

Perceptions of the Dwindling Appeal of the Teaching Profession: A South African Case-Study

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ABSTRACT The teaching profession in South Africa has been generally viewed as a profession endowed with a prestige, honour and respect, characteristics that seem to dissipate at an alarming rate, and substituted allegedly by apathy and pessimism. Prompting the question, “has teaching lost its appeal, and what could be the underlying causes of this situation?” This question gave rise to the pursuit of this study. The paper followed a multi-method approach, that is, observations, informal discussions and a semi-structured questionnaire using clusters of variables as guided by Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). The findings of this article based on the qualitative data collected from purposefully sampled (n=186) educators reveal that about (56%) of the older generation of educators (that is, from 51 years and above) bemoan change fatigue (that is, instability and uncertainties) contrary to their younger (that is, 21-35 years) counterpart who identified salary as their main concern with the teaching profession. Understanding current teachers’ views, needs and motivation has implications for teacher education planning and curriculum design, teacher recruitment authorities, and policy decisions.

INTRODUCTION

The shortfall of teachers in South Africa presents challenges for addressing skills shortages, facilitating economic development, poverty alleviation, and achieving social redress. The expansion of quality education provision has been hindered by teacher attrition and recruitment. There is a growing shortage of qualified teachers in South Africa (Hammet 2007). Similarly, the shortage of all suitably qualified and experienced teachers promises to worsen unless teaching as a career can be made attractive to new and older graduates (Serow and Forrest 1994). Unfortunately, in Australia (just like prevalent perceptions in South Africa), salaries and employment conditions continue to make teaching a less than attractive career option for the most gifted university graduates (Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) 2003; Richardson and Watt 2005).

“Is there a future for the teaching profession? I raise this question not so much to alarm educa-

tors as to challenge us to think together about what we should do to help our profession” (Null 2010). In their investigation of the public perceptions of the teaching profession in the UK, Everton et al. (2007) report that looking back half a century, Glass (1954) found that ‘the elementary school teacher was ranked by members of the general public alongside the news reporter, the commercial traveller and the jobbing master builder, but below a non-conformist minister, and certainly below the traditional professions’. More recent writers (Bell 1989; Cunningham 1992; Judge 1995) have suggested that public perceptions of teachers may not have improved very much and may even have declined. Bell cites a 1988 report on British social attitudes which found that of 3000 people questioned, 71% thought parents had less respect for teachers than a decade before, 88% felt pupils were less respectful and 60% felt teachers were less dedicated. Cunningham reports that there have been concerns about teachers’ status since the 1940s. He traces the image of teachers as presented by the media over a 40-year period through to 1990 and identifies recurring themes of concern with status, poor pay and problems with teacher supply.

To give credence to this argument, Hammet (2007) laments that in a British household where both parents were teachers, I was told from a young age “never go into teaching—it’s not

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worth it". The use of teachers as scapegoats for poor student performance, problems with youth behaviour and other social ills by politicians, policy makers, the media and the general public had, my parents felt, undermined the status of the profession. Evidently, number of studies investigated reasons why pre-service student teachers choose or not choose teaching as a career (Richardson and Watt 2005; Manual and Hughes 2006; Mau and Mau 2006; Park 2006; Wait and Richardson 2007; Montsi and Nenty 2009), with very little research focusing on eliciting the views and perceptions of the current cohort of teachers on their profession and career subject which this paper endeavours to explore.

This phenomenon has begun to emerge strongly in South Africa as well, and consequently, necessitating pursuance of this research study, where the fundamental purpose is to reflect not only on the casual factors attributable to the pessimism towards teaching as reflected and expressed by the teachers from the Limpopo Province, but also explore possible remedial strategies to address this challenge facing the teaching profession.

