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by David E. Vocke and James V. Foran
Abstract
With the teaching profession under attack from political, social, and economic forces, what is attracting individuals to seek out careers in education? Sort out the facts from the biases with evidence to guide your informed, thoughtful decision about teaching as a viable career option.

Key words: careers in teaching, motive for teaching

Why do people seeking satisfying careers choose to enter the teaching profession? Surveys over the years have consistently identified key motivators for choosing a career in teaching as a love of students, interest in subject matter, and the opportunity to perform a valuable service to society. In general, individuals enter the teaching profession for altruistic reasons because they see teaching as socially worthwhile (Heinz, 2015).

Unfortunately, a growing number of negative influences are casting a shadow over public education. Prospective teachers should be aware of the current climate surrounding public schools as they make an informed decision about a career in education. They should balance the research on public schooling with the realities, both negative and positive.

Job Market
Some question the viability of a teaching career because of a fluctuating job market. In 2011–2012, 84% of districts eliminated teaching positions (Roberts, 2011). In contrast, the 2015–2016 hiring season was one characterized by teacher shortages, and such shortages are projected to be a growing phenomenon in the years to come (Billups, 2016; Sutch, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Hussar and Bailey (2013), writing for the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), reported that the student–teacher ratio has been consistent over the past few years; they attributed shortages to variances in the regional demands for teachers. For a variety of reasons, teachers are hesitant to seek employment where demand is the greatest (Brenneman, 2015). Hussar and Bailey (2013) suggested that there should be a rising demand for teachers because of enrollment growth and an increasing number of teacher retirements. The reality, however, is that budget constraints may be causing many districts to hire fewer teachers even though class sizes are increasing. The combination of these factors may sometimes make finding full-time positions as classroom teachers difficult for new graduates.

Roberts (2011) suggested that some teaching positions have been eliminated because of shrinking budgets; yet, others project that improved economic conditions and declining enrollments in teacher education programs make teaching a field that is still hiring (Brenneman, 2015). Additionally, the U.S. Department of Labor (2015) predicted that jobs in education would grow by 8% from 2014 to 2024, keeping pace with increases across all occupations and generating 697,600 new jobs in education. Further, the median salary for teachers as of May 2015 was $47,220 versus an average of $36,200 for all occupations. These data should encourage college students to consider majoring in an education-related field.

Political Climate
In addition to job market considerations, the current political and social environment also causes prospective teachers pause as they consider career alternatives. The perceived poor performance of students on standardized testing measures, particularly international assessments, has yielded a loud call for educational reform. Some governors and legislators have introduced legislation to limit teachers’ collective bargaining rights and reduce taxpayer contributions to their pensions (Dillon, 2015).
2011). Other efforts have called for an increase in the number of years required for teachers to achieve tenure or elimination of tenure altogether (Robertson, 2015). Moreover, states across the country are adopting legislation requiring teachers to be evaluated, in part, based on the achievement gains of their students as measured by standardized tests, regardless of circumstances beyond the teachers’ control.

An expansion at the state level of school choice options, such as charter schools and vouchers, seems to undermine the status of public school teachers because those options are often characterized as alternatives to the “bad” public schools and hence the “bad” teachers. Accordingly, many state political leaders are pushing legislation that paints teachers as obstacles to be excluded from decision-making that affects the education system (Perez, 2011).

Increased federal involvement in education during the past two decades likewise has created a negative climate for teachers. The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and Race to the Top (RTTT) program, which provided considerable financial incentives for states, undermined the public’s confidence in teachers (Croft, Roberts, & Stenhouse, 2016). On a parallel track, the Common Core State Standards were immediately controversial in that their prescriptive nature is perceived as inhibiting teachers from being creative in the classroom. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education instituted a process that essentially allowed the Secretary of Education to waive state violations of NCLB legislation, even for states that did not participate in RTTT, provided those states agreed to adopt certain policies that were the cornerstone of RTTT—for example, standards and teacher evaluation based on test performance. For all practical purposes, states could not say no without facing serious consequences. Black (2015) suggested that the waiver process amounted to a federalizing of education at the expense of state autonomy, further eroding the role of states and the perceptions of the classroom teacher.

