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# why do english-speakers drop out of teaching?

H HOLMES

If 1975 has been the International Year of the Woman, it has also been the Local Year of the Teacher, for rarely has such publicity been directed on the teaching profession. Inquiry into the shortage of teachers — for a time incidentally a world phenomenon — is not new in South Africa. Teachers' associations have been concerned to a lesser or greater degree about the supply to their ranks: education departments, in general, have a perennial fear of a surplus of teachers, even when class numbers are running high on the scale. The shortage of teachers in Black education is critical.

Towards the end of 1974, teachers' bodies in the Transvaal approached the provincial authorities about what they considered approaching "crisis" conditions in the schools. The response of the authorities was cool; there was no crisis. Nevertheless, it was remarked that the field officers of the Transvaal Education Department immediately went scurrying round the high schools to beat up recruits for the teaching profession. 1975 has been marked by investigations carried out by The Star newspaper in Johannesburg, investigations which have gone on for several months, each investigation throwing a little more light on what appears to be an insoluble problem: how to induce young people to come into teaching.

At one stage, the major shortage was in the English-language schools. As men are considered important in the education of the young, their absence was thought critical, but more important was the shortage of suitably qualified teachers in certain subjects, notably mathematics and the sciences, but also in the languages, commerce, industrial arts, etc. Even teachers of religious knowledge were missing in this "very Christian country". These so-called "scarce" subjects still remain a problem, and the shortage has spread into the Afrikaans-language schools. It is refreshing to find the largest teachers' association in the country (one that could really exert pressure where it is needed) boldly dropping the old "Daddy's-good-and-we're-grateful" theme and calling for action from all involved in education to the highest level.

Our main concern in this article is with the English-language schools, so I now return to their special problems. For more than a decade, the Johannesburg College of Education has taken recruitment seriously, even in years when the TED was lukewarm. Helped generously by the Council of Education, Witwatersrand, the college issued attractive publicity material which had a marked effect on recruitment and overal numbers rose steadily.

We must not, however, think that verbal persuasion in glossy covers will solve all our problems. The Johannesburg College of Education campaign coincided with a reasonably satisfactory new deal for teachers, at any rate in the matter of salaries and pensions, though it was pointed out, quite rightly, that the salary rises did little more than bring old salaries into line with the new cost of living, and pensions are rarely seriously considered by the young, who are immortal.

It is necessary to give some background to the problem of drop-outs, as I have done above. But there is more to it than this. Drop-outs are taken to mean dissatisfaction with whatever the drop-outs have been doing, not merely, of course, going into teaching.

Many fingers, belonging to schools and universities largely, were pointed at the training of prospective teachers. I have no intention of retelling the uninformed tales of low academic levels and embarrassing paternalism — lots of maternalism too — in the college of education. The complaints were not confined to university students; college students had their own brand. This all led to a kind of alienation of the young, an alienation often inspired by people whose bread and butter depended on a steady and sufficient supply of well-qualified teachers.

Such complaints, often from sensitive undergraduate groups with incomplete degrees, led in the end, though only after a lot of infighting whose full history has still to be written, to a change in the mechanics of training. Full university training for teachers going into high schools instead of three-quarter university training was to be the panacea, leading to a healthy flow, hopefully of men, into the teaching profession. So far, this

has not proved true, but it is early days yet, and the universities must be given a chance to show that they know what teacher training is all about.

The quota system introduced in the Transxaal, though apparently nowhere else, to control the admissions of students into teacher training suggested that there was a surplus of teachers. A massive study in 1970 by the Education Bureau of the Transvaal Education Department into Personnel Needs in the Transvaal forecast a critical shortage of teachers in English-medium schools as high as 78 per cent. The study covered almost every aspect of teacher supply, even down to the favourite month of resignation. Official statements shortly after the report was "deconfidentialised" asserted that there was no real shortage, only difficulties in staffing, especially in what were called "rare" subjects (readers will get some amusement, and perhaps instruction, in looking up the word in the COD). About the same time ,the Administrator of the Transvaal stated that the colleges were producing too few teachers. Was quota selection to put everything right? At the same time, the TED planned to initiate a recruiting campaign in the schools, and suitable material was prepared. This material, it was understood, was not distributed because this would mean that a provincial education department was recruiting for a university, something apparently almost not legal.