Perceptions of Teaching in the 1950s and 1960s

The historical evolution of the prestige and honour of the teaching profession in South Africa is elucidated by Hammet (2007). Albeit his emphasis and focus being on coloured population, his caption is most applicable to Africans as well. Career opportunities for school leavers defined as coloured during the 1950s and 1960s were restricted; the majority of available occupations in low- or unskilled areas of agriculture, manufacturing and industry. Professional opportunities were limited to teaching, law or medicine. In this period, teachers "were highly respected. People virtually revered teachers. These were the people who were the community leaders. The teacher's word was law, inside and very often outside of the classroom" (Richard 06/05/2005). Richard's observation that the "teacher's word was law, inside and very often outside of the classroom" reflects their wider community leadership role and the social control function enabled by the social capital of their position. The roots of this respect lay in the social and institutional capital of being educated and being a teacher, considerations that James intimated

in recalling his childhood in the 1960s when "[t]eaching was one of the top positions. Even if you were in the private sector, and you earned a lot of money, you never had the type of clout as a teacher. Teachers were the crown jewels of the society" (James 25/07/2005). The artificial scarcity of professional occupations further enhanced this prestige, "[t]eachers were very conscious of their professional status because the coloured group had no other substantial professional class. Teachers had high prestige because they were literate, relatively learned, eloquent on occasion" (Adhikari 1981). This prestige, linked to a stable salary and wider job scarcity, encouraged applicants to the profession. The remark by Gold and Roth (1994) that "the great promise of teaching, the reward of personal satisfaction and sense of accomplishment, is increasingly being unfulfilled" put a damper on this illusion. Furthermore, Armstrong's (2009) study shows that the teaching profession is relatively unattractive to individuals at the top end of the skills distribution in the South African labour market.

Contextualising the Teaching Profession: Limpopo Case-Study

Post 1994 democratic dispensation, a number of changes affected teachers in South Africa, curriculum changes, redeployment/right-sizing, retrenchments, etc. Some of these developments were perceived to be putting a strain on the morale of the teachers. The following report succinctly captures the essence and underlying rationale of this study.

In 2005 a colleague of mine and I from the School of Teacher Education at the Central University of Technology, Free State, embarked on a recruitment campaign/drive for student teachers in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The Limpopo Provincial government were going to grant those Grade 12 learners wishing to pursuing education as a career once they have successfully completed their Grade 12 bursaries. As we go about moving from one school to the other leaving our marketing material, at one secondary school in Thohoyandou, one elderly teacher from a group of teachers enjoying their lunch remarked that "these learners are not going to apply, not to be teachers" the researcher abruptly interjected "why that is, curriculum) don't seem to stop, I am in the profession for more than 25 years now, and I have never seen change taking

place at the rate we are going, every new (education) Minister uses education to push her/his agenda, at the expense of our children". Another teacher remarked "show me a rich teacher my friend, we cannot even afford very basic stuff, like buying your own decent house, how do you get motivated to work hard under these conditions?"

Around Polokwane, one principal took liberty to paint a picture to us "this profession has gone to the dogs, you can't blame teachers for being so frustrated, look at the type of learners we have today, no respect, we suppose to allow them to come to school pregnant, you can't discipline them, the (education) authorities use liberalisation and democratic rights to play politics with the future of our nation. Maybe things are different where you come from, but here is just a struggle non-stop". Surprisingly, most of the best performing (in Maths and Science) schools come from the deep rural areas of this province, coincidentally, the area where my colleague got his primary and secondary education from. Quoting him verbatim, "I chose teaching primarily because of the type of teachers I used to have, I dreamt of being just like them, the passion and love they've instilled in me, especially for Maths and Sciences, I never thought they worry about all these other things, I can understand where they come from now".

