

Student Teachers' Reasons for Choosing Teaching as a Career: A Case Study of First Year Students from a Rural University

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ABSTRACT Teaching is an important profession as it affords students to develop knowledge before joining the world of work. The present paper sought to gather student teachers' reasons of why they chose teaching as a career and implications of the findings on the enhancement of teacher preparation programmes. The study adopted a qualitative case study design in which a purposeful sample of 50 first year B. Ed Foundation Phase students 'teachers participated. Open ended questionnaires were used as the main and sole data collection tool. Content analysis was used to analyse data thematically after coding. The study found that student teachers reasons for choosing teaching as a career were both positive and negative. There were gaps that emerged from the questionnaire that needed to be addressed. In some instances they felt excited to teach and improved on practice over time. The study concluded that there were challenges in student teachers staying longer in the teaching profession. Recommendations were made.

INTRODUCTION

Career development may start on childhood experiences and may be influenced by personal and environmental factors. In view of that, Nguyen and Huang (2007: 91) agree that personal and social experiences have strong impact on career choice. The issue of teaching careers among student teachers are seen in many countries (Briggs 2008; Frakenberg 2010; Safdarian et al. 2014), as well as in South Africa as crucial. Literature has shown that high school students have preferences for some professions while shunning others. Krumboltz' (1983) Social theory argues that there are factors such as innate genetics, special abilities and environmental conditions that influence an individual's attitude towards a career. In the literature on teachers and teacher education world-wide, a concern is frequently expressed about high attrition rate in the profession, a state of affairs that can arguably be ascribed to the fact that teachers have lost aspiration for the profession. In the United States of America, for example, 30 percent of beginning teachers leave the profession within the first three years of teaching, and almost 50 percent by their fifth year of teaching (Kysilka 2010: 783).

In Australia, the Wilhelm et al. study found that the teachers' exodus occurs after a short period in a post. The research team found that teachers who left did so within the first five years

of teaching. In the US, Susan Moore Johnson (2004) depicted the 'whole in the bucket' inflow and outflow of staff as an expression of a shifting socio-economic situation. In Ingersoll's metaphor (2003), the 'revolving door syndrome' is symptomatic of a profession that loses new recruits very early as teachers suffer from lack of autonomy and flexibility in addressing pedagogical issues creatively. While the rates of teacher turnover in Australia are difficult to obtain, as no official statistics are available, conservative estimates in 2003 suggested that one out of every four teachers did not teach beyond five years (Friedman 2000: 595).

In South Africa, the attrition is higher than the replenishing rate, as has been pointed out by several analysts (Crouch 2002; Steyn 2006; Wong et al. 2014) in their research on the career paths of education graduates. Reasons why student teachers chose teaching as a career have both positive and negative influence in their teaching. Kyriacou et al. (2003) conducted a study on student teachers' expectations of teaching career in England and Norway and found that more than 50 percent of the respondents stated that teaching was a worthwhile job, have lengthy holidays and that they feel elated by pupils achievement. These findings are consistent with Manuel and Hughes (2008) who mentioned that 80 percent of the respondents have positive expectations about teaching.

Despite challenges mentioned above there are still students who register for teaching as their full time career at universities. The present study seeks to understand the reasons why pre-service teachers choose teaching as a career in one rural university using a qualitative approach.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore reasons why student chose teaching as a career in one rural university in Limpopo Province.

Research Question

Why do student teachers choose teaching as a career?

Objectives

To explore the reasons why students chose teaching as a career.

To determine the students perception and knowledge base about the teaching profession.

What is Teaching?

Teaching is a career that the State of Victoria in Australia as stated in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2013: 9) points out that:

Teaching is a career of choice for talented people with the skills and attributes that make for great teachers. There are attractive pathways and incentives for top graduates and professionals from a range of disciplines and backgrounds.

The effects of a teacher on the nation and the future of the nation are unquestionable. As it was stated by the philosopher Henry Adams (cited in Oruc 2011: 83) a teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops. In addition, Zuzovsky and Donitsa-Schmidt (2014: 2) add that [teaching] is a profession that profoundly affects the lives of every individual, and ultimately the strength and well-being of the nation. According to Marinell and Johnson (2013) people who love teaching are generally attracted by the process and the spontaneous aspects of teaching.