Though teachers have been labeled by many politicians as part of the problem rather than part of the solution for the perceived ailments within the American education system, Diane Ravitch praised teachers for their “forbearance to put up with the bologna that’s being shoved on them by their state capitals and by the national government” (Jehlen, 2010, para. 4). The recently reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act, titled the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), seems to hold great promise in eliminating many of the disincentives for teachers to enter the profession as well as ameliorates the deleterious effects of NCLB and what many consider the broad overreach of the federal government in public education. ESSA also returns much of the decision-making authority and autonomy to the states in such areas as accountability, standards, and teacher evaluation—the very areas that have negatively affected teachers the most. It will be interesting to see where the policies of the new administration will impact the teaching profession.

**Status of the Profession**

The teaching profession in the United States no longer maintains the same high status as it once did, nor does it compare with the status teachers enjoy in the world’s best-performing economies (Paine & Schleicher, 2011). Finnish teachers are afforded a status comparable to what doctors and military officers enjoy in the United States, and Singapore is held in high regard for selecting teaching candidates from the top one third of secondary school graduates and providing them a monthly stipend during their college training (Paine & Schleicher, 2011).

Though teachers are feeling the backlash of the political environment, there is high regard of the profession among the general public, as demonstrated in a number of polls. For
example, in the 2014 Harris Poll that ranked the prestige of occupations, teaching was tied for tenth place—with 60% of the public linking the ratings great deal of prestige (21%) or prestige (40%) to teachers (Pollack, 2014). Most impressive is the longitudinal trend of the data in this poll; there has been consistent growth in teachers’ standing on the prestige scale since 1977, when teaching was ranked as a prestigious profession by only 29% of the public (Corso, 2005). Teachers remain in the top 10 most prestigious professions in spite of recent negative publicity (McCarthy, 2014), and 81% of parents said they would encourage their children to become teachers (Pollack, 2014).

Additional evidence of the public’s positive perception of teachers is reflected in the annual PDK/Gallup Polls. Teachers received a grade of A or B by 69% of respondents (Bushaw & Lopez, 2011). Additionally, 55% of respondents indicated that high-achieving students should be recruited to become teachers (PDK International, 2015b), and 57% “would like their child to take up teaching in the public schools as a career” (Bushaw & Calderon, 2014, p. 51). Finally, when asked whether they have trust and confidence in the men and women who are teaching in the public schools, 62% of public school parents surveyed in 2015 indicated they had such confidence (PDK International, 2015b). Moreover, parents are upset about political mandates on public schools. For instance, 55% of parent respondents opposed using student standardized tests to evaluate teachers (PDK International, 2015a).

Surely negative press affects the public’s support for teachers; nonetheless, the fact that there is still strong support should be a motivator for prospective new teachers. In short, the public seems to have an opinion of teachers and teaching that is quite favorable. Once again, ESSA has the potential of positively addressing many of the issues that continue to affect the public’s perception of teachers and schools.

**Teacher Preparation**

Not just teachers, but also teacher training institutions are subject to criticism. In their report, *Closing the Talent Gap*, Auguste, Kihn, and Miller (2010) cited Department of Education data that approximately 80% of teachers enter the profession through traditional certification paths, but then suggested that many of the 1,450 schools, colleges, and departments of education are held in low regard. According to Auguste and colleagues (2010), more than half of teachers are trained in schools with low admission standards, and many of those institutions accept nearly everyone who applies. In this same report, the authors go on to claim that nearly half of the nation’s teachers come from the bottom third of their college classes and suggest that the percentage increases when focusing on teachers working in low-income schools.

