

## **Finding and Redefining the Meaning of Teaching: Exploring the Experiences of Mid-career Teachers**

Shannon Coulter  
San Diego County Office of Education

Jessica Nina Lester  
Washington State University

### **Abstract**

We carried out a grounded theory study to describe how mid-career English teachers make meaning of becoming teachers and persisting in the field. We explored the experiences of mid-career teachers in order to understand the experiences of those who made it “over the hump,” yet were far enough away from retirement so as not to be focused on such. After participant interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the constant comparative method, we developed the four themes, referred to as activities: (a) changing over time, (b) seeing the big picture, (c) sticking around, and (d) receiving rewards. Participants identified the primary reasons why they became teachers to be the intrinsic and subjective qualities of being a teacher and making a difference in students’ lives. These reasons were also the only motivators for why they remained in the field. A model describing the process of identity formation for teachers was proposed.

Currently, teachers within the United States are facing challenges daunting for even the most experienced among them. Not surprisingly, teacher attrition remains a pressing educational issue with the “early and frequent loss of new, talented teachers” being of primary concern for educational researchers and school districts alike (Yonezawa, Jones, & Singer, 2011, p. 914). A fairly large body of research has examined the reasons why teachers leave the profession (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2003) with some research pointing to concerns with school climate (Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2005) and particular features of school organizational structures (Ingersoll, 2001). Darling-Hammond (2003) reported that one-third of all new teachers leave the teaching profession within their first five years of teaching with the reasons for leaving ranging from desire for higher pay to frustration to lack of support.

Indeed, informative data exist on those who have left the profession, but what do we know about those who chose to stay in the profession? Contrary to the common belief that teacher attrition is on the rise, some research suggests that teachers are in fact staying longer in the profession. According to a National Education Association (NEA, 2003) study in the United States, 27% of teachers in 2001 had been in their current position for more than 20 years compared to only 8% in 1976. So, if indeed more teachers are staying in the profession, what is keeping and sustaining them? How

do they make sense of their experience and teaching journey? While data point to the presence of teachers who choose to stay, little is known about this population of persisting teachers, particularly, since data similar to the NEA findings are rarely disaggregated by content area. We believe that the content areas of those teachers who choose to stay is an important consideration, as certain content areas (e.g., reading, math, English) have been subject to increasing pressures with the mandates associated with the No Child Left Behind Act. Scherff, Ollis, and Rosencrans (2006) conducted a study with 12 novice English teachers, five of whom left teaching by the end of their second year. They reported that the factors contributing to these teachers' decisions to quit included increased demands associated with special education, minimal administrative support, and challenges with colleagues.

In this study, we focused on English teachers who chose to stay in the field. English teachers comprise the largest percentage of teachers, amounting to roughly 22% of the teaching population. In 2003-2004, over 25,000 English teachers in the United States left the profession. A third of them left for retirement, but nearly as many (25%) left to pursue a career outside of K-12 education for reasons such as better salaries, personal motives, dissatisfaction with the profession, lack of administrative support and authority, and discipline (Baker & Smith, 1997; NCES, 2007). An additional 29,200 moved from one school to another citing better teaching assignments and workplace conditions as two of the primary reasons for the move. On average, American school districts experience a 25% turnover rate in their English faculty from year to year with English teachers ranking second behind special education teachers as the group most likely to leave their current teaching position (NCES, 2007).

English teachers also comprise a prime demographic to investigate in that they likely account for both a high percentage of teachers who leave the profession as well as a high percentage that stay. English teachers are being held publicly accountable for student achievement in reading and writing. Other fields such as math and science undoubtedly feel the public pressure of content knowledge; however, these fields depend on the foundation established by English teachers in the areas of reading and writing. For example, math teachers refer to their students' inability to comprehend written information as one of the main reasons why they perform poorly (Franz & Hopper, 2007).

While we focused our study on English teachers, attending carefully to those who were considered mid-career, some research suggests that teachers in general stay in the profession when they are a part of a community of learners, when their schools are organized for learning, and when they love what they do (Nieto, 2003). However, these experiences are often based on exemplars or those veteran teachers who have made teaching a lifelong career. Thus, in this grounded theory study we explored the experiences and development of mid-career teachers in order to understand the perspectives of those who made it "over the hump" of the beginning years, yet were far

enough away from retirement so as not to be focused on such. The purpose of this study was to learn how mid-career English teachers develop as professionals, exploring how mid-career English teachers made sense of their daily work and development as teachers over time. More specifically, the research question that guided our research was: How do mid-career teachers get “over the hump” and stay in the profession?

## Methods

In grounded theory, researchers attempt to derive a theory of a particular phenomenon, grounded in the words of the participants. This research process involves using multiple stages of data collection and the refinement of interrelationships of categories of information (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In that the data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously, each aspect of the research process informs the other. Within this paradigm, theory is inductively developed with the researchers' presuppositions continuously monitored. The development of theory, therefore, is “closely tied to the data from which it is derived or *grounded*” (Rennie, 2006, p. 61).

