

# the retention of teachers in training

A STUDY OF THE INCIDENCE OF DROP-OUT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE TEACHING PROFESSION

H. HOLMES

## Background

The shortage of teachers, especially in certain "more difficult" subjects has bedevilled English-medium education in South Africa for many years. The shortage of English-speaking teachers continues. In the Transvaal, according to the Director of Education, English-speaking teachers number only about 20 per cent of the teaching staff; in proportion to the English-speaking population of the province and to the children in the schools, this figure should be 30 per cent. Bodies such as the English Academy are concerned about the position and have set up a standing committee to study teacher training and one of the first aspects this committee will investigate is the shortage of English-speaking teachers. In the Transvaal (and this article is chiefly concerned with the position in the northern province), strong pressure is being brought to bear on the provincial authorities to establish an English-medium university and a college of education in Pretoria. The arguments for and against the proposal are cogent, and would be worthy of an objective investigation.

In spite of statements to the contrary by provincial authorities, who say, probably correctly, that all posts are filled, headmasters and to a certain extent, headmistresses of schools would say the statement is not completely true. "Filling posts" is not the whole answer to the staffing problem.

With a certain amount of smugness, certain Afrikaans-speaking people, politicians, educationists, and others, try to place the blame on the English-speaking community. This may have been true in the past, but is not true today, though even today, when many more women are attracted to the profession, men continue to be in short supply because the rewards outside the profession are infinitely greater than they are within it. In a society like ours, there is very little opportunity for the cultivation of that most tender plant, idealism.

In the Transvaal, enrolments at the Johannesburg College of Education have risen consistently in recent years, in spite of the physical conditions under which the College works. These conditions are being corrected at a snail's pace. It is not possible to assess what effect the physical conditions of work and play may have on recruitment. Let us start with the fact that enrolments have been reasonably satisfactory and that a certain amount of selection has been possible; in the past, selection has been fairly cursory for obvious reasons. But the shortage of English-speaking teachers has remained, especially of high school teachers and men. When graduation day comes round, it is evident that a great many students have fallen by the way, both at college and the university. The question of drop-out is, therefore, of prime concern to the teacher trainer. Hence this limited study.

## Teacher Training prior to 1967

Some explanation of the system of teacher training in the Transvaal before the Education Act of 1967 may be necessary as the arrangement between the Johannesburg College of Education and the University of the Witwatersrand was unique in South Africa. The university did not engage in teacher training as did the other universities of the country. Primary school training was offered at the college in certain specialisations in a full-time four year course. The university prepared student-teachers for degrees in arts, science, commerce, etc., but did not offer a post-graduate course for a teachers' diploma. This was provided by the college, and this also meant that students who had completed degrees independent of the college and later wished to teach took the Teachers' Higher Diploma at the college of education. The system worked, on the whole, very well, with, however, the well-known complaints from some graduates that they hated moving in a non-academic world, and had no real interest in the **craft** of teaching.

## **The problem of drop-outs**

We must accept, that a fair slice of the teacher shortage originates in the drop-out. The drop-out is a feature of the upper classes of high schools, of colleges and universities. The falling out of many able young people from the academic scene must not be interpreted as a final loss of manpower; many drop-outs are successful in other careers, but they are a loss to teaching. It is perhaps worthwhile to examine why we lose young teachers-in-training, if we feel that they are worth retaining; if not, do not let us shed too many tears.

High schools must obviously be interested in the failure of those students whose original intention was to teach in high school to complete their training course. For those who are interested in this topic, an up-to-date and scholarly work is "Success, Failure and Wastage in Higher Education" by G. W. Miller (published by Harrap for the University of London Institute of Education, London, 1970). I have referred freely to this book (for this section) and have supplemented it by local information, mostly from the Johannesburg College of Education.

## **Higher education drop-out in Britain**

The problem is serious. Even in a country like Britain where the entry to university is by no means easy and, even with the expansion of universities, still highly selective, the failure or drop-out rate is high. Dr. Miller notes 14,3% for Arts, 17,8% for pure Science, and 22,4% for applied Science (page 16). The annual cost of this wastage has been put at £5 million (page 17). Pass rates in technical colleges in Britain are about 54%. Dr. Miller emphasises that even a pass rate of 90% produces "a grievous wastage, and a 66% pass rate over a three or four year course would reduce the number of students passing in minimum time, even if they did not drop out, to below 30% of original entry" (page 19). The cost per capita of successful students, i.e. graduates, is far too high.

