

Developing Early to Mid Career Teachers

by Patricia Scallan Berl

Most teachers enter our profession eager and enthusiastic, high on energy and ideals. They come believing that good teaching will positively influence children's development and society's

future. Once out of academia, however, the realities of teaching often differ significantly from expectations. Day-to-day challenges in the classroom contradict educational theory and cherished beliefs, dampening the morale and enthusiasm of many early to mid career teachers.

Because these teachers already "know the ropes," opportunities for individu-

alized professional development are frequently ignored. Directors, short on time and administrative resources, can unintentionally overlook the career development needs of this group, focusing their limited supervisory time on beginning or underperforming teachers.

The consequences of poorly planned or random professional development for teachers in the early to mid career cycle, are serious. Without input from knowledgeable mentors or supervisors, these teachers can flail about professionally. Without the benefit of individualized staff development plans, they may perpetuate ineffective teaching practices or fail to develop core competencies required to advance to the next rung on the career ladder. Worse yet, when left alone, early to mid career teachers suffer low morale and can stagnate professionally.

Teachers having passed successfully through the career survival stage are still vulnerable to inherent pressures in the education field, leaving their centers in search of more supportive work climates, higher pay, or faster promotions. When directors design professional development programs that incorporate the needs of early to mid level teachers, they strengthen teacher competencies, enhance center morale, and lower staff turnover. By aligning staff development to teachers' specific needs and career cycles, directors help to strengthen employee morale and commitment, making an investment in the future success of our profession.

A closer look at the early to mid level career teacher

In designing staff development programs, it is important for a director to actively engage early and mid career teachers in their planning, balancing the needs of the organization and the individuals. A comprehensive staff development plan for teachers builds on existing job competencies and skills, but also creates opportunities for teachers to expand in new directions that take into consideration longer term career aspirations.

As individuals move through the career cycle, their personal goals and motivations vary. The degree of independence, self-sufficiency, or stability one achieves through experience and maturation (such as work, marriage, or child birth) influences how each individual views personal goals and priorities. Major life changes, such as marriage, birth of children, divorce, and loss of a parent or isolation also impact self confidence, career goals, or motivation for many individuals.

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This article on developing teachers is dedicated to Ruth Ann Russell, with much appreciation for her work that has given vision, direction, and passion to the task of developing teachers and center managers at Bright Horizons Family Solutions.

Applying what we know about career cycles

In the first article in this series, (Berl, 2004) stages of adult maturation emanating from the research of Erik Erickson, Stanley Levine, and Gail Sheehy, offered insight into the career cycle and professional development of beginning teachers. Maturation and professional development go hand in hand, as age and common experiences influence each individual's motivation and productivity through the life cycle. This approach known as "life cycle theory" defines adult maturity as a continuous process of maturation, progressing in fairly sequential stages, from birth to death. Maturity is not a constant characteristic among individuals but rather a progression through a series of developmental stages.

The progression through maturational stages is uneven, vacillating between equilibrium, disequilibrium, and resolution as each person passes through the maturational life cycle in pursuit of autonomy, competency, meaning, and personal satisfaction. At every milestone along the maturational continuum, one's attitude, motivation, self-esteem, competency, and adaptation to change are affected. In a similar way, as teachers progress through their career stages, their outlooks and commitment to life, work, and relationships change. Since early to mid career teachers are more experienced and secure, they are more likely to be independent, confident in their judgments and accepting of their shortcomings. Lilian Katz, noted researcher in teacher development, describes these early to mid-cycle teachers as being in a stage of consolidation. Because teachers at this stage of career development feel more secure about their teaching, their efforts are more educationally stimulating and psychologically rewarding (Katz, 1991). While beginning teachers are focused on day to day survival skills, the early to

mid career teachers are more organized and ready to engage in more thoughtful planning. They are capable of self-reflection and are open to new ideas and innovation. During this "consolidation stage" teachers begin building a repertoire of skills. It is "a time when their sense of themselves as competent teachers and caregivers is established" (Zeece, 1991).

Outside of work, early to mid career teachers begin forming significant relationships and putting down roots. Many, in their mid 20s, approach their careers with equilibrium and enthusiasm, which, as they near 30, gives way to a sense of restlessness or disillusionment. As teachers approach their late 20s, they become more urgent, pressing to move up in the organization, in both responsibility and pay. Or, they begin to place more emphasis on accommodating to changing situations outside of work, subordinating their career goals to other life goals, involving themselves in committed relationships, marriage, child bearing, and other passions that take on a greater focus in their lives.

