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WHAT MOTIVATES PEOPLE TO BECOME TEACHERS

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Introduction

There is no shortage of attempts to explain why people want to be teachers, and many of these attempts are used to frame this paper. Most of the research cited comes from the United States, some comes from Australia, and a few references are made to research from other countries. What attracts people to teaching has been a popular research theme for several decades, and it has been simultaneously quite popular in many countries. In Israel, for example, 2% of all educational research done between 1974 and 1985 related to “teachers’ education, attitudes and behaviours” (Peritz, 1989:62). Prominent among the questions were why people wanted to be teachers in the first place, and what motivated them to make the choice. From almost all the studies, something loosely called “altruism” provided the most compelling answer to the question of why the choice was made. Joseph and Green’s (1986:31) study offers the conclusion: “indeed, there may be few reasons for considering the teaching profession except the altruistic motive.”

Associate Literature

Joseph and Green’s (1986) review of the literature suggests eight themes, or reasons, for entering teaching. Five reasons parallel themes constructed from Lortie’s (1975) regularly cited research. These are: working with people, or young people; the desire for creativity. Second, is the ability to influence others, and the others include parents, spouses and other teachers, not just pupils. Third, are the psychological motivations focussed on the needs and desires for authority, “children’s love, to entertain people and to be in a field that is not competitive” (Joseph and Green, 1986:29).

Other researchers have identified several more motives. Thirty years ago, Haubrich (1961:382) noted that job security, or the mattress factor, “something to fall back on”, was a major motive for choosing teaching as a career, and he reasoned that this may be “an entirely tenable rationale for some individuals who see little economic or social security in today’s world.” This view may be equally applicable today, due to the wide-scale decline in the availability of professional work. An interesting contrast is provided by the Book, Freeman and Brousseau (1985:29) survey which showed 28% of responses to the question, “...why you have not yet considered teaching as a career” dealt with inadequate teachers’ salaries. The negative manner in which the question was framed could have had an adverse effect on the answers, and, of course, the question was asked of those who had already decided not to be teachers.

The impact of “others” persists as an important factor. Daniel and Ferrell (1991:1) feel that the influence of students’ parents has decreased as a motivational force in career decision-making, and it has been supplanted by the “influence of students’ former teachers”. Lortie (1986:152) agrees that “teachers have played a significant role in recruiting new people to the profession.” Book and Freeman (1986:49) cite figures to support this view, and they note that a higher percentage of secondary candidates (32%) than elementary teacher candidates (21%) claimed former teachers as being particularly influential in their decisions to become teachers. Roberson, Keith and Page (1983:13) also conclude that former teachers were the “most influential factor” in the career choices of education students.

Of course, altruism still seems to rank high among the attractions to teaching, but there are others which are hard to classify. Jantzen (1981:47) found that “advancement, obligation to society because of a need for teachers, retirement provisions, and tenure...” had become less important over time. Daniel and Ferrell (1991:10) believe “aspects of personal enrichment afforded by teaching” are on the ascendency as motivational factors. In a similar vein, Roberson, Keith and Page (1983:13) conclude that teacher aspirants are influenced by a desire to work with friendly people, and “...are not especially concerned with ‘success’.” In the Roberson et al. study, job satisfaction was ranked higher than both salary and job security.

There has been a “definite shift in perspective” from “negative images and comments about the teaching profession” according to Bonnetempo and Digman (1988:28) while students recognize that the teaching profession needs improvements, they are more hopeful that the images and realities of teaching are changing for the better. This is not the view of Sykes (1983:88-89) who contends that “the best and brightest among college educated blacks and women have turned to more lucrative and prestigious careers than teaching — careers that were denied them until recently.” These opinions are drawn from optimism. This may be because the essays were associated with an application to be a student teacher the following year. Variables such as gender, ethnicity and educational achievement as measured by grade point average, although available to the researchers, were not used to structure the gathering of data, and the data collected for this study were not used in any way to establish the academic quality of the applicants.