Grounded theory research is particularly appropriate when used to gain a better understanding of a given phenomenon, especially within applied fields focused on improving professional practice (Darkenwald, 1980). Considering the purpose of our study, we utilized grounded theory as a “continual interplay between data collection and analysis to produce theory during the research process” (Bowen, 2006, p. 2). Additionally, we drew from a constructivist framework rather than an objectivist perspective, taking a “reflexive stance on modes of knowing and representing studied life” (p. 509). Orienting ourselves from this constructivist perspective, we did not presuppose an impartial stance, but shared the following assumption that “what observers see and hear depends upon their prior interpretive frames, biographies, and interests as well as the research context, their relationships with the research participants, concrete field experiences, and modes of generating and recording empirical materials” (Charmaz, 2005, p. 509).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated, “It is impossible to know prior to the investigation what the salient problems will be or what theoretical concepts will emerge” (p. 49). Thus, we approached the interpretation of our data as an emergent process, grounding our findings in the participants' experiences rather than the literature alone. Prior to collecting and analyzing our data, we did not select a specific conceptual framework; instead we linked our analyzed data to the relevant literature. The understanding that “grounded theory studies emerge from wrestling with data, making comparisons, developing categories, engaging in theoretical sampling, and integrating an analysis” (Charmaz, 2005, p. 510) served as the overarching guide to the research process.

## **Role of the Researchers**

As we approached the research process, we continually reminded ourselves that “what we know shapes, but does not necessarily determine, what we ‘find’” (Charmaz, 2005, p. 510). With one of us having worked as a high school English teacher for eight years (Shannon) and the other an elementary and middle school teacher and special educator for seven years (Jessica), we recognized that we were no exception to the reality that “education researchers are often researchers of familiar educational settings” (Rogers et. al., 2005, p. 382). As the study progressed, we aimed to continually monitor our own assumptions and thoughts related to the emerging findings. We met weekly to discuss the data collection process, refine our intended research purpose, and collaboratively engage in the data analysis process. In addition, we occasionally invited our colleagues in the college of education to critique our work and findings, often pointing out our unquestioned assumptions. Furthermore, we used member checking to acquire the participants’ feedback.

## **Participants**

Eight mid-career high school English teachers from a county in the south-eastern region of the United States participated in this study. Purposeful sampling was employed to acquire the participation of individuals who closely aligned with our phenomenon of interest. We were specifically interested in participants who (a) taught English at the high school level and (b) had taught between 10 and 20 years. We obtained the names of 32 high school English teachers from a database provided by the county’s school system, intentionally including those teachers who worked within urban, rural, and suburban settings. All 32 prospective participants were contacted by phone and email, with 10 willing to participate in the study. We contacted the 10 prospective participants via phone at their place of employment. Of the 10, we were able to interview only eight in that the remaining two did not respond to our three attempts to schedule an interview. All eight of these teachers were from the same county; however, as noted in Table 1, these teachers taught in varying school contexts.

The eight teachers who participated in this study had taught high school English for at least 10 years, but no more than 17. Three of the participants taught in suburban schools, two in rural schools, and three in urban schools. There were two white male participants and six white female participants. Of the participants, five were department chairs and all had experience working as mentors for student teachers. After we received approval from our Institutional Review Board, the potential participants were contacted via email and phone and invited to participate in the study. At the conclusion of our data collection and analysis, we contacted those individuals who participated in an interview and asked them to review our emerging themes and supporting data.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

| Pseudonym | Age | Years of Teaching | School Type |
|-----------|-----|-------------------|-------------|
| Barbara   | 42  | 13                | Rural       |
| Debbie    | 39  | 11                | Rural       |
| Diane     | 41  | 16                | Urban       |
| Gary      | 35  | 10                | Suburban    |
| Jackie    | 44  | 17                | Suburban    |
| Kyle      | 42  | 12                | Urban       |
| Leslie    | 37  | 14                | Urban       |
| Susan     | 34  | 10                | Suburban    |

**Data Collection**

Over a six-month timeframe, data were collected in the form of one semi-structured interview with each of the eight participants. An interview protocol (see Appendix) was followed during each of the interviews, leaving room for the researchers to ask the participants follow-up questions that clarified information already given, deepened understanding of emerging themes, and/or provided concrete examples. The interview questions focused on the everyday experiences of the participants and the meaning that they attached to these experiences. These interviews, occurring at the participants' places of work, were audio recorded and lasted between 45 to 90 minutes each.

**Data Analysis**

According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), in studies using a grounded theory approach, data analysis begins the moment the initial data is gathered. Thus, in this study, we intricately linked our collection of data with the analysis process. The first step in the analysis process involved the transcription of the recorded interviews. Following each interview, the researcher (Shannon or Jessica) who conducted the interview carefully reviewed and transcribed the recording verbatim, using pseudonyms to protect the participants' anonymity. In that the data collection and analysis process occurred concurrently, as the interviews were analyzed, the findings iteratively informed the entire research process. Although we did not alter our interview protocol, when, for example, "changing over time" was selected as a category, in subsequent interviews, we more specifically asked the participants to compare their current teaching experience to their beginning years as a teacher.

We collaborated throughout the analysis process, utilizing an inductive approach with constant comparative methods, allowing us to compare within and across our

interview data. The research question that guided our analysis process was: How do mid-career teachers get “over the hump” and stay in the profession? Since we were particularly interested in how the participants made sense of their work as mid-career teachers, as well as their decision to continue teaching, we closely attended to how they spoke about their process of becoming and persisting in the field. Following the transcription of each interview, each researcher independently read and re-read the data, engaging in line-by-line coding in which we named or coded each line of a given interview.

