

Teacher shortage essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States, there have been reports circulating about increasing levels of teacher shortages especially at the elementary and secondary levels. Whether or not there are indeed shortages in the supply of teachers has been debated and even more so the causes of such shortages if they do in fact exist are topical, debatable issues. The claim of shortages in teachers is, therefore, questionable.

Teaching vacancies are usually filled from three specific sources. New entrants are those recently qualified to enter the profession after having completed either a bachelor's degree or postgraduate qualification in education which involves teacher training. The second source is untrained teachers who have completed tertiary education but who are not qualified or trained as teachers. The final source covers re-entrants who are returning to active teaching after having left the classroom for one reason or another (Wilson & Pearson, 1993).

However, the concept of what exactly constitutes teacher shortage has not been very clearly defined. Research has revealed that an increasing number of teachers are leaving the profession to take up positions elsewhere and often this is due to their dissatisfaction with the profession for any of several reasons (Thomas, 1998). It is generally accepted, therefore, that a decrease in the number of teachers in the educational system in relation to the number of students represents teacher shortages. Teacher shortage is also seen as a low supply of new teachers relative to the institutional demands (White & Smith, 2005).

Wilson & Pearson (1993) do not accept these broad conceptualizations of teacher shortage. They believe that, not only the rates of vacancies for teachers should be taken into account, but that the number of teachers who are within the system yet are not qualified or specialized in the area they teach also represent teacher shortage. They also believe that normal turn-over rates in teachers retiring from the profession are not valid data to be used in determining such shortages. Moreover they argue that estimates of teacher shortages are flawed as some administrators may decide to exclude particular subject areas from the curriculum if they anticipate that those positions would not be filled. Webster, Wooden & Marks (2005) also agree that the concept of teacher shortage must be broadened and they argue that “ it is ... not correct to assume that since there is a teacher in front of every class that shortages do not exist” (p. 92). Teacher shortage is therefore both quantitative and qualitative (Boe, 2006).

Kerchner (1984), writing back in 1984, was among those who had envisioned a fall-off in the teaching profession beginning in the late 1980s. At that time, the teaching profession was beginning to be a lot less popular among graduates as reflected in their enrollment in bachelor’s degrees programs with specializations in education. Kerchner (1984) points out that enrollment in such programs had stood at only 5% in 1982 and even the percentage of degrees being offered in teaching had decreased from 21% to 11.6% from the early 1970s and 1980s.

The number of teachers leaving the profession to pursue different professional goals elsewhere is also on the rise. Some researchers believe

that this issue of failure to retain teachers is of much more relevance to understanding the teacher shortage problem than the lack of new entrants to the profession. The turn-over rate of teachers, therefore, seems to be increasing. U. K. based studies estimated that the number of teachers leaving the profession completely stood at approximately 10% in the 1990s (Kerchner, 1984). Figures for United States schools also reveal disappointing trends. Within the first year of teaching about 16% of new entrants resign from the profession and the figure increases to 50% within the first five years (Howard, 2003, p. 144). The Economist (2001) produces a figure of 40% of teachers leaving within their first three years.

Such reports of increasingly less teachers entering the profession and more going out does indeed suggest that there would be shortages. With total enrolment in elementary and secondary schools on the rise, the short fall of adequate teachers would be significantly greater.

Of course the overall shortage of teachers is not necessarily homogenous across subject areas. One of the most notable areas of shortage is in the area of special education. McLeskey, Tyler & Flippin (2004) view this shortage as a qualitative one. Special education teachers (SETs) are usually classified as either employed-fully certified or employed-not fully certified. While there is not a complete lack of teachers to fill vacancies in special education classes, there is a noted lack of teachers who are qualified to fill those positions. As McLeskey, Tyler & Flippin (2004) note that although 99% of special education vacancies are filled yearly:

“... many of these teachers are uncertified. Some have no degrees; some have college degrees in other concentrations; and still others have degrees in special education but are certified to teach children with another type of disability. Regardless of the level of training all of these teachers are considered uncertified (pp. 14 & 19).”

The rate of the shortage of qualified teachers in the area of special education is interesting. Data from the 2000-2001 academic year reveal a 23% increase in the number of special education teachers who lack the necessary qualification over the previous school year. On average 11.4% of teachers in special education, were not qualified for those positions. This figure is even more significant considering that these uncertified teachers were responsible for teaching approximately 808,000 pupils (McLeskey, Tyler & Flippin, 2004, p. 7).

