

# Transformational Narratives: Reexamining the Life Cycle of the Teacher

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## Abstract

Teacher education (pre-service training and in-service development) is systematic and comprehensive in nature. However, more attention could be given to the aspect of life cycle and its relevance to a career in teaching (especially considering the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic). This paper therefore offers a critical reexamination of the profession of teaching through the prism of the life cycle as proposed by key researchers in the field (Fessler, 1985; Huberman, 1989, 1993; Lortie, 1989; and Sikes, 1992). In this paper, the different phases of the teaching career are discussed, and analyzed as transformational narratives starting from the novice through to the seasoned educator with particular emphasis placed on the concept of expertise which is ambiguous and open to interpretation. Specifically, in each phase, the various challenges and rewards are presented, and the reasons for continuing along this particular career track are investigated with respect to personal and social identity, expectations, aspirations, and ageing. As a working framework, this paper adapts the work of Sikes (1992) which is regarded as a highly accessible and clear model of the teacher life cycle. Additionally, this paper draws from Rogers (1961), whose psychological constructs of process, potential, and the fully-functioning individual make it possible to reconsider the nature and function of teaching, and the life of the teacher, from a humanistic and phenomenological frame of reference.

キーワード : Life cycle, teaching

## Introduction

"... As often as you can, free yourself from worldly affairs so that you may apply that wisdom which God gave you wherever you can. Remember what punishments befell us in this world when we ourselves didn't cherish learning nor transmit it to other men."

— King Alfred the Great

Without exception, there are inherent advantages and disadvantages to be found in any occupation, and the teaching profession is naturally not exempt from its own peculiar trials and tribulations to be encountered by those who choose to associate with it. Moreover, the physical, psychological, and emotional impact of being a teacher (with key emphasis on stress, exhaustion and burnout) has already been well documented in the literature and various sources over the years, and this impact is widely regarded as a significant indicator of the state of the profession and its practitioners (personal environment).

Any discussion of education (and teacher training/teacher development) would be incomplete without taking into account any relevant historical dimensions of note. Significantly, King Alfred the Great in the 1st century, the renowned scholar, translator and early champion of learning, reportedly left no stone unturned in his valiant attempts to introduce an equitable, democratic and universally accessible educational system for all. However, as the historical records attest, his vision was thwarted as a direct result of the innumerable hurdles that beset him, including the unexpected arrival of hostile invading forces. Consequently, contextualized by the lessons learned from history, teachers today (instructors/educators/learning facilitators) of any persuasion, can be reminded that their experience of an occupation-specific rollercoaster psyche is not unique to them, and that they are certainly not the first to encounter setbacks and pitfalls in their profession.

Needless to say, it should also be stressed that teachers are also cognizant of the wonderful riches to be gained too, and the societal trust bestowed upon them. And while the rewards of the profession can be immediate and hugely satisfying and gratifying, they are similarly well aware of the risks, pressures and stresses (hopefully kept in check by coping mechanism and survival strategies) that are intrinsically part of this career choice that is shaped by both objective and subjective experiences in the pursuit of the art of teaching. The resonating words of Ball and Goodson (1992:2) underline the mutable nature that is the teaching profession:

Any attempt to portray the contemporary situation of teachers' work and teachers' careers must inevitably begin by recognizing the changing context within which this work is undertaken and careers constructed.

In this profession, the above dynamism manifests itself as teachers find themselves openly exposed with all their mannerisms, foibles and eccentricities — in classrooms, lecture halls, language labs, workshop rooms (or even online) whilst trying to connect and engage effectively with learners. Teachers also look for ways to optimize learning conditions so that learners can immerse themselves in personally meaningful classroom experiences in the hope that these learners can become motivated to meet their various aims and objectives, and ultimately realize their potential along their individual paths. All of this is made incredibly more difficult and problematic as learners are not automatons but rather human beings who understandably bring their 'humanity' and all kinds of extraneous variables (life baggage) to learning arenas that teachers (who are also human beings with baggage) have no control over. In other cases,

teachers may face certain restrictions and may be tied by institutional, national, societal expectations, constraints and requirements (organizational environment) that make the job even more taxing and frustrating. But, this notwithstanding, teachers persevere somehow in the knowledge that what they are doing has a magical synergy and a noble purpose, in the hope that their skill sets and personal touch can have a direct effect on those they teach (Cortazzi, 1993). Professional narratives of teachers' lives also reveal that teachers are most certainly united in the belief that what they do is honorable and worthwhile, and that they are inspired and guided by the principle that educating hearts is just as much as (if not more) important as educating minds.

