

High School Students' Attitudes towards the Teaching Profession

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ABSTRACT The purpose of the study is to determine the attitudes of the high school students/learners towards teaching career. A survey research design was utilised to collect data for the current study as it can be used to describe attitudes, beliefs, opinions and other types of information. Self-designed questionnaires the researchers used to collect quantitative data. Focus group interviews the researchers also conducted to gather qualitative data from the participants the main findings of the current study have to do with the salary factor, learners disrespecting teachers, violence at schools, the status of teaching and the stress that comes with work overload, added responsibilities that teachers face on daily basis at schools and the fact that teachers are discouraging students from taking teaching as a career.

INTRODUCTION

A cumbersome challenge that high school students grapple with is choosing a life career from the many available options such as medicine, engineering, accounting, law, pharmacy, journalism and teaching among others. It has emerged from literature that among the career preferences made by high school students, the teaching profession featured lowly (Halperi and Ratterree 2003; Austin 2008). Quite disturbingly high school students' general despondence towards the teaching profession has somewhat contributed to enormous teacher shortages in the schools (Halperin and Ratterree 2003). Halperin and Ratterree (2003) might not be unreasonably magnifying the teacher shortage problem by metaphorically referring to it as silent crisis swiftly stalking the whole world. That a large number of countries throughout the world are facing problems in recruiting an adequate supply of new teachers into the profession (McGraw 2001; Menter et al. 2002) is strong indication that teacher shortage is a serious looming problem.

According to McGraw (2001) and Menter et al. (2002), published UNESCO policy Research Note estimates that from 15 to 30 million additional primary school teachers will be needed by 2015, three million in Sub-Saharan Africa alone. These shortages are threatening the ambitious

goals to achieve Education for All (EFA) in all countries by 2015 (McGraw 2001; McGraw et al. 2002). There have been some attempts to explain students' negative attitudes towards the teaching profession. A report by Smith a leader of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) (in BBC News 1999) indicated that secondary school learners believe that teaching offers too much stress and too little pay. Unlike other professions such as medicine, law and engineering the teaching profession lacks status and glamour and these the researchers are implicated as the major deterrents for students not to choose the teaching as a profession (Austin 2008; Gough 1990; Kyriacou and Coulthard 2000; Summison 2000). As a result universities are failing to attract the best graduates and more as more high school students are shunning the teaching profession (Austin 2008).

Theoretical Frameworks

Literature has shown that high school students have preferences for some professions while shunning some. Krumboltz' (1983) Social theory argues that there are factors such as innate genetics, special abilities and environmental conditions that influence an individual's attitudes towards career. Also Gottfredson's (1981) developmental theory of occupational submits that individuals progressively eliminate what they perceive as unacceptable alternatives to create social space or a zone of unacceptable alternatives. The theory argues that individuals hold images of occupations often referred to as occupational stereotypes (Gottfredson 2003).

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METHODOLOGY

A survey research design was utilised to collect data for the current study as it can be used to describe attitudes, beliefs, opinions and other types of information (McMillan and Schumacher 2006). Self designed questionnaires the researchers used to collect quantitative data. Focus group interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data from the participants.

The following categories formed the population of the study:

- Data were collected from 142 students (71 males and 71 females) who the researchers selected from Thohoyandou Grade 12 learners (n=215) using a stratified random selection technique. Their ages ranged from 14 to 20 years with a mean age of 17 years.

Sample

142 students (71 males and 71 females) who the researchers selected from Thohoyandou Grade 12.

Data Gathering Instruments

A five-point Likert Scale was designed to explore high school learners' attitudes towards teaching profession as a career. The five-point Likert scale measures ranged from strongly disagree (0) through disagree (1), not sure (2) agree (3) to strongly agree (4). An interview schedule was constructed to collect qualitative data from the 142 participants. Each school had two focus group members (n=12). Focus group interviews were conducted to determine consistency of students' perceptions towards teaching profession as a career.

Data Collection

The data collected using the 5-point Likert Scale from the 142 participants were analyzed using the SPSS package version 21 using simple statistics such as percentages and frequencies while data from the focus group discussions the were transcribed with the help of an editor in the Media Studies Department. The focus group data were parceled into various themes.

