Chapter 2: Perspectives on the Teaching Career

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INTRODUCTION

When one of the authors (MH) was beginning his career in Geneva in the early 1970s, he had the privilege of working with the celebrated psychologist Jean Piaget on a study of the human life cycle. ‘Tell you what,’ Piaget said, ‘I’ll take the period from neonatal development to 14 years, and you take the rest. But don’t be disappointed. There won’t be much going on after 14.’

Until recently, one might have reached a similar conclusion about our topic, teachers’ professional lives. If we consult, for example, the *Third Handbook of Research on Teaching* (Wittrock, 1986), there is no mention of life cycle or even career-relevant issues beyond pre-service education and its immediate consequences. With a handful of notable exceptions, teachers’ professional lives had not been the subject of much social scientific study until the early 1980s. Nearly all inquiry stopped roughly three years after career entry. One might have concluded, like Piaget, that there was not much going on.

By contrast, to consult the more recent handbooks, publication series, monographs, and research journals is to witness an explosion of interest in the teaching career from virtually every epistemological and methodological quarter. Why the explosion of interest? Why now? One reason appears to be the growing recognition that teachers’ commitment, energy, knowledge, and skill may be the central determinants of schools’ effectiveness. In a discussion of teachers’ career satisfaction, McLaughlin and Yee (in Lieberman, 1988, pp. 40-41) ask rhetorically, ‘Are we talking about anything much more than teachers’ ‘happiness quotients’ – a desirable end to be sure, but hardly a compelling issue for policy?’ Addressing their own question, they argue that

The vitality of today’s schools as well as tomorrow’s hinges to a significant degree on the extent to which teachers have a rewarding career. In education, where teachers comprise the technology, the link between individual responses to challenge and change and organizational effectiveness is direct and irreducible.
The unfolding of a career is, after all, a story of waxing or waning satisfaction, commitment, and competence. Without doubt, a variety of other forces are contributing to the growing interest in teachers’ professional lives. For one thing, people are staying in teaching far longer, so that the years beyond the initial struggle to survive and gain a minimal level of control over the classroom have taken on increased significance. For another, feminist scholars have given new voice to those who people this still female-dominated profession. Other likely sources of the heightened interest in the teaching career could be adduced, but from our point of view, none is so compelling as the premise that the success of educational reform — indeed, of education — hinges critically upon the growth of the teacher’s competence and commitment throughout her career.

With this in mind we ask, what is happening to the teaching career? Is it changing, and if so, how? To frame the question more sharply, let us examine two images created a little over 10 years and a continent apart — Dan Lortie’s classic Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study (1975) and ‘School as a Place to Have a Career’ by Milbrey McLaughlin and Sylvia Yee (in Lieberman’s Building a Professional Culture in Schools, 1988). Both studies are based in part on interviews with teachers in five districts (Lortie’s in the Boston area, McLaughlin and Chee’s in Northern California) and both draw upon a broad array of related research. And there are certain continuities; the structurally flat or ‘unstaged’ career; and the primacy of psychic rewards — derived from working with young people in the classroom — over extrinsic rewards.

But in 1975 Lortie saw individualistic, present-oriented teachers, left largely to their own devices without a shared technical culture to provide reliable solutions to the problems they confront, yet defending their autonomy within the egg-crate structure of the school, warding off intrusions from colleagues and supervisors (not to mention parents), indifferent to broader influence upon the organization, craving only more time with their own students in their own classrooms, and deriving sparse, uncertain rewards from successes far more modest than their ambitious goals and hopes would seem to countenance.

And in 1988 McLaughlin and Yee found more collegial teachers, eager to build an integrated organization with clear guidelines aligned to a unifying purpose and well-defined goals, seeking to share a sense of responsibility for the school’s performance, to assert their needs for adequate resources and tools, to solve problems together and derive satisfaction from the process, to commit to continuous improvement through individual learning coordinated with development of the organization, and seeking refreshment through innovation and periodic changes of assignment.

Has there, indeed, been a sea change in the institutional and organizational environments within which American teachers’ professional life cycles are playing out? Did the years between Lortie and McLaughlin and Yee witness a transformation in the structure and culture of schools and of the profession? The
image of a new collegial teaching professional in a ‘restructured,’ ‘recultured’ school certainly pervades contemporary literature on schools and school change (see, for example, Darling-Hammond, 1993, pp. 753-761; Little, 1987, pp. 491-518; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

Though the ‘integrated environment’ of shared purpose and mutual collegial support dominates the image of schools and careers presented by McLaughlin and Yee, they still lament that, ‘Unfortunately, most teachers work in schools where these features are uneven or absent.’ They found many teachers in schools that look more like the teachers and schools that Lortie found — in ‘segmented environments’ characterized by individual objectives and responsibility for performance, evaluation focused on eliminating ‘incompetents’ rather than nurturing growth by all, self protection through problem-hiding and blame-fixing rather than joint problem solving, a minimum of collegial exchange, division among teachers, and consequent low morale.

Perhaps, however, we are witnessing the early stages of a process that could ultimately issue in broad and deep changes in the teaching career and teachers’ experience of the career. How would we know? What kinds of educational policies or professional movements might support productive changes in the career? How should various ‘consumers’ of research — from policy makers to local administrators to teachers and teachers’ organizations — make sense of and assess the burgeoning literature on the teaching career? What theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches should guide additional research in this area?

