

# Dancing with Demographers

by Heather-jane Robertson

**T**hese days demography is a hot topic in education circles. For the first time in years, it is widely expected that Canada's teachers will soon be in short supply, although the jury is still out on exactly how many, where, and in what subject areas. In fact, the jury is still out on whether an acute teacher shortage has already begun. Uncertainty begets inefficiency, and since efficiency has become the most desirable characteristic of the public sector, there is some urgency about this problem. Surely we should be able to confidently project today's supply-and-demand numbers and to forecast the exact nature and effects of a teacher shortage on public education. How hard can it be?

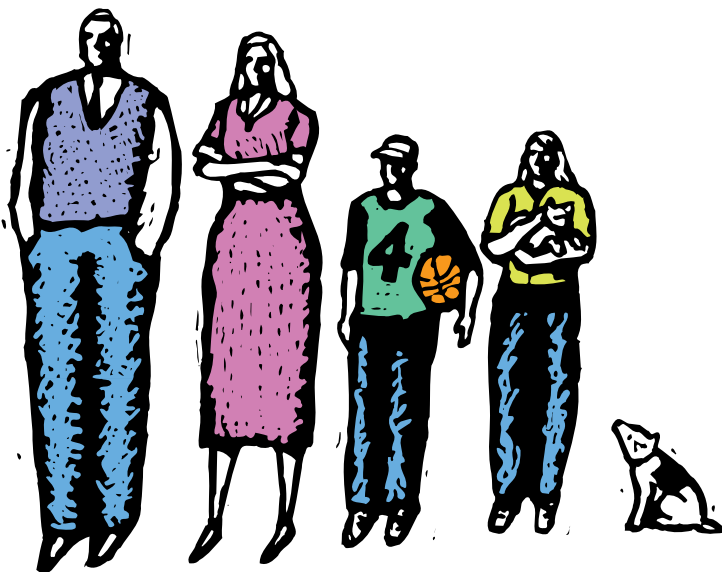
After all, in his best-seller *Boom, Bust and Echo*, author David Foot reassures us that the people who understand demographics understand two-thirds of everything.<sup>1</sup> What Dr. Foot didn't mention is that demography explains things particularly well when it is used as a rear view mirror. "Ah yes", we say, "it makes perfect sense that media has manufactured a 'tax revolt' that would resonate with the baby boomers who are belatedly trying to finance their retirements. No wonder healthcare eclipsed education as a public priority just when the over-sixties began to outnumber the under-fifteens. It's all so clear to us now."

There is another problem with David Foot's rule of thumb. What about the one-third of everything that demographers can't explain, or else get wrong?

Because it attempts to project behaviour as well as numbers, demography is far from exact science. It is always easier to be wrong than right when forecasting what will happen when multiple trends intersect. Even *Boom, Bust and Echo* made some notable errors, such as the confident prediction that "the demand for elementary school teachers will peak in about 1999 and then start to decline. Training to be an elementary school teacher is therefore a risky career choice in the mid-1990s."<sup>2</sup>

Oops. Many recent education graduates who ignored this advice are now happily fielding a fistful of job offers. Dr. Foot's calculations were wrong because although he accounted for the declining size of the student cohort, he ignored the diminishing teacher cohort, which has been aging more quickly than the general population. (Despite the way it sounds, this is not a snide comment on the well-being of stressed-out teachers. It refers to the anomaly that the average age of teachers is higher than the average age of the overall workforce, because so many teachers were hired in the sixties and so few in the seventies.)

It seems that all the demographic gurus get it wrong from time to time. In 1985, the Canadian Teachers' Federation held a national seminar on "The Dynamics of an Aging Teaching Profession." According to the published proceedings, OISE's John Holland and Saeed Quazi warned teacher organizations that "the increasing supply of potential teachers" was a much more severe problem than "decreasing demand for their services."<sup>3</sup> The speakers advised that despite teacher retirements, this oversupply would persist indefinitely: The "stock" of the university-educated was increasing, and the relatively high wages and security of public sector employment would always attract a high percentage of these graduates into the





## Demography explains things particularly well when it is used as a rear view mirror.

teaching force. Most seminar participants probably agreed with these conclusions. Fifteen years later, CTF would determine that since 1985, education degrees have represented a consistently declining share of all bachelor's degrees granted.

On the other hand, sometimes demographic projections are right despite themselves. In 1989, a CTF committee correctly predicted that a national teacher shortage would occur at about the end of the century, even though its calculations were based on projections that have turned out to be wildly inaccurate. Using StatsCan figures, the committee estimated that Newfoundland's student enrolment would reach 140,000 by 2006.<sup>4</sup> Sadly, today's estimates place this number at less than 72,000.<sup>5</sup> No supply-and-demand committee could have foreseen the tragic collapse of the fishery and the other circumstances that have resulted in the massive outmigration of Newfoundlanders, especially those with school-aged children. No supply-and-demand committee could have anticipated the wave of early retirement packages that would soon flow across the country and invalidate all its tidy calculations.