In order to highlight the importance of teaching as a career Block (2008: 425) notes:

Why should I be a teacher? Perhaps we might suggest that the satisfactions of teaching are to be achieved in its difficulties and these satisfactions are hard to wrung. Standing ethically before our students, commanding them to command us, we demand their attention with our devotions. We demand they learn to be attentive. To teach is to assume an ethical position in an immoral world. To teach is to be a prophet in a degraded world. To teach is to not suffer silently, but to suffer nonetheless. To teach is to change the world student by student and paper by paper.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Career Choice

A number of career theories have been developed to aid in our understanding of career development. The study is underpinned by Theory of Work-Adjustment TWA who (Dawis 2002, 2005; Dawis and Lofquist 1984) posit that theory of work adjustment is a class of theory in career development that is anchored on the individual difference tradition of vocational behaviour (Dawis 1992 cited in Leung 2008: 116) called person environment correspondence theory, viewing career choice and development as a continual processes of adjustment and accommodation in which: (a) the person (P) looks for work organisations and environments (E) that would match his/her "requirements" in terms of needs, and (b) E in turn looks for individuals who have the capabilities to meet the "requirements" of the organisation. The term satisfaction is used to indicate the degree that P is satisfied with E, and satisfactoriness is used to denote the degree that E is satisfied with P. To P, the most central requirements to meet from E are his/her needs (reinforces), which could further be dissected into categories of psychological and physical needs that are termed as values. To E, the most central requirements are abilities, which are operationalized as dimensions of skills that P possesses that are considered necessary are given to E.

This implies that the degree of P's satisfaction and E's satisfactoriness would jointly predict P's tenure in that work environment (Leung 2008: 116). Because teaching expose teachers to interact with different people such as parents and learners, TWA may be applied to the teaching profession because it may assist teachers to

learn to cope in different situations in which they find themselves.

Dawis (2005 cited in Leung 2002: 416) further identified four adjustment styles of TWA namely flexibility, activeness, reactivity and perseverance; and flexibility refers to P's level of tolerance to P-E dis-correspondence and whether he/she has a tendency to become easily dissatisfied with E. Activeness refers to whether P has a tendency to actively change or act on E to reduce dis-correspondence and dissatisfaction. Reactiveness, conversely, refers to whether P would resort to self-adjustment in order to deal with dis-correspondence without actively changing or acting on E. Perseverance refers to P's degree of resolve and persistence to adjust and accommodate before choosing to exit to E.

To this end, Leung (2002) argues that as a whole, TWA seeks to explain career development and satisfaction in terms of person-environment correspondence and it offers career guidance professionals, a template to locate entry points to assist individuals with career choice and adjustment concerns. This implies that students' reasons have to be taken into account if lecturers are to help them to successfully accomplish their training in learning outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

While students seem to consider teaching as a worthwhile job, it is surprising why they do not stay in the profession but leave for what they call greener pastures. This can be evidenced by high teacher attrition rate experienced in South African schools.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study is a case study comprised of first year student teachers in a four-year BEd-foundation phase teacher education programme. The study was qualitative in nature. Creswell (1994: 2) defines qualitative research as an enquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting. Using a qualitative research design via the questionnaire method, the research sampled 50 BEd-foundation phase students.

Trustworthiness

Elements of credibility, dependability and transferability were considered in ensuring trustworthiness of this qualitative study. To ensure credibility, the most appropriate method for data collection was selected. After analysing data, participants were asked to check for accuracy.

Population of the Study

Population is used to denote all those who fall into the category of concern (Oppenheim 1992: 38). This study population consisted of 50 first year student teachers who have enrolled in the teacher education-B. Ed-foundation phase programme. All first year student teachers completed the questionnaire

Data Collection

Gay (1996: 227) has the following to say about data analysis in qualitative research: "In a simplified nutshell, qualitative analysis involves making sense out of an enormous amount of narrative data".

A questionnaire with open-ended questions that represent the objectives of the study was completed by 50 respondents. Student teachers were asked to indicate relevant personal data such as gender, place of residence and type of high school graduated from. The questionnaire also contained items regarding how important the following factors were in respondents' decision to enrol for the teacher education programme: salaries of teachers, failure to gain admission, bursaries and the respect which teachers enjoy in the society.

Data Analysis

Hsieh and Shannon (2005: 127) define qualitative content analysis as:

... a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns.

Through identification of core consistencies and meaning (Patton 2002: 453), data was reduced in an attempt to make sense of participants' reasons of choosing teaching as a profession.

As regards data analysis, questionnaire responses were subjected to thematic analysis. From the questionnaires, five themes were identified as main reasons for choosing to become a teacher. These written responses were analysed by identifying common themes from the statement responses of the participants. A resulting list of themes was compiled as the set of main reasons for these pre-service teachers choosing teaching as a career. Each of the responses was then coded by one researcher according to the identified themes. Data was analysed using themes. Questionnaire responses were content analysed and coded and categorised into themes. The nine themes listed as main reasons in verbatim quotations were presented to support respondents' statements.