Null (2010) maintains that history is useful in helping us to reconceive the way in which we think of ourselves as professionals. Around 1900, the teaching profession began to distance itself from the moral foundations that are the true source of real professionalism. Psychologists such as Edward L. Thorndike and William Heard Kilpatrick separated themselves from the moral basis of teaching. They simultaneously sought to create a purely technical profession that had nothing to do with the "traditional" basis for our field. The new "science" they attempted to create would have nothing to do with moral virtues such as practical wisdom, honesty, and courage – precisely the virtues that are essential to renewing the profession today (MacIntyre 1981). Within developing societies specifically, teachers are often perceived to be the central learning resource given the difficult working and living conditions prevalent in these societies. The scarcity of teaching resources often renders teachers the only channel through which society is able to achieve its educational aspirations. Teachers interaction with learners is the axis on which

educational quality turns (Voluntary Services Overseas [VSO] 2002); Armstrong 2009).

Literature Review: Causes to the Attrition from Teaching

Teaching holds many frustrations for the beginning professional (Barrett Kutcy and Schulz 2006). Ness' (2001) example is representative of these frustrations and their eventual possible consequences: a new teacher leaves the profession after two years due to lack of support, impossible teaching loads, financial issues, and outrage about the children who "are the victims of a floundering public school system". Taylor et al. (1992), in their survey of 1000 second-year teachers, noted that fewer than half of the respondents felt that their experiences with their principals were very satisfying. Additionally, they cited frustrations with parents and a lack of parental support as a reason for leaving teaching.

Everton et al. (2007) report that Ingersoll's (2001) analysis of US national surveys on teacher staffing, however, found that teachers' own perceptions were much less positive. High attrition rates were associated with school factors, including lack of support, limited input in decision-making, and student discipline, as well as low salaries, job dissatisfaction and pursuit of better jobs. Similarly, Cushman (2007) reports that the results of her research with high school leavers (Cushman 2000) and practising male primary school teachers (Cushman 2005) support international findings that showed men consider teaching unattractive because of poor salaries, the profession's low status, and issues around working with young children (Carrington 2002; Smith 2004; Thornton and Bricheno 2006). In all four schools Diko and Letseka (2009) visited, some teachers were enrolled in some form of further study to upgrade their qualifications. Yet, contrary to aim (b) of the National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development (2007), there was concern that they were wasting time and money given that qualifications are not recognised for remuneration or promotion. This caused much distress for experienced teachers who were studying towards master's (MEd) and doctoral (PhD) degrees but were stuck at PL1. They were concerned (a) that they were investing huge amounts of their hard-earned money towards further education and development with no assurance of return on investment (ROI), (b) that notwithstanding their extensive

experience and qualifications they were overlooked for promotion posts, and (c) that there was therefore no reason why they should not leave the teaching profession. A Business and Commerce teacher surmised that investing in further study in modern-day South African education did not make business sense given that such an initiative was neither recognised nor rewarded. He likened such an investment to throwing money into the paper shredder.

Diko and Letseka (2009) further reports that the Area Programme Officer (APO) of Bojanala (Rustenburg) acknowledged that the province's public schools are plagued by lack of capacity and general dysfunctionality, particularly in respect of parental involvement and participation in SGBs. They also acknowledged that the mines pose a serious threat to public schools in that they are not only aggressive in branding their schools and marketing the benefits and opportunities they offer qualified teachers, but they also offer competitive remuneration packages that far exceed packages offered by public schools.

METHODOLOGY

The study followed a qualitative research design, based on a phenomenological approach (that is, based on a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasise the importance of personal perspective and interpretation (Lester 1999). The paper adopted a multi-fold research approach, that is, observation, informal discussion and a questionnaire. A survey method is used to administer the semi-structured questionnaire, consisting of twenty-eight (28) questions, in a mixture of rating scales using a non-probability sampling technique, that is, purposeful sampling approach. Mwamwenda (2004) states that a survey is a structural questionnaire designed to solicit information about a specific aspect of the subject's behaviour.