They further point out that 90% of school districts across the United States report a shortage of special education teachers and, above all shortages in other subject areas, special needs education is the most deficient. The American Association of Employment in Education (AAEE) issued a national report in the year 2000, ranking the areas with the most severe shortages. All of the special education areas ranked in the top fifteen. In addition it must be noted that the top five shortage areas were all in the area of special education. These are emotional/behavioral disorders, multicategorical, severe/profound disabilities, learning disabilities and mild/moderate disabilities. The remaining areas are mental retardation which tied for 6th along with mathematics, visual impairment stood at 9th, hearing

impairment at 11th, dual certificate (special and general education) 13th and early childhood special education 15th (McLeskey, Tyler & Flippin, 2004, p. 7).

The problem of the lack of certified teachers to fill vacancies in special education seems to be a national phenomenon. Across the United States there are considerable shortages and McLeskey, Tyler & Flippin (2004) point out that it is only in the Northeast region that this problem is not as severe. This short-fall in teachers must have significant implications for the general quality of education. Boe & Cook (2006) reiterate what has long been known by educators “ fully certified SETs were substantially more effective than partly certified SETs in planning and delivering instruction, and in establishing a positive classroom environment” (p. 443).

Shortages in teachers are also greatly evident in general education areas particularly the natural sciences and bilingual education. In the AEEs rank of areas of teacher shortage mathematics education positioned at 6th, physics at 8th, bilingual education 9th, chemistry stood at 12th and computer science at 13th (McLeskey, Tyler & Flippin, 2004, p. 7). Kerchner (1984) indicates that there has long been a shortage of general education teachers (GETs) in these areas but this was masked in the early 1980s by an overall surplus of teachers. Webster, Wooden & Marks (2005) also acknowledge the historical nature of this problem. An article in *The Economist* (2004) had estimated that there was a shortage of approximately 3400 Maths teachers nation wide. The article further indicated that, even where vacancies were filled, on average 30% of teachers delivering the

mathematics curriculum were unqualified to do so as they had not obtained tertiary level qualification in the subject. The Australian context is not much different. Webster, Wooden & Marks (2005) also list physics, chemistry, mathematics, information technology and languages besides English as the areas with the most deficiencies in staffing.

The situation of the lack of an adequate supply of qualified teachers to deliver particular subject matter on the curriculum seems daunting. Howard (2003) is convinced that this shortage could have serious implications for educational officials, institutions and the overall quality of education. He argues that this issue “ represents arguably the most imminent threat to the nation’s schools” (p. 142). Among the possible repercussions that could arise Howard (2003) believes that the students are the ones who will suffer the most if solutions are not immediately forthcoming. He anticipates that class size will increase and more unqualified teachers will be recruited to take care of the shortages and this will only end up making the problem worse.

In his paper Howard (2003) contends that urban inner-city schools are the ones who are most affected by shortages in teachers. He argues his point by pointing to empirical evidence that suggested that “ the nation’s largest urban school districts face more severe teacher shortages than districts in other areas” (p. 143). Even more disappointing statistics determine that the areas most affected in urban school districts are Mathematics and the sciences. Howard Nelson (as cited in Thomas, 1998) after conducting research on the trends in teacher shortages agrees that urban areas are the

more volatile and suggests that new teachers are unwilling to enter urban areas where crime is known to be rampant.

Shortages in teachers have been attributed to a number of factors. While some may believe otherwise, salary has not been demonstrated to be the area of most concern for teachers leaving the profession. Howard (2003) lists four factors that account for teacher shortages. First a large portion of teachers of the baby boom generation are now up for retirement. This movement could potentially represent about 25% of the current teaching population within the next few years. Second reports reveal that student enrolment increased by 14% between 1990 and 2000 and this figure is set to increase at an even faster rate. Third, modified educational policies are now requiring that the student-teacher ratio be decreased. Schools are finding it difficult to fill these new vacancies with qualified teachers. The fourth cause, and the one that is most bothersome to policy makers is the problem of teachers leaving the profession to pursue different career goals. Howard (2003) notes that teaching has traditionally had the highest rate of turnover in employees and this trend is not changing (p. 148).

Another factor that has been cited as contributing to the teacher shortage problems is what Holtmann (2001) refers to as the “ nature of the wage structure” (p. 218). He argues that the equitable treatment of teachers, regardless of areas of competency, is preventing highly qualified professionals from seeking to enter the profession. He asserts that, specifically in the areas of mathematics and the physical sciences that are experiencing severe shortages, the compensation for such teachers is

equivalent to teachers in English and the social sciences which have a relatively high teaching population in these areas. Holtmann (2001) observes that males are usually the ones trained in these shortage areas but are not attracted to the teaching profession because the wages being offered are not comparable to what they would receive in a private corporation with the same qualification. Holtmann (2001) does not see this as solely an economic issue. He believes that educational officials should aim to stratify wages within the profession based on the relative demand for teachers. Since a shortage in teachers within these areas represents a corresponding shortage in males Holtmann (2001) argues that “ equal pay for men and women without regard to field therefore leads to the recruiting problems in the schools” (p. 217).

