

The Winding Path

Understanding the Career Cycle of Teachers

Susan K. Lynn

Susan K. Lynn is an associate professor of physical education at Florida State University, in Tallahassee.

Teachers are a primary component for educational excellence, and the need to attract and retain highly capable individuals to the teaching profession is clear (Holmes Group 1986, Carnegie Forum 1986, National Governors Association 1986). In response to that need, numerous reform efforts, including programs, plans, and recommendations, have emerged in an attempt to professionalize teaching and make the career more rewarding. Many of those reforms are predicated on the assumption that teachers develop through different career stages and undergo continual change.

Within the adult development and career development literature are theories and studies that acknowledge that teachers have different attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors at various points during their career. Early models viewed teachers' careers as progressing through three or four sequential stages (Burden 1982; Newman, Burden, and Applegate 1980). Later models have attempted to incorporate the career stages and principles of adult growth and development (Fessler 1985, Leithwood 1990, Super 1994). The literature suggests that the characteristics of teachers that appear to change are their concerns, instructional behaviors, understanding of children, awareness and understanding of the school and teaching environment, and perceptions of themselves, their work, and their profes-

sions. The literature describes the variability that occurs in the areas of personal awareness, cognitive development, interpersonal development, and theoretical knowledge. Implied is the idea that as teachers' characteristics change, their needs with regard to professional activities, relationships, and interests will change accordingly.

The teacher career cycle model incorporates both the literature on career stages and the literature on adult growth and development (Fessler 1992) (see figure 1). The model is an attempt to describe the teacher career cycle within the context of a dynamic and flexible social system. The career cycle itself progresses through stages, not in a lock-step, linear fashion, but in a dynamic manner reflecting responses to personal and organizational environmental factors.

Among the variables from the personal environment that affect the career cycle are family support structures, positive critical incidents, life crises, individual dispositions, and avocational outlets. The organizational environment of schools and school systems compose a second major category of influence on the career cycle; among the influential variables are school regulations, management style of administrators and supervisors, atmosphere of public trust in the community, expectations of the community for its educational system, activities of professional organizations and associations, and union atmosphere.

The model proposes that a supportive, nurturing environment can assist a teacher in the pursuit of a positive career progression. Alternatively, an environmental atmosphere that includes negative pressures and conflicts can have an adverse effect on a teacher's career path. Fessler's (1992) career cycle model, based on self-reported

"The Winding Path: Understanding the Career Cycle of Teachers," Susan K. Lynn in *The Clearing House*, March/April 2002, pp. 179-182. Copyright © 2001. Reprinted with permission of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation. Published by Heldref Publications, 1319 Eighteenth St., NW, Washington, DC 20036-1802.