RESULTS

The following results emerged from descriptive statistics calculations from the Likert type

scale responses and focus group discussions. Responses to the various statements regarding the attitudes of the high school students towards the teaching profession:

The results in Table 1 show that the majority (75.4%) of respondents would not choose teaching as a career after matriculation. Austin (2008) attests that more and more high school students are shunning the teaching profession because it lacks 'glamour'. These results support Du Plessis (2009) who states that the teaching profession in South Africa is not a popular choice with school leavers, although the South African government has made substantial bursaries available to students of Education. If the current high school/secondary school pupils say that teaching doesn't attract them as a career as it offers 'too much stress and too little pay'.

Table 1: Participants by preference for teaching

<i>Item</i>	<i>Response</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Teaching is my career of choice	Strongly agree	3	2.1
	Agree	10	7
	Not sure	22	15.5
	Disagree	60	42.3
	Strongly disagree	47	33.1
Total		142	100

The results in Table 2 show that the majority of the respondents (67%) do not regard teaching as a status profession. Herring (1998) and Gottfredson (1981) suggest that at this stage, which is often referred to as 'an identity crisis of adolescents', high school students tend to develop attitudes and perspectives about their roles as adults and they regard specific careers as imbued with different amount of status, and at this age status is an important issue. Also Hall and Langton (2006) point out that, although teachers are recognized as having been trained and highly skilled and are seen as being hugely

Table 2: Frequency distribution on respondents' views on the status of teaching

<i>Item</i>	<i>Response</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Teaching is a status profession	Strongly agree	10	7
	Agree	32	22.5
	Not sure	33	23.2
	Disagree	44	31
	Strongly disagree	23	16.2
Total		142	100

influential on society in the future, neither of these factors deliver status or result in them being famous or rich. As stated by Guss and Adams (1998), Farmer (1995) and McDonald and Jessell (1992) young students often rely on stereotypical views of specific careers, and in this case their stereotypical view is that status of teaching is no longer high.

The results in Table 3 reflect that the majority, 78 percent of respondents felt that teaching does not offer good salary. These results support the findings of Kubberud et al. (1999), who noted that indeed the salary of teachers is low and renders the profession unattractive to high school students. Armstrong (2009) suggest that the most obvious reason that teachers leave the profession is that teacher salaries lag far behind those of many other professions.

Table 3: Frequency distribution on respondents' views on the attractiveness of teacher's salary

Item	Response	Frequency	Percent
Teaching offers attractive salary.	Strongly agree	5	3.5
	Agree	22	15.5
	Not sure	37	26.1
	Disagree	50	35.2
	Strongly disagree	28	19.7
Total		142	100

Table 4 shows that the majority of the participants (n=124) regard the teaching profession as stressful. These results support Butcher and Lewis' (2002) findings that the Year 12 students regarded teaching as stressful and that teachers cannot handle it.

Table 4: Frequency distribution on whether the respondents feel that teaching is stressful

Item	Response	Frequency	Percent
Teaching is a very stressful profession	Strongly agree	73	51.4
	Agree	51	35.9
	Not sure	5	3.5
	Disagree	6	4.2
	Strongly disagree	9	6.3
Total		142	100

Table 5 shows that the majority of respondents, 51.4 percent think that there is overworkload in teaching. These results support the opinions of Chisholms et al. (2005) and McCormarck (2004) both of whom state that teachers are overworked. These findings suggest that, if high

school students perceive or see teaching as imposing a work overload, then considerable attention should also be given to these aspects so as to address the attitudes of the high school students towards the teaching profession.

Table 5: Frequency distribution on whether the respondents think that there is work overload in teaching

Item	Response	Frequency	Percent
There is over work-load in the teaching profession	Strongly agree	34	23.9
	Agree	47	33.1
	Not sure	21	14.8
	Disagree	26	18.3
	Strongly disagree	14	9.9
Total		142	100

Table 6 shows that the majority, 62.7 percent, of respondents thought that violence at school is indeed making the teaching environment unsafe. This suggests that high school students feel that it is not safe to be teachers, as they may be exposed to violence. The Department of Education (DoE 2005) notes that schools in both rural and urban areas are experiencing violence on a daily basis. Security in school is an issue in all urban centres, particularly in neighbourhoods where most of the school is exposed to conditions that would foster violence, poverty, prostitution, drugs and delinquency. Some examples of violent incidents are the murder of the principal of one of the high schools in The researchersstern Cape on Monday 24, August 2009 (www.eneews.co.za); the killing of a pupil at the Nic Diederichs Technical High School 2008 (www.News24.com); the stabbing to death of a grade 12 learner at Jack Lavhengwa Sec.School in Limpopo Province 2009 (Tshikhudo 2009; Matlala 2009); the stabbing to death of a learner at Roodepark High School (Ngobese 2008); the stabbing of another pupil in the back with a knife at Woodlands Secondary School in North dale