Ethical Considerations

Permission was sought from the School of Education. Permission was also sought from the informants through an informed consent. Respondents were informed that all procedures would be anonymous and confidential, and that their participation was voluntary. Students were made aware of the fact that they were free to terminate their participation in the study without any fear of being victimised.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Presentation is according to themes and categories that emerged from the analysed data

Themes: students' reasons were both positive and negative.

Positive reasons why student chose teaching as a career.

Participants indicated the benefits of being a teacher.

Negative Reasons

Students' teachers indicated some gaps in the teaching profession that may affect their long term service in the profession.

Five themes emerged from data analysed. Student teachers gave the following reasons for choosing teaching as a career:

Teaching is a Stable Job-civil Servant

Studies conducted revealed that more extrinsic motivations such as salary, job security and career status are important motivations for

choosing a career in teaching (Koran 2015: 73; Sadeghi 2014). This was supported by the following quotations:

The reason why I chose teaching as a career was that I wanted to work for my family and nothing else. It is hard out there when you don't work; I have experienced it for many years. It is painful to see your family suffering [Students No.8,10,13,25].

The majority of the students confirmed that teaching is a stable job. This was further supported by the following quotation:

Teaching is a guaranteed job, even though some years back teachers were confused sometimes retrenched or moved to another school, but now I can see teaching is back, and there is a need for teachers. I want a guaranteed job. I can see that I will not be stranded any longer [Students No. 8,12,18,40,43,50].

Social Environment

Ibrahim (2005) emphasised that quality of school teachers especially in the elementary level affects how children learn in the later stage of life. The role of the family relatives and friends play an important role in career choice. In this study some students indicated that they were inspired by friends, families and teachers.

Eight teachers commented as follows:

My mother's family, her two sisters are teachers and her cousin as well. So, whenever they visit mum, they speak about teaching young children. Whenever her sisters come for holidays too; one could have time for family [Students No.10,14,18, 21,26,33,42,46,47,50].

Other Comments

To be honest I became a teacher today because I envied my primary teacher. She was so kind and loving. I admired her all my life. [Students No. 24,48].

Student teachers pointed it differently indicating the importance of the previous teachers.

The comments below serve as evidence:

My teacher was everything to me, since my parents were staying in Pretoria working for us, I use to run for her and she would listen to me. I learned to love from my teacher and that is why I became a teacher today. I am practising love always [Students No. 15,18,23].

Another comments related to the above:

It is because of love for children, 'I love watching young children grow and learn to read and write' [Students No. 1,7].

At the same time literature supports what is said by the participants. Authors Philips and Hatch (1999); Synder et al. (1999) agree that there exists various factors for student teachers for choosing teaching as a career such as the opportunity to work with young people; the joy and satisfaction in witnessing a child's learning process and being able to make a difference to their student and to the society at large.

This has been confirmed by the student in the following quote below:

Yes, I chose teaching because it means caring for the children, and it makes me feel good and fulfilled. I get chance to help them and I am able to make a difference in their lives [Students No. 44].

Without any lie about it, I am a loving and caring person, so I am confident that I can be a good teacher for young children. Wherever am, children love me, so I can get on well with them in the classroom. [Students No. 12,30]

Teaching is a Well-respected Career: A Noble Profession

Bandura's self-efficacy theory relates to whether people believe they can be successful in their chosen careers and the number of career alternatives that they may select (Harms and Knobloch 2005; Vereza 2013). Bandura (1997) proposed that self-efficacy and people's beliefs in their own abilities to complete a specific task was a powerful drive influencing motivation to act, the effort spent in the performance and the persistence of coping with mechanisms for the difficulties. The following quote confirms this:

I love teaching because it is exciting and stimulating and I feel I do have the potential to can teach young children. Teaching is doing the right thing when no one is watching,eh. I am aware and I am confident that I can handle the children very well [Students No. 1, 29,41].

Teaching Will Enable Me to Contribute to Communities

Crosswell and Elliot (2004) as a 'passion' (positive emotional attachment); as an investment of time outside of contact hours with students; as a focus on the individual needs of

students; as a responsibility to impart knowledge, attitudes and values; as 'maintaining professional knowledge' and as engagement with the school community.

The participants stated that teaching makes teachers to get in touch with the communities and so one is able to contribute by helping children to develop and learn. This is supported by the following quotations:

I believe that teaching is a good way of making contribution to the communities and it brings me joy watching children growing and developing [Students No. 3,5,11].

