerian nursery and primary school teachers in Nigeria with those reported by teachers abroad.

The study was guided by three research questions;

1. What professional development and career opportunities are available to nursery and primary school teachers in Nigeria?
2. What professional development and career opportunities are available to Nigerian nursery and primary school teachers abroad, and how do they differ from those available

in Nigeria?
3. How are professional development and certifications linked to the decision to migrate?

Theoretical framework

The study draws on two theories. Lee's (1966) push–pull theory explains migration in terms of factors at the place of origin that repel, factors at the destination that attract, intervening obstacles, and personal factors. In this study, limited professional development and few progression opportunities are treated as possible push factors, access to free training and internationally recognised certifications as possible pull factors, and the cost of courses, visa conditions and the recognition of qualifications as intervening obstacles.

Human capital theory (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964) treats education and training as investments that are expected to yield returns in the form of better employment and earnings. Where returns are perceived to be low at home, individuals may seek settings in which the same training yields more. Because human capital is embodied in the person, it is wasted if it cannot be used. The two theories are complementary: push–pull theory identifies the conditions that prompt a move, while human capital theory explains why teachers invest in training and certifications in preparation for it.

Research Methodology

A mixed-methods design was adopted. A descriptive survey established how teachers rated their professional development and career opportunities, and semi-structured interviews explored how teachers described and explained these opportunities. The two forms of data were analysed separately and then compared theme by theme.

The sample size for teachers in Nigeria (n = 384) was determined using Cochran's formula, and respondents were drawn from four out of the six geopolitical zones and from both private and public schools. The diaspora sample (n = 20) was selected by convenience from the United Kingdom and Canada, the two destination countries from which teachers were available at the time of data collection. Eight teachers were interviewed, four in Nigeria and four abroad. Codes (N1 to N4 for teachers in Nigeria and D1 to D4 for teachers abroad) are used in place of names.

Table 1: Interview participants

Code	Location	Group	Role (as described by the participant)
N1	Lagos	Nigeria	Early years teacher in a private school
N2	Borno	Nigeria	Teacher; also a mentor in a programme run by an external organisation

N3	Abuja	Nigeria	Teacher; studied business education
N4	Port Harcourt	Nigeria	Teacher in a private school
D1	United Kingdom	Abroad	Teaching assistant (student visa)
D2	United Kingdom	Abroad	Learning mentor in a special school (dependent visa)
D3	Canada	Abroad	Early learning educator in a public school
D4	United Kingdom	Abroad	Teaching assistant with Qualified Teacher Status

Two questionnaires were used, one for teachers in Nigeria and one for teachers in the diaspora. Both were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree = 5 to Strongly Disagree = 1), and the reliability coefficients were 0.76 and 0.75, respectively.

Questionnaire data were summarised using means, standard deviations and the percentage of respondents who agreed (Agree or Strongly Agree). A mean of 3.00 or above, the midpoint of the scale, was taken to indicate agreement, and a mean below 3.00 was taken to indicate disagreement. The interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically following the procedure of Braun and Clarke (2021): familiarisation, coding, generation of themes, review, definition and reporting. Quotations are verbatim. Each participant's contribution is reported separately so that individual accounts remain visible. The findings of the two strands were then compared theme by theme.

Results

Research question 1: What professional development and career opportunities are available to nursery and primary school teachers in Nigeria?

Table 2: Professional opportunities: teachers in Nigeria (n = 384)

S/N	Item	Mean	SD	% Agree	Decision
1	I have undergone significant professional development programs in Nigeria	3.87	1.20	68	Agree

2	I have experienced significant career growth	3.68	1.28	62	Agree
3	I have access to enough professional development training	3.21	1.41	44	Agree
4	I don't feel limited in my career advancement as a teacher in this country	3.13	1.57	51	Agree
5	I had to undergo significant professional certification to teach	3.76	1.27	66	Agree
6	The available professional development programs are budget friendly or subsidized	2.93	1.41	39	Disagree
7	The class I teach has opened more professional growth for me	3.62	1.36	62	Agree
	Grand mean	3.46			Agree

Table 2 presents the responses of teachers in Nigeria. Six of the seven items recorded means above the 3.00 benchmark, and the grand mean of 3.46 indicates overall agreement. The highest means were for having undergone significant professional development programmes (M = 3.87, SD = 1.20) and for having had to obtain professional certification to teach (M = 3.76, SD = 1.27). Two items, however, indicated limits to provision. Only 44% of the teachers agreed that they had access to enough professional development training (M = 3.21, SD = 1.41), and the availability of affordable or subsidised programmes was the only item below the benchmark (M = 2.93, SD = 1.41), with 46% of teachers disagreeing. Responses on career advancement were divided, as 51% of the teachers did not feel limited while 43% did. Overall, the results indicate that teachers in Nigeria have some exposure to professional development but that many consider it insufficient and costly.