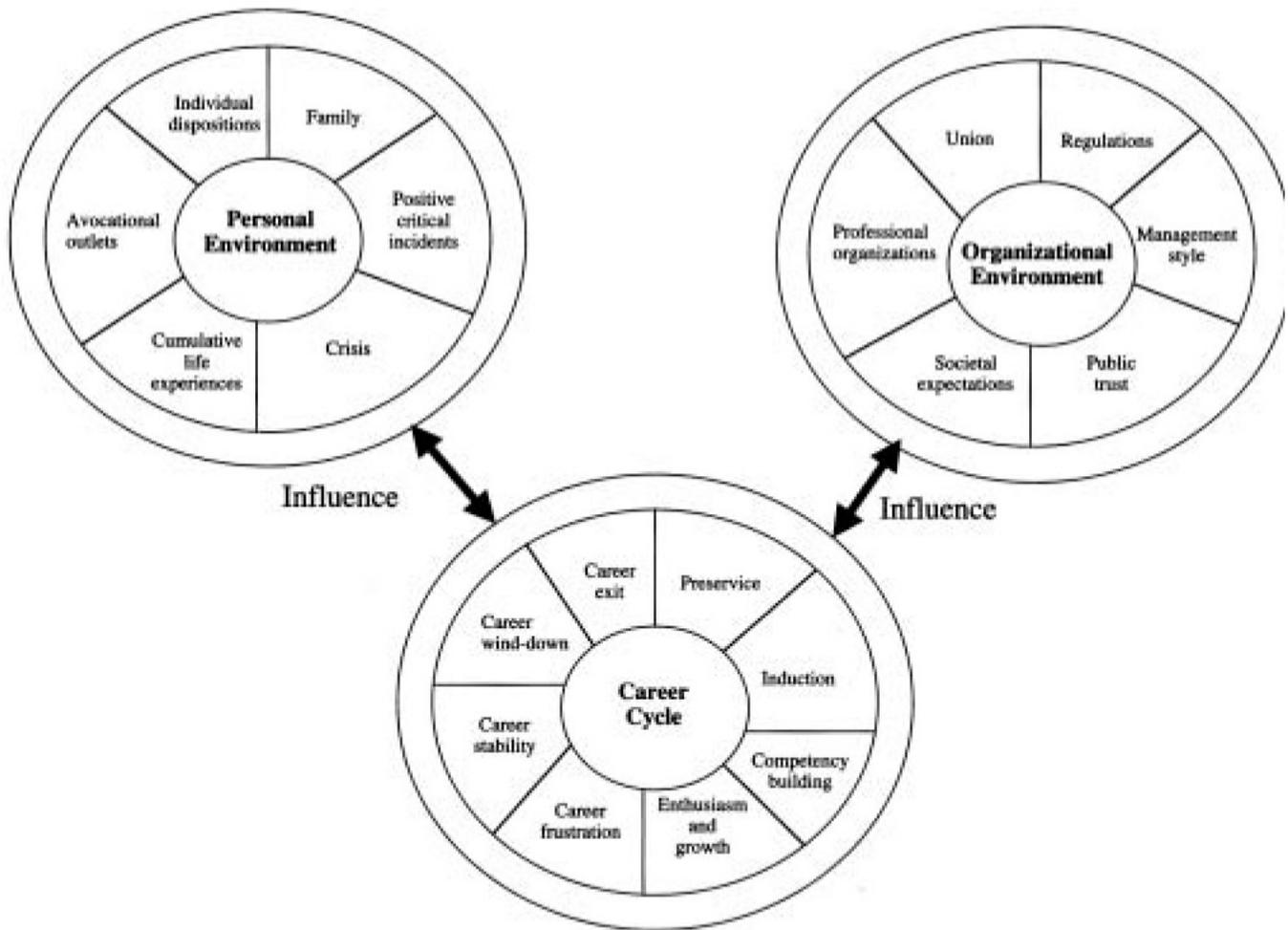


Figure 1. Model of the Teacher Career Cycle and Environmental Influences.

characteristics of teachers on the variables of enthusiasm, interactive teaching skills, attitudes toward students and teaching, and attitudes toward the teaching profession, consists of eight stages: preservice, induction, competency building, enthusiasm and growth, career frustration, career stability, career wind-down, and career exit.

PRESERVICE

The preservice stage is the beginning period of preparation for a specific professional role. This includes initial study in a college or university or retraining for a new role or assignment, either by attending a higher education institution or participating in staff development within the work setting. Typically a teacher who changes positions within the profession, as from teaching high school algebra to teaching fourth grade, or who changes professions completely, as from teaching third grade to owning a business, will find herself back in the preservice career phase.

INDUCTION

The induction stage is generally defined as the first few years of teaching, when the teacher is socialized into the professional and social fabric of the school and community. For example, as a first-year teacher Sarah is implementing a discipline strategy recommended by several of her colleagues who are veteran teachers. Although she recognizes the inappropriateness of the strategy from the perspective of her preservice preparation program, Sarah uses the strategy with her students merely to placate her colleagues. They are socializing her to be in sync with their more traditional teaching practices.

During the induction period new teachers strive for acceptance by students, peers, and supervisors and attempt to achieve comfort and security in dealing with everyday problems and issues. Although induction is usually viewed as the time when teachers go from preservice preparation to full-time classroom instruction, as Sarah did, teachers may also experience the induction stage when shifting to another grade level or subject, another building, or another job.

