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PREVIEW

**A LIFE HISTORY:  
CAREER STAGES DURING A THIRTY-FOUR YEAR TEACHING CAREER  
by**

**Patrick J. Hunter-Pirtle**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Education**

**Major: Educational Administration**

**Under the Supervision of Professor Marilyn L. Grady**

**Lincoln, Nebraska**

**May 1998**

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DISSERTATION TITLE

A Life History: Career Stages During A Thirty-Four Year Teaching

## Career

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GRADUATE COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

**A LIFE HISTORY:  
CAREER STAGES DURING A THIRTY-FOUR YEAR TEACHING CAREER**

**Patrick J. Hunter-Pirtle, Ed.D.**

**University of Nebraska, 1998**

**Adviser: Marilyn L. Grady**

**This study presents a life history of Mrs. Rose Beideck, business teacher and department chair, who taught at Lincoln Southeast High School, Lincoln, NE, for thirty-four years from 1961-1995. Very few, if any, qualitative life histories have been written of a career teacher. Most of the stories of career teachers are either brief interviews of successful teachers, or lengthy studies of teacher burn-out.**

**In addition, this study explores the research on the career stages of teachers. Many career stage models base their findings on the age of the teacher or the years of teaching experience. Fessler and Christensen's (1992) Teacher Career Cycle Model presents a series of stages but adds into the model the influence of personal and organizational factors that can affect a teacher during her career. This is not a linear model but one experienced in a dynamic manner reflecting responses to the personal and organizational factors.**

**The purpose for conducting this study is to explore the career stages a teacher of thirty-four years in the same environment experienced using a life history design. What career stages did Mrs. Rose Beideck experience during her thirty-four year tenure at Lincoln Southeast High School? This study was**

conducted through a series of approximately twenty interviews with Mrs. Rose Beideck, former students, and former colleagues.

If career stages are to be explored and understood, it is also important to study teachers' lives. Studying the life of Mrs. Rose Beideck and exploring her career development, enabled the researcher to draw conclusions about teacher growth throughout a professional career and to determine whether this teacher experienced career stages during her tenure.

PREVIEW

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## **A Life History: Career Stages During A Thirty-Four Year Teaching Career**

### **Introduction**

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Teacher development is a dynamic, career-long process. Similar to the research on the life cycles of adults, it is generally agreed that the career cycle of teachers is not a linear process, but one in which teachers move in and out of stages in response to environmental influences from both the personal and organizational areas (Fessler & Christensen, 1992). In order to explore a teacher's career stages, we must first understand the teacher and who this person is. "Teachers teach in the ways they do not just because of the skills they have, or do not have, but also because of who they are as people" (Hawthorne, 1994). Teachers' professional behavior is largely determined by, and has to be understood from, their experiences throughout their careers. The importance of teachers' "biographies" or professional lives is being acknowledged lately by a growing number of educators (Kelchtermans, 1993).

It is rare to find a teacher who held the same position in the same school for thirty-four years. What did this teacher experience as she moved in and out of career stages during her tenure? Mrs. Rose Beideck was a business teacher and department chair at Lincoln Southeast High School from August of 1961 until she retired in June of 1995, after thirty-four years of service. This longevity allowed her to experience and adapt to many changes during her career while remaining in the same environment. Mrs. Beideck has a unique perspective to share.

To date the work on teachers' lives has largely reflected the stories of action; studies that locate these lives in their full context have been much less common (Goodson, 1992). In trying to understand a profession so intensely personal as teaching, it is crucial we know about the person the teacher is. There are several

examples of short case studies of strong teachers. For example, Cohen (1991) in A Lifetime of Teaching: Portraits of Five Veteran High School Teachers focuses on five successful practitioners selected from around the country. Cohen says the teachers were discovered by talking to people. "In every community, even the largest, the best teachers always seem to gain a kind of informal renown. Their identities are known, even to those not involved in education" (Cohen, 1991). She chose teachers who had taught for at least twenty-five years, who had vivid memories and enjoyed talking about their experiences, and who had impressive accolades in and out of the classroom.