It has been argued in the literature that teaching should be treated and examined in the same way as any other profession that has its own inherent advantages, disadvantages, and individualized worker learning curves. To this end, it may be insightful to reevaluate the career teacher from the perspective of the teaching life cycle by critically assessing existing research conducted in this area in order to gain fresh insights into the profession with its particular benefits and flaws.

It is also worth mentioning here that the concept of life cycle as described in this paper is utilized in keeping with the accepted scientific definition relating to the developmental stages of any living organism. However, it should also be noted here for reference purposes only that in economics and business, life cycle can also be understood as a research tool (methodology) used to conduct environmental-impact assessments in the various stages of a commercial product's life from the extraction of raw materials, through to processing, manufacturing, distribution, recycling, and the ultimate disposal of the product itself (the abbreviation LCA: life cycle assessment, is commonly used to refer to this methodology).

### The Life Cycle of the Teacher

The balance between effort and reward in teaching is complicated..  
(Lortie, 1989: 174).

In this paper, narrative is understood as the 'voice' of the teacher as defined by Cortazzi (1993). This directly relates to the concept of life cycle in that this paper explores qualitative experiential elements such as feelings, perceptions, aspirations, and thought processes in order to better understand the circumstances, experiences, and stories that are congruent with a life in the teaching profession.

The general notion of a cycle can be equated with other terms such as stages, phases, seasons, and rhythms to denote something (natural) that follows an order and a structured path. Life cycle, as explained above, applies this idea to the developmental stages in a person's life (from birth to death). Similarly, within Human Resource Management (HRM), the employee life cycle generally includes the following stages in a person's professional life (from beginning

to end): attention, recruitment, onboarding, development, actualization, and exit.

Of particular relevance to this paper, however, is the professional career cycle of the teacher which has been keenly and extensively explored and modelled by Huberman (1989, 1993), Fessler (1985), and others who have since applied this concept to various educational contexts. These explorations touch on similar, complex themes relating to growth, challenges and transformation in a series of phases (usually starting with the novice teacher and ending with the expert or emeritus teacher) while Lortie (1989) specifically dedicates a large portion of her discussion to the destructive incidence of isolation and its toll on both men and women, and by both single and married teachers. However, Huberman's model of teacher development (represented in figure 1 below) is generally regarded as the most widely applied model of life cycle and has often been adapted to studies relating to the ELT/TESOL/TEFL industry.

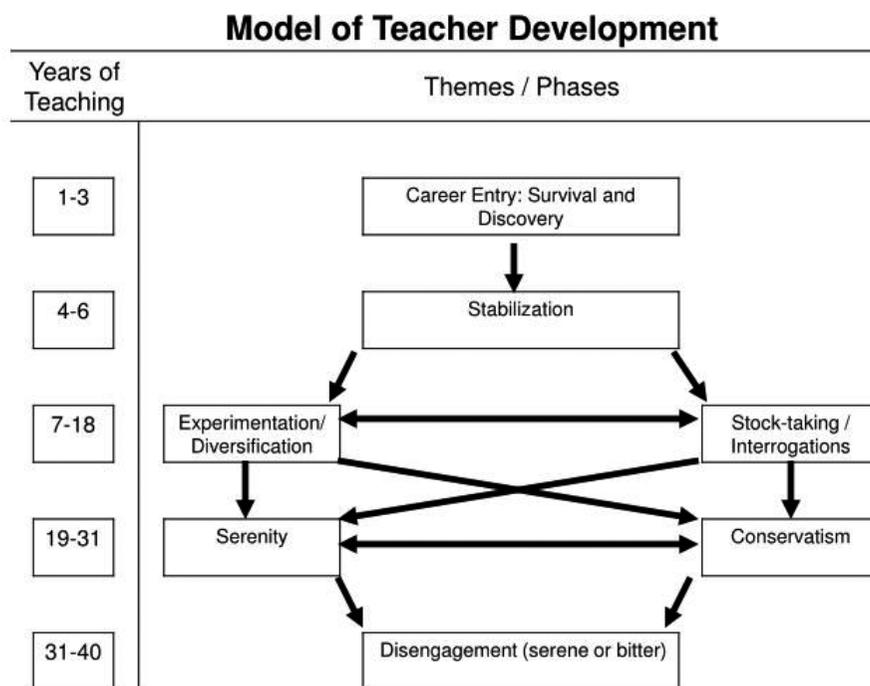
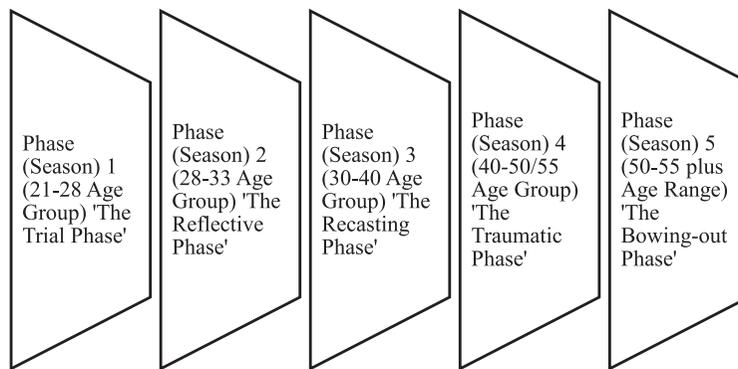


