

## What inspires South African student teachers for their future profession?

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*The need for an inspired professional teacher corps to haul South African school education out of its current low level of quality was the driving force behind this project. Its aim was to determine what counted as sources of inspiration for student teachers and hence for future teachers. Based on a conceptual-theoretical study, a questionnaire that could probe student teachers' sources of inspiration was completed by a sample of student teachers (n = 1,683). A factor analysis of their responses revealed the following as their sources of inspiration, from most to least important: (extended) family, religion, the teacher education institution, teaching practice, friends, and personal life. A comparison with similar research elsewhere revealed that, in this sample of respondents, considerations, such as education being the only accessible profession or being forced to enter the teaching profession because of economic circumstances, did not figure at all.*

**Keywords:** family; inspiration; religion; student teachers; teacher education

### Introduction

South African school education is suffering from a quality problem, as reflected in IEA's Progress in International Reading Literacy Study in Primary Schools in 40 Countries (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy & Fay, 2007) and in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (Gonzales, Guzman, Partelow, Pahlke, Jocelyn, Kastberg & Williams, 2004). This is a cause for concern because education is looked upon as key to effecting an economic, social, moral, political and value reconstruction of society (Wolhuter, 2010a:6-7) and enabling South Africa to hold its own in a competitive globalised world characterised by a knowledge culture. An education system can only be as good as its teacher corps. South Africa is, however, suffering from a serious teacher attrition rate (Wolhuter, 2010b:869-870). All of the above underscore the importance of understanding what inspires student teachers to prepare themselves for a teaching profession.

The aim in this paper is to report on a study into the sources of inspiration of student teachers in South Africa, and the driving forces behind their preparation for entering the teaching profession. It commences with the conceptual-theoretical framework that clarified the concept inspiration and provided the underpinning for the empirical investigation.

## Conceptual-theoretical framework

### Demarcation

In psychology, career theory deals, amongst other things, with the question of how members of staff can be retained. In this regard, descriptors like *spirited*, *motivated*, *committed* and *resilient* are used to refer to the professional behaviour of staff members whose work has stood the test of time. Of these, the concept of “teacher resilience” forms an integral part of current scholarly debate (Green, Oswald & Spears, 2007:133, 144).

However, we decided not to concentrate on resilience for two reasons. Firstly, inspiration is essentially an initiating (and only thereafter perpetuating) life-giving, transcending, stimulating, invigorating, motivating, engaging, encouraging, soul-moving, guiding and, above all, input force that enables the teacher to act in a manner that is spirited, committed, motivated as well as resilient. Inspiration denotes an internal space that is devoid of stress (Inge, 2003:5). In contrast, resilience seems to denote a mode of interacting with events in the environment that is activated in times of stress (Tait, 2008:2; Gu & Day, 2007:1302; Patterson, Collins & Abbott, 2004:1). We did not have the latter in mind when we conceptualised this project.

### Conceptual clarification

Google Scholar and EBSCO Host searches based on descriptors such as “inspiration and teacher education”, “inspiration and education” and “inspiration/education/teaching” yielded several hundred articles. With the exception of one (Ekiz, 2006), none of them pertinently deals with teacher education. Some discuss inspirational teaching in schools in several fields such as computer architecture. Inspiration even surfaces in topics such as asbestos litigation. Searches with descriptors “inspiration and profession” also yielded nothing with respect to teacher education. O’Grady and Richard (2010) worked with a rather narrow definition of inspiration, namely, “divine guidance or influence”; they also explore how professionals can facilitate a spiritual space in therapeutic context. Our conceptualization of inspiration of student teachers was much wider, and had to include not only spiritual or religious sources of inspiration but also other sources, such as family, friends, mentors and study materials.

The word inspiration is derived from inspire, which in turn is derived from the Latin *inspirare* from *spirare*, meaning to breathe. Sagan (2009:243) depicts inspiration (associated with spirituality in a non-religious sense) as “a soaring feeling, [a] sense of elation and humility combined.” Use of the word inspiration in texts shows that it indeed embodies an element of emotion, less rational motives, as well as a notion of being a driver, a guide, a moving force that impels a person in a particular direction (Van der Walt et al., 2011). The student teacher, to borrow a line from Sagan, ought to experience emotions of “soaring and elation” in the presence of their lecturers, the subjects that they are learning to teach in schools and in the interaction with their learners during teaching practice in schools.