In Australian universities the wastage rate has been stable at 30% to 40% over a period

of twenty years (page 20), although entry is also highly selective.

## **Higher Education drop-out in South Africa**

In 1965, the average first year failure rate for the white universities in South Africa was 35,6%, ranging from 24,6% at Free State to 45,8% at Cape Town. A Department of Higher Education official is reported to have commented: "It appears from the figures that over-crowding and lack of individual attention at the larger universities caused the higher failure rate there". This is the kind of naive observation that we should beware of. Reasons for failure and drop-out are not easily adduced.

## **Not merely a matter of high intelligence**

Schonell and others found it difficult to explain why 40% of above-average intelligence students were unable to make normal progress while 40% of below-average students were able to make normal progress; and 17,8% of the lowest range of IQ at university, 105-114, scarcely promising as university students, were able to finish their studies in minimum time (Miller, page 21). In the Medical School at the University of the Witwatersrand, it is of constant concern that so many students with first class matriculation passes (often including mathematics) fail the first year.

The wastage rate at the Johannesburg College of Education among university student-teachers is high although the overall pass rate in the first year is normally slightly higher than the overall university pass rate for the same group. Nevertheless, the teaching profession cannot afford to lose approximately 66% of its men and 50% of its women before they complete the diploma year.

## **JCE**

In the Johannesburg College of Education "graduate" group of 1971, there were 63 students, of whom only 42 had completed degrees. Of the 63, 43 had IQ ratings, either NSAGT or NIPR batteries. The IQ range was from 92 to 140. Of those students with IQ below 115 (sometimes stated as a minimum for university work), just over half had completed degrees, and half of these had com-

pleted their degrees in the minimum time of three years. Of the "brighter" group, just over three-quarters had completed degrees, but only two-fifths of these had completed them in the minimum time. On average the successful candidates had taken 3,6 years over a three-year degree. The unsuccessful candidates had already spent on an average 4,5 years over a similar degree.

This analysis is too limited to be of much statistical value, but it shows a pattern which is very common in the college concerned.

The following table shows the Johannesburg College of Education university passes over the past few years, and although "repeaters" as opposed to drop-outs are concealed in the table, and although incomplete degrees which may be completed sometime (often years) later are not included, the picture is depressing enough.

The table also shows drop-out during the year, the January figure being enrolment on 10th College day, and the December figure the enrolment on the last day of term.

TABLE 1:— UNIVERSITY STUDENTS  
Showing drop-out over 4 Years of Course

					First Year		Second Year		Third Year		Fourth Year (College)	
					Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
1963	January	...	...	...	100/113							
	December	...	...	...	92/104							
1964	January	...	...	...	119/127		69/82					
	December	...	...	...	114/118		64/79					
1965	January	...	...	...	110/ 97		88/95		58/74			
	December	...	...	...	97/ 87		82/95		56/72			
1966	January	...	...	...	81/118		81/74		75/93		28/50	
	December	...	...	...	77/114		79/74		75/92		26/49	
1967	January	...	...	...	76/125		68/83		73/78		47/66	
	December	...	...	...	71/123		66/81		73/78		47/66	
1968	January	...	...	...			50/99		74/73		36/64	
	December	...	...	...			52/95		72/74		31/64	
1969	January	...	...	...					54/96		35/53	
	December	...	...	...					53/91		35/53	
1970	January	...	...	...							35/72	
	December	...	...	...							32/65	

**N.B.:** The marked drop at the end of the third year is partly due to failure and partly to finding other careers.

A second table is appended showing the wastage in three-year college courses over the same period. It is evident that the wastage is much less than at university, but it must be borne in mind that some wastage is concealed by the transfer of failed university students to college courses. The college tries to salvage as many university failures as it can, as many may make good teachers.

The lower drop-out rate in professional courses is often attributed to lower college standards. This is true to a certain extent as half the college population has come from the non-academic stream in high schools, and find high academic standards a strain. An equally correct reason for the lower drop-out is undoubtedly the more personal contact between students and staff, as seems fitting in a profession like teaching.