Data Collection and Analysis

This data collection instrument's information is based on the data (that is, from the observation and informal discussions with principals and teachers) gathered during the random marketing/recruitment campaign from (n=11) secondary schools in the Limpopo Province. Which was further follow-up by the distribution of 186 semi-structured questionnaires with items aimed at soliciting responses on the following five clus-

tered factors that emanated from the observation and informal discussion with teachers from Limpopo Province namely, (i) frequency of curriculum change; (ii) career aspirations; (iii) learner discipline; (iv) adequacy of resources; and (v) teacher morale. The responses from the questionnaire are reported on in the narrative. White (2005:187) mentions that qualitative data is described by painting a verbal picture of the context and the process as viewed from the participants' perspective.

Population and Sampling Size

The sampling population of this study consists mainly of two purposefully sampled groups, firstly, 15 secondary school principals and teachers from four (4) education districts of Limpopo Province. Secondly, (n=186) purposively sampled teachers from two (2) primary and three (3) secondary schools in the Bloemfontein area, consisting of (n=103) female and (n=83) male educators, with a mean age of 42, and work experience ranging from 3-27 yrs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What Made You Choose Teaching as a Profession?

The following motives featured prominently from the list of items identified by the respondents, and they are ranked in terms of their scores.

- Working with children (81%)
- Holidays give me time with my family (31%)
- Positive influence on younger children's future (87%)
- The only available option (19%)
- Got a DoE bursary (44%)
- My parents were teachers (9%)
- Salary (36%)
- Status/respect (23%)
- Other (7%)

It is obvious that most respondents irrespective of gender, chose teaching mainly for influencing young children's future (87%) and the desire and passion to work with children, what is also interesting is the gap between females (53%) and males (52%) responses on the former and 57% and 43% on the latter. A total of 44% teachers seem to have joined the profession by default, with 36% indicating salary as their primary reason for joining the profession.

I am Happy in My Current Job as a Teacher

An overwhelming number (56%) of educators' response was negative, with 14% being unsure whether they are happy or not about their job as teachers. This is consistent with the response to the question "was the teaching profession your first preferred career choice?" where 71% of the respondents in the age range of 21 – 29 indicated a negative response. This is congruent to the findings of Kutcy and Schulz (2006) where second-year classroom teachers spoke of frustration in their daily work with students, parents, and administrators. They felt frustrated by the politics and policies of the school system, and by the impact of all these frustrations on their personal lives. Additionally, Adams (2003) also reported new teachers' enthusiasm waning within five years, teachers over 45 feeling that their contribution was often 'overlooked', and teachers of all backgrounds reporting that the profession has a poor image among the public, the government, media and other professions (Everton et al. 2007). On the contrary, the study by Erb (2002) reveals that teachers at the beginning of their careers experience the positive emotions of joy, elation, satisfaction, encouragement, interest, and relief, and to a lesser degree, the negative emotions of disappointment, frustration, anger, confusion, impatience, and exhaustion. Nieto (2003) contends that teachers will stay in the profession precisely because of these positive emotions, and will "persevere, in spite of all the deprivations and challenges, for reasons that have more to do with teaching's heart than its physical conditions. In this study, a measly 23% of the respondents within the age range of '51 and above' still derive pleasure in their current

teaching job. In the final analysis, the results of this question seem strongly supported by the findings of Everton et al. (2007) which indicates that younger people responded more negatively and older people more positively to the question "Is teaching an attractive career?" They have also indicated that this is in line with the results of previous studies, in which children and young people appeared to have more negative opinions of teaching than adults (MORI 2000; MORI 2001).

Please Briefly Explain Your Answer to the Above Question Below

This follow up question intends to solicit precise details of their feeling about the teaching profession.

Prior to focusing on the enlisted issues, it is essential to note that for my Masters study (see Naong 2000), I requested teachers to identify differences between determinants of (alleged) high motivation levels of teachers in the early 1950s and 1960s, and those that led to (alleged) poor motivation level for current teachers. The findings are listed in Table 1.