Of course there is a shortage of teachers. F E Auerbach has recently published, under the aegis of the SA Students Trust, a pamphlet entitled "The Need for Teachers in South Africa". The facts in this booklet, mostly from official sources, make it quite clear that the shortage is real. Bad enough in White Schools, but threateningly catastrophic in Black Schools.

The prevailing concern about the teacher shortage in English-language schools in the end brought the English Academy off its academic perch. A committee was set up to investigate the problem, and some excellent work was done. "The shortage of graduate teachers in science subjects, in mathematics, and in some other subjects is common to the whole country. In English, only Natal is not experiencing a shortage" So says the report in one place. In another, "The shortage of English-speaking teachers in the Transvaal is chronic and widely recognised". The fact is that in the Transvaal, one-third of the staffs in English-medium schools are Afrikaans-speaking.

All in all then, it is evident that some action must be taken. But where to start? Some educationists, though few teachers, seem to think that the recommendation of the van Wyk de Vries Report that all teacher training should be in the universities will solve many problems. A number of our universities have been responsible for teacher training, both primary and secondary, for many years, but with what some people consider inconspicuous success. Unfortunately, many colleges of education have been equally unsuccessful.

One cure, though perhaps not a complete one, would be to cut down wastage. Hence a study of drop-outs from teaching could be rewarding. Unfortunately statistical evidence is not complete, though there is sufficient to show where we must look to correct the ill. We cannot view drop-outs from only one aspect. The problem is educational, and I prefer to view education as a unity, from admission in the junior school (or earlier) to drop-out or graduation (in the broadest sense) 10 to 15 years later. Wastage tends to be associated in the popular mind with students and students alone, but this tells only half the story, as we shall see.

The drop-out of English-speakers (and probably of others too) begins in the high school, in fact from the moment that a pupil in the matriculation class decides to be a teacher.

English-medium high schools have only comparatively recently accepted that they have a responsibility to recruit teachers to staff their schools. This was especially true of the so-called "best" schools. Even a cursory glance at a table of the "schools of origin" at the Johannesburg College of Education shows that certain schools do not support their profession by sending pupils into teaching, but nevertheless they expect, though no statistical table will show thus, to take the best people from college and university. The schools which support teaching are modern and co-educational, and also some of the girls' high schools. Men by themselves apparently are unable to persuade boys to enter the teaching profession.

Nevertheless, the allegation that the English-speakers do not provide their own teachers is exaggerated. In recent years, young English-speakers have come forward in encouraging numbers. By the closing date for registration each year, nearly double the number

required by quota fill in the necessary forms — many parents liken the forms to a morass of fly-papers hampering progress to the goal. About 20 per cent of the total — the figure varies from year to year — drop out before selection is complete, and many potentially good teachers are lost even if there were no quota. Why is this?

A "Star"' survey has shown that there is apparently little enthusiasm for teaching among English-speaking youth (the figure is much higher in Afrikaans-medium schools). This may seem at variance with what has been said in the previous paragraph, but this is not really so. A logical explanation is that even those who sign up for teaching at first do so reluctantly, without adequate motivation (we cannot avoid the word), and so, when better opportunities offer, they fall away. What purpose do school guidance teachers serve? is a question that is often asked. In what light do they present teaching to their pupils? Are they so actuated by material rewards that they fail to point out the satisfactions of teaching? Does teaching appeal only to the lower intellects so that many fall out because of the final examination? Figures collected by the Johannesburg college show that the rate of matric failure among selected candidates is very low; there are no figures for the rest.

Registration for teaching is often a hedging of bets. Something better is almost certain to turn up, but it is bettter to be safe. The merits of teaching must not be presented either in a wholly materialistic way (the arguments too often sound hollow) nor by older, official people who may obviously have an axe to grind. When the Johannesburg College of Education was allowed to recruit in the schools, the best agents were happy students; this practice has now been revived.

In the first phase then, we can say that the high schools are aware of their responsibility to their own profession, but that the approach may be faulty. They must try to interest the best, and sufficiently to prevent them dropping out.