A number of the concerns about the motivation for a teaching career can be linked to teacher shortages. Times of anticipated teacher shortages are “most notably linked to proliferation of research on career motivation” (Daniel and Ferrell, 1991:5). These shortages are identified with the 1950s and 1960s, “years characterised by increased teacher shortages following the post WW2 baby boom and...a phenomenon which is still of concern” (Jantzen, 1981; Roberson et al. 1983.) The fashionable aspects of such research now are probably nowhere near what they were then. Teacher gluts have not tended to encourage career choice research. Consequently, this current study of initial teacher motivation seeks some of its justification in the dearth of studies during times of oversupply. Most motivation studies are removed from the question of employment availability.

Among the positive features to emerge as a result of these motivational studies, according to Knight, Duke and Falicc (1988:28), is the laying to rest of some “myths and stereotypes about prospective teachers”. These include such notions as “future teachers are drawn from the least capable students that attend colleges and universities”. It does depend on how the calculations take place, as well as on what factors one wishes to highlight. These trends have prevail on most Australian campuses. Bonnetempo and Digman, (1985:1) refer to surveys in the United States which indicate that “education majors tend to be at the bottom rung of the achievement ladder”, while Anderson (1987:48) is more charitable about Australian teacher trainees. He claims that in spite of more demands being placed on tertiary institutions for admission, “teacher trainees remain of average scholastic attainment and of average social background”.

Although the data from the study reported here show no appreciable difference in motivation between males and females, this has not been the case with all studies of motivation to be teachers. Joseph and Green (1986:30) found agreement between men and women on the most significant reasons for entering teaching. However, teaching as a career “still has a higher status for women than for men.” Brookhart and Freeman (1992:41) found from their review of 44 studies of entering teacher the following year. Variables such as gender, ethnicity and educational achievement as measured by grade point average, although available to the researchers, were not used to establish the academic quality of the applicants.

Among the Australian studies of teaching, the one from Queensland is a very extensive study which used 1787 Tasmanian students from years 9-12. They found from this sample population that the human relations aspects of teaching are paramount in intending students’ thinking (Abbott-Chapman et al., 1991:112). This concurs with findings from most countries where similar research has taken place. Another study, from the Queensland Board of Teacher Education (1987:63), has speculated on several attractions to the teaching profession. They believe the public image may be a determinant, along with the fact that, until recently, the preservice teacher education courses provided only a diploma, while entry to most other professions is by the attainment of a degree. Several studies from non-English speaking countries provide perspectives about gender and being a teacher. In Sweden, “women are concentrated in shorter educational programs within the care and educational sectors” and make up 80% of the total education student body (Elgqvist-Saltzman, 1992:45). In Poland, there appears to be a “strong tendency for women to be concentrated in certain subject areas, notably humanities, education and economics.” In the United States, women “reflect the world’s situation in that education institutions, women represent 74% of students (Watson, 1992:132). These are insignificant instances from which to generalise, however, it is clear that gender does not function the same way, universally, as a structuring element.
The socialisation of men and women into some careers over others is an important issue, but too large to be explored here, especially since our data give us no encouragement for such an exploration. We are specifically interested in why this particular group of student teachers chose to be teachers.

Context of the Study

Within the Graduate School of Education, at The University of Queensland, is a preservice secondary school teacher qualification called the Postgraduate Diploma in Education. In these times of teacher oversupply in most secondary school subjects, people wishing to become secondary teachers are drawn to the Diploma because it carries the status of The University of Queensland, but also because Diploma students from recent years have had a higher percentage of success with obtaining teaching positions than any other teacher training institution in Queensland. Accurate figures are difficult to provide, but informed estimates put the success rate from last year (1992) at about 75%.

The data used for this study are essays written by 399 of the approximately 800 applicants to be part of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education class of 1993, of whom 199 were ultimately successful, 111 rejected the offer of a place and 89 had their application rejected. The task was unstructured, and the instruction required the applicants to make a handwritten statement about reasons for wanting to become a teacher in secondary schools and, personal qualities and experiences that would help me become a teacher.

Methods

The themes were initially extracted by the application of principal component analysis (PCA) to the relative frequencies of “stems” (ie, collections of reasonably synonymous words). Note that this highly quantitative process is meant to complement the informed scanning of the text, and is not intended as a substitute for examining the richness of expression in the original texts. PCA provides a means of mapping recurrent groups of stems into classes of original transcript (approx 400 pages), and having done so, plays no further part in the qualitative process of identification of themes.