Cohen's first portrait is of Carl Brenner, a math teacher from Alamo Heights High School in San Antonio, TX. He is the author of four nationally adopted textbooks and a keynote speaker at many conferences. Brenner's undergraduate degree is in engineering; after graduating from the University of Texas at Austin, Brenner enlisted in the navy where he met Admiral Hyman G. Rickover. Brenner credits Rickover for being his inspiration for going into teaching. "Rickover inspired me in so many ways. He inspired me by being so conscientious, so directly oriented towards what he was doing. I have always had a tendency to get sidetracked, distracted. He taught me, in a harsh way, not to be lazy." (p. 12) When Brenner first began teaching, he wanted a job teaching chemistry, a subject that was applied and not theoretical. However, Brenner became a converted mathematician, when he says he realized math is the foundation that underlies everything.

Brenner's style of teaching is to question students, to get the information out of them. He thinks math is personal and should reflect the way math is used in the real world and should not appear as disjointed and unconnected as it does in most math books. "Because of my engineering background, it was easy for me to think of real-world applications - applications to bridges and buildings and baseball games. When students work my problems, they get an equation from which they can answer many

questions instead of just one. They're using a lot of skills, and the focus is less on formulas and more on procedures." (p. 15) Even though Brenner has taught in the same room for twenty-eight years, he maintains his freshness by teaching different courses, by teaching the same course differently, and by teaching different students. "It's always changing. It's never, never the same. That's why I keep writing new books. I keep thinking of new ways to do it." (pp. 16-17) Another secret to Brenner's success is his attentiveness to differences in his students; he knows who to push, who to reprimand, and whose hand to hold. For Carl Brenner and his students, math is their life.

Cohen's second portrait is of Andy Galligani, an English teacher and department chair from West Morris Central High School, Long Valley, NJ. Galligani was born in 1926, the youngest in an impoverished family of eight. An attack of polio in infancy left him severely crippled in one leg. His father was a waiter, who was rarely home, and his mother was mentally ill. It is amazing that Galligani could overcome such a childhood. Galligani's educational philosophy is based on discipline. He believes students must first learn the tools for perception, which can be a difficult and dull process; then the capacity to reason begins. For example, he does believe students need to learn grammar in order to be better writers.

Fellow English teachers rave about Galligani's leadership in the English Department. He spends hours with department members teaching them how to teach literature and how to relate literature to the students' lives. He teaches his teachers how to discipline a class, role playing and modeling his expectations for them.

Cohen's third portrait is of Lily Chin, a science teacher and department chair at Brackenridge High School in San Antonio, TX. Chin's parents came to the United States in the 1920s from Canton in the southern part of China. Her parents pushed Chin to excel to prove that Chinese people were good and responsible students. In the

classroom she is a success because she has the right temperament and a capacity to adapt over time. Chin believes that change is essential. "People change, lifestyles change, education needs to change. So I never do the same thing twice in the classroom, even though I teach five sections of ninth grade biology. Everyone of them is different, every day. Each year I make up new experiments for the course." (p. 52) In addition, Chin knows her students so well because she works with many of them outside the school in an Engineering Club where she takes students on trips, she takes students on college visitations, and she enters her science students in contests.

One of Chin's students who now attends Rice University in Houston believes Chin is successful working with a large Hispanic population because she shows her students she cares. "Many of these kids are apathetic and lazy and uninvolved. She gets them motivated; she gets them moving." (p. 55) Another of Chin's responsibilities has been as department chair for over twenty years, and she is known as a collector, a flea market connoisseur. Since she receives almost no money from the school for department supplies, she relies on garage sales and warehouse clearance sales for purchasing teacher resources. Using small grants and her own money she has purchased a veritable warehouse of materials which are now stored in the high school science department for use by her teachers.