Figure 1. A representation of the model of teacher development (Huberman, 1989).

For ease of use, however, this paper draws from Sikes (1992:27) in Ball and Goodson (ibid), who proposes a straightforward model of life cycle that is easily accessible to those who are unfamiliar with studies on life cycle. She starts her discussion (specifically with school teachers in mind although certainly applicable to teachers of all callings) by stating that: "By virtue of the nature of their job it is difficult for teachers, as it is for obstetricians and lollipop people, to avoid recognizing their own mortality." The issue of ageing (mortality) is a resonating one to

raise here as it is very much connected to the personal and social identity of teachers. In particular, she concedes that expectations, aspirations and status are inextricably linked to the idiosyncratic nature of the job, and that it is a profession in a continuous state of flux as teachers set out on their path, endeavor to establish themselves professionally, and then bow out gracefully at the end.

Sikes identifies a number of phases (or euphemistically as 'seasons') in the life cycle of the teacher (adapted and represented in figure 2 below):



*Figure 2.* A representation of the cyclical five phases (adapted from Sikes, 1992).

The phases (adapted from Sikes) as transformational narratives are as follows:

#### Phase 1 (21-28 Age Group): 'The Trial Phase' Narrative

In this exploratory, trial phase, new (apprentice or novice) teachers enter the profession of teaching either by choice or as a second career and have a typically vague sense of commitment to becoming a teacher for life initially. Usually, this phase is marked by teachers keeping their options very much open to other possibilities and opportunities that may possibly come their way as alternatives. Fostering communication skills and evolving teaching philosophies and nurturing teaching styles (classroom practice) seem to be a rite of passage, and towards the end of the age range, the idea of becoming a future 'expert' becomes a key consideration. This new mind set starts to shape a new identity and a born-to-be-a-teacher persona before entering the next phase.

#### Phase 2 (28-33 Age Group): 'The Reflective Phase' Narrative

In this post-exploratory (post honeymoon) phase, the realities of life start to become a serious matter to contend with. There are increasing responsibilities, challenges and commitments in the workplace now. This is also a time for reflection and introspection, and it is also a time to personally assess whether it's best to dig in and stay the distance or look around for other careers before it's too late. This phase can also be renamed the Age Thirty Transition phase.

Itchy feet begin to set in, and the issues of career and promotion start to become serious food for thought. Additionally, the harsh demands of the job have a negative effect while personal and professional satisfaction is questioned and disillusionment spirals. Also, the thought of potentially becoming embittered and entrenched like older colleagues can breed intense feelings of uncertainty and intolerance which can, as a result, fan a secret desire to flee the profession completely.

#### Phase 3 (30-40 Age Group): 'The Recasting Phase' Narrative

In this phase, with the benefit of a number of years' experience, teachers are often at their peak of performance, oozing self-confidence, ambition and energy. For some, however, the narrative may be quite different, with home life (family) and work becoming a delicate challenging balancing act, or even being faced with having to make a choice of the two. During this phase, teachers may also start to view their career trajectory in a new light, preferring to recast themselves as being involved in a worthwhile profession rather than a professional ladder to senior positions. They may also now regard themselves as experienced (seasoned) rather than novice practitioners and may view young, inexperienced teachers with indifference but also with a touch of envy. There is also a sudden realization that the generation gap between them and their students is becoming evident and quite possibly burdensome.