Establishment of Stems

The 399 transcripts provided 58,885 words, with 4,491 of them being distinct (eg, the stem “school” occurs 389 times in the transcripts; the first transcript in the data base contains “me” 6 times in a total of 268 appearances of the stems, giving a relative frequency of 6/389 = 0.022. A PCA analysis is then applied to these relative frequencies. This quantitative process was carried out using macros written for SAS statistical software. The macros draw heavily on the manipulation facilities in the SAS data step and a number of SAS procedures, principally FREQ and PRINCOMP (SAS, 1985, 1986a, 1986b, 1988c).

Table 1 presents some features of the process for three of the eight themes pursued in this paper and the results of the PCA. The qualitative description of the themes is derived in the next section. The software assigns a representative name to the stem and they appear in the first columns of Table 1; these names do not necessarily correspond to a known word in the English language and will often appear as a truncated version of one of the words making up the stem. The second column lists the frequency of occurrence of the stem in the transcripts of the 399 applicants (eg, the stem “school” - or the words making up that stem appears in Theme 2 and occurs 850 times in all). The loadings in the third column of Table 1 can be interpreted as the raw Pearson correlation between the stem and the theme. Interpretable loadings are set to lower absolute values than in quantitative work using accepted, focussed measurement scales because of the exploratory nature of the task in hand and the diffuse nature of the raw material (ie, the statements in the transcripts). Also, with 369 stems under consideration, the average variance accounted for by a theme is just 0.27%, hence a theme accounting for more than 2.7% of the variance takes up more than ten times the average. Based on this arbitrary numerical criterion of a theme explaining more than 2.7% of the variance, plus the substantive criterion of identifiability of the theme, eight themes were chosen for further analysis. The signs of the loadings are arbitrary and only their magnitude is of importance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stem</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Loading</th>
<th>Words making up the stem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>me</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assist</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>assist, assistance, assistantship, assisted, assisting, help, helped, helpful, helping, helps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>langua</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>language, language-related, languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qualit</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>qualities, quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lives</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>life, lifes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>patient</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>-0.42</td>
<td>patience, patient, patiently, patients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>austra</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>Australia, Australian, Australians, Australia's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>groups</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>group, groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dealin</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>deal, dealing, dealings, deals, dealt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>passed</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>pass, passed, passes, passing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>new</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theme 1. Patience is an important quality helping teachers deal with groups of young Australians. 
The principal components were regressed on possible explanatory variables to see if any discriminatory power could be attributed to them (these variables are: (i) source - accepted the offer of a place, rejected the offer of a place, not offered a place; (ii) gender; (iii) age). There were no statistically significant relationships between any of these variables and the principal components, justifying the use of the results for all 399 applicants, rather than the 199 who accepted the offer of a place.

**Themes From Intending Teachers**

From the analyses of the candidates' scripts, eight principal components were extracted that corresponded to meaningful themes. These themes recur in the writing of many students. The themes were constructed by scanning instances among the scripts where key stems were prominent. A few words were added to make some of the themes more comprehensible.

The themes are presented according to the amount of variance accounted for by each in the statements as a whole. For example, theme one accounted for more of the variance in the text than theme two, and so on. We list the eight themes and examples of them taken from the scripts. The percentage variance explained by the theme is also given.

### Theme 1. (3.5%) Patience is an important quality helping teachers deal with groups of young Australians.

I have a caring, patient and friendly nature, qualities which have helped me in the past, and would enable me to relate to fellow teachers and students in the future.

### Theme 2. (3.5%) The quality of my own enjoyment of schooling and Teaching has led me to turn to teaching as a vocation.

... I have a caring, patient and friendly nature, qualities which have helped me in the past, and would enable me to relate to fellow teachers and students in the future.

### Theme 3. Imparting love of Teaching as a vocation.

Large absolute values of the principal components (eg, the extreme 5% from each tail of their distributions) provide maps of occurrences of stems back into the original transcripts, allowing a proper qualitative discussion of the themes being raised by the applicants.