Even though salaries ranked number six amongst factors affecting teacher motivation from Table 1, it has also began to take a centre stage among concerns raised by teachers in the recent past. Armstrong (2009) points out that the wage structure of teachers in the South African labour market is not conducive to attracting workers who may consider to be endowed with above average productive characteristics. This confirms the complaint by a male educator that their salaries is not comparable to any other profession, which is why they must always be on strike for government to take their plied seriously.

Table 1: Perceived reasons for yesteryear teachers' high morale/motivation vis-à-vis current teachers' morale/motivation

<i>Perceived reasons for yester-year teachers' high motivation</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Perceived reasons for current teachers' low morale</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Jobs were secure	211	90.2	Redeployment/retrenchments – future insecure	189	80.8
Disciplined pupils	202	86.3	Big class sizes	114	48.7
Small classes	98	41.9	Lack of facilities	112	47.9
Teaching was a calling	89	38.0	Ill-disciplined pupils	103	44.0
Respect by the community	87	37.2	Lack of cooperation from parents	86	36.8
Self-respect and discipline	65	27.8	Teacher salaries	74	31.6
Less stressful conditions	48	20.5	Lack of motivation from pupils	43	18.4
Promotion opportunities abundant	48	20.5	In-fightings - power struggle	13	5.6
Resourcefulness	23	9.8	General working conditions	9	3.8
Fewer politically motivated problems	10	4.3	Amount of paperwork involved	7	3.0

Source: Naong (2000:94)

Cushman (2007) states that while teacher salaries are a concern to those considering a career in teaching (Cushman 2000; Waterreus 2002), Chambers and Roper (2000) and Thornton and Bricheno (2006) found no indication that financial problems were a significant factor in attrition rates from teacher education institutions.

The following are complaints from teachers, listed not in a particular order:

- “OBE brought a lot of paper work, instead of focusing on teaching”,
- “We work hard but get paid peanuts”
- “Instability caused by constant (curriculum) change - how many curriculum changes did we have since democracy?”
- “Extra work involved with OBE, without necessary material support”,
- “Politics, policies, etc. gets to my nerves,
- “No equitable distribution of workload and favouritism”
- “Nothing is done with ill-discipline and lazy learners, but when results are bad, fingers are pointed at teachers”
- “OBE requires collaboration, but we find no support from authorities and parents”

It is evident from these remarks that mainly curriculum change brought lot of uneasiness for teachers across age divide. Nearly similar results are reported by Diko and Letseka (2009). The general sense one gets which is a consequence of (alleged) hasty curriculum roll-out, seem to have infused a sense of weakness, which resulted into self-doubt for most of educators in this country.

Teaching profession was my first preferred career choice

A sizeable number (71%) disagree with the statement, this is made clear by one educator’s strong remark that “teaching was my very, very last choice out of maybe five options, I never dreamt of becoming a teacher”. One mature teacher between the age of ‘51 and above’ stated that “we did not have as many options as today’s kids, so you either become a teacher, a policeman or a nurse for ladies during those times. Strangely, one female teacher, with a work experience between 1 – 5 years, bitterly argued that “teachers are not made but they are born, I have concluded that not everybody is cut to be a teacher, why do most older and experienced teachers refuse to teach the Gr. 12s? I was thrown in the deep-end in my first-year and I am proud

to say my Gr. 12 results speak for themselves, despite number of difficulties”. Despite this encouraging comment, 19% of teachers in the same work experience category, complained about money and benefits. One remarked that “we come with a lot of energy to make a difference in the future of the lives of young people, who are the future of this country, but government do not want to reward our efforts, we have needs that must be fulfilled, teaching is a passion for most of us, but government wants to chuck us off”.

What Was Your Most Preferred Career Choice?

Table 2 provide a detailed summary of careers aspirations current crop of teachers will have preferred to pursue.

