



Resisting plateauing: Four veteran teachers' stories

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and interprets the career experiences of four veteran secondary teachers and their ability to resist plateauing. Three areas of veteran teacher research informed this study: career stages, plateauing, and resiliency. In-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted to investigate and depict the meanings these teachers attached to their career experiences.

Several factors emerged for each participant's resilience. First, building leaders influenced their enthusiasm and professional growth. Second, positive effects on students' lives affirmed their work. Third, interactions with colleagues promoted growth, and individual support systems helped them bounce back from career frustrations.

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1. Introduction and purpose

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (2005) report provides a comprehensive, international analysis of trends and developments in the teacher work force in 25 countries around the world. The report includes these startling facts: On average 25% of primary teachers and 30% of secondary teachers are over the age of 50 years old. In some countries, the average jumps to 40%. In addition, many countries cannot retain a core of experienced teachers. Recent international studies of veteran teachers (Ben-Peretz & McCulloch, 2009; Day & Gu, 2009; Gu & Day, 2007; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Tsui, 2009) demonstrate the pervasive issues that can impede teachers' enthusiasm over the course of time.

One way to keep teachers engaged in their work is to understand plateauing, a term used to describe the frustration and disillusionment some teachers may experience over the course of their tenure in the classroom (Milstein, 1989). Research on plateauing (Bardwick, 1986; Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Milstein, 1989, 1993; Near, 1984; Orpen, 1983; Slocum, Cron, Hansen, & Rawlings, 1985; Veiga, 1981) indicates that the stability achieved during one's tenure can be rewarding, but over time can lead to a sense of routine and stagnation. When work is perceived as repetitive and the possibility of promotion is remote, teachers are likely to become skeptical about achieving career fulfillment.

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Although researchers (Burke, Fessler, & Christensen, 1984; Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Huberman, 1989; Steffy, 1989; Vonk, 1989) found that some teachers are able to maintain their enthusiasm and continue to grow professionally throughout their careers, little research has been conducted to ascertain how these teachers are able to resist the negative effects of plateauing. Who are these teachers that have maintained their enthusiasm and idealism after working in the same position for over twenty years? What has kept these veteran teachers from plateauing, from becoming frustrated and disillusioned with their jobs? Do they possess resiliency characteristics? Is their resiliency related to the influence of their personal and organizational environments?

The purpose of this paper is to describe an exploratory study of resistance to plateauing in four veteran secondary teachers. They represent four teachers who, after more than twenty years in the classroom, are enthusiastic about their jobs and continue to grow as professionals.

2. The research design

The research perspective that underlies the study is phenomenology, which focuses on how individuals put together the phenomena they experience in order to make sense of the world (Patton, 1990). From this perspective, the only reality is the reality each individual comes to know and experience. The researcher attempts to enter the conceptual world of the participants to understand it as they do and to portray that understanding so that it will be insightful and illuminating for others. Given its phenomenological perspective, this study attempts to understand the

meaning of the events and interactions of these four veteran teachers during their careers by trying to come to understand their perceptions as they do.

3. Data collection

After our university's Internal Review Board approved the study's protocol, we contacted potential participants, explained the study, and secured their written informed consent. After the teachers were selected, we conducted three in-depth phenomenological interviews based on Seidman's (1998) model. Each interview lasted 60 min over the course of three months.

These interviews allowed the teachers to reflect upon their careers and allowed us to discuss their perceptions of their career development. We focused on their accounts of specific events and their responses and interpretations of those events. The interviews provided insights into how these teachers negotiated changes in their careers and how they maintained their enthusiasm.

We focused on each teacher's career history for the first interview. This interview concentrated on discovering who these teachers were and the experiences that had an impact on their careers. The first interview also helped build rapport with each participant. The second interview focused on the details of the experiences elicited in the first interview. Particular questions emerged from the first interview, and some of these questions differed for each participant. These questions yielded more details on the teachers' perceptions of their experiences. In the final interview, the teachers were asked to reflect upon the meanings of their career experiences.