Many students, after selection, drop out of training before that training has begun. These are the best people, whether they come from the academic or non-academic groups in the high school. The temptation to take up "better opportunities" is strong. After all, in the case of the Johannesburg College of Education (and until recently they handled all teacher trainees whether higher or ordinary diploma, university or college), about 80 per cent of recruits came from south of a line drawn from east to west half-way between Johannesburg and Pretoria, ie where conflicting interests and opportunities are greatest. So, hopefully, at the beginning of the new academic year, the survivors arrive at college or university, half of them, to use the old terminology, from the B-stream, but the majority from professional or para-professional homes, in fact all above the artisan level (who know where their bread is buttered). The B-streamers are the backbone of the profession, or have been. Should holders of university entrance certificates be better teachers? The university is now demanding the latter certificates even from those wishing to teach physical education and industrial arts. Are they right professionally? Or will this be a stimulus to drop out? The survivors incidentally arrive in sufficient numbers, according to the education department, to supply the future needs of the English-language schools in the Transvaal.

Now the drop-outs begin. The problem is serious, not only in this country, but almost everywhere. One of the most valuable studies of the problem is that of G W Miller, "Success, Failure and Wastage in Higher Education" (published by Harrap for the University of London Institute of Education).

Even in a country like Britain where the entry to university is by no means easy and, even now, with the expansion of universities, highly selective, the failure or drop-out rate is high. Dr Miller notes 14,3 per cent for Arts, 17,8 per cent for Pure Science, and 22,4 per cent for Applied Science. The annual cost of this wastage has been put at £5 million. Pass rates in technical colleges in Britain are about 54 per cent. Dr Miller emphasises that even a pass rate of 90 per cent produces "a grevious wastage, and a 66 per cent 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 per cent of original entry".

In Australian universities the wastage rate has been stable at 30-40 per cent over a period of 20 years, although entry is also highly selective.

The average first-year failure rate in South African universities varies, but averages out at about one-third — in some faculties considerably higher, and apparently higher at the

English-language universities than at the Afrikaans. In 1965 the first-year failure rate at the University of the Free State was 24,6 per cent and at Cape Town 45,8 per cent. 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." Naive, or somewhere near the mark?

Schonell and others found it difficult to explain why 40 per cent of above-average intelligence students were unable to make normal progress while 40 per cent of below-average students were able to make normal progress; and 17,8 per cent 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 p 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. A careful study over a number of years at the Johannesburg College of Education of the progress of university students registered with the college showed that high IQ students were likely to take longer over their degrees than students with only average IQs.

The wastage rate of the latter group of students i.e. those formerly registered at the college, but attending university, was high, although the overall pass rate in the first year was normally slightly higher than the overall university pass rate for the same group. Nevertheless, the teaching profession cannot afford to lose approximately 66 per cent of its men and 50 per cent of its women before the completion of the diploma year.

Table 1 shows the enrolment of college/university students on the tenth college day of each year and from the table we may easily trace the drop-outs for each year. Although "repeaters" as opposed to "drop-outs" are concealed in the table, and although incomplete degrees which may be completed sometime (often years later when promotion beckons) are not included, the picture is depressing enough.

TABLE 1 — **UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**
**SHOWING DROP-OUT OVER FOUR YEARS OF COURSE**

| | | First Year | | Second Year | | Third Year | | Fourth Year (College) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Men | Women | Men | Women | Men | Women | Men | Women |
| 1963 | January | 100 | 113 | 66 | 73 | 68 | 85 | | |
| | December | 92 | 104 | 64 | 73 | 59 | 82 | | |
| 1964 | January | 129 | 127 | 69 | 82 | 65 | 71 | 31 | 67 |
| | December | 114 | 118 | 64 | 79 | 64 | 72 | 31 | 68 |
| 1965 | January | 110 | 97 | 88 | 95 | 58 | 74 | 38 | 53 |
| | December | 97 | 87 | 82 | 95 | 56 | 72 | 35 | 55 |
| 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 | 62 | 103 | 50 | 99 | 74 | 73 | 36 | 64 |
| | December | 54 | 91 | 52 | 95 | 72 | 74 | 31 | 64 |
| 1969 | January | 61 | 115 | 50 | 75 | 54 | 96 | 35 | 53 |
| | December | 52 | 104 | 46 | 74 | 53 | 91 | 35 | 53 |
| 1970 | January | 62 | 127 | 49 | 87 | 31 | 70 | 35 | 72 |
| | December | 54 | 117 | 47 | 86 | 33 | 69 | 32 | 65 |
| 1971 | January | 63 | 158 | 36 | 93 | 30 | 81 | 21 | 46 |
| | December | 57 | 143 | 32 | 91 | 30 | 75 | 21 | 46 |
| 1972 | January | | | 37 | 107 | 24 | 60 | 23 | 61 |
| | December | | | 34 | 106 | 22 | 60 | 21 | 58 |
| 1973 | January | | | | | 25 | 87 | 12 | 48 |
| | December | | | | | 25 | 85 | 12 | 46 |
| 1974 | January | | | | | — | 2 | 14 | 61 |
| | December | | | | | — | 2 | 13 | 59 |