Smith (2002:364) gives slightly different meanings to inspiration. Inspirational ideas, he suggests, work for us in the sense of benefiting us when following or applying them. Jones (2007:401, 402) gives similar meanings to inspiration: “enduring significance”, “stimulation of experiences of relevance in the minds of students”, students “empathising with the enthusiasm of the lecturer” and “interest kindled in the subject.” He also speaks of experiences that “can be exciting, uplifting”, that draw the students together as a “community of learners” whose attention (if transiently) is focused on a performer, the lecturer. The inspirational lecturer “creates an image, a new landscape” for the group. An inspirational experience is also an engaging one in which, for instance, the lecturer’s “speech is graced by the category of

presence” (Jones, 2007).

An experience should be meaningful to the participants if it is to be inspirational (Jones, 2007:403). Jones emphasizes the fact that “effective education must proceed from *engagement*”. For talk to be engaged, participants’ experiences, beliefs, knowledge and questions have to be brought together in ways that can interact intelligibly, say Howes, Jones and Rosenthal (2004:568).

Inspiration has also been used for expressing notions of “sudden insight” or “a moving of the soul”, for example, in the case of an artist moved to do creative work. In a religious context it can also take on the meaning of a moving of the soul. In sum, according to Jones (2007:404), inspiration is something like an “appeal to the desires of the students for excitement [and] motivation.” According to Sadlak, Miller and Bergan (2006:350), inspiration can flow from links between universal values and locally determined cultural values. Student teachers’ cogitations should result in deeper understandings of themselves as future teachers. According to Howes et al. (2004:569), teacher education should “make room for practices that help us and our students to connect more deeply to each other and the rest of the ... world.”

Inspiration also carries meanings of invigoration, stimulation, sudden insight and immediate understanding, meanings that can be reinterpreted as motivation (as energy or invigoration and insight), evocation (to be called to...) and transcendence (to go beyond the current situation) (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Although not part of its etymology, the notion of broadening one’s vision to the longer-term view seems of late also to have emerged as one of the modern meanings of inspiration (Sادلak, Miller & Bergan, 2006:349). Part of this broadening is “taking time to reflect on why we are here and where we come from,” as well as where we are heading. This view dovetails with that of psychiatrist Scott Peck (2006:249; 300) who avers that inspiration is a force “that has been potentially influenced by human consciousness” but has its origins “outside of the conscious will and beyond the process of conscious decision-making.” Although it is impossible to measure and fully understand this force, it assists a person to understand the cosmos and the nature of humankind, and also nurtures the person’s growth and development. Significantly, it helps the person to travel meaningfully through time and space (as embodied in a teacher education course, for instance).

Perhaps the best definition of inspiration is that it is a life-giving force in a person’s life. As Ekiz (2006:70) says in the context of teacher education, inspiration is about the reasons for a student teacher choosing teaching as a profession. Before even participating in a teacher education programme, student teachers each have their own diverse experiences and interrelated sets of thoughts as well as often incoherent ideas about educational theories and methods for teaching which affect how they are going to be teachers. It is therefore important to listen to their voices (Ekiz, 2007:71).

### **High teacher attrition rate and low teacher morale**

In the literature on teachers and teacher education worldwide, concern is frequently expressed about the high attrition rate in the profession, a state of affairs that can arguably be ascribed to the fact that teachers have lost their inspiration for the profession. In the United States of America, for example, 30% of beginning teachers leave the profession within the first three years of teaching, and almost 50% by their fifth year of teaching (Kysilka, 2010:783). In South Africa, the attrition is higher than the replenishing rate, as has been pointed out by several analysts (Crouch, 2002; Steyn, 2006). In their research on the career paths of education graduates at a South African university, Geysler and Wolhuter (2001:94) found that only 34.5%

of a particular year's intake were still practising as teachers five years later. Bertram et al. (2006:4) found that 7.2% of final year student teachers indicated that they had not even planned to go teaching.