Directors working with teachers in the early to mid career phase (consolidation stage) can support their development by focusing on five key areas:

1. Motivation
2. Supervision and Reflection
3. Evaluation
4. Recognition and Reward
5. Work Culture

Motivate by autonomy, independence, and decision-making

Motivation of the early to mid career teachers increases naturally when teachers are provided opportunities for more autonomy, independence, and input into goals. Because they already know the expectations and possess core competencies, they are poised to take on

greater responsibility in defining classroom and career goals. They choose to take an active part in measuring and improving outcomes and are eager to take on more responsibility. When discouraged or thwarted in their attempts to gain independence and self-direction, early to mid career teachers may challenge status quo or leave the center. Teachers in this career development stage need to be full participants in the life of the classroom and the center. They need to feel valued and that their opinions matter.

Directors promote autonomy among early to mid career teachers by allowing time and encouragement for exploring and experimenting with new curriculum, classroom materials, or changes in teaching teams. Activities central to teaching, such as creating portfolios, writing anecdotal records, conducting transition conferences, completing assessments, designing room arrangements, creating documentation panels, or leading parent conferences add both valuable skills and opportunities for building leadership skills.

Supervise through peer coaches and mentors

Elizabeth Jones, author of *Growing Teachers: Partnerships in Staff Development*, stresses the importance of teachers becoming active participants in the construction of knowledge about their work and in making choices among the various options for their personal growth (Jones 1993). By creating professional development plans that build on the specific aspirations and competencies needed for an individual to move forward in the career life cycle, Jones maintains that training becomes more relevant and the individual's commitment to the profession more sustainable.

According to Jones, both supervision activities and performance management tools need to reflect a number of approaches that incorporate goal setting, dialogue, observations, mentoring, peer coaching, and self-evaluations.

Supervisory methods of the early and mid career teacher must be sufficiently varied to enable teachers in this stage to proactively build their repertoire of teaching skills. Effective supervisors stress mutual goal setting in reviews, demonstrate reflective listening, create an open climate of discussion that encourages self-reflection and self-evaluation.

In meeting the needs of early to mid career teachers, supervisors should continually reinforce the importance of learning new skills and working with new and different groups of children and faculty. They should also insure that succession plans are in place, encourage participation in collaborative projects, assign peer role models, and should expose teachers to exceptional teachers and teaching styles. In discussing goals, they emphasize clarity of ideas, organization, and setting priorities.

Peer coaching in particular, is an excellent strategy for helping early to mid career teachers build specific competencies as part of succession planning. Peer coaches are an effective strategy in helping teachers strengthen competencies in many areas including teaching practices, classroom organization, prioritizing tasks, classroom observations, gathering anecdotal information, learning assessment and evaluations, and parent communications. Peer coaching is effective because teachers are more willing to modify attitudes and practices alongside a colleague, without the fear of evaluation by higher ups.

Peer coaches are also excellent vehicles for exposing teachers to different teach-

ing styles and classroom organizations. Mentors who work outside a teacher's immediate teaching team provide new contexts for developing fluency of ideas or styles, flexibility, and insight that are needed to grow or aspire to higher levels of leadership in the organization. Opportunities that enable teachers to work in multiple teams builds employee morale and organizational strength.

■ Evaluate performance with multiple tools

Goals must be understood and mutually agreed upon before proceeding with any formal performance evaluation of early to mid career teachers. Directors should seek their input from self-evaluations, as an important tool to helping any teacher overcome a performance issue. In the book, *When Teachers Reflect*, authors Elizabeth Tertell, Susan Klein, and Janet Jewett comment that self reflection enables teachers to reframe their thinking and consider other strategies. The act of thinking back, reconsidering goals and approaches, or evaluating a challenging situation enables teachers to notice, examine, and rethink the tacit understandings that have developed around familiar practices. It is through the self evaluation process that teachers can make new sense out of situations and uncertainties and respond successfully to challenges.

When reflections allow teachers to reach a new way of framing a dilemma or a new understanding, they often experience a gratifying burst of energy. They no longer feel confined to a particular way of behaving. New doors are open; new paths appear for exploration, discovery, and understanding.

Formative (ongoing) review processes are more effective with teachers at the early to mid career stage because feedback is more specific, relevant to the moment, and meaningful. Summative,

annual review processes used by many directors can be less motivating to employees and less likely to bring about lasting change in teacher performance. Ongoing reviews, in contrast, allow for honing in on specific areas, allowing for recalibrating expectations and revising goals as needed. Regardless of the evaluation system used, outcome measurements need to be judged in terms of their efficacy in meeting specific, agreed upon goals and in achieving mutually desirable outcomes.