We initially coded each line using *in-vivo* codes, allowing “us to preserve participants’ meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 55). Each researcher maintained a list of these initial codes. Then, over a six-month period, we met weekly to develop a second level of coding, allowing us to synthesize larger segments of our data sets. Through an iterative process, we identified which initial and secondary codes made the most analytic sense. Using our initial and secondary codes, we developed categories. Next, we organized the data into categories and subcategories, noting relationships within and across interviews. Finally, we considered “how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory” (Glaser, 1978, p. 72) about the process by which mid-career teachers enter and persist in the field of teaching. Drawing upon our initial and subsequent levels of coding, we developed abstract themes, all of which were identifiable within all of the participants’ interviews. All of the participants were given copies of our emergent, as well as final findings. They were each asked to review the findings, though only five of the eight responded to our request. Of the five participants who responded, all expressed that our interpretations represented what they desired to share about their experiences as mid-career English teachers. We compared the final themes to the participants’ feedback and literature, until four final themes were agreed upon.

Within our study we aimed to continually acknowledge that “phenomena are not conceived of as static but as continually changing in response to evolving conditions,” recognizing this concept as “an important component of the method” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 5). Hence, throughout this article, we refer to the themes as activities in that they are understood as fluid and dynamic acts that mid-career teachers perform within the process of both becoming a teacher and persisting in the field.

## Findings

Four activities, or themes, related to the process of becoming a mid-career teacher and staying in the profession emerged from our analysis: (a) changing over time, (b) seeing the big picture, (c) sticking around, and (d) receiving rewards. With varying degrees of emphasis, all of the participants discussed each activity (Table 2). In this section, we explore these findings, which were ultimately used to flesh out a

theoretical representation of the development of teachers as they chose to remain in the profession.

Table 2

*Frequency of Participants' Emphasis on Individual Activities/Themes*

| Number of Times Participant Addressed Activities/Themes |                    |                        |                 |                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Pseudonym                                               | Changing over Time | Seeing the Big Picture | Sticking Around | Receiving Rewards |
| Barbara                                                 | 3                  | 3                      | 5               | 4                 |
| Debbie                                                  | 5                  | 5                      | 2               | 9                 |
| Diane                                                   | 4                  | 3                      | 4               | 10                |
| Gary                                                    | 5                  | 4                      | 4               | 8                 |
| Jackie                                                  | 2                  | 4                      | 3               | 9                 |
| Kyle                                                    | 8                  | 8                      | 6               | 16                |
| Leslie                                                  | 6                  | 6                      | 9               | 12                |
| Susan                                                   | 4                  | 1                      | 1               | 15                |

**Activity One: Changing Over Time**

The first activity, changing over time, reflected how the participants' teaching identities evolved as they were challenged to expand their understanding of what teaching and learning meant for both them and their students. Williams (2003) expressed that the changes experienced by teachers who choose to stay in the profession are not only perceived as being inherent to the process of teaching, but also serve to rejuvenate teachers as they engage in innovative practices. Teachers view these changes as positive influences for the classroom environment and for the lives of their students. The teachers in our study affirmed such sentiments, highlighting how for them the need to change began the moment they set foot in their classroom. When discussing his early years of teaching, Kyle, a teacher of 14 years, shared the following:

There can be some mentoring, but you might just have to break out the machete and make your way through the jungle. Find your own path. I don't know about you but I was trying to be my mentoring teacher the first year. That doesn't work.

For these teachers, one of the dimensions associated with "finding their own path" was the development of an identity as a teacher within the classroom, actually finding what works. This idea of professional growth is reflected in the words of Barbara:

You're not only trying to find out what works, but what works for you. I've tried all kinds of things...having them sit in a circle on the floor, going outside, just all

these crazy things, circling up in the chairs. Being able to manage a class, using body proximity, where am I, a look, catching someone's eye, putting your hand on their shoulder...all those little things. There's always room to grow. That's another good reason to keep you coming back. It's kept me coming back.

All of the participants described their current teaching practices in light of their first years of teaching. Early in their careers they seemed to follow a defined path while teaching, often scripting each learning activity, as expressed by Susan:

I was always afraid to get off track and deviate at all from the subject matter when I first started teaching. Bell to bell I needed to have something to do. I would be so obsessed that I would want to script out the whole class so that I knew what I was doing...now I'm more relaxed.

During their early years, the process of teaching was approached in a more linear, straightforward manner. As they evolved, their scripting decreased as the messier work of carving out the learning path with their students took precedence. The participants' shift from a focus on "stuff," such as paperwork and scripts, to "what really matters" occurred gradually. It seemed that only after several years of teaching the participants "broke out the machete to make [their] own way through the jungle."

With their early scripts left behind, the teachers began experimenting with more authentic forms of classroom learning as they intentionally worked to meet their students' needs. They frequently associated "rote" activities with their initial years of teaching, expressing how as they became more experienced, what they viewed as "artificial" was gradually replaced with "real world activities." Their focus shifted from simply "meeting baseline objectives" to "making things more interesting" for their students.