Table 6: Frequency distribution on whether school is making the teaching environment unsafe

Item	Response	Frequency	Percent
The teaching profession offers a safe working environment	Strongly agree	43	30.3
	Agree	46	32.4
	Not sure	18	12.7
	Disagree	21	14.8
	Strongly disagree	14	9.9
Total		142	100

area (SAPA 2009)¹. The results of the current study, together with the reported incidents of violence suggest that the teaching environment nowadays is indeed unsafe and not one to consider as a career or a profession.

Table 7: The four year training duration is long.

Item	Response	Frequency	Percent
A four-year duration of teachers' training is too long.	Strongly agree	32	22.5
	Agree	37	26.1
	Not sure	13	9.2
	Disagree	38	26.8
	Strongly disagree	22	15.5
Total		142	100

Table 7 shows that 48.6 percent of the respondents indicated that the four (4) years of study are too long. On the same note Park (2006) states that one thing that deters students from taking teaching as a career or a profession is that they feel that the four (4) years of study to become a teacher is too long. On the other hand, 42.3 percent of the respondents disagree with that view, which may suggest that not all the respondents are deterred from following a career in teaching by four years of teacher training, and that the duration of teacher training has no influence in their attitude towards the profession. Braslavsky (2003) has this to say with regard to teacher training duration: One reason why people are reluctant to enter into the teaching profession today in a world where working opportunities seem to be in decline could be that the relationship the number of years of study and the actual salary of a teacher is not attractive compared to other professional options.

Table 8 shows that the substantial percentage, 52.1 percent, of the respondents felt that, even if bursaries are made available, they wouldn't choose teaching, yet the Honorable MEC of Education, Limpopo Province, Dickson Masemola in his Budget speech said:

Table 8: Frequency distribution on whether the respondents would follow a career in teaching if bursaries the researchersre available

Item	Response	Frequency	Percent
Bursaries make teaching career attractive	Agree	27	19
	Not sure	20	14.1
	Disagree	52	36.6
	Strongly disagree	22	20.3
	Total	142	100

While 500 students were targeted by the Department of Education Limpopo in 2008, very few students were attracted to take up bursaries to become teachers, thus only 165 were recruited (Masemola 2009: 6).

Data Collected Through Focus Group Discussion

Focus group interviews involve carefully screened individuals gathered together to respond to questions about a product or service or anything which is under investigation (Ciliberti and Associates 2005). The data collected from the focus group interview were analyzed under the following themes:

Career Aspirations

Most of the high school students indicated that they want to go into film and media production, chartered accountancy, mining engineering, analytical chemistry, medicine, mining survey, social work, aircraft piloting, financial management. None of the students mentioned teaching high school students' as their career.

The responses from students were "No". When asked why they don't consider teaching as their career, their responses were: "I can't take all the responsibilities they have in their working environment"; "teachers nowadays are not being paid what they are worth and they suffer humiliation and abuse from students but yet they earn peanuts, which is not fair"; "It is such a difficult job and I just cannot do it". One interesting response was that some of the teachers are in teaching because they had problems with their first choices of study due to financial constraints.

Attitudes towards the Teaching Profession

When the students were asked to mention factors that contribute to their attitudes towards the teaching profession, they indicated the following: uncomfortable work place, the behavior of students/learners, like learners not respecting the teachers (teachers are being insulted and some are being beaten, so generally violence at schools), the salary package (low wages) that doesn't correlate with the workload, they are being paid "peanuts" and have no subsidy. One of the students indicated that the working con-

ditions were poor in the teaching profession. Lack of resources was also mentioned as one of the factors making teaching a difficult profession. These perceptions were also shared by Dolton and Chung (2004), Hanushek and Rivkin (2007) and Armstrong (2009), who all noted poor working conditions, lack of resources such as adequate facilities, textbooks, teaching materials and relatively low wages as some of the factors worth noting as influencing the attitudes of high school students towards the teaching profession.

Government Efforts towards Making Teaching an Envable Career

Some of the students indicated that the government was doing enough to promote teaching as nowadays there are bursaries for students who want to pursue a career in teaching. Others indicated that the government should increase the salaries of teachers and promote the good behaviour of learners so that the school premises may be a good working environment safe for the teachers.