Yes, I agree, I want to make a difference in the lives of children. When they come to school for the first time, they don't know how to read and write but as time goes on they start to read and write correctly and this makes me happy, teaching in the primary school is amazing [Students No. 13,18,19].

Love to learn-being a Teacher One is Always a Student

Participants indicated that teaching is a profession where a more knowledgeable person (a teacher) shares the knowledge with the children. Teachers are expected to allow discussions in classrooms. In the process, children become competent and are able to participate in their own learning. This was supported by the students who said:

I love teaching because I enjoy teaching and sharing knowledge and you can change people's lives. There are many changes, so I am always learning. Teaching is very rewarding because I am also a student and I enjoy learning new things almost daily. It's good to see children moving from one level to a higher level. In addition, to see smiling faces when they do it correctly. [Students No. 18,21,24]

According to MacBeth (2002) teaching is a profession that lies at the heart of both the learning of children and young people and their social, cultural and economic development. It is crucial to transmitting and implanting social values, such as democracy equality, tolerance cultural understanding, and respect for each person's fundamental freedoms (MacBeath 2002: 3).

Gaps

There were gaps that emerged from the questionnaire that need to be addressed. The students mentioned the following:

Teaching is a Stressful Career

In a Swedish study (Paulin 2006), it was reported that teachers were demonstrably unprepared for difficulties in understanding and handling problematic pupils, dealing with discipline, managing relationships and cooperation with colleagues and parents.

The above findings are consistent with the participants, who indicated the various roles they should play and as a result teaching becomes a stressful job. This is supported by the following quotation from the students:

In relation to teaching, I worry that the children are so ill disciplined even at primary school, so much that teaching has become a stressful job because of that. Seemingly teachers must be careful these days. In addition the salary is very low compared to other profession. I can stay but obviously will go for something much better, let me just have a taste of it. Above all I must pay the bursary otherwise the government will charge me for that, because I signed the contract [Students No. 9,14,17,28].

Another Comment

I agree with my colleague, but what I hate is a lot of paper work, being a teacher you become an administrator, writing about assessment. All these makes the day very long and stressful. Maybe the government must consider that we teach all four subjects, so the day becomes longer than those of higher classes where they have subject teaching [Students No. 48].

Another Comment

I start my day very early and leave the school late in the afternoon. You cannot help them without spending sometime after school, planning for the next day. The principal does not even see it is painful; you become emotionally stressed honestly. In addition even the government put pressure on us as foundation phase teachers. There are many changes that is happening in teaching, today is this, tomorrow is that, teaching is difficult [Students No. 28,35].

Literature study supports what has been mentioned by the participants. For instance, teachers, unlike most professionals, are burdened with excessive expectations from society at large, caught between high expectation and

low professional esteem (Punch and Tuetteman 1996).

The irony is that we in education are expected to develop in our young people attributes, skills and capacities that will enable them to prosper and succeed in the knowledge society desire and, at the same time, we are expected to counteract and mitigate, to an extent, the problems emerging from an increasingly globalised economy (Taylor and Runté 1995: 5).

The Income is Low Compared to Other Professions

A workload, salary, disruptive students and low status have been identified as four key reasons for leaving the profession (Kyriacou and Kunc 2007). Most participants in the study indicated that they will have to leave teaching because of the various reasons.

This is evident in the following quotation from the students:

I love teaching but there is one thing that makes me feels discouraged, with so many hours in the classroom, teaching children to read and write, but when it comes to salary, it is too low. I feel I went to school to get rich and not to work hard for low income. There is no money in teaching even if you work overtime, compared to other professions. It is hard work (ten female students) [Students No. 14,17,27, 36].

CONCLUSION

The reasons of student teachers for choosing teaching as a career were both positive and negative. Factors such as the knowledge which student teachers already possess when they come into teaching may play an inspirational role in their lives. It is thus important to determine empirically the reasons why student teachers join the teaching profession. This can inform the university and other stakeholders about measures that can be taken to ensure that teachers stay on in the profession. To build a competent teacher who can stay in the teaching career, the study explored reasons why students chose teaching as a career.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teacher training programmes need to be structured and designed carefully to can help

student teachers to achieve satisfactory levels of individual success and personal fulfilment on their journey to become competent teachers.

Student teachers must be equipped with self-management and coping skills during their training to enable them to cope with everyday occupational problems.

The DBE in consultation with teacher training institutions should jointly create conditions that will retain teachers in the profession.

LIMITATIONS

The findings may not be widely and directly generalized because of the following reasons:

1. This study which was carried out in one university, only first year students were selected for the study.
2. Not all universities which offered Bed Foundation phase programmes students had a chance of being included in the study. The sample was purposive and included only one programme from the school of education.

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