All of the participants described how, as they gained experience, they better understood the value of personalizing classroom activities. With personalization of learning activities recognized as an effective way to motivate students (Strong, Silver, & Perini, 2003), we were intrigued by how these mid-career teachers described their authentic teaching practices. The teachers saw these authentic assignments as those that students "have something invested in." When describing one of her fundamental English classes, Jackie shared the following:

We do a lot more of real world activities. We practice things like filling out job applications and making a resume instead of doing worksheets on, "find the predicate nominative in this sentence," because frankly, who needs to know that unless you are an English teacher.



Overall, the action of changing over time reflected the participants' awareness that change was inherent to becoming a teacher and persisting in the field. Further, these changes encompassed the shift from highly scripted to more authentic ways of teaching.

### **Activity Two: Seeing the Big Picture**

The second emerging activity, seeing the big picture, reflected the participants' perspectives on beginning teachers, along with their holistic views of the teaching process. It was as if the participants were saying, "Here is where I am as a teacher, and this is where they [new teachers] are." All of the participants were somewhat critical of new teachers, yet they couched this criticism in understanding that many new teachers had yet to achieve a level of wisdom that they felt was gained only through experience. Jackie expressed the following:

And so you have new teachers coming out of college who are probably academic stars. They were in the nice quiet honors classes and things like that and then they run into the vast majority of our population who don't bring a pencil to class, don't do their homework, sometimes don't want to listen, give you all kinds of excuses for why they don't want to do this or why they don't want to do that. And they [new teachers] are immediately, "Uh, this isn't what I thought it was"—the reality is so jarring for them.

When discussing their first few years of teaching, many of the participants shared how their school experiences as teachers were somewhat incongruent with their school experiences as former students. Five of the eight participants expressed that for some new teachers, this somewhat disorienting dilemma often leads to new conceptions about teaching and learning. Some have suggested that part of developing a teaching identity is recognizing that the practice of teaching is not nearly as "angelic" as teacher training programs suggest (Gohier, Chevrier, & Anadon, 2007, p. 153). Leslie, a teacher of 12 years, affirmed this perspective:

I see these new teachers, I love it, but I see them coming to the school their first week. They've got the seats all in circles like their professors are teaching them or they've got the seats facing each other and I'm like "Oh my God." When you've got hormonal teenagers facing each other, even though somebody might believe that might promote some type of discussion, it's not going to be the discussion you want.

All of the participants in our study believed that one of the factors that impacts persistence in the profession is whether a beginning teacher works through the discrepancy between the personal expectations of teaching and the realities of the actual experience. Three of the participants felt that if beginning teachers do not make

this transition, they will likely leave the profession. On the other hand, for those beginning teachers who embrace this discrepant reality and as one participant stated, avoid “getting jaded,” their perception of teaching and learning will be expanded. Seeing the big picture seems to require teachers to confront their idealized vision of teaching with the reality of the teaching experience. This confrontation eventually yields a more realistic picture of the teaching profession. Even though the participants in our study articulated the existence of this discrepancy between teaching expectations and the actual experience of teaching, they also delineated key ways to assist beginning teachers in making this crucial transition. One of the mentioned keys was providing new teachers with support and opportunities to converse with their colleagues, a suggestion supported by other research (Denmark & Podsen, 2000). This call for collegiality was encapsulated by Barbara:

They [new teachers] need time to interact with people who are doing this job. They need lots and lots and lots of support from their administrators when they don't know very much about classroom management besides what they read in the textbook; which unfortunately doesn't always work.

Despite this call for collegial interaction, all of our participants recognized that many aspects of teaching simply require time and a willingness to “hammer out your style.” Kyle mentioned:

I see these new teachers get into these antagonistic relationships that they are not going to win. There are 30 of them [students]. If you set that up, then everybody starts feeding in on it and you're not going to win that battle.

The wisdom in Kyle's words stems from the fact that he too experienced this challenge when he was a new teacher. In retrospect, Kyle recognized that when he was a new teacher, he attempted to set a clear distinction between the students' role as being simply students and his role as teacher. It seemed to Kyle, and several other participants, that many new teachers do not enter a classroom attempting to build strong personal relationships with students; instead, they often attempt to distance themselves from those they teach in order to establish a sense of authority. Part of seeing the big picture requires the teacher to reflect on his or her relationships with students. These reflections lead to more authentic relationships and are ultimately incorporated into the teacher's burgeoning professional identity. Our participants suggested that as a new teacher's experience expands, this tendency to remain distant from students decreases. The inherent value in and absolute necessity of building a strong relationship with students is cited as keeping many teachers in the profession (Cochran-Smith, 2006).

Ironically, the overarching element that our participants cited when referencing new teachers was their need to “just stick around long enough to see the big picture.” Jackie expressed the following:

To see the, the big picture, you [new teachers] need a little bit more time. And that’s why, if new teachers could just stick around, I think the statistics are like 50% leave within the first five years. That’s not long enough to see the big picture. And when you are in the middle of that first year and “I don’t know if I can wait four-and-a-half more years. I don’t know if I can wait six more years.” But if they [new teachers] could, if they could see what’s going to happen on the other side then that might help them too.

It seemed that as the participants embraced the realities of teaching, the “big picture was worth sticking around for.”