A fourth teacher portrait is of William Salerno, an English teacher, who is a legend in the New York City school system. He has taught all ability levels of students, all socio-economic backgrounds, all grade levels including adults. In addition, he has taught in both public and private schools, and besides teaching English, he has done guidance and college counseling. Salerno's forte is getting along with all students. He deeply cares for each one and is hard on himself when he finds a student he cannot reach. "Maybe it's a defect in my personality, but I find it very hard not to feel for almost anyone. I think that might be one secret of my success and also one defect.

It's like walking up to a baby rattlesnake and petting it because it's a baby. It can kill you. I've gotten involved with these kids' tragedies, their grieves, and it used to almost kill me. But now I'm probably immunized by all those small bites." (p. 69) Salerno has a realistic view of his teaching because he has been in several buildings over his thirty years. He knows the school is not as important as the students in his classes. "It doesn't make any difference what school you're in, because you close the door with your group of kids and whatever it is you're going to teach takes over, and the relationship with the kids takes over, and the reality is in the room. And the rest of it you can put up with." ( p.71)

A former student of Salerno's pays this tribute, "The thing I remember most about Mr. Salerno's class is that never for a moment was I ever bored. Never for an instant. I remember sitting in Salerno's class, and over the course of forty minutes going through a whole range of emotions: laughing hysterically, being really angry, being sad. He could manipulate my emotions better than anyone I've ever known. It was like going to a really great play." (p. 77)

Cohen's fifth and final portrait is of her own mother, Ruth Marantz Cohen, a French teacher for thirty years in the Morris School District in New Jersey. Marantz Cohen's parents were Jewish, European immigrants who also pushed her to excel in the classroom. She remained home for five years to raise her own children and jumped at the chance to teach again. French is her life. She spends hours preparing lessons and rereading books. She subscribes to several French publications because it is important that her students learn the language, the culture, and the French style. At the same time, she is tuned in to her students. It is very important to Marantz Cohen what her students think of her. "It's part of what it means to be the best teacher. You can't be the best if you're unaffected by the student's response to you." ( p. 88) In addition, Marantz Cohen insists the only other profession she could ever have

imagined herself in is acting. She believes teachers need to be great actors and enjoy having all the eyes on them. "You have to be able to play all different roles - sage, parent, friend, policeman - and to do it convincingly. You have to have the resiliency to get back on stage after a disastrous performance." ( p. 91)

A fellow department member of Marantz Cohen's agrees that she is the consummate actress, "I've watched her many times over the years. The kids just love it. There she is, all dressed up there like she's going to a party, and she's chattering away in French. She's got so much love for what she's doing, so much respect, that the kids feel it. They're inspired by that." (p.92) Marantz Cohen would advocate for students to go into the teaching profession; her two daughters are teachers. If students believe they will be successful as teachers, they will succeed. For Marantz Cohen it's all a matter of attitude.

These five outstanding teacher portraits have several commonalities. First, each teacher has a passion for his/her subject matter, and students are energized by the enthusiasm and vigor of these teachers. This passion plays a vital role in longevity for these teachers. The teachers' interest in their course content has sustained these teachers when the process of teaching becomes difficult to bear (Cohen, 1991). Second, there is a lack of conventional career mobility in these teachers; they are not looking to move into administrative positions. What is important to these teachers is their teaching. Job satisfaction comes from within, from meeting internal standards of excellence they place on themselves. Third, these teachers have strong reputations for originality and creativity in their classrooms, which students and members of the community pass on by word of mouth. Fourth, these teachers are very concerned with what their students think of them; this continued concern enables them to relate well to novice teachers. Also, this concern adds to their longevity as teachers because they are constantly attempting to improve the product for their consumers. Fifth, these

teachers ran teacher-centered classrooms; they were always in charge and usually the center of focus. "Teacher's voice that articulates the life and its purposes should not be merely acknowledged. It should be actively sponsored as a priority within teacher development work" (Hargreaves & Fullen, 1992).