In contrast, other research challenges claims of poor academic performance by members of the teaching corps. In one study, Ingersoll and Merrill (2010) noted the number of teachers from top colleges and universities has increased (by 59% for females and by 29% for males) as the teaching force has grown. In sheer numbers, the teaching profession is attracting more of the best and brightest than it has in past years. An Educational Testing Service (ETS) study of Praxis II test-takers from 2002 to 2005 found that the percentages of candidates earning higher than a 3.5 undergraduate grade-point average increased from 27% to 40%, indicating a significant improvement in the quality of the teacher pool compared to the 1994–1997 comparison group (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education [AACTE], 2012). An additional study suggested that SAT Verbal and Math scores of those who passed the Praxis test showed substantial gains that were significantly above those of the general testing population (AACTE, 2012). Such evidence serves to refute the notion that teachers are drawn from the lower academic...
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achievers and to encourage strong performers to consider teacher education programs.

Proposed U.S. Department of Education regulations for the evaluation of teacher preparation programs, as of this writing, have not been finalized. Initially, the regulations included mandates for states to evaluate these programs based on the performance of their graduates; but that requirement likely will be omitted from the final regulations (Sawchuk, 2016). Criticisms of these proposed regulations mirror those that were raised and later ameliorated in NCLB, namely placing blame on teachers, being overreliant on student test-score growth as evidence of effective programs, and undermining efforts in getting more low-income and minority teachers into the field of education. The final regulations, ideally, will take a more commonsense approach to teacher preparation programs as has ESSA for public schools. Of course, as with any change in administration in Washington, DC, it is likely that these regulations will get renewed scrutiny resulting in possible additional changes in the future.

Realities of the Classroom
In addition to the social, economic, and political forces putting pressures on public education, the realities of the classroom—especially in high-poverty schools—can be daunting. Interfering with learning are many factors outside a teacher’s control. Hungry and improperly clothed children, as well as those acting out behaviorally, are difficult to motivate. In classes that include students who are three grade levels behind, it is challenging for teachers to focus on grade-level standards.

Teachers often cite the lack of effective leadership as a factor associated with the decision to leave a school (Sutcher et al., 2016). Additionally, the system for evaluating principal leadership is often ineffective (Stronge, 2013). On the other hand, good principals are like teacher magnets—they attract the best and brightest to be on their teams. Eighty-five percent of teachers give positive ratings to their principals (MetLife, 2013), suggesting that poor principals are in a distinct minority. Yet there is a growing consensus suggesting that states and local education agencies must take seriously the development of the next generation of school leaders (Mana, 2015).

Yes, teachers experience great challenges in their classrooms and schools. Nonetheless, one needs only to ask veteran classroom teachers what it is that makes them continue to teach to hear the counterarguments. Following are some sample responses to the question, “Why do you teach?” (Education Trust, 2016; Wagner, 2009). Career teachers appreciate the opportunity to reach the hearts and minds of young people, to see children grow intellectually and personally, to experience the satisfaction of accomplishing something important on any given day, and to feel the sense of helping change the world—one child at a time. For teachers, every day is different, and no single day is boring. They enjoy the feedback, energy, and enthusiasm they get from their students and, for the most part, they love the freedom they have once they close their doors. Teachers are sustained by the curiosity of the students and the ability to witness children exploring their uniqueness. They also enjoy the laughter and the unexpected. Finally, they are fulfilled by giving the gift of knowledge, a return of a precious gift that they were once given.

Job Satisfaction
Considering all of the negative influences and disincentives for entering the teaching profession, it should be no wonder that teacher job satisfaction (in the category very satisfied) fell 23 percentage points between 2008 and 2012 (MetLife, 2013). While such information might concern prospective teacher candidates, the perceptions of current teachers provide a more balanced view of the profession.