TABLE 2 — **PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS**

**SHOWING DROP-OUT OVER THREE YEARS OF COURSE**

| | | First Year | | Second Year | | Third Year | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Men | Women | Men | Women | Men | Women |
| 1964 | January ... ... ... | 49 | 277 | 51 | 242 | 43 | 204 |
| | December ... ... ... | 46 | 256 | 50 | 240 | 42 | 204 |
| 1965 | January ... ... ... | 45 | 309 | 46 | 241 | 47 | 236 |
| | December ... ... ... | 41 | 283 | 41 | 234 | 47 | 232 |
| 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 ... ... ... | 29 | 298 | 34 | 283 | 26 | 217 |
| | December ... ... ... | 22 | 262 | 31 | 276 | 26 | 216 |
| 1969 | January ... ... ... | 39 | 355 | 24 | 236 | 26 | 268 |
| | December ... ... ... | 37 | 316 | 19 | 229 | 24 | 268 |
| 1970 | January ... ... ... | 47 | 394 | 24 | 279 | 18 | 225 |
| | December ... ... ... | 41 | 348 | 21 | 262 | 18 | 223 |
| 1971 | January ... ... ... | 49 | 378 | 39 | 338 | 23 | 261 |
| | December ... ... ... | 39 | 337 | 35 | 333 | 22 | 260 |
| 1972 | January ... ... ... | 58 | 511 | 32 | 314 | 33 | 328 |
| | December ... ... ... | 50 | 461 | 29 | 305 | 32 | 325 |
| 1973 | January ... ... ... | 49 | 390 | 35 | 417 | 28 | 300 |
| | December ... ... ... | 43 | 353 | 32 | 390 | 27 | 296 |
| 1974 | January ... ... ... | 61 | 394 | 35 | 353 | 27 | 356 |
| | December ... ... ... | 57 | 345 | 30 | 325 | 27 | 355 |
| 1975 | January ... ... ... | 56 | 436 | 35 | 322 | 31 | 312 |

Table 2 shows the wastage in three-year college courses over the same period. It is evident that wastage is much less than at university, but is must be borne in mind that some wastage is concealed by the transfer or failed university students (or tired ones) to college courses. The salvaging of university failures for the profession can be defended on many grounds.

Is there any possibility at all of locating the reasons for the high rate of drop-out, and is there anything that teachers especially 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. Another view is that free entry is the best method of selection for weak students will select themselves out; obviously the financial cost would be prohibitive.

Better selection methods would probably help, but, as Lieberman points out (Teaching as a Profession), "Every teacher has a personal stake in the selective recruitment and orientation of new teachers because the reputation of the entire profession is shaped by the performance of each member thereof. Furthermore, every teacher should have enough concern for the welfare of students to motivate him to help recruit good prospective teachers, to discourage or block admission of poor prospects to teaching, and to help new teachers succeed in their work." Teachers may feel they do not measure up too well.

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

1. 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 in university or college).

2. Social problems may so worry a student that they may affect his work e.g. love affairs.
3. Variations in temperament and physique can affect performance.
4. Lecturing can be improved (the Transvaal colleges and many universities have accepted this and research is being done on the topic).
5. Lecturers (or others, e.g. counsellors) should help students when they are in difficulty (in spite of charges of paternalism, colleges try to help weak students or those in difficulty; this is also true of university).
6. A sense of vocation and maturity are important factors in achievement.
7. Institutions occasionally raise standards with unfortunate results for the students (this only happens occasionally).

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

1. Lack of intellectual ability (basically true, but too many exceptions).
2. Lack of application by student (very common).
3. Defective teaching.
4. Difficulty in adjustment, psychological and other, to university and college life (also common).
5. Extraneous personal troubles.

Headmasters in Britain see failure as a lack on the part of students, with lack of ability the chief reason for failure (Miller p 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; psychological disturbance. All these reasons crop up regularly in interviews with students locally.