Responses did not differ appreciably by school type on access to enough training (M = 3.20 for private school teachers and M = 3.22 for public school teachers).

Interview result

Theme 1: **Limited, privately sourced and costly professional development in Nigeria**
Participants in Nigeria gave differing accounts of whether professional development exists. N3 reported none at present, and N4 reported none provided by government beyond

licensing. N2, by contrast, reported many opportunities, although the one he described was a mentoring programme run by an external organisation. N1 reported that courses are available but unaffordable on a teacher's salary.

> "Do we even have professional development for Nigerian teachers? There's no professional development. The only thing is just for you to get the license, and then there's no professional development that's… on the part of the government, except if you are working with private organizations." **(N4)**

> "I don't think there is any professional, any systemic professional development for teachers in Nigeria apart from the license, the [TRCN] is not doing enough compared to countries like the UK where teachers have access to quality professional development at no cost, free." **(N4)**

> "For now, there's nothing like such for now." **(N3)**

> "There are many. In fact, presently now I'm a mentor at… a school. So usually we go there, we are mentoring some of… students in some locations that attach to us." He added that the training teachers receive in Nigeria differs from that received by teachers abroad: "it's different." **(N2)**

> "What I feel is, it's quite expensive, there are expensive ones and there are cheaper ones, but you know when you compare it from salary as a teacher…" **(N1)**

N4 further observed that private organisations are the ones that recognise the need for continuing training:

> "Private organizations always believe that as a teacher… as education is evolving, you also need to evolve with education." **(N4)**

N1 was unsure what teachers abroad receive but believed it to be better:

> "with what my friends… told me, I think they are." **(N1)**

Taken together, N1, N3 and N4 described gaps in availability, in government provision or in affordability, while N2's access came through an external organisation and not through the school system.

Research question 2: What professional development and career opportunities are available to Nigerian nursery and primary school teachers abroad, and how do they differ from those available in Nigeria?

Table 3: Professional opportunities: teachers abroad (n = 20)

S/N	Item	Mean	SD	% Agree	Decision
1	I had to undergo significant professional certification to teach abroad	4.20	0.77	80	Agree

2	I have experienced better career growth opportunities in this country	3.40	0.50	40	Agree
3	I have undergone more professional development training abroad	4.20	0.77	80	Agree
4	I do not feel limited in my career advancement as a teacher in this country	4.20	0.77	80	Agree
5	The professional opportunities available are budget friendly or subsidized	3.80	1.05	60	Agree
6	I have access to more professional opportunities due to the subject(s) I teach	3.60	0.82	40	Agree
	Grand mean	3.9			Agree

Table 3 presents the responses of teachers abroad. All items recorded means above 3.00, and the grand mean was 3.83. Three items recorded the highest mean (M = 4.20, SD = 0.77) with 80% agreement: having had to obtain significant professional certification to teach abroad, having undergone more professional development training abroad, and not feeling limited in career advancement. Better career growth opportunities recorded a lower mean (M = 3.40, SD = 0.50), with only 40% agreeing and the remaining 60% neutral. On affordability, 60% agreed, 20% were neutral and 20% disagreed (M = 3.80, SD = 1.05). The grand mean for teachers abroad (3.9) was higher than that for teachers in Nigeria (3.46).

Teachers in both groups reported having to obtain professional certification in order to teach, although the item was rated higher abroad (M = 4.20) than in Nigeria (M = 3.76).

Interview result

Theme 2: Regular, free and mandatory professional development abroad

The three participants abroad who responded to these questions (D2, D3 and D4) all described extensive opportunities for training. D3 gave the most detailed account of how provision is organised in Canada.