Our assumptions about stability and change colour all our predictions, even when we believe them to be rational and utterly objective. Statistical models may predict the relationship between deteriorating working conditions and the number of teachers who will leave teaching early in their careers, or predict how many of those who are trained as teachers will find other work, but in the end these models are based on hunches as much as anything else.

This uncertainty is unlikely to deter the demand for forecasts or influence their supply, both of which will continue to grow. However, in the long run, how the public perceives the problem of a teacher shortage and its consequences may well matter more than the finite numbers. While the statisticians are busy arguing over their assumptions, perhaps the rest of us can ponder other demographic matters that can't be captured by graphing calculators. Three topics come to mind.

First, what are the implications for the role and status of teachers in the event of a moderate or severe shortage of teachers? As public concern over the shortage of nurses grows, suddenly it seems to be a seller's market. Nurses are being offered large signing bonuses and subsidized mortgages, unequal benefits that are apparently uncontested by nurses' unions. American school boards are using the same tactics to lure teachers from other states and from Canada.

Teachers here may be amazed (and envious), but we should hardly be surprised. Market theory suggests that the value of the

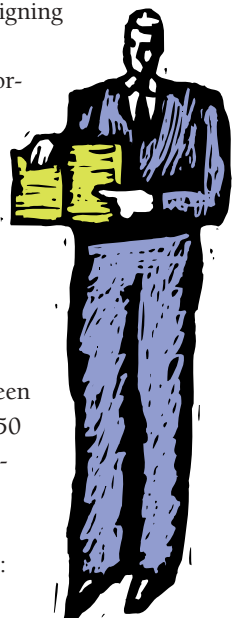
commodity known as "teacher" should increase in times of scarcity. If so, the profession can look forward to better working conditions, more respect, better pay and careful attention to the "satisfiers" that will attract and retain teachers. Happy times, eh?

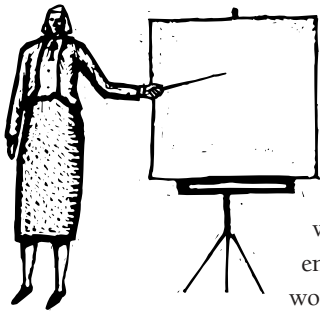
Or perhaps not. After all, in the last decade, the market has largely solved supply problems by resorting to just-in-time production. It has learned to meet an unanticipated demand for high-end, "branded" products with knock-off versions of the real thing, which the indiscriminating (or impecunious) can easily be convinced are equal or superior to the original. Why should education be spared the impartial efficiency of the "unseen hand" of the market? Particularly when the general competence of schools is under attack, why shouldn't we expect classrooms to be staffed with eager (and possibly cheaper) edu-serfs who can be easily dismissed if they don't deliver results? After all, as long as the classroom is hooked up to the internet, and unlicensed "teachers" are closely supervised – perhaps by videocams – there shouldn't be a problem. More standardized testing and a more tightly-controlled curricula should take care of any quality control concerns.

While we may want to believe that the knowledge society would especially value teachers as prototypical knowledge workers, we cannot hope to foster the same relationship between an information society and information workers. After all, information is hardly scarce, and it is increasingly cheap. There are many ways, some of them mechanical, to transmit information from one source to another that can not only eliminate signing bonuses, but also eliminate contracts altogether. Whenever education is cast primarily as acts of information transfer, we are inviting agents much cheaper than teachers to flood the market.

Second, whether the teacher shortage is mild and transitory or deep and prolonged, for the foreseeable future the profession will be bifurcated, divided between those in the first and last five years of their teaching careers. In 1971, youth ruled; there were three teachers between the ages of 20 and 24 for each one between 50 and 54. By 1995, there were 10 teachers over 50 for each one younger than 25.<sup>6</sup> By 2005, the numbers are expected to reverse again.

As the proportion of "new" and "old" teachers changes, contract priorities will undoubtedly shift: twenty-somethings are unlikely to be enthused about trading off today's income for the comfort of





disability insurance. Professional needs will change as well.

Outnumbered by 5- or 10- to 1, will teachers with 30 years' experience be forced to endure countless workshops on classroom management

and unit planning - perhaps just retribution for dominating a decade of staffroom conversation with talk about RV's and RRSP's? What about the lingering practice of giving the toughest assignments to the newest teachers? Would it not be sweetly ironic if the beginning teachers used their numbers to reverse the tables, to claim that only the sage wisdom of the last baby boomer on staff could possibly manage that particular group of grade nines in that particular portable?