### **Activity Three: Sticking Around**

The third activity, sticking around, reflects how, as the participants found the good in the midst of the challenging realities, persistence became more feasible. As Diane stated, “From time to time you can say, ‘Okay, this is the reality.’ It’s not all like the picture book we remember from our own experiences. But it still can be good.” For participants, sticking around involved an ideological shift. For example, Gary stated:

I think many teachers have a really idealistic view of teaching, like it’s not like other jobs. Once you’re there and it’s a Thursday of the 14<sup>th</sup> week of the school year, and you’re teaching pronoun antecedents, well, you’re just working, and it’s not that idealistic anymore.

Cochran-Smith (2006) suggested that many of the often cited reasons for becoming a teacher, such as “they love children, they love learning, they imagine a world that is a better and more just place,” are not able to “sustain teachers’ work over the long haul” as they are faced with “extraordinarily complex and multiple demands” (p. 20). Kyle expounded upon this idea with the following: “I think after all these years I’m not jaded. I’m realistic. I’m not optimistic about changing the world, but I still think kids are basically good kids.”

For many of the participants, sticking around not only included an ideological shift, but also involved persevering through the bad days. Jackie stated:

There are times when all you are experiencing seems like failures, when none of your kids seem to be learning anything, when you feel like you are talking to the back wall instead of the kids, when a fight breaks out in your classroom...those times when the most exciting part of your day is the fire drill! People who have

been able to go to those dark places and then stick through it see it does get better.

The participants shared that their relationships with their colleagues and their personal connections with students were what ultimately sustained them through the “dark places.”

Literature focused on teacher retention has confirmed that teacher growth is maximized when they are supported by other professionals (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007). Johnson (2006) noted that while a degree of autonomy is appreciated by teachers, isolation from collegial support can have a detrimental effect on teacher satisfaction, effectiveness, and retention. Isolation is not a viable option (Brown, 2005), as Jackie noted:

If you stay in your room all the time and don't talk to other people, you can get burned-out fast because you think you are the only one going through this and it's very isolating and you need a place to vent...you need to be with other people who have successfully gotten through these obstacles.

Nieto (2003) noted that in order to persevere, teachers often look for options other than giving up on students and their dreams, such as participating in teacher communities and working with others who see teaching “as a way to live in the world” (p. 101).

Beyond collegial relationships, all of the participants cited their relationships with students as being what teaching was all about. Kyle expressed his care for students as follows: “At this point in my career, I think personal relationships with the students is very important, so a lot of times I have kids hanging around my room, or coming by and chatting.” The participants viewed the relationships with their students as positively influencing their capacity and willingness to stick around, as expressed by Leslie:

I'm glad that I have built good relationships with the kids and they will stop back by and say hi and tell me how they are doing. I want that long term update of knowing that. If you are not building those kinds of relationships, I don't see the point in being here; that's what keeps it new each year.

As one participant noted, there are many logical reasons why teachers may choose not to stick around; however, all of the participants maintained that part of coming back year after year was found in making a difference in the lives of students. Diane, a teacher of 16 years, described how she navigated the challenges of external policy following her schools' failure to make adequate yearly progress. In the end, making a difference kept her coming back, as she described with the following words:

...the definition of my identity is not this job...for me to go in and have to sign a piece of paper that says I've made no discernible difference in the lives of my students – and it's in the [test] scores of my students – it's not in the lives of my students – but it still felt like, the first time that I had to do that, that I was signing, "Yes, I understand that I have made no discernible difference in the lives of my students." If my identity was tied up in this job why would I come back? Why, why would I come back? So I know that I've made a difference.

Even in the midst of the challenges inherent to teaching, the participants expressed that it was worth sticking around because they felt they were making a difference, as Jackie expressed:

Despite all the preparation that you may have and no matter how smart you are and how organized you are, there's just a heck of a lot of stuff that goes on that's not in the book and if it were in the book, then probably nobody would start out being a teacher. If new teachers knew that there's going to be a kid who, one day, comes to you and tells you that she wants to kill herself. There's going to be a kid who you would never have dreamed of who comes up and says, "I'm pregnant." There's going to be a kid who says, "My Daddy's been touching me." Those are the times when you can really make that difference. Those are the times when, if they are at the point of telling you then you have earned their trust and that's wonderful.

As the participants continually redefined what it meant to teach, the process of *sticking around* was seen in light of receiving the rewards of teaching.

#### **Activity Four: Receiving Rewards**

The fourth activity that emerged explicated the many aspects of teaching that the participants identified as rewarding and in many ways intangible, as stated by Kyle:

And you get feedback from your kids . . . you get that letter or you run into someone at Kroger's. You do get that stuff. They tell you, you made some ground. You've learned something. We remember those days when it all comes together. Those intangibles are huge in this job and that's not just smoke and mirrors.

It seemed that for all of the participants, despite the low pay, policy hassles, and occasional dark days, the gift of watching and influencing their students' development was considered "really rewarding." Diane expounded further:

On the other hand, the cliché that you never know what influence you've had is absolutely true because I've had students come back and say, "You did this with

me.” I don’t even remember what it is they are talking about but they say, “It is one of the most powerfully important things that ever happened to me.” And I don’t understand how that can be, but it is true, you know, and it’s like, “Wow! Good.”

Several of the participants explicitly connected the rewards of teaching with classroom experiences that were meaningful for both themselves and their students, as reflected in Gary’s words below:

The times that are rewarding happen more often than the frustrating times or they are more meaningful. You can brush off the frustrating times. You know, re-teach or try a different way next time or just forget about it. The rewarding times you can remember and talk about, mention to another teacher, “Hey I did this or whatever.” Just in general, getting something out of it keeps you going.