TABLE 2:— PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS  
Showing drop-out over 3 Years of Course

		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
1964	January ... ..	49	277				
	December ... ..	46	256				
1965	January ... ..	45	309	46	241		
	December ... ..	41	283	41	234		
1966	January ... ..	33	262	41	276	40	231
	December ... ..	30	244	41	270	40	230
1967	January ... ..	50	344	28	227	36	264
	December ... ..	42	319	26	223	35	264
1968	January ... ..	27	298	34	283	26	217
	December ... ..	24	263	31	276	26	216
1969	January ... ..			24	236	26	268
	December ... ..			19	229	24	268
1970	January ... ..					18	225
	December ... ..					18	223

Is there any possibility at all of locating the reasons for these high rates of drop-out and is there anything that teachers generally in school, college and university, can do to improve the situation?

It is often rather glibly said that more rigid selection would remedy all our ills, but the evidence shows that this is not true.

As long ago as 1952 a University Conference in Britain tried to locate the reasons for drop-outs and they noted the following reasons:

- (i) Failure is in part a function of the interaction between the student and his teacher (this is self-evident in school, but is often denied at university. Universities are increasingly aware of the teaching weaknesses of many of the staff and are taking measures to remedy this situation.)
- (ii) Social problems may so worry a student that they may affect his work e.g. love affairs.
- (iii) Variations in temperament and physique can affect performance.
- (iv) Lecturing can be improved (the Transvaal colleges have accepted this and research is being done on the topic).
- (v) Lecturers (or others, e.g. counsellors) should help students when they are in difficulty (in spite of charges of paternalism, colleges and universities must try to help weak students or those in difficulty).
- (vi) A sense of vocation and maturity are important factors in achievement.

- (vii) Institutions occasionally raise standards with unfortunate results for the students (this only happens occasionally). (Miller, page 22.)

The Robbins Committee (par. 578) gave these reasons for failure:

- (i) Lack of intellectual ability (basically true, but too many exceptions — see note above).
- (ii) Lack of application by student (very common; often because of the change from an authoritarian to a non-authoritarian environment).
- (iii) Defective teaching.
- (iv) Difficulties in adjustment, psychological and other, to university life (also common).
- (v) Extraneous personal troubles.

Headmasters in Britain see failure as a lack on the part of the students, with lack of ability the chief reason for failure (Miller, page 29). Students in contrast (or perhaps not) tend to rationalise failure. Experience in many parts of the world confirms this, but nevertheless, the majority of students both in South Africa and elsewhere tend to be honest enough to admit that they have not worked hard enough (or is this merely another rationalisation?)! Student reasons for failure include: no vocational aim; tired of being a student; difficult to keep balance between academic and social life; social isolation; and psychological disturbance (Miller, page 31 seq.). All these reasons crop up regularly in interviews with students locally.

Dr. Miller (page 76) tries to sum up findings

from many parts of the world. He divides the variables into three groups:

- (i) those with **least influence**: age; peer relationships; residence while student; nationality; religion; time spent on games, etc.; childhood happiness; childhood discipline; ability; social class;
- (ii) those which give **inconsistent findings**: anxiety; birth rank and family size; home location (rural, urban, etc.); broken homes; finance;
- (iii) those which give **consistent findings**: effort; interest; curiosity; aspirations; study attitudes.

It is noteworthy that **ability** features in the first group, and **finance** in the second, i.e. neither is a major reason for drop-out in spite of popular belief to the contrary. **Effort** and what we may call **motivation** are the major requirements in a successful academic and professional career as they are elsewhere.

An analysis of students' reasons for leaving training has been taken at three different periods during the past decade at the Johannesburg College of Education. The first showed that of those who gave a reason, the majority of drop-outs (70%) were due to university failure; wrong choice accounted for 8% and financial difficulties for the same number. Other reasons given were college failure, health, "circumstances" (whatever that may mean). Five years ago the reasons for drop-out were as follows:

#### REASONS

Failed and did not continue ... ..	...
Unsuitable for the profession in own opinion	...
Lost interest ... ..	...
Took up other employment ... ..	...
Courses cancelled by Department ... ..	...
Miscellaneous ... ..	...
Studies in other field ... ..	...
Health reasons ... ..	...
Financial difficulties ... ..	...
Marriage (did not complete course) ... ..	...
Parents transferred ... ..	...
Deaths ... ..	...
No reason ... ..	...