**Stem** | **n** | **Loading** | **Words making up the stem**
---|---|---|---
myself | 1281 | .26 | my, myself
school | 850 | -.30 | school, schooling, schools, schoolwork, secondary, secondary-school
year-old | 384 | -.36 | year, year-old, years
enjoy | 269 | -.34 | enjoy, enjoyable, enjoyed, enjoying, enjoyment
quality | 134 | .32 | qualities, quality
establish | 123 | -.31 | establish, established, establishment, find, finding, found
patience | 110 | .29 | patience, patient, patiently, patients
Australia | 98 | .37 | Australia, Australian, Australians, Australia's
course | 84 | .40 | course, courses, coursework
better | 53 | .28 | best, better, betterment
new | 41 | .33 | new

**Stem** | **n** | **Loading** | **Words making up the stem**
---|---|---|---
impart | 1497 | -.35 | impart, imparted, imparting, instruct, instructed, instructing, instruction, instructional, instructor, instructors, taught, teach, teaching, tuition, tutor, tuition, tutorage, tutored, tutorial, tutorials, tutoring
employ | 570 | -.33 | employable, employed, employee, employers, employing, employment, job, jobs, occupation, occupational, occupations, profession, professional, professionally, professionals, profession, vocational, vocationally, work, worked, worker, workers, workforce, working, work, workable, workplace, workplaces
oldest | 370 | .48 | age, aged, ages, old, older, oldest, olds, young, younger, youngest, youngster, youth, youths
tertiary | 162 | -.27 | tertiary, uni, universitas, university, university’s, uq
good | 132 | -.26 | good
keenly | 99 | -.29 | keen, keenly, love, lover, loves, loving
groups | 68 | .32 | group, groups
complete | 64 | .27 | complete, completed, completely, completing, completion
artist | 33 | .29 | art, artistic, arts

**Stem** | **n** | **Loading** | **Words making up the stem**
---|---|---|---
myself | 1281 | .26 | my, myself
school | 850 | -.30 | school, schooling, schools, schoolwork, secondary, secondary-school
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enjoy | 269 | -.34 | enjoy, enjoyable, enjoyed, enjoying, enjoyment
quality | 134 | .32 | qualities, quality
establish | 123 | -.31 | establish, established, establishment, find, finding, found
patience | 110 | .29 | patience, patient, patiently, patients
Australia | 98 | .37 | Australia, Australian, Australians, Australia's
course | 84 | .40 | course, courses, coursework
better | 53 | .28 | best, better, betterment
new | 41 | .33 | new

**Stem** | **n** | **Loading** | **Words making up the stem**
---|---|---|---
impart | 1497 | -.35 | impart, imparted, imparting, instruct, instructed, instructing, instruction, instructional, instructor, instructors, taught, teach, teaching, tuition, tutor, tuition, tutorage, tutored, tutorial, tutorials, tutoring
employ | 570 | -.33 | employable, employed, employee, employers, employing, employment, job, jobs, occupation, occupational, occupations, profession, professional, professionally, professionals, profession, vocational, vocationally, work, worked, worker, workers, workforce, working, work, workable, workplace, workplaces
oldest | 370 | .48 | age, aged, ages, old, older, oldest, olds, young, younger, youngest, youngster, youth, youths
tertiary | 162 | -.27 | tertiary, uni, universitas, university, university’s, uq
good | 132 | -.26 | good
keenly | 99 | -.29 | keen, keenly, love, lover, loves, loving
groups | 68 | .32 | group, groups
complete | 64 | .27 | complete, completed, completely, completing, completion
artist | 33 | .29 | art, artistic, arts

I enjoy the subject of mathematics and I would like to impart some of my knowledge and skills to students.

**Theme 4. (3.3%) (My) keenness to share knowledge.**

I believe that my desire to impart my knowledge onto others along with my long term desire to help people in some way, will ensure my success as a teacher.

I wish to teach because of my love of knowledge and the joy I have at being able to share the knowledge and learning I have with others.

I have always enjoyed learning and speaking another language. I would therefore like to bring my own enthusiasm into the classroom along with my experiences.

### Theme 5. (3.2%) (My) anticipated successful completion of the Diploma.

I have for some years, since year 12 (1982), almost ten years ago, wanted to teach.

All my life I have aspired to become a teacher. Since studying at university I have come to realise the full value of my high school years. I enjoyed the close student relationships I enjoyed there. I hope to become a teacher such as them.

Although I postponed higher education and went on to gain different types of learning experiences, a desire for education for its own sake never left. I have now almost realised this desire, and I feel I have gained a measure of wisdom and have experienced many facets of learning which could be channelled to young adults in a mutually creative way.