In an interview and survey study of 92 urban teachers, Shann (1998) found that teacher-student relationships were ranked highest overall in relation to the importance and satisfaction assigned to various teaching components. Interestingly, Nieto (2003) suggested that many of the teachers who persist in the field find great reward in shaping the future of their students’ lives and society as a whole. The participants shared this perspective, as expressed by Leslie in the following quote:

But there are other times when you give a kid praise for something that nobody else has ever done before or when you can make a kid laugh about something or you can get a kid angry enough that he will go, “I’m going to show you I can do this.” I like seeing them grow and mature and become young men and ladies and work their way out the door into the real world.

Each of the participants viewed the rewards of teaching as the intangibles that were only attained through perseverance and patience. Regardless of the challenge, the rewards stood as reminders of how, throughout the process, persisting became meaningful and well worth the commitment. As Debbie stated about teaching, “It’s won out, and I’m here.”

## **Discussion**

We attempted to make sense of and conceptualize the process of becoming a teacher and persisting in the profession based on the activities (i.e., themes) we described above. While our study focused on English teachers, we believe that there are likely similarities between the teachers who participated in our study and mid-career teachers who teach other grade levels and content areas. We deduced from the findings that teachers in our study conducted these activities within a larger framework, which included their professional and personal identities. In contrast to a teacher’s

personal identity, their professional identity reflects the way a teacher identifies with the profession over time. Therefore, the process of developing a professional identity should be viewed as both individualistic to the particular teacher, and *dynamic*, since it attempts to combine the teacher’s theoretical understanding of teaching with the actual practice of teaching. Further, we use the word “dynamic” in order to acknowledge that development does not necessarily follow a linear pathway, as some teachers may experience various developmental phases concurrently or in an unexpected pattern. Nonetheless, we attempt to capture the ways in which the participating mid-career teachers made sense of their own teaching trajectory.

The proposed model, as displayed in Figure 1, attempts to account for the transformation in the professional and personal identities of mid-career teachers. Three phases in the process are depicted as conceptual categories, and at each phase, important action(s) occurs. During the first phase, the teacher is both adopting and abandoning, to some degree, a professional identity. The activity/theme of *changing over time* occurs throughout this initial phase, extending into the two phases that follow. This initial phase is one in which *seeing the big picture* is not necessarily occurring, at least not regularly nor with ease. Phase two includes developing and integrating a new and ever-evolving professional identity with the teacher’s personal identity. Within the second phase, the idea of *sticking around* is beginning to be actualized, particularly as *seeing the big picture* is little by little becoming part of the teacher’s activity. Finally, phase three involves sorting out the most integral parts of the professional identity, with *seeing the big picture* and *sticking around* being part of the everyday workings of mid-career teachers. Further, *receiving awards* is now part of the integrated professional identity.

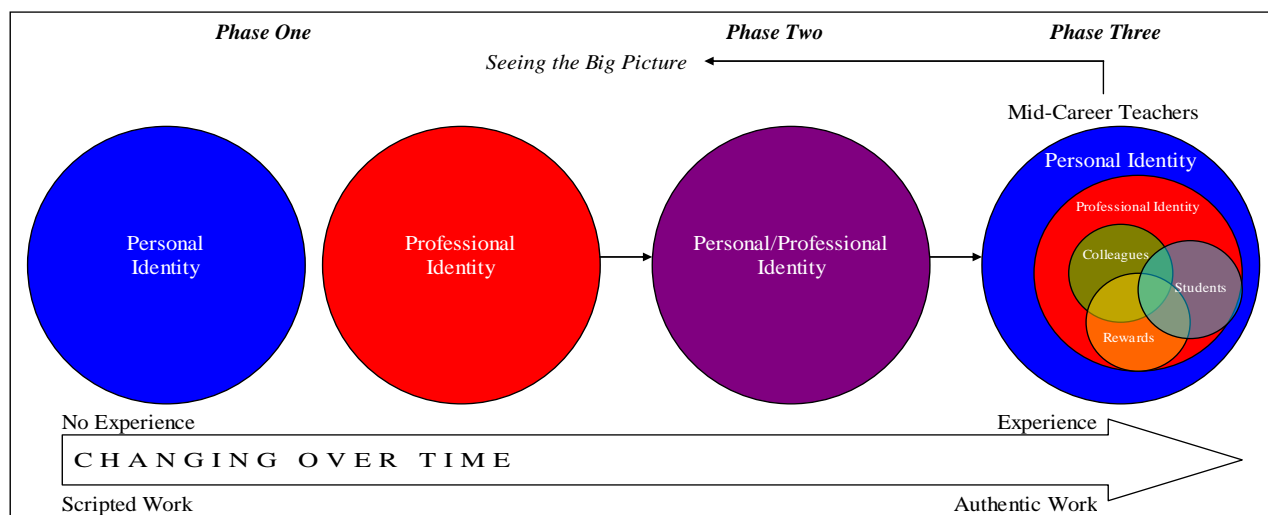


Figure 1. Model of development of mid-career teacher identity and persistence.