De Beer (2004) showed that the morale of South African teachers is low. Absenteeism is a serious problem. Hard evidence is difficult to come by, but in an empirical survey of principals and their work, Steyn et al. (2004) found that on average 1.7% of the teachers at historically white schools and 15.5% (rising to 25.5% in some cases) of teachers at historically black schools are absent on any given day (Hamlyn, 2009). Although these figures may point, in part, to a low morale and a lack of work ethic among teachers, they may also be symptomatic of a lack of inspiration. There is a conceptual link between the notions of being uninspired and teacher attrition, when the input forces in a teacher's life are such that they reflect, overall, the absence of life-giving, stimulating, invigorating, motivating, engaging, encouraging and guiding influences, there is a chance that such a teacher may no longer feel inspired for the profession. When this point is reached, attrition seems to be a logical outcome (Green et al., 2007; Gu & Day, 2007; Gupta, 2006; Patterson et al., 2004; Tait, 2008).

Not surprisingly, research has revealed a positive correlation between the motivation and the commitment of teachers, for example, in Chan's (2005) research in Hong Kong, and between student teachers' preference for the teaching profession and their performance levels in teacher education programmes, such as mentioned in Montsi and Nenty's (2009) research in Botswana.

### **Sources of inspiration of student teachers**

In most studies about the process of teacher education, the notion of being inspired for the teaching profession as such is usually not discussed in any detail. A search on Google Scholar (2010), using the descriptor "inspiration and teacher education" yielded about 184, 000 hits, but in most cases, the inspiration of future teachers figures only fleetingly. A systematic exposition of the sources of inspiration of student teachers, an empirical investigation into the phenomenon in particular, as far as could be ascertained, does not exist.

Ekiz (2006:71, 73-74, 77) mentions students' diverse experiences — (teaching the only job available, a certain role-model, personality, ability, the social environment, interrelated sets of thought, expectations about training — but he does not refer to what exactly inspires them to study for the teaching profession. In one of his publications, Korthagen (2004) mentions inspiration in his search for the essence ("deepest ideals") of a good teacher. The same applies to the typology of reflexive practice for teacher education developed by Jay and Johnson (2002) and by Brouwer and Korthagen (2005:157).

From a literature study of the life-world of tertiary students (Light, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Astin, 1993; Hermes et al., 2007; Barch & McKenna, 2004; Dolby, 2001:14) the following may be inspirational contexts of student teachers:

- family
- friends
- fellow students and peer group
- religion and faith
- teaching practice
- lectures; lecturers
- mentors
- miscellaneous contexts: media, culture, literature, hobbies, part-time work.

It has been reported (Silowa & Kazimzades, 2010:66) that students enrolling for teacher education programmes perform much poorer in university admission tests than students who enrol for other programmes, and the indication is that student teachers opt for teacher education as a choice of last resort. Many prospective teachers do not seem to be intrinsically inspired for the profession. This may be ascribed to the fact that in South Africa, as for instance in the Netherlands, the teaching profession does not enjoy high esteem, especially among young men (De Muynck & Ruit, 2010:1335-1336). On the other hand, at least at some times in South Africa's history, teacher education was the most accessible route to higher education and to upward social mobility. This has been linked to occasional oversubscription of teacher education enrolments (Wolhuter, 2010a:867).

In Richardson and Watt's (2006) study, based on a sample of 1,653 student teachers at three urban Australian universities, the authors concluded that the following, in order of importance, were the major motivators: perceived abilities (students believed they had the ability to teach and to become good teachers), intrinsic motivations (intrinsic value of teaching), then three altruistic motivations: making a social contribution, help in shaping the future of the world, and enhancing social equity. Personal-utilitarian motivations, such as job security, securing an occupation where they will have much time for their families, many holidays, job security and a good income, did not figure prominently, neither did socialisation influences (which this study limited to the family). This study of the motivations of student-teachers was, however, limited to one country and to urban universities, and some possible inspirational factors such as religion, friends, teaching practice, teachers, university lecturers and mentors, whilst the informal education environment (books, media, hobbies, part-time work) was not measured.