When conducting performance evaluations with early to mid career teachers, keep these points in mind:

- Prior to reviews build in time for self-evaluation/self reflection.
- Conduct evaluations in a nonjudgmental way, describing behaviors and results vs. making judgments.
- Use peer coaches to reinforce core competencies and offer feedback that enables the individual to progress up the career ladder.
- Incorporate team evaluations as well as individual evaluations.
- Include anecdotal information, work samples, parent and peer comments in reviews.
- Assign a mentor when there are longer term development needs or in preparation for future leadership positions.
- Counsel unsuccessful teachers out of teaching when it is clear that they are not well suited to teaching.

■ Recognize and reward outstanding performance

As a group, early to mid career teachers are at substantial risk for exiting the profession. Economic pressures and realities of inadequate compensation lure many star performers to higher paying jobs in industries related to and outside of education. Teachers who are striving to balance work and family

commitments may struggle at centers that are highly regulated or inflexible about schedules. They may simply be unable to work the extended hours required for ratio coverage that many child care programs require. Small centers may have fewer opportunities for increases in pay or career advancement.

Directors who fail to recognize talented teachers or help them in career planning may unintentionally drive away gifted teachers. In the knowledge driven economy of today, attaining higher education or advanced degrees is a consistent standard for climbing most career ladders (Singletary, 2005). Opportunities to attain degree credentials or acquire leadership and supervisory skills while teaching can be a tremendous draw for retaining experienced teachers.

Below is a sampling of motivations and rewards that can sustain teachers in addition to salary incentives:

- Acknowledge exceptional performance and successes by sharing feedback from parents, thank you notes, and documentation in reviews.
- Offer skill based training that has application outside of work — such as basic computer skills, web access and design, digital photography, graphics work, fundraising, parent marketing, staff supervision.
- Form linkages to community, technical colleges, and universities to provide on-site courses or online programs for AA and BA degrees, CDA.
- Encourage and fund teachers' participation at state/national professional conferences or state sponsored initiatives for teacher development.
- Create opportunities for developing leadership skills within the organization by chairing a faculty committee, overseeing accreditation preparation, preparing for licensing inspections, resolving employee relations, conducting parenting seminars, leading staff inservice or orientation.
- Sponsor wellness activities, such

as exercise, yoga classes, Weight-Watchers®, time management, journal writing, memory books, book clubs, community service projects.

- Celebrate personal accomplishments.



Respect the changing dynamics of work life balance

Above all else, directors must respect the role of work life balance in sustaining the mental health and well being of faculty. This means being respectful of privacy and personal boundaries of teachers outside of work. As individuals mature and take on more responsibilities outside of work, flexibility may be required to help individuals balance work and family priorities. As managers, we must be willing to accept that there will be times some teachers will need to scale back work, take leave, and reenter the work force. Because this group is gaining in maturity and is less restless, encourage activities that give them a place in the organization that builds a sense of community and commitment. Some examples are:

- Employee support groups
- Empowering teaching teams to take responsibility for scheduling hours assigning tasks
- Enabling job sharing / co-teaching among tenured teachers
- Creating modified work schedules, compressed work weeks
- Organizing study groups and enabling computer access on weekends or evenings for teachers pursuing online degree programs
- Allowing multiple methods for acquiring inservice training hours such as journals and book discussion groups, computer based training, videos, participation in advocacy / research or community projects
- Expanding resources to complete administrative work (classroom newsletter, child assessments, lesson plans, and staff training) at home, online, or with flexible schedules.

Final thoughts

One cannot overlook the importance of addressing the development needs of teachers in the workforce. Just as novice teachers need to be supported, inspired, and encouraged, early to mid career teachers, too, need to flourish in their work environments. The growing number of resignations among gifted early to mid career teachers is a huge vulnerability in our profession and an impediment to sustaining high quality programs for children. Care and attention must be given to the early to mid career professionals, who are poised to either invest significantly to the organization or leave the profession altogether.

Early to mid career teachers thrive on career development that is built on motivation, supervision, evaluation, recognition, and a healthy respect for work life balance. By creating staff development plans that build not just upon their individual competencies but extend into personal and life goals, we engender a sense of commitment and belonging to the organization. While organization climate matters to almost everyone, it is critical to nurturing and sustaining talented teachers. The gifted teachers are not apt to stay around if the environments are not right. Their professional futures await them. Our task is to ensure their future is nurtured and sustained through us.

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