More specifically, we posit that a new teacher has a limited experiential basis for a professional identity because she reflects on her experience in the classroom as a student and begins to form a professional identity based on naïve observations. As this teacher acquires a classroom of her own, the professional identities of previous teachers (based on observations) become a surrogate professional identity for this teacher. She then field tests this newly adopted identity in her work context. This surrogate identity is abandoned or significantly modified as the new teacher recognizes the highly individualized nature of a professional identity.

Over time, the new teacher develops a professional identity of her own, one situated within a multiplicity of identities, which may involve simply reconceptualising the idealized version of teaching for a more contextually driven one. As this process unfolds, the teacher develops and integrates this new professional identity into her personal identities, and to some extent, overcompensates for how much this professional identity is a part of her personal identity. Without a clear understanding of the balance that is needed, the two or more identities become blurred and seemingly indistinguishable at times. For a time, this gradual fusion of personal and professional identity may result in a teacher being unable to distinguish between what she does professionally from who she is personally. For the less experienced teacher, this phase of development is characterized by attributing professional failures to personal faults.

Another stage of development initiates, however, as the teacher shifts her questioning away from personal qualities. The teacher then undergoes a subtle change whereby her previously held view of professionalism becomes distinguishable from her personal identity. Instead of solely blaming herself for these problems, she redirects her focus outward, toward other professionals and students with whom she works. This shift allows her to view other teachers and students in a more collaborative and cooperative light, which further distinguishes these integral parts of her professional identity. By the mid-career stage, these integral parts allow her to distinguish what she does from who she is, or as Diane, one of the participants, noted, "My personal identity is more than my professional identity."

## **Conclusions**

The majority of models describing teacher development have described the careers of teachers as a series of stages or cycles (Hall, 2002; Huberman, 1993). For instance, the early years of teaching (one to five years) have been described as being characterized by anxiety, feelings of isolation, and lack of professional confidence (Day, 1999). Mid-career teachers (around 10 years) have been reported to feel stagnant or rejuvenated (Day, 2002). Late-career teachers (over 20 years), while described as being resistant to change (Huberman, 1993), have also been defined by a deepened sense of expertise (Huberman, Thompson, & Weiland, 1997). Yet, such stage-based perspectives on teacher development have not been without critique, as the very validity



of these models has been questioned (Oplatka & Tako, 2009). Further, many of the descriptions around such models have not explored in detail the ways in which the teachers themselves describe their own journey across and within the presumed “stages” in relation to persisting in the field. Thus, the findings of our study, while adding to the broader discussion around teacher development, offer understandings specific to the mid-career phase.

We conclude, then, by returning to the question that framed this study: How do mid-career teachers get “over the hump” and stay in the profession? We suggest that those mid-career teachers who have successfully navigated the stages of development are ultimately able to sort out and differentiate the important aspects of their professional and personal lives. If this explanation is true, then it has important implications for induction programs as well as administrators and policy makers. Research has consistently shown that induction and mentoring programs are essential for reducing attrition rates (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Gold, 1996; Johnson, 2004). These induction programs have the opportunity to continue new teachers’ access to professional development by helping them to see the balance that is needed between their personal and professional identities. Further, noting the importance of collegial interaction by observing other teachers teaching, the newer teacher may be able to see how more experienced teachers balance their personal and professional lives. Instead of pointing solely toward her personal attributes for her students’ failures, the new teacher may be able to understand how a distinguishable personal and professional identity keeps more experienced teachers in the field.

Further, school administrators and policy makers can benefit from a deeper understanding of teachers’ professional and personal identities. First, if teachers who have learned to balance personal and professional identities are more likely to persist in the field, administrators and policy makers may be able to more intentionally promote teacher retention. Second, school administrators and policy makers who place too many restrictions on teaching may in fact be stunting the new teachers’ development, which, in turn, may lead to higher levels of attrition and mobility. Forcing teachers to teach in a prescriptive manner may lead to situations where (a) teachers are unable to engage in the developmental process and leave the profession, or (b) they recognize the importance of their development and move to another school setting that supports this development. With a clearer vision of teacher development, we will be better able to celebrate those teachers who have successfully navigated their development, provide additional help to those who are failing to develop, and create policies more congruent with teacher development.

## References

- Baker, D. P., & Smith, T. (1997). Teacher turnover and teacher quality: Refocusing the issue. *Teachers College Record*, 99(1), 29-35. [GS Search](#)
- Bowen, G. A. (2006). Grounded theory and sensitizing concepts. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(3), 1-9. [GS Search](#)
- Brown, S. W. (2005). Emily and Rebecca: A tale of two teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(6), 637-648. [CrossRef](#) [GS Search](#)
- Buckley, J., Schneider, M., & Shang, Y. (2005). Fix it and they might stay: School facility quality and teacher retention in Washington, DC. *Teachers College Record*, 107(5), 1107-1123. [CrossRef](#) [GS Search](#)
- Charmaz, K. (2005). Grounded theory in the 21st century: A qualitative method for advancing social justice research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.) (pp. 507–535). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (2006). *Stayers, leavers, lovers, and dreamers: Why people teach and why they stay*. New York: Bank Street College of Education.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13(1), 3-21. [CrossRef](#) [GS Search](#)
- Darkenwald, G. G. (1980). Field research and grounded theory. In H. Long, R. Hiemstra, & Associates (Eds.), *Changing approaches to studying adult education* (pp. 63-77). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2003). Keeping good teachers: Why it matters, what leaders can do. *Educational Leadership*, 60(8), 6-13. [GS Search](#)
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Bratz-Snowden, J. (2007). A good teacher in every classroom: Preparing the highly qualified teachers our children deserve. *Educational Horizons*, 85(2), 111-132. [GS Search](#)
- Day, C. (1999). *Developing teachers: The challenge of lifelong learning*. London: Falmer Press.