### Theme 6. (3.2%) (My) general interest in knowing and sharing language and culture.

I would like to utilise my university qualifications, life experiences and love of the English language.

I have chosen to study foreign languages in order to help equip our future Australians with skills to cope in a multi-cultural and ever changing society.

Japanese is the language of the future in Australia's economic plan and it is essential that secondary students develop an ability and
understanding of the Japanese language and culture.

Theme 7. (3.2%) My hopes of success in the Diploma (program) as a key to career opportunities.

I believe it (teaching) to be a prominent career and a profession of integrity and responsibility. I feel that the teaching profession will allow me to combine my enthusiasm and creativity sufficiently to make for a rewarding job experience.

A career in education, from my perspective, represents a personally rewarding occupation that is more worthwhile and challenging than any of my previous positions.

Theme 8. (2.9%) Developing (personal) fascination with imparting knowledge.

I commenced my university degree studying Arts and Law and achieved well academically, but subsequent work experience in the area left me disillusioned until I made the decision to become a teacher.

I have been employed as both a tertiary administrator and accountant over the past 7 years, and while I believe I have carried out these roles effectively, I have not achieved a sufficient degree of job satisfaction.

The pupils in my classes came from extremely diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Many of them had only recently moved from Berlin from Eastern Block countries and I had the challenging task of teaching them both English and German. I discovered during that year that teaching involves much more than conveying a subject matter to a classroom of children, and I learnt that to teach effectively it is of tantamount importance to understand the specific needs of each individual.

Commentary Within and Beyond the Themes

Because the research technique relies on relative frequency of occurrences, some comments which are important to just a few candidates are not reflected in the themes. Some of these comments relate to classroom discipline, for example, "I am not a strict disciplinarian, preferring to approach students as equals, and not subordinates". Concerns about discipline may become more widespread once the applicants are in the program.

Beyond the Themes

Some of the comments that were infrequently expressed are important to just a few candidates are not evident across men and women applicants. Again, this may be a product of the restricted perspective. The work of family members may become familiar to some members may become familiar to some children, and high school students may have part-time jobs, but ultimately teaching is the vocation they can observe in any detail.

Conclusions

Even in these days of reduced professional options, people will continue to seek work which is personally fulfilling, safe, and adequately paid in the eyes of applicants.Few jobs offer these qualities more than teaching. This may account for why teaching is the most popular profession in Australia, and these attractive qualities may allow teacher training institutions to recruit the very best candidates more than ever before.

There is a point beyond which efficiency and effectiveness in the selection process become antithetical to the qualities sought in future teachers. Impersonal criteria such as grade averages, and appropriate academic study can be used dispassionately, but once these are met, the subsequent choices become more difficult. Using a selection procedure based on essays such as those used in this research has the potential to assist with the "first sort" of the applicants. That is, it can be used to help determine more about the applicant than academic background and language proficiency. An immediate qualification must be used dispassionately, but once these are met, the subsequent choices become more difficult. Using a selection procedure based on essays such as those used in this research has the potential to assist with the "first sort" of the applicants. That is, it can be used to help determine more about the applicant than academic background and language proficiency. An immediate qualification must be attached to the use of essays to select teacher candidates. It is that the essays may only be useful as part of an ensemble of devices. For example, the essays may locate completely unacceptable attitudes among some applicants regarding discipline in the classroom. The essay has value in this instance because it allows those who make the selections to be made aware of a potential problem.

Locating potential problems is a negative justification for the use of essays in the screening of preservice teacher trainees. There are at least two quite positive justifications for the use of such a
procedure as requiring an essay as part of an application.

The first justification has to do with identifying the aspirations of the candidates. In the case of the sample used in this study, the themes which have motivated their choice to be teachers are known to some of those who actually frame the course they will study. It is always useful when constructing a curriculum for a teacher education course to know what it is that has brought the students there in the first place.

The second justification is quite complementary to the first, but the emphasis is on what the teacher educators want in concert with the wants of the students. Stated more succinctly, the use of essays as part of the selection process would allow those associated with teacher education the opportunity to try to match their preferred motives among potential teachers with those actually expressed by the applicants.

The case for the use of essays in both selection procedures and teacher education curriculum deserves more consideration. They cannot be allowed too great a role, but their utility should not be ignored either. Clearly, this is an instance where more research is warranted.

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