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SECOND CAREER TEACHERS: Work Motivations

by Nancy H. Ellis

The teaching profession is rapidly approaching a crisis of numbers. Nearly 200,000 vacancies are anticipated to occur during the next few years, and, while there is an increase in the number of college students interested in becoming teachers, the number falls far short of projected need (Darling-Hammond, 1988, p. 7). The reasons for this projected shortfall are twofold. First, the profession continues to fail to attract a sufficient number of talented young people to its ranks. Added to this is the problem of attrition as many capable, experienced teachers find other doors opening to them and leave to pursue other careers (Cresap, McCormick and Paget, 1984).

Although much attention has been focused on the projected teacher shortage caused by the lack of bright young people entering the teaching profession, little has been written about those people who, in their 30's and 40's, leave successful, and often very lucrative positions in other professions to pursue teaching as a second career. If indeed there is a wide spread shortage of qualified, dedicated teachers, perhaps we need to look beyond the recent college graduates to a new, largely untapped yet very talented market—the second career professional. Once considered a rarity in schools of education, second career teachers are becoming an increasingly common sight due to disenchantment with their first careers and a desire to make a contribution to society (Viadero, 1990).

The growing number of students who have chosen to become second career teachers by attending a traditional graduate level teacher certification program at the university provided an opportunity to explore their backgrounds, earlier career choices and motivation for choosing teaching as a second career.

Conceptual Framework

Levinson et al. (1978) point out that society assumes, often erroneously, that a person should have made a firm career choice by the early 20's. Berman and Munson (cited in Okun, 1984, p. 247) agree, adding that "millions of Americans

have been inculcated with traditional career wisdom that says an individual needs to identify a career goal during adolescence or early adulthood and develop a long-range plan to achieve it." However, theorists have now come to realize that career choice is a continuous process. It is now becoming recognized that people do change careers in mid-life (Okun, 1984).

"Why a second career?" asks Sheehy (1976):

The simple fact that people are living longer in better physical condition than ever before makes commitment to a single forty year career almost predestinate stagnation . . . It will be progress when we come to think of serial careers, not as signifying failure, but as a realistic way to prolong vitality. (p. 332)

Mid-life career changes are becoming viewed as a natural phenomenon. Can the teaching profession benefit? A look at the literature on adult development shows why a recruitment effort aimed at attracting to teaching second career people in their 30's and 40's may prove successful.

Gould theorizes that by their late 20's, people begin to realize that although their stated goals may have been attained, hidden goals may remain unfulfilled. Sheehy (1976) concurs. In turning 30, she explains, people begin to feel the constraints of choices made in their 20's. Frequently, people begin to want something more, something that touches some of the vital aspects of their inner beings that have been left out of their earlier choices.

Gould (1978) sees the 30's as the decade of a "new kind of opening up" that offers information on potential new directions and goals (p. 165). To Gould, the 30's are the "natural time for career commitments to deepen; either we extend ourselves anew in the career we've chosen or we enthusiastically move into a new one" (p. 205).

Levinson et al. (1978) see the transition into the 30's as a time to reaffirm initial choices or make new ones. The age 30 transition provides the "opportunity to work on the flaws in the life structure formed in the previous period, and to create the basis for a more satisfying structure that will be built in the following period" (p. 84). The age 30 transition gives people "a second chance to create a more satisfactory life structure" (p. 85). Gould (1978) finds the 30's a period for returning to school to enhance one's present career, to begin a new career, or, for women who have been at home raising families, to begin a career for the first time.

To Okun (1984), the mid-thirties represent a time for consolidation when priorities are revised and new goals are developed as one approaches mid-life. Sheehy (1976) calls the time between 35 and 45 the "deadline decade" (p. 286). People in this stage, she explains, sometimes face an authenticity crisis in which they re-examine their lives and re-evaluate their goals and values. And Krupp (1987) describes the late 30's and early 40's as the time in which "the extrinsic value of work gives way to its intrinsic worth," the time when people "seek self-fulfillment more often than compliments from others" (p. 25).

Jung (cited in Okun, 1984) theorized that the mid-life transition that occurs at about age 40 often calls for a "reorganization of one's dominant pattern of self-identity" as ". . . one turns inward and examines the meaning of life" (p. 179). Gould (1978) concurs. During the mid-life decade of 35-45, he explains, people begin to feel the pressure of time. Often this precipitates changes in their visions of themselves and subsequently in their careers.