> "We do professional development at the beginning of the year, all the schools in the division come together. We have professional development training. Also, in the middle of the year, we also have it… There's so many trainings to take, and they're free. The trainings are free. You just go on. In fact, it's a requirement. You have to." **(D3)**

> "Every two weeks here, we have PLF days. PLF is professional learning Fridays. So on those Fridays, there are no school for kids." **(D3)**

D3 also reported learning from the other professionals in her school:

> "Here you have the occupational therapist, you have the speech language pathologist, you have the special ed experts… having the opportunity to work with different people on different… capacity has really improved the knowledge." **(D3)**

D3 noted that she had already trained her own staff when she ran a school in Nigeria:

> "Professional development is something you have to take by yourself, and this is something I used to do back home… My teachers used to go for training every term." **(D3)**

The difference she identified, therefore, is that in Canada professional development is built into the system, whereas in Nigeria it depended on individual initiative.

D4 described opportunities for leadership as well as for teaching, and stated that her Qualified Teacher Status gives her access to wider international opportunities:

> "I've attended different conferences… I am not limiting my experience because here you are encouraged to do what you know you can do to improve yourself… I became a school governor last year just to improve my leadership skill." **(D4)**

> "Attaining my QTS last year has really opened me to a wider international opportunity. If I wish to leave the UK today, the QTS is broadly recognized everywhere." **(D4)**

> "I've had loads. I've been able to do courses in administration, courses in data analysis." **(D2)**

Theme 3: Unequal career progression abroad

The questionnaire showed that only 40% of teachers abroad agreed that they had experienced better career growth. The interviews help to explain this result. Three of the four teachers abroad held support roles although they had taught in Nigeria, and D1 and D4 attributed this to visa conditions and to the rules on who may teach.

> "The only role you can be assigned to… as a student visa, is… a teaching assistant." **(D1)**

> "I have my QTS, qualified teacher status, but I'm still working as a teaching assistant while looking for a teaching role just because of my visa situation." **(D4)**

D2 works as a learning mentor, and her additional training is moving her away from the classroom:

> "Right now where I work, I work as an administrator on Mondays because that's where I plan to branch to because there's more opportunities for me there." **(D2)**

N4, who remains in Nigeria, had anticipated this pattern, and he added that opportunities

vary by level and specialism:

> "Even on LinkedIn, you hardly see a Nigerian moving to the UK, unless it maybe if the person is relocating with their family and they end up being class assistant, and they keep developing on the job." **(N4)**

> "Specialist teachers have more that they have added advantage compared to primary school teachers… the first criteria is not your qualification, the first criteria is your nationality… the opportunities for primary… early years and primary teachers is very slim." **(N4)**

D4 supported his account in relation to level and subject:

> "Secondary teacher even have a lot of more advantage and overseas teacher who are STEM… They kind of have some bursaries and some things allocated to them… in my EYFS practitioner… there isn't any huge advantage as compared to other section." **(D4)**

N1 held a different view, suggesting that nursery and primary teachers are valued abroad, this was based on what friends had told her. N4 and D4, by contrast, described specific barriers linked to nationality, level and subject.

Research question 3: How are professional development and certifications linked to the decision to migrate?

Table 4: Professional growth as a reason for migrating

Item	Mean (SD)	% Agree
Professional growth and the decision to migrate (Nigeria: "Lack of professional growth is a reason for me to migrate")	3.56 (1.58)	60
Professional growth and the decision to migrate (Abroad: "My decision to migrate was influenced by professional growth prospects")	3.80 (0.77)	60

Table 4 shows that 60% of teachers in each group linked professional growth to the decision to migrate (M = 3.56 in Nigeria and M = 3.80 abroad).

Interview result

Theme 4: Professional development and certifications as a pathway to migration

Professional development was not only something that participants lacked; it also served as a route out of the country. N1 is currently taking a course because she wishes to leave, and N4 is planning certification and courses before he considers leaving. Among the teachers abroad, three of the four had migrated in order to study.

> Asked whether she had considered migrating: "Yes. That's why I'm going for

the course right now." **(N1)**

> "Making sure that you've got the needed experience, the needed certification, for example, like QTS, which is… internationally recognized… having an international certification or international license like QTS would be an added advantage for you… I need to show that I've got… needed… things like the certification and the license before I can consider… leaving the country." **(N4)**

> "I'm always… looking forward to enrolling in professional development that would change the dynamics of my classroom so that I can get acquainted with how teaching and learning is done in places where I would like to be employed as a teacher." **(N4)**

N4 also noted that colleagues' departure has led teachers who remain to invest in their own development:

> "Every teacher is now looking forward to developing themselves, becoming better at what they do… because they want to mimic what's… done in the UK or what is done in developed countries." **(N4)**

Among the teachers abroad, D1, D3 and D4 had migrated through study, while D2 had joined her husband.