As the title of this chapter suggests, professional lives or careers, including those of teachers, have been studied from more than half a dozen distinct perspectives. Or, to use a different metaphor, there are several different schools of thinking and research on the teaching career, each with distinctive theoretical and methodological (or epistemological) assumptions. One set occupies itself with the stories of individual lives — or with the career dimension and segment of individual lives — captured in

(a) autobiographical narratives of teaching, or
(b) professional biographies, life histories, or case histories that are composed by others, sometimes in collaboration with teachers.

As we shall see, the former tend to stick closely to the unfolding story of the career as the author experienced it. The interpretations they do include are generally the teacher’s own, derived (or at least presented as though they were derived) directly from her experience. In other words, these accounts tend to be atheoretical, phenomenological, feminist, or hermeneutic in orientation. By contrast, biographies or life histories tend to include more explicit interpretation drawn from the traditions, concepts, and formats of literary biography, history,
psychoanalysis or psychosocial theory, anthropology, or sociology. Nevertheless, they remain primarily stories of individual teachers' lives, with all of the strengths and limitations of single cases.

The second major set examines larger numbers of teaching careers from within various theoretical and methodological traditions in order to create accounts not of individual careers or professional lives, but of patterns in the career paths taken by the teachers studied and of the dynamics that underlie or explain these patterns. Included here are sociological, anthropological, social-psychological, career theory, life-course theory, and developmental contextualist accounts of the career. Though they may use cases or stories of individual teachers' careers as evidence or to illustrate key points, these accounts are conceived and presented primarily in propositional, rather than story form. Or, in Bruner's (1986) terms, this second set is predominantly 'paradigmatic,' seeking to identify regularities across many individual careers and to generalize about them; while the first set is predominantly—though not exclusively—'narrative,' aimed at revealing meaning in individual experience rather than generalizing about it.

In the next two sections, we review the narrative and paradigmatic literatures on the teaching career, situating these studies of teachers within the broader theoretical and epistemological traditions that supply their key concepts and methodologies. Then, in a concluding section, we return to the question of what these literatures might imply for governmental policy or professional action.

NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF THE TEACHING CAREER

We see the emergence of autobiographical and biographical accounts of teaching—or 'teachers' stories'—as a reflection of work in narrative and life history across the academic disciplines. Thus, 'teachers' stories' can be understood, evaluated, and indeed, appreciated, in terms offered by other fields themselves having complex histories and lively current debates about methods and uses. A complete survey is beyond the scope of this chapter. We focus here primarily on the behavioral and social sciences as a backdrop to the specific work by and about teachers. We then offer an account of the key themes and problems in recent work based on 'teachers' stories' and conclude the first half of the chapter with comments on the strength and limits of the focus on individual narratives of teaching careers.

The Case for Narrative Inquiry and the Search for Meaning in Careers

When he used the phrase, 'The Narrative Construction of Reality', as the title of a recent essay, Jerome Bruner registered growing recognition in many fields
of the significance of stories in human development and social life. Since the early 1980s narrative has been the object of considerable theorizing in old and new fields (see Mitchell, 1981, for a widely-cited selection of views of narrative deriving from literature, history, and philosophy). Feminism, for example, has been a strong influence on the revival of educational interest in narrative, particularly with regard to reforming classroom practices, the value of ‘caring,’ and ‘dialogue’ as features of a more relational approach to learning, and the need to reclaim the ‘voices’ of those in the system whose interests have been misrepresented or ignored (e.g., Witherell & Noddings, 1991).

The case for narrative in education is ambitious, reflecting:

(a) the desire for the reform of teaching and the ethical norms that guide it;
(b) ideas about gendered epistemology and the lives and careers of students and teachers; and
(c) proposals for change in the ways that education itself is studied by both professors as a university subject and by public school teachers themselves with the advantages they have of practice and experience.

Accordingly, narrative has become a large category for work that employs ‘storytelling’ of some kind with one or another of these purposes.

It is, of course, not only the educational experiences of teachers and students which can be better understood with narrative. We all live, we are now often told, ‘storiied lives’ where narrative guides experience as well describes or explains it (Freeman, 1993; McAdams, 1985; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992; Sarbin, 1986). As (mainly) psychologists propose, narrative is a form of knowing that supplies a temporally organized and ordered ‘self-concept.’ When made part of the ‘plot’ of our lives, educational, professional, and other experiences gain meaning. Careers and lives are unified by the narrative ‘impulse’ as their episodic and contingent character are subordinated to the sense that can be made of their long term relations and significance. Donald Polkinghorne (1991), one of the leading proponents of narrative, summarizes its uses:

Human existence is temporal. We do not come to self-understanding by seeking to know what kind of thing we are. Rather, we come to know ourselves by discerning a plot that unifies the actions and events of our past with future actions and the events we anticipate. Relating separate events that occur over time involves the cognitive operation of narrative structuring. Narrative structuring gives sense to events by identifying them as contributing parts of an emplotted drama. Self-concept is a storied concept, and our identity is the drama we are unfolding. (p. 149)

In a teacher’s personal narrative, or an account by someone else of a teacher’s life, narrative represents the effort to give form and meaning to a career, and the
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