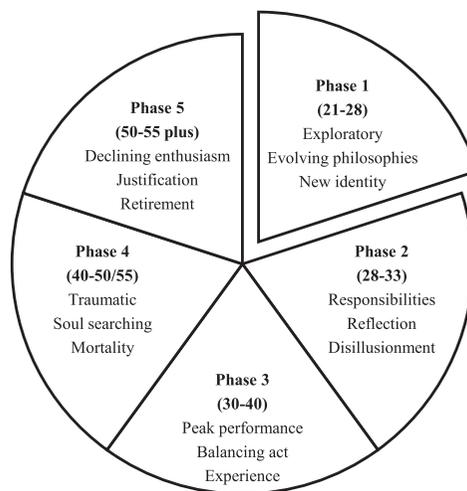
#### Phase 4 (40-50/55 Age Group): 'The Traumatic Phase' Narrative

This phase can be characterized as a traumatic one. Survival strategies, coasting, declining ambition and self-doubt become the norm as the whole idea of what it is to be a 'successful' teacher is thoroughly called into question. This leads to much self-analysis and soul searching, and this introspection eventually ignites a coming to terms with one's mortality. This sudden realization accompanied by feelings of vulnerability may even be exacerbated upon seeing younger teachers who are the same age as their own children. However, teachers who move into senior positions with authority can find it easier to adapt to the tumultuous challenges of this phase with the hope of future satisfaction. Those who cannot or are unwilling to move on may fall into a downward spiral and become even more cynical and bitter as time passes.

#### Phase 5 (50-55 Plus Age Group): 'The Bowing-out Phase' Narrative

This phase sees the emeritus/expert teacher in pre-retirement, disengagement, or 'bowing out' gracefully as energy and enthusiasm for the job dwindle and decline drastically. The mad dash to the finishing line signals leaving the profession entirely and the very appealing prospect of retirement (life post teaching). At this point in their careers, the generational gap between them and their students can become more and more problematic. Teachers hark back fondly and nostalgically to better days when young people were better behaved, more respectful, and had better manners and values. Also, feelings of being outdated

can lead to a mental struggle as newer teachers come into the profession with fresh perspectives and new ways of working, unaware of their mortality. Teachers may even show reluctance to seek out the advice, opinions or experience of these novice teachers or of those veteran teachers who have also been doing this job for many years. However, justification comes in terms of seeing former learners doing successfully in life and feeling pride in having contributed in some concrete way to that success. This feeling helps to keep the fire alive and passion for the job as retirement looms just around the corner.



*Figure 3.* The key elements of the five phases (adapted from Sikes, 1992).

Taking the framework of the phases (represented in figure 3 above) as a reliable matrix and indicator, to what extent can this life cycle be said to be an accurate portrayal of the reality of most teachers? According to Wright (1987), personal beliefs and attitudes (linked to social role and status) are key to defining the various roles of the teacher, but perhaps the single most important message that can be drawn from a closer examination of these phases, as the psychologist Carl Rogers (1961) would argue, is that we all wish to fulfill our potential (according to our own unique, creative personalities) and strive to achieve the highest level of 'humanbeingness' possible if the conditions are right and the environment allows us to do so. However, if our self-image doesn't match our ideal self for whatever reason, this can stop us from becoming a fully functioning person. In synthesis, Rogers concludes that all of us can have personally successful lives if we don't turn away from the realities of the present moment and if we allow all our experiences and feelings to continually grow and change. Rather than an end in itself, for Rogers, life is a phenomenological journey characterized by an existential process of becoming and changing in which maintaining a positive regard and nurturing a sense of self-worth is paramount (represented in figure 4 below).

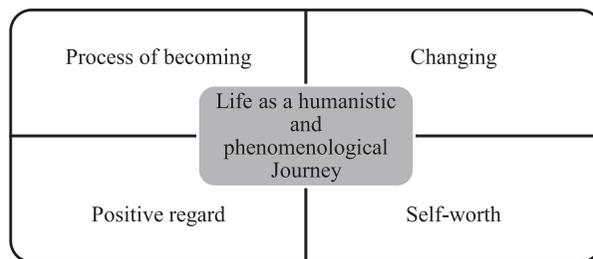


Figure 4. Life as a journey (adapted from Rogers, 1961).