Miller tries to sum up findings from many parts of the world. He divides the variables into three groups:

1. those with **least influence:** age; poor relationships; residence while student; nationality; religion; time spent on games, etc; childhood happiness; childhood discipline; ability; social class.
2. those which give **inconsistent findings:** anxiety, birth rank and family size; home location (rural, urban, suburb, etc); broken homes; finance.
3. 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, ie neither is a major reason for drop-out in spite of popular belief to the contrary. **Effort** and what is called **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 survey showed that of those who gave a reason the majority of drop-outs (70 per cent) were due to university failure; wrong choice accounted for 8 per cent and financial difficulties for the same number. Other reasons given were college failure, health, "circumstances" (whatever that may mean). A more recent survey showed the following: Wrong decision 35 per cent; Failure 8,5 per cent; personal/domestic 9,5 per cent; other (marriage, financial, course too difficult, etc) 17 per cent; no reason 30 per cent. The high figure for "no reason" probably has some significance; at a guess lack of interest in the profession.

Drop-out by years is of some interest:

| During | per cent |
|---|---|
| First year | 66 |
| Second | 22 |
| Third | 8 |
| Fourth | 3 |
| Fifth | 1 |
| | 100 |

These figures are broadly consistent over the years. Some students stay on at college and/or university for longer, but as they are usually perseverators, they keep right on to the end of the road.

In the JCE/Wits situation, at any rate in the past, lack of effort and lack of interest account for the majority of losses. Lack of effort has been accounted for in a number of ways, some of which have already been mentioned. I would not go so far as one university principal who called South African students a "society of loafers", but work opportunities have been so plentiful in our unbalanced society that no real strain has been put on students to succeed. Lack of interest is closely linked with lack of effort. It seems to be due, among teacher students, to wrong choice, resulting from a number of factors which students have variously described 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 in time, or early in their training. Selection then does not end at the school level, but continues throughout training. Nevertheless as I have stated earlier, the schools have a major responsibility in guiding pupils in the right direction, not merely through the guidance classes, but through the whole professional atmosphere of the school, where pupils see teaching to be a profession worth joining. Retention of students in college and university will be helped by properly organised counselling and tutorial services, a fact to which these institutions are alive.

To sum up then, drop-outs during training may be attributed to a number of reasons: lower ability groups enter teaching; much of the schooling is inadequate; selection procedures are not entirely satisfactory; students are thrown in at the deep end; lecturing is not always of a good standard; there is lack of application on the part of students; and many others.

What then about the wastage of teachers in service? The general opinion is that English-speakers stream steadily out of the daily purgatory of the classroom into the liberty, untrammeled by regulation, of the wide, wide world. How true is this popularly held belief? I have recently interviewed a reasonably large sample of teachers about why teachers leave the service. In the sample were teachers who are apparently contented and happy in the service, those who are contemplating leaving, and those who have recently left. A consistency of opinion emerges: teachers feel shackled by regulation and petty orders; they consider that they are under too close scrutiny all the time; many principals are dictatorial in their running of the school; extramural duties are often burdensome; discipline in class is increasingly difficult; financial stringency is felt especially by those teachers, men especially, with from six to ten years' service. Most claimed they loved teaching, but . . . ! Security of tenure does not seem to have great holding power, nor better salaries and pensions; and other fringe benefits, eg medical aid and housing loans, are thought inadequate. Perhaps this explains the "stream out".

The most recent statistical figures from the Transvaal Education Department show that 18,7 per cent of the approximately 18 500 teachers in the Transvaal are English-speakers. The resignations from both groups — English and Afrikaans — was 6,7 per cent and of men 0,6 per cent. Talk to any businessman and he would consider the wastage small. Actually these figures are lower than they were for the four previous years. Is the profession then doing a better job of retaining its teachers?

Recruitment of the right quality people, old-fashionedly inclined to teaching as a vocation, and retention of these people throughout training by all the means at our disposal seem to be the two lines of action most likely to improve the undoubtedly critical postion in South Africa's schools. Improvement in conditions of service, better training facilities, including in-service training, more planning for recruiting English-speakers, less emphasis on ideological matters in schools, possibly some recruitment overseas in the scarce subjects, would all contribute something to solving the problem. But in the end, the mattter is in our own hands.