In conclusion, qualitative studies of successful veteran teachers whose morale and effectiveness have withstood the test of time are virtually nonexistent in the educational literature. Most of what we know about long-term teachers comes to us through the voluminous studies on burnout (Cohen, 1991). It is also important to study the successful teachers, to see why students want to be in their classrooms, and why these teachers are remaining in their profession for thirty years or longer.

Do career teachers like the five mentioned in Cohen's portraits follow career stages throughout their professional development? The pioneering research on the career stages of teachers began with Frances Fuller's work at the University of Texas in 1969. She wanted to plan meaningful inservice activities for her education students and noted that the focus of concerns for those becoming teachers progressed from concerns for self, to concerns for teaching tasks, and finally to concerns for the impact they were having on students (Marso & Pigge, 1994). Unruh and Turner (1970) were among the first to propose the idea of career stages for teachers. First, the initial teaching period is from one to six years when the teacher's focus is on management and organization issues. Second, the period of building security from six to fifteen years finds the teacher seeking ways to improve her background and education and finding satisfaction in a career. Third, the maturing period allows teachers to see change as a process and not a threat. The teacher looks for new ideas and new concepts. Burden's (1982) framework continued to add to the research on career stages by also identifying three stages; however, all mature teachers continued to be

placed in the same category and differentiation among mature teachers was not explored (Fessler & Christensen, 1992).

Vonk (1990) added to the research on career stages by differentiating among career teachers and introducing the idea of alternative career options experienced by teachers at various stages. Vonk's seven stages are:

1. Preprofessional stage is the period of initial education and training.
2. Threshold phase describes the first year of teaching when the teacher is trying to survive and gain acceptance by students, peers, and administrators.
3. Growing into the profession is during years two and seven when the teacher is improving skills and competencies.
4. The first professional phase is when the teacher can demonstrate the skills of an accomplished professional.
5. Reorientation to oneself and the profession is a time when the teacher may doubt her commitment to teaching. Some may drop out, and others may continue but with less energy and enthusiasm.
6. The second professional stage is when some teachers re energize themselves.
7. The phase of running down is the period before retirement.

Huberman (1989) describes a series of paths or options for teachers in which between years one and three the teacher is most concerned about survival and discovery and then moves to a time of stabilization. Some teachers then follow a path to experimentation/diversification and others move to stocktaking/integration which can lead to career serenity or conservatism. Finally, all paths end at disengagement which can be positive or negative. Both Vonk's and Huberman's theories are multifaceted and complex and omit the idea of earlier theorists that career progression is linear.

Fessler and Christensen's (1992) Teacher Career Cycle Model presents a series of stages but adds into the model the influence of personal and organizational



factors that can affect a teacher during her career. The personal factors include family, life stage research, outside hobbies and interests, personality traits, positive critical incidents, and crises outside of teaching. Organizational factors that influence teachers include trade unions, professional organizations, societal expectations, public trust, regulations, and the management style of administrators (Casey, 1994). The Teacher Career Cycle Model contains eight stages:

1. Preservice is the period of preparation for a specific professional role.
2. Induction is the first few years of employment when the teacher is socialized into the system. The teacher strives for acceptance by students, peers, and supervisors and attempts to achieve a comfort level in dealing with problems and issues. Teachers also experience this when shifting to another grade, building or district.
3. Competency Building is when the teacher is striving to improve teaching skills and abilities. Teachers are receptive to new ideas, attend workshops and conferences, and enroll in graduate programs. Their job is viewed as challenging.
4. Enthusiastic and Growing is the period when teachers have attained a high level of competence and enthusiasm for teaching. These teachers are enthusiastic and have a high level of job satisfaction.
5. Career Frustration is the stage when some teachers are frustrated and disillusioned with the profession; this is when teacher burn-out occurs.
6. Stability is the stage where the teacher does what is expected of her but little more. There is no commitment to the pursuit of excellence or growth, and the teacher reaches a plateau. Teachers at this stage are in the process of pulling back from their commitment to teaching.
7. Career Wind-Down is when the teacher is preparing to leave the profession. It may be a pleasant period where a person is looking forward to a career change or retirement, or it may be a bitter period because of a forced job termination or anxiety

before leaving an unrewarding job. A person may spend several years in this stage, or it may occur during a matter of weeks or months.