COMPETENCY BUILDING

During this stage of the career cycle, the teacher strives to improve teaching skills and abilities by seeking out new materials, methods, and strategies. Teachers at this stage are receptive to new ideas, attend workshops and conferences willingly, and enroll in graduate programs through their own initiative. They see their job as challenging and they are eager to improve their repertoire of skills. For example, to help his students concept-map short stories, Frank, a fifth-year middle school English teacher, implements a new computer program he learned about while attending a computer education conference during the summer. Frank and other competency-build-ing teachers are attempting to develop a feeling of confidence and comfort in their teacher knowledge and skills.

Fessler (1992) considers this a critical period in the career cycle. He suggests that those teachers who are successful in building confidence in and skill with their teaching competencies will likely move forward to an enthusiastic and growing stage, whereas those who do not may experience a level of frustration that can even result in early career exit.

ENTHUSIASM AND GROWTH

At the enthusiasm and growth stage, teachers have reached a high level of competence in their jobs but continue to progress as professionals. Teachers in this stage love their jobs, look forward to going to school and to interacting with their students, and are constantly seeking new ways to enrich their teaching. Hollie, a secondary physical education teacher, can be identified as being in an enthusiastic and growing phase of her career cycle. She is a master teacher who is competent and self-confident; she is also active in her state physical education organization, attends the yearly conference, and serves on numerous committees. Her students describe her as enthusiastic and as someone who appears to love her job. Within the school district Hollie lends a helping hand to other teachers and organizes workshops for the districts' secondary physical education teachers. Enthusiastic and growing teachers like Hollie not only experience high levels of job satisfaction, but also tend to have a positive impact on the climate of the school community.

CAREER FRUSTRATION

Unlike the enthusiasm and growth phase, the career frustration stage reflects a lack of job satisfaction, and the teacher may even question his or her choice of entering the profession. Frustration and disillusionment with teaching

characterize this career stage, and teacher burnout is common. Erika, a fifth-grade educator in her seventh year of teaching, has entered the career frustration stage. She has mixed emotions about her tenure as a teacher in a large inner-city school. Although Erika appreciates the relationships she has established with her colleagues, she harbors deep frustration with the factors that make the job so difficult: large classes, state testing of students, limited resources for classroom materials, mountains of paperwork, and a low salary. She feels powerless in the face of an immovable bureaucracy. Historically this frustration occurs during career midpoints; however, such feelings are on the rise among teachers in the relatively early years of their careers, particularly among teachers who face the continual threat of job loss due to budget cuts or those who face environmental problems too severe to overcome.

CAREER STABILITY

This stage marks the point when teachers may move into patterns of maintenance, stagnation, or renewed growth. Environmental factors play a huge role in determining which direction a teacher will go. For some it is a period when they have lost their enthusiasm for teaching and are simply going through the motions. For others, stability may reflect a period of maintaining a competent and steady commitment to teaching. Chad, a sixteen-year veteran of high school social studies teaching, is in the stability phase of his career. Chad still enjoys teaching but has settled into simply meeting the letter of his contract. He works hard during the school day but refuses to take work home. He takes on no extra activities. Teaching has become just another job. The stability stage of the career cycle can take place at any time for a variety of reasons. The needs of teachers at this stage vary greatly, as should professional development opportunities.

CAREER WIND-DOWN

Teachers preparing to leave the profession enter the career wind-down stage. For some, it may be a pleasant period during which they reflect on the many positive experiences they have had and look forward to a career change or retirement. For example, after twenty-nine years as an elementary school teacher and principal, Betsy is approaching her final year with a deep sense of satisfaction. She reflects on her career feeling good about the children whose lives she has influenced and grateful for having had the opportunity to make a difference. In contrast, for ten years Harry has loved his job as a sixth-grade teacher/coordinator of the gifted program. However, he learns that he has been reassigned to

a traditional fourth-grade classroom for the following year. For teachers like Harry career wind-down may be a period of mixed emotions, such as resentment for a forced job termination or reassignment or yearning to get out of an unrewarding job. The teacher remains excited by the profession but definitely feels that it is time to move on.

A person may spend weeks, months, or even several years in this stage. Although the career wind-down stage is generally viewed as a precursor to leaving the profession, for some teachers, like Harry, it may lead to a preservice or induction phase for a new position or role within a school or a new career outside of education.