Un = University

Co = College

REASON	PER CENT
Wrong decision ... ..	35,0
No reason ... ..	30,0
Failure ... ..	8,5
Personal/domestic ... ..	9,5
Other (marriage, financial, course too difficult etc,) ... ..	17,0
	<hr/> 100,0

The high figure for "no reasons" probably has some significance; at a guess, lack of interest in the profession.

The distribution of drop-out by years of this group may be of some interest:

DURING	%	COMPARE 1969 %
First Year	64	66,1
Second Year	22	16,4
Third Year	8	15,8
Fourth Year	3	1,7
Fifth Year	1	—
	<hr/> 100	<hr/> 100,0

N.B. Some students may stay on longer at college and/or university, but they are usually "perseverators", they keep right on to the end of the road.

A detailed analysis of drop-outs from the first year at the Johannesburg College of Education for 1968, 1969, 1970, shows the following:

1968		1969		1970	
M	F	M	F	M	F
Un	Co	Un	Co	Un	Co
6	11 16	7 2	9 6	7 2	9 5
1	1 9		3 8	1	3 10
2 2	3 8		3 9		1 5
	4 5	2 1	3 4	3 1	2
6 1	4	1	3 2	2 3	2 7
1 1	4	1 1	1 6	1	3
2	2 5		1	1 1	9 13
	1 1	1	3	1	2
1	1	1	1	2 1	3
		1			1 2
			1 2		1
		1			
4 4	7 28	2 2	2 22	4 3	5 19
<hr/> 23 9	<hr/> 28 82	<hr/> 16 8	<hr/> 24 63	<hr/> 21 13	<hr/> 34 69

	1968	1969	1970
	M 32	M 24	M 55
	F 110	F 87	F 82
Totals:	<u>142</u>	<u>111</u>	<u>137</u>
Per cent of enrolment	25,1%	21,2%	23,0%

Can we learn anything from this table? If we group together the withdrawals which may be attributable to lack of effort, these account for over 25% of the total and lack of interest 33½% (not taking into account the proportion of "no reasons" that would inevitably belong to lack of effort and interest).

"Lack of interest" is due largely to wrong choice which may result from a number of factors variously described by students as: did not know what to do; waiting to see how I did in matric., my parents were keen; it's a job, etc. Fortunately many discover their error by the time college and university open. Of the 850 who applied to enter the Johannesburg College of Education first year in 1970, only just over 600 arrived. The pre-enrolment drop-out seems to merit the attention of the high schools. Once again I must seriously query the contribution that guidance teachers are making to help maintain their own profession and not only guidance teachers but also staffs in general. But the guidance teacher has a special responsibility towards his own profession. In the first place, he must have and be able to impart all the necessary information about the profession. In the second place, he or she should be a good advertisement for the profession in bearing, ability, speech, humanity; too often they are lively sniffers-out of psychological case-histories, men and women who see themselves as latter-day Freuds. There is nothing much we can do about this, but principals at any rate could tell them not to be foolish.

### Drop-outs and the teaching profession

Staff, too, must be honest. Too often teachers parade, because it is trendy, a cynicism

they do not really feel, but this has a bad effect on pupils. With all its faults, and they are not so many really, teaching is a good profession, highly satisfying to many of its members. They must say so. No Teachers' Council can do for the profession what the musket-bearer in the classroom can do.

It may be quite legitimately asked what the colleges and universities are doing to retain the students who have come from the schools.

The universities are aware of the difficulties confronting students, especially first years, and all, I think, have counselling and tutorial services to help the weaker or more troubled student to survive. Most universities, here and overseas, regret that for a number of reasons they cannot do enough.

As far as the colleges are concerned, they try to do the same kind of thing although perhaps on a more personal level. Vice-Rectors and heads of departments spend many hours interviewing and trying to help students in difficulty. As I said earlier, our continued (may I stress this word) interest in our students is interpreted as paternalism which we most strongly deny. The atmosphere of college and university residences should be conducive to work and an interest is taken in individual students there too and many run a tutorial service by senior students for first years. Staff endeavour to keep the profession and its ideals before the students; colleges try to fill their staffs with dedicated people and if these are young, highly qualified and happy, they are a strong element in the retention of students. Acts of Dedication and dignified Honours Day ceremonies enhance the profession in the eyes of students. As the figures given earlier show, if we can keep students beyond the first year, we have a hope of keeping them to the end of the course. But many first-year students fold their tents as the Arabs and as silently slip away, we are not exactly Hounds of Heaven.