Finally, it would be a good idea to think about the somewhat thorny issue of the feminization of the teaching profession. In 1985, Holland and Quazi's teacher supply model assumed that many (if not most) female university graduates would continue to be attracted to teaching because of its superior benefits. They expressed concern that this large pool of too-willing female workers could well undermine the recent contractual "achievements" of which teachers unions could be justly proud. These successes would be maintained "with a bit less difficulty if young women will give up the notion that teaching is a likely way to a well-paying job in the late 20th century."<sup>7</sup>

The conference report does not record whether these gentlemen were accused of sexism or praised for belling the cat. Either way, their observations may have been absolutely on target. After decades of being numerically dominated by women, in the early 1980's the teaching profession was attracting and retaining more male teachers. Many were predicting that "parity" was just around the corner. That same year, 1985, the percentage of Canadian teachers who were male was at its peak. It may be merely a coincidence, but 1985 was also the year that teachers' salaries peaked in comparison with the average industrial wage. Since then, both the percentage of the profession that is male and teachers' relative salaries have declined. Few labour analysts will see these as unrelated trends. It is well-documented that occupational categories dominated by women are less well paid (and enjoy less status) than those dominated by men.

## EN BREF

Alors que les démographes se disputent à propos de leurs hypothèses sur la profession enseignante et font des prédictions qui peuvent, ou non, s'avérer justes, plusieurs tendances démographiques qui défient les analyses statistiques affectent les enseignantes et enseignants. Même si le manque modéré ou sévère de personnel enseignant semble suggérer que nous sommes dans un marché favorable à ceux et celles « qui offrent leurs services », il existe des forces dans ce marché et dans la société qui nous obligent à remettre en question cette hypothèse. Qui peut prédire les conséquences professionnelles de l'équilibre changeant entre anciens et nouveaux enseignants, ou de la féminisation de la profession enseignante ? Il revient aux enseignantes et aux enseignants de trouver des réponses à ces questions, non aux démographes ou aux statisticiens.

These findings, of course, are at the crux of pay equity debates. But neither pay equity legislation nor equal pay itself can instantly erase decades of internalized stereotypes that have served to convince us, at least unconsciously, that most women seek jobs that are not too demanding so that they can devote more energy to their families. In addition, tasks done well by women are generally seen (particularly by men) as not terribly difficult. Nonetheless, jobs done predominantly by women are much more closely supervised, and women are granted less autonomy in performing tasks than are men in similar circumstances. (Don't shoot the messenger. I'm reporting the findings of research, not defending them.)

It is tempting to draw certain parallels between the decreasing autonomy of teachers during the last decade, and the increasing percentage of teachers who are women. It is always tempting to forecast the key characteristics of the future by projecting the prejudices of the present. After all, it would be the height of arrogance to assume that any generation is free of its history. Yet at the same time, knowing that the teaching profession of the next decade will be younger and more female (as well as more "worldly", better educated and more diverse) doesn't begin to tell us what will be most important about the future of this profession. Teachers with identical characteristics can be – no, are always – remarkably different human beings who approach their work and their students in remarkably different ways.

I propose that while we are waiting for the number-crunchers to predict who teachers will seem to be in the next decade, we contemplate who we really want to be professionally, what we want to change and what we want to keep. Neither biology nor demographics is necessarily destiny. After all, Dr. Foot claimed that demographics only explains two-thirds of everything. The most important third is still up for grabs.

1 David K. Foot, *Boom, Bust and Echo: How to Profit from the Coming Demographic Shift*, 1996 (Toronto: MacFarlane Walter & Ross), 2.

2 Ibid, 152.

3 Canadian Teachers' Federation, *The Dynamics of an Aging Teaching Profession, Proceedings of the Canadian Teachers' Federation Seminar*, presentation by John Holland and Saeed Quazi of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, (Ottawa: Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1985): 7.

4 Canadian Teachers' Federation, *Projections of Elementary and Secondary Enrolment and the Teaching Force in Canada 1987-88 to 2006-07* (Ottawa: 1997), 48.

5 Robert Crocker, *Teacher Supply and Demand in Newfoundland and Labrador: 1998-2010* (St. John's, NF: Memorial University of Newfoundland and the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers Association, November 1998), 28.

6 Statistics Canada, *Education in Canada*, 1995, Catalogue no. 81-229-XPB (Hull, CAN: Government of Canada).

7 Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1985: 47.

**Heather-jane Robertson** is director of professional development services at the Canadian Teachers' Federation. She is author of "No More Teachers, No More Books: The Commercialization of Canada's Schools" (McClelland & Stewart, 1998) and co-author with Maude Barlow of "Class Warfare: The Assault on Canada's Schools" (Key Porter, 1994).

hrobe@ctf-fce.ca