Career Exit

The exit stage of a teacher's career represents the period of time after the teacher leaves the job, either through retirement after many years of service, involuntary dismissal, an elected career change, or temporary career exit for child care or other necessity. This may also be a time of alternative career exploration or of moving to a nonteaching position in education such as administration. For example, Brenda entered the career-exit stage after ten years as an art teacher when she accepted a position as an assistant principal, whereas Bill, a high school history and economics teacher, entered the career-exit stage to fulfill a lifelong dream of seeking elected office. Most career exits stimulate professional growth and offer gratification. When a teacher's leaving is involuntary, however, the exit can result in personal crisis.

SUMMARY

Movement in and between these eight stages is dynamic and flexible rather than static and linear. Teachers do not necessarily circulate through all the stages. At first glance it does appear that the model (Fessler 1992) represents a linear process, with an individual's entering at the preservice phase and progressing through each phase to the career exit. However, the significance of the teacher career cycle model lies in the implication that teachers move in and out of career stages in response to personal and organizational environmental conditions.

Consider the following scenario as a demonstration of the dynamic nature of the career cycle. A teacher in the career wind-down stage is about to leave the profession. Unexpectedly, his wife dies. The dramatic change in his personal life may result in a reassessment of his career wind-down decision. Depending on the nature of additional personal and organizational environmental conditions, the teacher may renew a commitment to teaching

and enter an enthusiastic and growing phase, or he may remain in the profession, being stable but stagnant.

CONCLUSION

Educational leaders should view a teacher's professional development and provide inservice and professional growth opportunities in light of his or her career cycle phase. Teacher development theory is predicated on the assumption that the needs of the beginning or novice teacher in the induction phase differ from that of an experienced teacher who has reached the enthusiasm and growth stage or has entered the stable phase. As a result, teachers must be motivated to seek continual growth through professional development that advocates personalized and individualized support systems.

To that end, induction-year teachers should be provided an individualized program that integrates the beginning teacher into the professional social fabric of the school. Such attention helps the beginner to recognize and manage the debilitating effects of isolation, self-doubt, stress, and anxiety often associated with the first year of teaching. The program should foster skills and habits that allow the beginning teacher to reduce or eliminate management problems known to trouble many beginning teachers. On the other hand, support systems for the enthusiastic and growing teacher might include opportunities for advanced study, collaboration and leadership, presenting at professional meetings, and increased autonomy.

For all teachers across the career cycle, the concept of staff development and professional growth should be broadened to include concern for the personal needs and problems of teachers, such as financial loss, divorce, illness of a loved one, and chemical abuse by a family member. Support systems should assist teachers in dealing with personal environmental factors that may likely affect their career path. Organizational policies on liberal sabbaticals, modification of job assignments, job sharing, and leaves of absence should be examined to provide support for teachers at various phases of the career cycle. Teachers at all career stages need support and assistance to realize their professional potential.

REFERENCES

- Burden, P. 1982. Implications of teacher career development: New roles for teachers, administrators and professors. *Action in Teacher Education* 4(4): 21–25.
- Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy. 1986. *A nation prepared: Teachers for the 21st century.*

- Washington, DC: Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy.
- Fessler, R. 1985. A model for teacher professional growth and development. In *Career-long teacher education*, ed. P. J. Burke and R. C. Heideman. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- . 1992. The teacher career cycle. In *The teacher career cycle: Understanding and guiding the professional development of teachers*, ed. R. Fessler and J. Christensen. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Holmes Group. 1986. *Tomorrow's teachers*. East Lansing, MI: Author.
- Leithwood, K. 1990. The principal's role in teacher development. In *Changing school culture through staff development*, ed.
- B. Joyce. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum.
- National Governors Association. 1986. *Time for results: The governors' 1991 report on education*. Washington, DC: National Governors Association.
- Newman, K., P. Burden, and J. Applegate. 1980. *Helping teachers examine their long-range development*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Association of Teacher Educators, Washington, D.C.
- Super, D. 1994. A life-span, life-space perspective on convergence. In *Convergence in career development theories: Implications for science and practice*, ed. M. Savikas and R. Lent. Palo Alto, CA: CPP Books.