To Levinson et al. (1978), the primary task of the mid-life transition is to modify one's life structures to allow a new structure to emerge. They see the mid-life transition as a time for people to reassess their life structures, their decisions and their values. It is "no longer crucial to climb another rung on the ladder . . ." (p. 214), but rather, it becomes a time to search for meaning in life, to make some contribution to the world.

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Gould (1978) too sees mid-life as the time for repositioning basic work motivations, the time when doing work that expresses one's inner self becomes more important than wealth or society's view of success. Gould sees this switch of priorities in motivation as a frequent cause of mid-life transitions and career changes.

Sheehy (1976) discusses the phenomenon of mid-life career changes. She finds that "secondary interests that have been trapped earlier in life can in middle and old age blossom into a serious lifework . . ." (p. 404)

Can the teaching profession capitalize on the aging population demographics by tapping into the motivational change that occurs in mid-life? Levinson et al. (1978) would lead us to believe that it can. In mid-life, they explain, a desire emerges "to leave a trace, however small, on the course of humankind" (p. 217). One way to accomplish this, the authors contend, is by becoming a mentor to young adults, i. e., a teacher.

Discussion

These theoretical concepts and propositions were investigated among a group of second career teachers using questionnaires completed by eight adults who received their teacher certification. The eight respondents ranged in age from 31 to 48. Six were female and two were male. Seven were married, one for the second time, and one was divorced. All were in the top 20% of their high school graduating classes and scored well over 1000 in their Scholastic Aptitude Tests. Two had composite scores between 1000 and 1100; one scored between 1100 and 1200; four scored between 1200 and 1300; and one scored above 1300. Their names have been changed to protect their rights to privacy.

Of the eight subjects, only one had not established a firm career path before selecting teaching as a career. Among the others was a physician, two nurses, a stock broker, a homemaker, a management consultant and an environmental analyst. All decided to enter teaching within the last five years.

Why they chose to leave their first careers and enter the teaching profession at this point in their lives was the fundamental question underlying this research.

In a study by Joseph and Green (1986), 234 education majors at Northeastern Illinois University were asked their reasons for entering teaching. More than 90% of the respondents indicated a desire to work with people or the need to be of service (p. 29). The eight second career teachers with whom I worked went beyond these reasons and echoed more closely the reasons for career changes described in the literature on adult development.

"Elizabeth", a 36 year old environmental analyst, and the divorced mother of two young children, attended an Ivy League college majoring in geography. "Elizabeth" credits her role as a parent for awakening in her the desire to teach. She explains:

I have found personal involvement in the growth and development of my children to be the most satisfying thing I have ever done. The joy of being part of the learning process is immeasurable. Becoming a teacher may be the way to combine my 'two loves'—the earth and its environment and helping children to learn and grow.

"Debbie", a 34 year old emergency room physician, was expecting her first child at the time these data were being gathered. As a physician, she experienced a great deal of stress. "The responsibility is awesome" she explains. "I often felt like it overtook my entire life . . . This is the main reason I stopped. I wanted to collect myself and I realized that I really was not happy . . . I felt very isolated." When asked why she decided to become a teacher, "Debbie" responded, "I realized that much of what I enjoyed about being a doctor was the education of my patients." Not all of "Debbie's" motivation is idealistic, however. She adds that "the schedule of teaching will be better for me now that I am expecting my first child."

"Marie" is a 36 year old married nurse with four children ranging in age from three to eleven. Returning to work after time at home raising a family, she cites the work hours as one reason for entering teaching. Teaching is "a profession that seems to be worthwhile, fun and challenging," she explains. "And it doesn't hurt to have good working hours which coincide with the rest of my family."

In September, 1968, "Susan" began her working life as an elementary school teacher, but left after seven months. She left, she says:

. . . after my fifth month of pregnancy, I was not unhappy to leave. I really enjoyed the children and parents, but I didn't have too much confidence in my teaching abilities. There was little in-service or support. There was no time for planning and no special subjects such as art or music. The staff was split politically over union representation issues and there was a lot of tension in the school. The four of us who were new graduates were caught in the middle between the two sides. All in all, it was not the best foundation for a teaching career.

"Susan" remained at home for four years, raising two children. Her husband also left teaching and began medical school. During that time, "Susan" decided to become a nurse and entered nursing school.