This humanistic and phenomenological dimensions of life's journey can be further isolated as follows:

- Being open to experience: Both positive and negative emotions should be accepted, acknowledged, and embraced.
- Living existentially: All experiences in their various forms should be embraced as they present themselves in life. Living fully in the present moment without anchoring ourselves to the past or obsessing with projections regarding the future is key.
- Trusting our feelings: People should trust their own intuition and feelings, and they should trust themselves to make the most suitable choices in life.
- Leading a creative life: The ability to engage in creative thinking and risk-taking enable people to adjust and change and seek new experiences in life.
- Attaining a fulfilled life: When people look for new challenges and experiences, this can lead to happiness, satisfaction, and self-fulfillment.

Additionally, linked to the discussion above is the idea of expertise which, by its very nature and function (an arguably mixed blessing bound up in loaded concepts such as talent, competence, skill(s), motivation, professionalism, specialization, authority and age), would appear to be a major defining quality of the teaching profession. In this regard, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) suggest that teachers have the tendency see 'expertise' as the art and science of problem-solving and as themselves as knowledgeable and skilled problem-solvers (experts). In contrast, Tsui (2003) is quick to remind us that expertise has become a thorny, elusive and slippery buzzword or industry portmanteau that can be interpreted in so many ways. Ultimately, on a positive note, she concludes that it can be best understood as a continuous process that develops or matures over time through exploration and experimentation – rather like fine wine or cheese – as opposed to some kind of 'medal' or epithet ('expert') that is either obtained or conferred upon a person after years of experience and classroom practice (represented in figure 5).

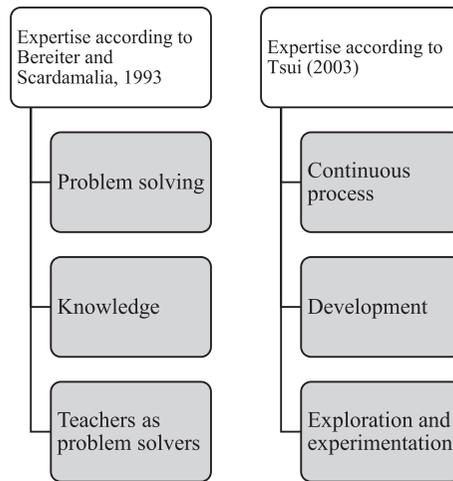


Figure 5. Expertise.

## Conclusion

Teachers do not all follow the same occupational career path, nor are their lives necessarily similar in other respects – each has their own idiosyncratic biography. (Sikes, 1992: 29).

In returning to the beginning of this paper, a valuable lesson can certainly be extracted from the exploits of King Alfred the Great. His fixation with learning as an intrinsic part of a fully-functioning and developing society can be said to reflect the profile of the modern, dedicated career teacher whose resolve is to nurture and empower learners to succeed in life.

This paper has reexamined the phases in the lifecycle of the teacher and synthesized the ideas put forward in the relevant literature. It also underscores the position that the notion of life cycle warrants further exploration within teacher education especially with reference to the transformational experiential narratives (feelings, perceptions, aspirations, and thought processes) of growth, challenges, and transformation. Additionally, the contentious notion of expertise has also been clarified within the psychological and sociological parameters that underpin this paper.

Within its methodological working framework, this paper is intended as an exploratory vehicle for further discussion on this subject, especially pertinent given the current global pandemic and its implications for the teaching profession. Having said this, additional large-scale studies based on subjective narrative analyses of individual teacher experiences would be required in order to obtain a more expansive assessment of the life cycle of the teacher. This is beyond the scope and remit of this paper.

In summation, the model of life cycle as elucidated and explored in this paper serves to

illustrate the notion that despite the myriad frustrations faced by teachers in the course of their life in process, the rewards of the profession are immediate and highly valued, and these are reflected in the aims of honing skills and acquiring expertise which translate into tools to mentor learners in their personal growth and better prepare them for their own future life cycles.

On a final note, teaching, as deconstructed in various studies (Fessler, 1985; Huberman, 1989, 1993; Lortie, 1989; and Sikes, 1992), can be perceived as a profession marked by a cycle of personal trials and tribulations endemic to that particular career. In essence, it can be said to be driven by a central tenet at its core, namely that teachers, who are agents of change, have an active and salient role to play in educating both the hearts and minds of their learners for the benefit of greater society. While this dynamic agency is conveyed effectively through teacher education courses, this paper puts forward the idea that the integration of a clear, workable understanding of life cycle in the training and development process would allow teachers to acquire not only a better understanding of the positive attributes, but also the negative aspects of the occupation, and hence make informed choices as to how to approach and manage the possible risks before entering the profession and once invested in, and committed to, their various career paths.

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