

Longitudinal research on beginning teacher development: Complexity as a challenge to concerns-based stage theory

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Abstract

Stage theory represents a concise explanation for change in teacher professional development with gained experience in the classroom. This study examines the *self-task-impact* stage chronology proposed by concerns-based theory within the framework of longitudinal research on beginning teaching. The study investigated developmental change in a panel ($N = 79$) of beginning teachers across two years utilizing the Teacher Concerns Checklist, a concerns inventory, at six application points. Analysis of variance with Scheffé post hoc tests was utilized to rank categories of concerns and to test whether teacher and school contextual variables would affect these rankings. The results confirm findings of similar longitudinal studies, indicating teachers' concerns for *impact* consistently rank highest across time. Additionally, the ranking of concerns categories was not affected by the contextual variables. Two aspects of *impact*, one academic in orientation and the second consisting of personal and individual concerns for students, emerged as distinct dimensions across time. The author proposes a reconsideration of concerns-based theory for its limited ability to comprehensively explain the complex nature of teacher development. Rather than chronological, concerns are recurring and indicate the need to scaffold linkages between student learning, learning theory, and instructional practices early in teaching careers in lieu of singularly focused managerial aspects of teaching.

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Many researchers and theorists have proposed developmental changes in teachers with increased classroom experience (Berliner, 1988; Burden, 1981; Fuller, 1969; Fuller & Bown, 1975; Fuller, Parsons, & Watkins, 1974; George, 1978; Kagan, 1990; Katz, 1972). Such stage theories focus on distinct characteristics in teacher development often presented within a chronological framework unrelated to background of the teacher or teaching context.

Developmental theories offer parsimony in their comprehensiveness to the multiple contexts in which teaching and teacher development take place, but risk oversimplifying the complex nature of learning to teach (Bullough, 1990; Cattani, 2002; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). This article presents a study of teacher developmental theory across 2 years of beginning teaching. The results challenge notions of stage theory based on teachers' concerns and its chronology popular in the professional literature. Evidence is presented of a complex process in which student learning and well-being remain a primary

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focus as beginning teachers cope with the pragmatic concerns associated with notion of “survival” (Veenman, 1984). The results serve to inform research and theory directed towards recent calls for a reconceptualization of developmental theory based on teachers’ concerns (Conway & Clark, 2003).

1. Concerns as a framework for teacher developmental theory

As has been reported in recent issues of *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Fuller’s “concerns theory” (1969) continues to receive attention in a wide array of teacher education contexts: multi-culturalism, assessment, instructional innovation, education reform (Conway & Clark, 2003). An important strand in this literature is research, which utilizes concerns’ inventories based on Fuller’s original work, that investigates the chronology and nature of stages pre-service and in-service beginning teacher development (Adams & Martray, 1981; Adams, Hutchinson, & Martray, 1980; Conway & Clark, 2003; Dadlez, 1998; Kazelskis & Reeves, 1987; Lamanna, 1993; Reeves & Kazelskis, 1985; Schipull, 1990; Turley, 2002; Watzke, 2003). This work explores the fundamental nature of this theory, its generalizability to multiple beginning teacher contexts, and the viability of its stages.

Concerns theory proposes three developmental stages. The first stage is concern for *self*, reflected by feelings of self-adequacy, concerns for receiving good evaluations by administrators, and acceptance by students and colleagues. The second stage is described as concern about the teaching *task*, such as the instructional methods, delivery of the curriculum, and, in particular, perceived deterrents to effective teaching (e.g. too many non-instructional duties, poor instructional materials, high number of students). The third stage is *impact*. This stage represents concerns for “guiding, challenging, and meeting the diverse needs of students” (Schipull, 1990, p. 11). The *impact* stage represents the act of teaching the *whole person*—it differentiates between the first two stages because the teacher views her own self-development and the impact of effective teaching within the broader context of student socio-emotional well-being, motivation, and academic growth. Fuller proposed that these concerns follow a hierarchical pattern; one advances through the stages by addressing and resolving perceived problems at each consecutive stage.

Research on teacher development identifies as particularly problematic the beginning years of teaching. The challenges, issues, and processes by which teachers emerge during these early years is often described in the professional literature as a process of “survival” congruent with the *self* and *task* stages—a focus on student classroom discipline, management of classroom routines and procedures, the mechanics of teaching (lesson planning and instructional organization), development of effective teaching techniques, student interest and acceptance, and intense feelings of emotional inadequacy (Ammon & Lidstone, 2002; Berliner, 1988; Burden, 1981; Carter, 1990; Kagan, 1990; Katz, 1972; Nemser, 1983; Odell, 1986; Veenman, 1984). *Impact* represents teachers’ emergence from the process of survival into an advanced developmental stage. Instruction at this stage is characterized by contextualized, intuitive, and adaptive practice. The process of professional development itself is oriented towards higher levels of student learning, how students learn, and understanding and meeting the socio-emotional and academic needs of students as a means to facilitate student learning.

2. Problems with concerns theory

Concerns theory has been applied to a range of educational settings beyond teacher development in the form of the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (Hall & Hord, 2000). This broader application has served as a framework for monitoring the preparedness and experience of stakeholders in contexts ranging from training to institutional change: staff development, school reform, educational leadership, and organizational change (Hall, 1975; Loucks, 1983; Shotsberger & Crawford, 1996). Although popular in many educational contexts, concerns-based theory as a model to inform teacher development is not without problems.

The *self-task-impact* chronology, and underlying dimensions representing these developmental stages, has demonstrated considerable variation across longitudinal replication studies utilizing Fuller’s original instrumentation or adaptations to the concerns inventory. The importance of this research cannot be understated. Since concerns-based theory is longitudinal in nature, studies investigating cohorts of teachers across time and replicating instrumentation serve as a means to validate the comprehensiveness of this theory. Five studies

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