I was becoming more interested in medical issues because of my husband's experiences in medical school and my work with LaLeche League. It also seemed to me to be a more practical career for someone with small children and a husband in medical school. There were more opportunities for part-time or weekend work, which would provide an opportunity for supplementary income with minimal child care problems.

"Susan" sees her interest in a special education career as the ideal way of combining her background in education with her skills as a nurse. Her goal is a career in early intervention, working with children who exhibit early learning problems.

"Theresa", 42, married with four children, is also pursuing a masters degree in special education. "I need to find some direction for myself," she says, "and to my surprise, I genuinely enjoy kids. Teaching is an important job. I think it is becoming a well-paying job. And it's a job which will not interfere with my family's needs."

"Nina", "Paul", and "Jim" all express highly idealistic reasons for entering teaching. "Nina", a 31 year old married stock broker, says that "after finding money making a dead end spiritually and morally, I felt I really needed to do something with my life that was more altruistic."

"Paul", 32, expresses a need to "embark on a career track that would make his work life meaningful. Previous to his teaching career, work was simply a means to pay the rent." And "Jim", a 48 year old management consultant, explains, "I want to be of use, to repay in a way some of the debts I feel that I owe to my teachers. And I love kids and am committed to seeing them to the future—which is in their hands."

It is interesting to note that while all the respondents feel that teaching is the right decision for them now, most indicated that to have entered the profession at 21, right after graduating from college, would have been a mistake. "Theresa" admits that at 21 she had no patience. "I thought everything was the parents' fault," she muses. "I was afflicted with the 'Not My Kid' syndrome. I did not enjoy children. Today, she says, she is much more tolerant of others and she realizes how much she truly cares about children.

"Elizabeth" feels she was too demanding, both of herself and of others to have been a good teacher at 21. She was impatient too, expecting immediate results for her efforts. Today she knows herself better and is more flexible and more understanding of others.

Self-knowledge, or rather the lack of it, is also what "Jim" feels was lacking in himself at 21. "I really didn't know myself—who I was, what I was good at, what I wanted to do. Experience with life is a key ingredient in a good teacher—and that I surely lacked then and certainly have now."

"Debbie" feels that for right now teaching is the best choice. "I love to teach and I love the students," she states. "Each one brings their own unique self to the learning experience and I enjoy finding ways to interest them and help them to learn."

"Marie" also is sure of her new career path. "I'm certain that I want to do this," she explains. "I enjoy learning [about teaching], and I feel competent and confident."

Conclusions

Each September new groups of second career teachers enroll in certification programs. Among the new group this year is a marketing manager planning on taking early retirement to begin a second career as a teacher; an engineer who wishes to share with others her love of learning and of mathematics; a financial analyst, tired of working long hours with no feelings of satisfaction or fulfillment; and a scientist who wants to motivate students through the wonders of science.

The literature describing adults in their 30's and 40's clearly posits that as the years pass, priorities and motivations for work change; that people become more aware of their own mortality and are more desirous of making some lasting contribution to society; and that material wealth, promotions, and other outward manifestations of success become less important than discovering and developing one's hidden talents and following paths not previously chosen.

This brief exploration into the phenomenon of second career teachers investigated the rationale for career paths and decisions of only eight people at one university. Of course, this is far too small and too homogeneous a group on which to base any far-reaching generalizations. Yet, each of these eight made a considered choice to diverge from previous career paths. Some left very lucrative or potentially lucrative posts; some left positions of prestige; all are seeking that self-fulfillment that adults approaching mid-life tend to seek. All chose to become teachers by entering a traditional teacher preparation program at a small but very highly regarded university.

Perhaps the feelings and choices exhibited by these eight respondents are replicated in other adults no longer satisfied by the rewards of their first career choices and standing on the brink of mid-life career change.

Many questions remain to be answered. How many potential second career teachers are there? How does the second career teacher differ from the young and eager college graduates entering the profession? Can the teaching profession capitalize on the changing needs and motivations of the mid-life professional and recruit them to our ranks? How can traditional teacher preparation programs wean the second career teacher away from "eight week wonder" alternative routes so that the knowledge base of the profession is not sacrificed in our desire to attract these people to the teaching profession?

Boyer (1983) suggests that "outstanding professionals be recruited" to the profession (p. 183). These results suggest there may be substantial merit in pursuing a resource as yet untapped, but fraught with possibilities—the second career professional.

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