8. **Career Exit** is the period after the teacher leaves the job. This could be after retirement, a period of unemployment after job termination, or a temporary career exit for raising a child, a time for career exploration, or moving to a nonteaching position in administration.

The Career Cycle Model is unique and adds to the research on teacher career stages because in this model a teacher can experience any of the stages at any time in her career because of the influence of the personal and organizational factors. Previous researchers attempted to label stages either by using the age of the teacher or the number of years the person had taught. For example, if an experienced teacher in the enthusiastic and growing stage transferred to a new school, the teacher would go into the induction stage due to the new organizational pressures. A teacher at any stage could move into the frustrated stage at any time because of personal or organizational pressures (Casey, 1994). Goodson (1992) stated that our perspectives at particular stages in our life crucially affect our professional work.

A life history of Rose Beideck which focuses on her perspectives will contribute to the knowledge in the area of education by describing the changes in her career and the stages which she experienced during her tenure. This information will be vital to administrators and staff developers, so they can work more effectively with career teachers. In addition, educators and historians will be interested in the results, reflecting on thirty-four years of service to one organization.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose for conducting this study was to explore the career stages a teacher of thirty-four years in the same environment experienced using a life history design. Career stages is defined generally as the career progression process that a

teacher experiences. "This is not a linear progression but one experienced in a dynamic manner reflecting responses to the personal and organizational environmental factors" (Fessler & Christensen, 1992).

### **The Grand Tour Question and Subquestions**

This grand tour question was addressed by the study:

What career stages did Mrs. Beideck experience during her thirty-four year tenure at Lincoln Southeast High School?

These substantive subquestions were addressed by the study:

1. What did Mrs. Beideck experience during her tenure at Lincoln Southeast High School?

2. How did Mrs. Beideck experience the career stages?

Preservice, Induction, Competency Building, Enthusiasm and Growing, Career Frustration, Stability, and Career Wind-Down

These process subquestions were addressed by the study:

3. What themes emerged on career stages from the interviews with Mrs. Beideck?

4. What major events can be chronicled during her tenure?

5. What turning points occurred during her teaching career?

6. What are the lessons learned from examining the life history of a career teacher who remained in the same environment for thirty-four years?

### **Definitions**

**Career stages** are the career progression process that reflects influences from environmental factors (both personal and organizational). The career cycle itself progresses through stages not in a lock-step, linear fashion, but in a dynamic manner reflecting responses to the personal and organizational environmental factors (Fessler & Christensen, 1992).

Turning points are key moments that leave permanent marks on an individual and shape a person's life (Denzin, 1989).

### Delimitations and Limitations

#### Delimitations:

1. This study, which is a life history, is only one form of qualitative research. In addition, even though this study is a life history, I am only providing for the reader glimpses of Rose Beideck's career and story. I do not claim to be relaying her entire life to the reader.
2. This study confined itself to interviews of one retired career teacher who taught in the same high school for thirty-four years in Lincoln, NE.
3. A life history of one retired career teacher decreases the generalizability of findings. This study is not generalizable to all areas of teaching.

#### A limitation

In this qualitative study, the findings could be subject to other interpretations.

### Significance of the Study

A study of one career teacher's thirty-four years of service to one organization and the career stages she experienced is important. Very few, if any, qualitative life histories have been written of a career teacher. Most of the stories of career teachers are either brief interviews of successful teachers, or lengthy studies of teacher burn-out (Cohen, 1992). Little information is available on the career stage of teachers, particularly research which does not base the career stages on the age of the teacher or the years of experience (Fessler & Christensen, 1992). Utilizing the influence of personal and organizational factors on the teacher's career stages is a unique perspective. Because this study is a life history, and also because of the unique perspective on career stages, researchers will be interested in the results of this study.