### **Research method**

A questionnaire<sup>1</sup> containing 156 items was drafted to cover the following sources of inspiration of student teachers: family and extended family; religion; friends and fellow students; activities including listening to music, reading of books and magazines, media, watching videos and films, part-time work, hobbies, holidays and participation in sport; practice teaching; lecturers; and aspects of personal life including emotional life, habits, and friends. Respondents were asked to respond to each question on the following 5-point scale:

- 1: fully disagree/never
- 2: disagree/rarely
- 3: neutral/at times
- 4: agree/often
- 5: fully agree/always

The questionnaire also contained items regarding how important the following factors were in respondents' decision to enrol for the teacher education programme: the salaries of teachers, failure to gain admission/bursaries for other fields of study, and the respect which teachers enjoy in society.

Respondents were also asked to distribute 100 marks amongst the following contexts according to the relative importance of each as a source of inspiration in their lives and studies:

- family and extended family
- part-time and voluntary work
- hobby
- religious organization

- teacher education institution
- sport
- fellow students
- friends (outside of the teacher education institution)

Ethical clearance was obtained for the project from the institutional research ethics committee, and respondents were informed that all procedures would be anonymous and confidential, and that their participation was voluntary.

Of all student teachers (i.e. all BEd I, II, III, and IV and PGCE students,  $N = c. 3,200$ ) at the three campuses of a South African university, 1,683 completed the questionnaire (52.6%). Respondents included all South African population groups.

The results were subjected to routine factor analysis, and the means, standard deviations, medians, and frequency distribution of the responses to each question were calculated. Results were also analysed by means of factor analysis per population group, but no significant differences between the various population groups regarding their sources of inspiration, and the rank order of their sources of inspiration, could be established.

## Findings

The factor analysis yielded 12 factors explaining 51.03% of the total variance in the data pool. The names of the factors and the percentage of the variance that each explains are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** The factors: Names and explanation of variance

Factor	Percentage of variance explained by factor	Cumulative percentage of variance explained by factor
1. Religion	20.12	20.12
2. Teaching practice, interaction with learners during teaching practice and emotional life	7.49	27.60
3. View of ideal lecturer	4.57	32.17
4. Friends; fellow-students, media	3.46	35.62
5. Reading books, magazines, and theoretical literature, reflection thereon	2.60	38.22
6. Interaction with mentor(s)	2.40	40.62
7. Family and extended family	2.11	42.74
8. Habits	2.08	44.81
9. Reflection about self and others and situation	1.70	46.51
10. Personal life	1.59	48.10
11. Sport and voluntary work	1.53	49.63
12. World and life view	1.40	51.03

Table 2 presents the numbers of the items that loaded onto the different factors. The aggregate mean response to and standard deviation of the responses to all the items pertaining to each factor are also presented in the Table 2. The Cronbach alpha coefficient of each factor is presented in Table 2 as well.

**Table 2** The factors: Items that loaded onto each factor; aggregate means and standard deviation of responses to questions pertaining to each factor; Cronbach alpha coefficient of each factor

Factor	Items	Responses to items: aggregate		$\alpha$
		Mean	<i>SD</i>	
1. Religion	8, 9, 10,11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 50, 52, 135	4.23	0.61	0.95
2. Teaching practice, interaction with learners during teaching practice and emotional life	58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 79, 80, 81, 82, 85	4.16	0.54	0.92
3. View/ideal lecturer, emotional life	90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100	4.33	0.60	0.92
4. Friends: fellow-students, media	26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 44	3.83	0.60	0.90
5. Reading books, magazines, theoretical literature and reflection thereupon	41, 42, 49, 83, 84, 85, 86, 126, 127, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134	3.70	0.57	0.85
6. Interaction with mentor	76, 77, 78, 87	3.94	0.81	0.81
7. Family and extended family	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	4.26	0.60	0.82
8. Habits	117, 119, 121, 1213, 124, 128, 129	3.61	0.63	0.68
9. Reflection about self and others and situation	112, 114	3.40	1.08	0.71
10. Personal life	46, 47, 48, 110,116	3.44	0.60	0.53
11. Sport and voluntary work	52, 53, 54, 57	4.02	0.70	0.70
12. View of life and world	109, 118, 120, 122	3.95	0.68	0.55

Items 43, 44, 45, 55, 56, 75, 88, 89, 111, 113, 115, 117, 119, 121, 125, and 135-156 did not load onto any of the factors. However, based on the theoretical framework, the average responses to items regarding the importance of the remuneration of teachers (item 149), the respect teachers are accorded in society (item 151), and the possibility of education being the option of study of last resort (item 150), are presented in Table 3.