Table 2: Most preferred career choices

No.	Preferred career choice (N=186)	No.	%
1.	Engineering	93	50
2.	Medicine	91	49
3.	Accounting and Finance	84	45
4.	Marketing and HR	62	33
5.	Law	59	32
6.	Tourism and Hospitality	19	10
7.	Architecture	12	6
8.	Actuarial Sciences	12	6
9.	Teaching	7	4
10.	Agricultural Sciences	3	2

Table 2 shows the dismal interest in teaching as a profession (4%), only coming second last. What seem encouraging is the fact that the number of graduates who completed degrees and diplomas in the field of education in South Africa increased from 17,823 in 1995 to 28,755 in 2004, or nearly 61%” (Paterson and Arends 2008). This trend is surely to be boosted by the introduction of the Fundza Lushaka Bursary Scheme aimed at enticing learners to pursue teaching as a career. However, this should not detract from the fact that teachers are leaving the teaching profession and will continue to do so until the working conditions at schools are improved (Diko and Letseka 2009).

CONCLUSION

Whether the appeal of teaching as both a profession and a career is under threat and gradually fading, remains a contested terrain. What this study shows is that the experience and perceptions expressed by the South African teachers in

this study mirrored those in the research literature. As documented in the literature, the concerns of these teachers touched on every aspect of schooling, from learners, parents, authorities, and extending to the general public, and the school system as a whole. Change-fatigue for older teachers and salaries for younger or new entrants into the profession superseded concerns such as ill-discipline, lack of involvement in decision-making (that is, top-down approach), lack of parental involvement, etc. for teachers in this study. Kutcy and Schulz (2006) advise that to achieve the intrinsic rewards of teaching and to stay in teaching, today's teachers need supportive school conditions. Conditions that can help boost teacher morale, status and image of the profession so that it retains its former appeal not only for the current crop of teachers but new aspirants as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Revive Professionalism Among Teachers – Strategy To Gain Public Sympathy

Firstly, the most profound questions by Null (2010) provide a solid foundation for thorough comprehension of what professionalism entails: What does it mean to be a professional? What are the foundations of a true professionalism? What about the moral foundations for the teaching profession? Have we forgotten what they are? If so, what must we do to revive them? Professionals have somehow come to be understood by the public as *self-interested, purely economic creatures*. We know this perception is not true in the teaching profession but, unfortunately, the idea has become widespread in many parts of the country (Null 2010). The researcher concurs with contention of Sullivan (2005) that (teaching) professionals must address this problem by demonstrating that we serve the public interest (not just our own) by communicating with people outside one narrow specialisation and by drawing on philosophical traditions that have been forgotten for decades. Without public support and a sound philosophy at its foundation, any profession will soon die.

Formalised Support, Induction and Mentoring of Novice Teachers

Moore Johnson (2004) cautions that all too often the frustrations that new teachers experi-

ence result in their moving on to other lines of work. It is worth noting the suggestion by DeWert et al. (2003) that one solution is an online network where experienced teacher mentors and other beginning teachers can provide the necessary “social, emotional, practical and professional support”.

Deliberate Attempt to Address Teachers' Concern

Addressing physiological needs of teachers might spur them to channel their energies in their work. Basic teaching and learning resources, inclusive of enabling environment, are the fundamental prerequisite for the cultivation of the culture of teaching and learning in every pedagogic milieu.

Re-branding of the Profession Through an Integrative Approach

This could include emphasis on work ethics (role of teaching training institutions), role-modelling and moral re-engineering (in terms of dress code, oath taking for behaviour inside and outside the school), reinforce teacher morale (keeping changes to the minimum, while encouraging creativity and innovation), mobilise support from various communities such as government, parental bodies, non-governmental organisations, etc. (through meaningful engagements).

Finally, it is evident and imperative from the findings of this study that a further study, in a much larger scale on this subject is necessary in this country, to get a better picture, and conclusive inferences can be drawn when a bigger sample with better representation is engaged.

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