> "I was there to study. I went for my master's program." She added that her husband's plan to study "can also help me to also advance in my own career as well, and also have… broaden my… knowledge in the international settings of… at the educational settings." **(D1)**
> "I researched, I attended a lot of conferences and trainings, and… I read a lot about it, and I took some courses back home… when we decided to relocate, I thought, okay, since I'm relocating, let me get certified, let me just come study." **(D3)**

> "I wanted to further in early years because my first degree was in English. So I thought of going to a country which is very renowned in… early years as I wanted to be an expert in it. And that was the main reason I chose the UK and I chose to continue my further education here." **(D4)**

Discussion

The two data sets point in the same direction for Nigeria. Teachers reported some exposure to professional development but considered it insufficient and costly, and they were dissatisfied with their professional experience (M = 2.55). Sixty per cent identified lack of professional growth as a reason for migrating. These results are consistent with Lee's (1966) conception of push factors and with Ejimonye's (2025) findings for secondary school teachers in Nsukka, and they extend that evidence to nursery and primary school teachers.

The interviews further suggest that much of the available provision is delivered by private organisations and external bodies and not by government (N2, N4), which may mean that access depends on the teacher's employer.

From a human capital perspective, teachers invest in training because they expect returns (Becker, 1964). The interviews show teachers making such investments in preparation for migration: N1 is taking a course because she wishes to migrate, and N4 plans to obtain QTS. Three of the four teachers abroad had migrated in order to study, which is consistent with the

growth in Nigerian student visas to the United Kingdom reported by Okunade and Awosusi (2023). Professional development and certifications therefore appear both as a reason for migrating and as the means of doing so.

In Lee's (1966) terms, course fees, the cost of study abroad and visa conditions function as intervening obstacles. N1's observation that courses are costly relative to a teacher's salary suggests that teachers with greater financial support, such as a spouse's income, may be better placed to prepare. This is in line with Lee's argument that migration is selective. The interviews also show that an internationally recognised certification converts skills into mobility: D4 described QTS as "broadly recognized everywhere", and N4 regarded it as an advantage. The cost and availability of such certifications therefore shape who is able to migrate.

Teachers abroad reported more professional development, often free and mandatory, but only 40% agreed that they had experienced better career growth and 60% were neutral. The interviews indicate why. D1 and D4 worked as teaching assistants because of visa conditions and because QTS is required before teaching. D2 works as a learning mentor and plans to move into administration. N4 and D4 reported that level, subject and nationality affect opportunities. In human capital terms, these teachers have invested in training but are not yet realising the full return, since their skills are only partly used. This is consistent with Yip (2023), who reports that immigrant teachers in the United States are sometimes regarded as assistants to the main teachers. It also suggests that the availability of professional development abroad does not by itself guarantee progression into full teaching roles.

N4 observed that colleagues' departure has led teachers who remain to invest in their own development. Such upgrading may strengthen the quality of teaching in Nigeria, but N1 and N4 show that it may also prepare teachers to leave, so that the same training can serve retention and migration at once. Motadegbe and Mogaji (2025) argue that push factors that are left unaddressed produce brain drain, and the cost and scarcity of professional development are push factors that policy can address.

Conclusion

Professional development and career progression are part of the japa story. Nursery and primary school teachers in Nigeria receive some professional development, but most regard it as insufficient and costly, and much of it is provided by private and external organisations and not by government. This limited provision acts as a push factor. At the same time, a course, a certificate or a degree is often the means of leaving. Abroad, teachers reported more professional development, which was often free and mandatory, but progression was unequal: some teachers with Nigerian qualifications worked as teaching assistants because of visa conditions or the absence of Qualified Teacher Status, and early years teachers may have fewer opportunities than specialist teachers. If Nigeria is to retain its teachers, it needs to provide functional professional development that teachers can afford.

Recommendations

The following are therefore recommended:

1. Government and the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria should provide regular, free or subsidised professional development for nursery and primary school teachers that goes beyond licensing. The free and mandatory provision described by the respondent in Canada offers a model.
2. Private schools should share the cost of courses with teachers, who currently bear it

largely alone.

3. Partnerships with external organizations to provide mentoring programmes should be extended to reach more teachers.
4. Destination countries and employers should provide clear routes from support roles to teaching posts for overseas-trained teachers and should recognise Nigerian teaching experience.
5. Prospective migrants should be given early information on roles, visa conditions and certification requirements.
6. Future research should use larger samples and follow teachers over time to examine how professional development shapes their careers.

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