Duration of Training

Some of the students indicated that four years is too long to study to be a teacher, especially when, after completion, the package is poor, that is "the salary is too low for that kind of duration". The results here also support Braslavsky (2003)'s findings which indicate that the reason why people are reluctant to enter the teaching profession could be that the relationship of the number of years of study and the actual salary of a teacher is not attractive compared to other professional options.

DISCUSSION

Findings Based on the Questionnaires Completed by the High School Students (Quantitative Data)

Factors that were highlighted in the literature review as being the ones that are influential on the attitudes of high school towards the teaching profession also indicated as having effect. The most significant factors or variables that high school students perceive teaching as a noble profession and that the status of teach-

ing is no longer high. These are major findings from empirical data. High school students also indicated that the salary of teachers is relatively low, thus teachers are being paid "peanuts".

Other factors worth noting are that high school students felt that teachers are not respected by students, teaching is stressful, the work overload, added responsibilities in teaching, violence at schools and most notably the fact that teachers are not encouraging students to take up teaching as a career. The high school students also stated that they do not like the teaching profession as they do not like the work the teachers do. Another aspect noted by the high school students was that they are not necessarily influenced by their friends when choosing a career as suggested in the literature review, but the students themselves and their parents do have some influence in their career decision making. It is also important to note that beside all the above mentioned findings, the high school students indicated though that teaching is not "boring" but "stressful". Furthermore, the findings suggest that students feel that there are enough holiday's opportunities and opportunities for promotion in the teaching profession.

Findings Based on Interviews with the Focus Group (Qualitative Data)

None of the high school students indicated that he/she is going to study to become teachers or to say the least, ever considered teaching as a career. In most cases their decisions with regard to choosing a career was found to be influenced by family members, that is parents, siblings and in some other cases their teachers who are either not talking highly of teaching or are discouraging students from taking teaching as a career. With regard to factors that are contributing to their attitudes towards the teaching profession, the low or unattractive salary issue again came to the fore. This is the factor that students often refer teaching as just banal. Uncomforting work place environments, lack of students' respect towards teachers, the work overload issue, violence at schools, and an added responsibility some of the factors bemoaned by students and are worth noting if the high school students' attitudes towards the teaching profession are to be addressed efficiently. It is also interesting to note that the government was and

still seen as promoting teaching as a profession though the findings show that it is not enough. Another aspect worth noting is that of teacher training duration which is said to be too long when compared to what the graduates earn after completion of the study.

CONCLUSION

The majority of students who are in grade 11 and 12 do not intend to follow the teaching profession after Grade 12. To students, teaching is a low status job and is no longer a noble profession as the salary is low. Other aspects worth noting from both quantitative and qualitative results is that the high school students see the teaching environment nowadays as unsafe to work in. The results also show that students feel that teachers are being disrespected by students and that there is a lot of violence at the schools. Furthermore students see teaching as stressful as teachers are overloaded with lots of work and added responsibilities. Another aspect worth noting is the fact that students indicated that teachers themselves are discouraging the high school students from following a career in teaching.

Drawing from the results of empirical data, the researchers conclude that the main findings of the current study have to do with the salary factor, learners disrespecting teachers, violence at schools, the status of teaching and the stress that comes with work overload, added responsibilities that teachers face on daily basis at schools and the fact that teachers are discouraging students from taking teaching as a career. All these factors and others that may not necessarily be identified are notably the ones that are influencing the attitudes of the high school students to an extent that they (students) no longer see teaching as a noble profession.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the recommendations:

- ♦ Improvement of remunerations of teachers in line with other professions like law, medicine.
- ♦ Establishment and reinforcement of security structures so as to make the environment safer.
- ♦ Effective measures to address learners' disrespect towards teachers and discipline since corporal punishment had been abolished. Teachers need to be afforded respect so as to maintain discipline and good image of the profession.
- ♦ Increase the availability of loan and bursary schemes or programs as they could also be used as a yardstick through which more students can be recruited to the teaching profession.
- ♦ The media should portray teaching as a noble and ideal profession and must refrain from negative reporting which is always termed "teacher bashing" by teacher organizations or unions.
- ♦ Job security for teachers should be improved as teaching is a career which requires time to develop skills in a risk taking environment and is difficult and demanding enough without the added concern of job security.

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