

# Stages in an Unstaged Occupation

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*Interviews with experienced teachers reveal evidence of typical stages in their professional development.*

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A segment of America's teaching force is middle-aged and has logged two and three decades of classroom teaching. These teachers began during a teacher shortage, witnessed the post-Sputnik curriculum boom, and experienced the liberalism of the 1960s and the teacher surplus and back-to-basics trend of the 1970s. In their personal lives they have moved from young adulthood into middle age. They have accumulated vast experience peculiar to their era, age, and occupation. How have these teachers developed through the years? What is their view of their life work? With the prediction of an increase in the proportion of career teachers has come a greater interest in their long-term professional development.

Because there is little opportunity for advancement in the usual sense, the occupation of teaching has been characterized as "unstaged" (Lortie, p. 82). While a few teachers become educational administrators, the majority either remain in the classroom or leave the occupation. Do classroom

teachers somehow stage their careers or is each school year a repeated cycle? In popular phraseology the question is: Has the teacher had 25 years of experience or one year of experience 25 times?

On the assumption that career teachers would be an excellent source of information about their development, I conducted an exploratory study in which ten middle-aged, experienced teachers gave narrative accounts of their teaching careers (Newman). The teachers were from urban, suburban, and rural central Ohio. They discussed the positions they had held, various grades and levels taught, their feelings about their jobs, and their awareness of changing times. From their accounts emerged several tentative stages of teacher career development; their professional energies, their commitment, and their satisfaction had changed over the years.

## Initiating the Career

Although all ten teachers saw the roots of a desire to teach in their childhoods, most made the decision to become teachers in college. Half fully expected teaching to be a lifetime career.

The teachers viewed their

teacher training positively, although several admittedly held low expectations of it. The first year of teaching, so all-important in the minds of many administrators, professors, and young teachers, did not stand out in the memories of the ten experienced teachers. Only a few recalled it distinctly and then not for its significance in learning to teach.

### The First Decade

The first decade was a time of high satisfaction for most of the teachers. They were enthusiastic about their new jobs, and their confidence increased with the realization that they were learning and succeeding. They felt they reached maturity during this time. Any dissatisfactions were attributed to the particular school situation, not to the occupation of teaching itself.

During these years the teachers moved from school to school, grade to grade, and/or subject to subject. They changed school systems for a more desirable community in which to settle down, for the opportunity to do graduate study at a nearby university, or in a relocation following a spouse's new position. They switched levels and subjects either to get out of teaching situations in which they were unhappy or when asked by an administrator to fill another open position; they found they enjoyed this new level or subject and decided to stay with it.

These early years were also a time of reconsideration of the decision to have a teaching career. Should they enter business, school administration, or college teaching? Because the work seemed more personally rewarding or the occupational conditions were more favorable, they stayed in the classroom. Women, having taken time off to start families, returned to teaching. The decision to remain in



the classroom was reaffirmed by their early thirties.

I decided to go for a master's degree in educational administration. I came to Columbus to teach and to get my master's at the same time. I finished the degree, but after talking with my principal friends, I changed my mind about going into administration. It wasn't worth the hassle.

### A Time of Stability

By their mid-thirties, most of these teachers had settled into a stable position in a particular school system and school, teaching the desired subjects at the preferred grade level. There they were to remain until the point at which, after 30 years of service, they could consider retirement. It was a time of continuing their effective teaching, experiencing the ups and downs of unique years and classes, updating certain aspects of their teaching, and adjusting to the changing times.

For some teachers this was a time of major changes in their own teaching behaviors and attitudes. They described long-term trends toward greater flexibility in dealing with students, better rapport with young people, but a loss of energy and increase in fatigue.





### A Good Decision?

At a point in their early forties a majority of the teachers experienced a drop in satisfaction with teaching. It is possible that the decrease was an indication of midlife stress. However none of the teachers attributed the decrease to his or her own aging process; furthermore, most of the teachers were in their early forties during the turbulent period of the late 1960s.

Closely related to the drop in satisfaction was a realization by several teachers that they were "getting in a rut"; they made changes in schools and/or grade levels to revitalize themselves.

After ten years at Marshall Junior High I realized I was one of the few original teachers remaining. The others had gone on to be principals or high school teachers or to get married. I began to wonder what was wrong with me. Everyone else seemed more successful. So I asked for a transfer to a new school that would open the following fall. I was hoping for the same kind of rebirth I had experienced when I came to Marshall.

A majority of the teachers, at some time between their early forties and early fifties, had temporarily refused to join the teachers' organizations. They were disgusted with the state and national associations becoming more like unions in their tolerance of strikes, support of political candidates, and control over the members. The teachers were distressed by how

the teacher's image in society had changed since they had begun their careers. Their withdrawal from membership coincided with a dip in association membership at the local, state, and national levels. After a few years out, the teachers rejoined for protection and to show support for fellow teachers.

### Time to Leave?

As the teachers drew near the point at which after 30 years of service they could retire without sacrificing benefits, they seemed to face a crisis in deciding whether to retire. The decision was complex; several sources of inner turmoil were evident. Some wished to retire but could not afford it financially. Several felt sorry that teaching was not what it used to be in many ways. Some, although currently not satisfied, felt they did not regret a career spent teaching.

When I started teaching, I had six classes with about 43 in each class. If I had not been young I could not have handled it. Today I have only 27 in each class and only five classes, and I am shot by the end of the day. So the load is about half, but the kids are so different that it takes every bit of energy to keep them in line, keep them going, and keep them responding. I've enjoyed teaching up to this point. I'm really tired this year.

Only two teachers had felt long-term high satisfaction with teaching, had definite plans for the future, and felt no ambivalence about these plans. Some teachers

still enjoyed teaching but felt the pull between the desire to teach and the desire to pursue other interests.

I'm at the point now where I try to think about retiring. I'm hoping that we can work out a schedule for me to teach only three days a week next year. I hate to give up teaching, but I'm getting a little jealous of the time I have to spend here when there are some other things I want to do. Three days a week will allow me a little more time for some of the hobbies I want to do. I'm not sure I'll be satisfied not teaching. I happen to enjoy teaching.

Whether these stages of career development are common to teachers of other ages and other eras has yet to be determined. What is more significant is the concept of stages within a teaching career. While stages have been posited for the process of learning to teach, the notion of development in long-term teaching is just beginning to receive serious attention. It has a great deal of potential for increased teacher self-understanding and for a more solid foundation of inservice education. ET

### References

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