Admittedly economics does play a large role in determining the attractiveness of the teaching profession both to those who are already employed within the system and those who are contemplating entering. It has been noted by researchers that the teaching profession does not compensate as well as other employment areas therefore qualified individuals would often prefer to take up positions other than teaching. Johnson (2006) remarks that even with attractiveness of summer vacations, individuals are still unwilling to pursue a career in teaching, at least not on a long-term basis, because the long-term loss in comparative income does not add up. Even though American teachers are noted to be much better paid than in other countries, the teaching field is still not attracting Americans as much as it did in the 1970s because the wage comparison with their national counterparts is disappointing (The Economist 2001).

Besides those issues already mentioned as contributing to the shortage in teachers others have been noted. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) in their 1997 report teachers left the profession because of disciplinary problems with students, low student motivation, lack of recognition and support from administrators and limited career advancement opportunities (Thomas, 1998, p. 27).

Though these concerns paint a gloomy picture for educational institutions some researchers suggest that a closer look may reveal that the situation is not as widespread or as serious as it is being suggested to be. Ingersoll (2002) argues that teacher shortage in the conventional sense of not enough new teachers and too many retiring teachers is not a real problem in the United States. He believes that schools are adequately staffed and that school administrators have developed efficient strategies to cope with issues of shortages in select areas. He, like See, Gorard & White (2004) does not view the “ regional, occasional and subject-specific disparities” (See, Gorard & White, 2004, p. 103) as adequate grounds on which to determine presumed shortages a matter of national priority or concern. Neither do they believe that intervention is necessary. As See, Gorard & White (2004) point out in reference to the state of the profession in the United Kingdom there is an adequate supply of teachers, even more so than in previous years. The National Centre for Education information, upon conducting research in a few U. S. states declares that teacher shortage claims are mythical (Education Digest, 1990).

One of the issues that researchers have pointed that is causing the most problems for the teaching profession is the matter of retention of teachers in the long term. As has been pointed out before too many teachers are leaving the profession only after a few years in the service. Zepeda (2006) makes a useful analogy of refilling a bucket with water that is riddled with holes at the bottom. She is of the opinion that strategies that aim at retaining existing teachers are of much more import and long-term value that strategies aimed at recruiting new teachers to the profession.

Ingersoll (2002) also supports this stance and contends that “ there have not been, nor will there be, shortages in the conventional sense of too few candidates available and wiling to enter teaching” (p. 43). Administrators have been coping with the quantitative demands for staff. The problem is that at the beginning of each school there is a considerable amount of vacancies to be filled by new, inexperienced teachers, because the more qualified and experienced teachers are leaving.

One report reveals that “ the U. S. Department of Education estimates that approximately 2. 2 million teachers will be needed over the next decade – an average of more than 200, 00 new teachers annually” (Howard, 2003, p. 142). A number of strategies have been proposed as to how best to address the problem of filling vacancies where they exist, whether such vacancies are attributable to true teacher shortages. One approach taken by the government beginning in January 1994 to cater for shortages specifically in the areas of mathematics, science and special education was the Troops to Teachers program. Under this program, initially organized through the

Department of Defense and later transferred to the Department of Education, military personnel who were being displaced from active service were recruited to be trained as teachers and then entered active service in the teaching profession (US GAO, 2001). Conclusive results as to the success of this initiative are not yet forthcoming. However from initial observations the program has addressed, at least temporarily, quantitative teacher shortage concerns.

Another alternative would be to make adjustments in teacher wages to make the profession more attractive to qualified professionals. Winston (2002) indicates that some school districts are calling for more funding from federal officials so that they could hire certified teachers.

One trend that has been adopted by some administrators is to hire uncertified teachers to fill what they consider chronic vacancies and *The New York Times* (as cited in Mason, 2002) points to figures of 12, 828 such cases in public school in New York city. Similarly in Texas an estimated 25% of the teaching force is not completely certified. Research suggests that this may not be a safe alternative and could contribute to a decrease in the quality of education in both the short and long term. Moreover neither teachers, officials nor the general public is in support of reducing or eliminating the required qualifications for entering the profession.

Additionally recruiting from other states or overseas territories is now a popular trend in the districts most affected by teacher shortages (Mason, 2002). This solution seems feasible once the recruiters enter with the necessary qualifications and experience.

Whatever alternative seems best to the policy makers, there is no doubt that there is a problem of not only recruiting teachers but keeping them in the profession. Though it appears that the problem is not as grave as it was purported to be initially there is still need for concern. Particularly in the areas of mathematics, science, languages and special needs education there is an unquestionable shortage of certified, qualified and experienced teachers. These shortages must be addressed soon before they reach unmanageable levels. Solutions that would make the teaching profession more attractive need to be adopted and strategies have to be employed to ensure training in the areas which are most deficient.

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