- Day, C. (2002). The challenge to be the best: Reckless curiosity and mischievous motivation. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 8(3-4), 421-434. [GS Search](#)
- Denmark, V. M., & Podsen, I. J. (2000). The mettle of a mentor. *Journal of Staff Development*, 21(4), 18-22.
- Franz, D. P., & Hopper, P. F. (2007). Is there room in math reform for preservice teachers to use reading strategies? National implications. *National Forum of Teacher Education Journal*, 17(3), 1-9. [GS Search](#)
- Glaser, B. G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity*. Mill Valley, CA: The Sociology Press.
- Gohier, C., Chevrier, J., & Anadon, M. (2007). Future teachers' identity: Between an idealistic vision and a realistic view. *McGill Journal of Education*, 42(1), 141-156. [GS Search](#)
- Gold, Y. (1996). Beginning teacher support: Attrition, mentoring and induction, In J. Skula, T. J. Butterly, & E. Guyton (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (pp. 548-594). New York: Macmillan.
- Hall, D. T. (2002). *Careers in and out of organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Huberman, M. (1993). *The lives of teachers*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Huberman, M., Thompson, C. L., & Weiland, S. (1997). Perspectives on the teaching career. In B. J. Biddle, T. L. Good, & I. F. Goodson (Eds.), *International handbook of teachers and teaching* (pp. 11-79). Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Ingersoll, R. M. (2001). Teacher turnover and teacher shortages: An organizational analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(3), 499-534. [CrossRef](#)  
[GS Search](#)
- Johnson, S. M. (2004). *Finders and keepers: Helping new teachers survive and thrive in our schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Johnson, S. M. (2006). *The workplace matters: Teacher quality, retention, and effectiveness*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), U.S. Department of Education. (2007). *The condition of education 2007* (NCES, 2007-064). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

- National Education Association (NEA). (2003). *Status of the American public school teacher, 2000-2001*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Nieto, S. (2003). *What keeps teachers going?* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Oplatka, I., & Tako, E. (2009). Schoolteachers' constructions of desirable educational leadership: A career-stage perspective. *School Leadership and Management*, 29(5), 425-444. [CrossRef](#) [GS Search](#)
- Rennie, D. L. (2006). The grounded theory method: Application of a variant of its procedure of constant comparative analysis to psychotherapy research, In C. T. Fischer (Ed.), *Qualitative research methods for psychologists: Introduction through empirical studies* (pp. 59-78). San Diego, CA: Elsevier.
- Rogers, R., Malancharuvil-Berkes, E., Mosley, M., Hui, D., & Joseph, G. O. (2005). Critical discourse analysis in education: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 75(3), 365-416. [CrossRef](#) [GS Search](#)
- Scherff, L., Ollis, J., & Rosencrans, L. (2006). Starting the journey together: A teacher educator and her "students" navigate their first semester in the secondary English classroom. *Issues in Teacher Education*, 15(2), 1-17. [GS Search](#)
- Shann, M. H. (1998). Professional commitment and satisfaction among teachers in urban middle schools. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 92(2), 67-73. [CrossRef](#) [GS Search](#)
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Strong, R., Silver, H., & Perini, M. (2003). Boredom and its opposite. *Educational Leadership*, 61(1), 24-29. [GS Search](#)
- Williams, J. (2003). Why great teachers stay. *Educational Leadership*, 60(8), 71-74. [GS Search](#)
- Yonezawa, S., Jones, M., & Singer, N. R. (2011). Teacher resilience in urban schools: The importance of technical knowledge, professional community, and leadership opportunities. *Urban Education*, 46(5), 913-931. [CrossRef](#)

## About the Authors



**Shannon Coulter, Ph.D.**, is an assessment coordinator with the San Diego County Office of Education. He provides assistance to schools in designing assessments, analyzing data, and evaluating school programs. Shannon is a former high school teacher and assistant professor. E-mail: [scoulte1@gmail.com](mailto:scoulte1@gmail.com)



**Jessica N. Lester, Ph.D.**, is an Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology at Washington State University. Her research focuses on broad issues within applied educational psychology and the learning sciences, with much of her work informed by critical understandings of human learning and development. Her research interests include inclusive pedagogies, teacher evaluation processes, and the educational experiences of children with refugee status. She is a former middle school teacher and special educator. E-mail: [jessica.lester@tricity.wsu.edu](mailto:jessica.lester@tricity.wsu.edu)

## ***Appendix***

### Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about your job as a teacher.
2. How is it that you have remained in teaching? What events led you to realize that you wanted to stay?
3. How has your job changed since you began teaching? How, if at all, has your teaching changed?
4. Have you ever thought about leaving? Could you describe that experience? What changed your mind?
5. Having remained in teaching, what advice would you give to someone who has just entered the profession? Others in the profession (i.e., administrators, school board members, other teachers)?