Respondents' own indications of the importance of the contexts of inspiration are presented in Table 4.

**Table 3** Responses to items regarding the importance of the remuneration of teachers, the respect teachers enjoy in society, and the possibility of Education being the profession of last resort

Question	Mean responses
The salaries of teachers motivate me	2.59
The respect teachers are accorded in society motivates me to study education	1.72
I enrolled for Teacher Education because I could not obtain admission or a bursary for any other field of study	3.20

**Table 4** Respondents' allocation of weights to the respective contexts of inspiration

Question	Responses	
	Mean (7)	SD
Which of the following contexts inspire you most for your future profession? You have 100 marks to distribute among eight contexts:		
• part-time and voluntary work	8.68	12.36
• family and extended family	22.75	7.30
• hobby	9.73	13.17
• church/religious organization	20.81	11.79
• teacher education institution	14.96	8.60
• sport	9.65	5.95
• fellow students	8.67	7.99
• friends (outside the teacher education institution)	11.57	0.91

The rank orders of sources of inspiration for student teachers as derived from the factor analysis and from respondents' own direct allocation of weights to the various contexts of inspiration are presented in Table 5.

All but three of the 12 factors have Cronbach alpha values of 0.70 plus (Table 2), which attests, on the basis of the factor analysis, to the reliability of the constructs identified as sources of inspiration for student teachers (Maree, 2007:216).

Table 5 contains an interesting comparison. The rank order of factors representing the sources of inspiration of all the respondents, as they themselves opined in a straight question as to their sources of inspiration (fifth column), differs from the combined weights allocated to the inspirational contexts (second column). Family and extended family and religion, church/religious organization are clearly important sources of inspiration (coming out second and first, and third and second, respectively), whereas sport, voluntary work seem to play relatively minor roles as inspirational factors. The factor view of the ideal lecturer/emotional life as the strongest single inspirational factor (column 2) can be construed to refer to the emotional inspiration that flows from the example of teacher educators. Although friends outside of the teacher education context are deemed important as an inspirational context (4th in the fifth column, 8th in the factor analysis (second) column), the average of 3.83 indicates that it is nevertheless a strong source of inspiration. The same applies for fellow students.



**Table 5** Rank-order of importance of sources of inspiration for student teachers as derived from factor analysis, compared with respondents' own direct allocation of weights to the various contexts

Factor analysis ( <i>cf.</i> Table 2)			Respondents: own direct assessment ( <i>cf.</i> Table 4)		
Rank order	Source	Mean (5 pt scale)	Rank order	Source	Mean (%)
1	View/ideal lecturer, emotional life	4.33	1	Family and extended family	22.75
2	Family and extended family	4.26	2	Church/religious organization	20.81
3	Religion	4.23	3	Teacher education institution	14.96
4	Teaching Practice, interaction with learners during teaching practice and emotional life	4.16	4	Friends (outside of teacher education institution)	11.57
5	Sport and voluntary work	4.02	5	Hobby	9.73
6	View of life and world	3.95	6	Sport	9.65
7	Interaction with mentors	3.94	7	Part-time and voluntary work	8.68
8	Friends; fellow-students, media	3.83	8	Fellow students	8.67
9	Reading books, magazines, theoretical literature and reflection thereupon	3.70			
10	Habits	3.61			
11	Personal life	3.44			
12	Reflection about self and others and situation	3.40			

According to the weights allocated to the different sources (column 5), the most important source of inspiration is the (extended) family, followed by church/religious organization. Third was the teacher education institution, particularly the mental construct of the ideal lecturer — which came out ranking first in the factor analysis (column 2). The factor analysis (column 2) reveals that teaching practice and interaction with learners counted as a strong source of inspiration. The same applies for sport and voluntary part-time work. View of life and the other factors, ranked from 7 downwards, despite their lower ranking, are still important sources of inspiration in the lives of this group of respondents if one takes 3 (the midpoint of the five-point scale) as the cut-off point. This is confirmed by the weights that were allocated to these sources of inspiration (column 5).