4. Data analysis

We started the analysis by placing the data into smaller units. Strauss and Corbin (1990) term this "open coding." To keep each teacher's data discrete, we analyzed the data of only one teacher at a time, looking for significant statements and themes. We then utilized the NVIVO computer program to organize the data. When we coded each unit, we ascertained if it belonged to a previously labeled free node or if a new category emerged. Sometimes the analysis resulted in dual codes for data.

After completing the open coding process, we began axial coding, which is organizing the data in new ways by finding the connections between the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We looked at the context in which the phenomenon occurred for each participant and how each participant responded to the phenomenon. We began by rereading the units classified under free nodes, looking for those categories that overlapped and those that were no longer relevant. As we continued through the process, new categories emerged while others were eliminated. Finally, we examined the cases together to discover emergent themes. We investigated the similarities and differences among the participants. Again we grouped the data into meaning units and wrote textural descriptions. From this analysis three themes emerged: building leadership, student affirmation, and external support systems.

5. Methods for trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that triangulation is aimed at the discernment of the exactitude of data items. They add that one way to judge the accuracy of data is through the use of a second or third interview. Through the use of three interviews, we were able to probe areas that needed to be clarified, to place the participants' perceptions in context, and to explore new categories or ideas that emerged. This interview process gave the teachers and us the opportunity to make sense of their lived career experiences.

Seidman (1998) maintains that this process is critical to the establishment of internal validity.

We conducted member checks throughout this study. After we transcribed each interview, each participant received a copy to verify the information. After the transcripts were approved, we wrote their individual stories, and each teacher read his or her story, making any necessary corrections. After reading our revisions, all four teachers agreed that we had captured the essence of their experiences.

Peer examination supports internal validity by asking others to comment on the findings as they emerge (Merriam, 1998). Two outsiders read each participant's story and asked us questions, which helped to clarify the experiences and perceptions of the participants.

Merriam (1998) writes that thick description provides enough information to enable the reader to make connections between the context of the study and his or her own context, thus allowing for transferability. Through the use of interviews, our results provide a thick description of the setting, the participants, and their lived career experiences.

6. Context and participant selection

The research site is a suburban school district located in Pennsylvania. The area served has a population of 30,000 and a student population of 5700. The school district is comprised of one high school, two junior highs, and seven elementary schools. Only ten percent of the student population is considered to be from a low-income family.

Since this study was not aiming at generalizability in a statistical sense, a purposive sampling of teachers was best suited. We used a combination of sampling approaches involving intensity sampling (Patton, 1990), criterion-based sampling (Patton, 1990), and reputational-case selection (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993).

Patton (1990) describes intensity sampling as "information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely, but not extremely" (p. 171). The selected teachers exhibited a continued enthusiasm for teaching and a desire to grow as professionals. Criterion sampling was used to "review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance" (Patton, 1990, p. 176). Using previous research findings in the areas of career stages and plateauing (Burke et al., 1984; Milstein, 1993), we employed the following criteria: (1) the teachers completed at least twenty years of teaching in the district; and (2) according to their supervisors and other key informants, they innovate in their classrooms, volunteer for committees, seek ways to grow as professionals, discuss their jobs in a positive manner, and receive accolades from the community, the students, and their supervisors.

The key informants – the superintendent, the director of secondary education, the director of elementary education, building principals, department supervisors and chairpersons – read the criteria previously outlined and suggested appropriate participants. Thus, these key informants provided the starting point for the selection process. As the lists of teachers from the key informants were received, they were entered into a database. After the database was completed, we searched for names recommended by four or more key informants who had at least twenty years of service to the district.

Eventually, four teachers who fit the criteria were asked to complete two surveys. The first survey was Milstein's (1993) Educator Plateauing Survey. This survey was developed to determine the level of plateauing teachers experience in terms of their work, their organization, and their lives. It was developed during the summer and fall of 1988 and has a Kuder-Richardson reliability coefficient alpha of 0.82 (Milstein, 1993). The second instrument was the Teacher Career Cycle Inventory Self-Assessment of Career

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