During the first decade of the 21st century, teachers as a group indicated a growing
satisfaction with teaching as a career. Sixty-six percent of teachers surveyed by the National Education Association in 2005–2006 indicated that, given another chance to choose a career, they again would choose teaching (Wolman, 2010). According to The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher in 2008 (MetLife, 2008), 62% of teachers indicated they were very satisfied and 32% were somewhat satisfied with teaching as a career.

A more recent MetLife Survey (2013), however, reported teacher job satisfaction at the very satisfied level at 39% in 2012—the lowest it has been since 1986. The drop in satisfaction, according to the survey, is mostly due to stresses experienced among mid-career teachers where two thirds or more of the students are from low-income households. On the plus side, the survey stated that principals have confidence in their teachers, rating nearly 98% of them as satisfactory in their performance.

Interestingly, while teacher satisfaction has fallen recently, the same trend exists for most occupations—suggesting that other forces, such as the Great Recession of 2008–2010, may be influencing the dissatisfaction of all workers. Adams (2014) reported that in a survey conducted by Forbes, 52.3% of Americans said they were unhappy at work. If the economy continues to improve, conditions for all workers should take a turn for the better.

Making an Impact

Richard DuFour (2015) refuted criticisms of educators and public schools and provided a hopeful and inspirational note for the future: “No generation of American educators has ever accomplished what our teachers and administrators are achieving today” (p. 14). As evidence, he cited two firsts in the history of the United States: (a) The high school graduation rate for the class of 2012 exceeded 80%; and (b) 20% of the high school graduating class scored 3 or higher on the Advanced Placement exams. DuFour (2015) claimed that students have shown steady and significant increases on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) since 1992.

DuFour (2015) also suggested, contrary to popular perceptions, that American students are doing well on international assessments. On the TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) assessment, America is one of only 12 countries to improve scores every year the test has been administered to fourth graders and one of only two countries that have improved every test cycle for eighth graders (DuFour, 2015).

While these data are indeed impressive, DuFour (2015) also suggested that these accomplishments come at a time when teachers are educating a more diverse student population of minority students, English language learners, students living in poverty, and students with disabilities—all of whom traditionally have struggled to succeed in school. He lauded educators’ sense of moral purpose, especially in light of little positive reinforcement. He concluded by stating, “Never have America’s educators accomplished so much for so many in the face of so many obstacles only to be subjected to unrelenting attacks and condemnation” (p. 21). Educators need to be able to filter out the noise and continue to improve their work with an increasingly challenging population while remaining proud of what they are accomplishing.

The Verdict: Choose Teaching

A balanced view of the condition of teaching includes critics who challenge the profession for a variety of reasons. Some are political in nature; some are real issues public schools face. On balance, though, teachers are extraordinarily resilient—likely due to the nature of those who enter the profession. No profession is without challenges, critics, and disincentives. Public support for schools remains strong. Many teachers remain satisfied in their careers in spite of significant challenges. The realities of the classroom,
including behavioral and language issues, as well as all the issues surrounding poverty, are certainly imposing. Yet, teachers still find their chosen career to be one that has significant influence on society and one where they feel fulfilled. Teachers have achieved remarkable accomplishments in the recent decades in educating an increasingly diverse student body.

The bottom line is this: Teaching remains an extraordinarily noble profession with intrinsic rewards that few other professions enjoy. And, to be clear, no other profession would be possible were it not for outstanding teachers. Teaching is not for the faint of heart, and it is not easy. Teachers have good days and bad days like any other profession. They must learn not to take aberrant student behavior personally; rather they need to understand that those behaviors reflect the voices of unheard and often neglected students who need help, which is why most teachers got into the profession in the first place. They must continue to build the relationships with students who so desperately need adult role models and professionals who truly care about them. The United States is facing many challenges as major demographic and economic shifts take place in schools and in society. Effective teachers are needed more than ever before to help create the educated, multicultural citizenry that is the bedrock of American democracy. Choose teaching; it is a noble and rewarding career.

References
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