By the same yardstick (3 as mid-point on the five-point scale), education as the only available profession played a smaller role in the choice of enrolling for a teacher education programme, while the remuneration of teachers and the respect teachers are accorded in South African society did not figure as sources of inspiration (Table 3).

## Discussion

The results of this study contradict some of the findings of Ekiz (2006). In our study, the possible financial benefits of being a teacher, for example, do not appear to be particularly inspiring, whereas the majority of the students in Ekiz's study who chose primary school teaching as a career indicated that they had done so not because of their interest, love, or commitment to teaching as a profession (the pedagogical ideals mentioned in the previous paragraph), but primarily because of economic reasons. His respondents pointed out that although they did not want to take up the teaching profession, the economic situation of their country at that particular time, and the inability to find a job after graduation, were incentives for their choice (Ekiz, 2006:78).

A hermeneutic phenomenological study of the five categories of reasons (proposed by Ekiz) why the relatively small group of students he worked with decided to choose teaching as a profession (2006:73-79) reveals, for example, little evidence of O'Grady and Richard's (2010) inspirational essentials of "divine guidance" or "influence". Furthermore they hardly reflect Jones's (2007:401,402) notion of "enduring significance". In terms of Thrash and Elliot's understanding of the exciting, uplifting, invigorating, insightful, evocative, transcending, life-giving and engaging semantic values of inspiration (2003:*passim*), Ekiz's respondents appear to have been rather materialistically self-centred, one-dimensional and pedagogically pragmatic as far as the factors that may have influenced them in choosing the teaching profession are concerned.

The results of this study (Tables 1, 2, and 5) suggest a well-established sense of caring and compassion for others (Ethic of Caring), coupled with a lifestyle that includes service to others (Charitable Involvement). They also suggest (although to a lesser degree than might have been expected) that students who wish to enter into teaching as a profession experienced a kind of ecumenical inclination, in other words, a desire to explore and feel a strong connection to all humanity (Astin & Astin, 2010:4) We may also note the emphasis on religion and on other people, including fellow students and friends. The purposive, probative, transcending and directional forces of the above sources of inspiration appear to be largely absent among the findings in Ekiz's study.

Although the results of Ekiz's study and of this study appear to be contradictory in some respects, both show that the reasons why students choose teaching as a profession may vary

in philosophical profundity from the apparently materialistically self-centred, one-dimensional and pedagogically pragmatic, to altruistic, socially refined connectedness. It also shows the difference of factors in various national contexts. Valuable follow-up research to this study would be in comparative educational investigations of sources of inspiration of teacher students in different, national contexts, thus explicating the role of context in the operation of sources of inspiration.

Jansen (2009) concurs with Ausubel (1978) and Arends et al. (1998) that teacher education is *inter alia* determined by the need to deal with or to rectify, as the case may be, the knowledge that students already possess and carry with them from outside into the teacher education classrooms, the “knowledge in the blood.” The sources of inspiration revealed in this investigation represent powerful forces, the “knowledge in their blood” which student teachers bring with them into lecture halls. Follow-up research could show how these forces may be harnessed for the maintenance of a professional teacher corps empowered to play their part in putting in place an education system of high quality, capable of effecting a much desired societal reconstruction.

## Conclusion

Not much research is available about what exactly inspires, motivates or drives student teachers to involve themselves in teacher education programmes and to persist with their studies. This study confirmed that certain inspirational contexts may play an inspirational role in their lives, for instance, their family, friends outside of the training context, their fellow students/peer group, their religion and faith, teaching practice in schools, the theoretical training and mentoring provided by their teacher educators, and several other contexts such as the media, culture, literature, hobbies, sport and part-time work. Based on the tenets of substantial, naturalistic generalization, there is a possibility that these factors may also play an inspirational role in the studies and lives of student teachers elsewhere.

## Note

1 A copy of the questionnaire can be obtained from the authors.

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