

'Too smart to teach'

Education is having trouble attracting top candidates, and keeping them once they start

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Recently a friend contacted me about her daughter, who was graduating from university.

Carol, she told me, had wanted to be a teacher all of her life. She had worked in camps and daycare centres. She had gone into university with the idea of completing her degree in biology and then getting her teaching certificate.

But now Carol wasn't so sure. One of her favourite professors, it seems, had taken her aside and asked her why Carol wanted to go into education. "You're way too smart for teaching," the prof told her. "Why don't you do graduate work and go into research?"

Way too smart for teaching.

I am an unabashed advocate of education as a profession, and this comment really hurts. Since my baptism by fire 38 years ago in the classrooms of rural Newfoundland, I have taught from university to elementary levels, from small native communities in British Columbia to West Africa. Most of the teachers I started with were bright, creative and committed. Teaching was a calling. Sure, teaching was tough, but that was the challenge. That's why you had to be smart, resourceful and innovative.

But over the intervening years, something seems to have happened. The vocabulary of passion in education has evaporated. While certainly many capable and dedicated young people still enter the field, many do not. One recent study indicates that over the past 25 years, the IQ of teachers in North America has dropped 12 basis points. In the United States, George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind initiative (mocked on thousands of bumpers as No Billionaire Left Behind) has been a disaster, creating hundreds of inner-city schools so underfunded and downright dangerous that teachers only work there at gunpoint (sometimes quite literally.) Gary Gordon, an executive with the education services division of the polling firm Gallup, described the situation this way in 2004: "Perhaps the most important challenge facing schools today is their flagging ability to recruit and retain effective teachers."

Forty-two states issue emergency credentials to people who have taken no education



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The academic level of new teachers has been slipping in recent years, but studies have shown that world knowledge, general academic proficiency and ability to communicate are key requirements.

courses, have no degree, and have not taught a day in their lives just to keep schools open. Many urban school districts in the U.S. have not begun a school year with a full complement of credentialed teachers in decades. More alarming, more than half of new teachers leave within the first five years. Ironically, studies show that the best and the academically brightest are more likely to leave, most citing job dissatisfaction for their departure.

Things aren't a lot better in Canada. We have a glut of teachers looking for work in urban and suburban settings and a severe shortage in rural and northern areas, as well as in aboriginal communities. Retention rates are similar to those in the U.S., and concerns mount over the strength of those entering teaching.

If this is the case, then the spiral continues. One Canadian study indicates that student success correlates highest with one teacher characteristic above others (far higher than having an MA or even a teaching credential) -- cognitive ability, or a teacher's "literacy level." This does not refer merely to an individual's ability to read, but rather one's "world knowledge," general academic proficiency, and ability to communicate.

What is keeping the best and brightest away from the teaching profession?

When highly literate university entrants are asked why they have not considered, or have rejected, teaching as a profession, the answers are many. University education programs are "Mickey Mouse." Top-down, compliance-oriented public-school bureaucracies stifle creativity and initiative. Prescriptive curricula offer little opportunity for innovation. There are too many under-performing teachers in the field, creating a culture of mediocrity.

The result? What labour economists call an "adverse-selection problem": Graduates with the strongest credentials opt for less demanding, better paying positions in the first place, and the most capable of those who do go into teaching often leave the profession within a few years for administrative jobs or other professions.

Nelson Mandela has said that "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." It is a field that produces extraordinarily intense, satisfying human relations. It can be personally and socially transformative. Educators have in their hands one of the few tools that can genuinely build hope, well-being and a sustainable future.

And it can give back more than any signing bonus, any stock option, any promise of corporate advancement. As educators, the deep interpersonal relationships we enter into pay off with joy, pain, triumph, frustration, anger, success, failure, wisdom, growth and a sense of real contribution, community and accomplishment. Teaching, quite simply, makes us fully human.

This is not the education of passion I hear talked about. We need to get beyond the bureaucracy and dumbing down and back to the excitement of transformative teaching and learning. Then, perhaps, Carol -- and her professor -- will once again see teaching as a career worth the investment of her skills, knowledge, intellect -- and passion.

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