

# Successes and Struggles of Teaching: Perspectives of Beginning, Mid-Career, and Veteran Teachers

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Wages that are not commensurate with level of education (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2013), demanding responsibilities, and pressures leveraged by high-stakes testing and evaluation, have led to soaring rates of attrition and a disproportionate number of beginning teachers in U.S. classrooms. Teacher experience has decreased from a mode of 15 years in 1978–1988 to five in 2011–2012 (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014). And, nearly half of all teachers leave within five years costing U.S. public schools 2.6 billion dollars annually (Alliance for Excellent Education [AEE], 2004).

These trends in the teaching workforce have important implications for school improvement, given that teachers show significant growth in their formative years (Henry, Bastian, & Fortner, 2011; Kersting, Chen, & Stigler, 2013; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005) and that *all* teacher turnover harms student achievement (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). For these reasons, the insights of mid-career and veteran teachers who have successfully navigated the treacherous first years are especially important, particularly in comparison to their early-career counterparts. We wonder: Is there a way of thinking about the struggles and successes within teaching that buffer teachers from their environmental stressors and supports retention?

## **Struggles**

Beginning teachers often hold idealistic expectations (Rust, 1994), but soon face the numerous challenges of reality, including: classroom management (Hong, 2012), higher student-to-teacher ratios, conflicts with pupils, feelings of inadequacy, assignments outside of their specialization (Manassero, et al., 2006), and a lack of curriculum guidance (Kauffman, et. al., 2002). Their struggles outnumber successes (Romano, 2008), particularly in teaching students with special needs and English language learners (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). These challenges can lead to burnout (Gavish & Friedman, 2010), increasing a teacher's desire to leave the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010), especially without support from administrators, mentors, and assistance from colleagues (Alhija & Fresko, 2010).

Veteran and mid-career teachers also experience challenges that can undermine motivation—working with unfavorable external policies, poor student behavior, personal life events, increased paperwork, heavy workloads and long hours, and results-driven systems (Day & Gu, 2009). Yet, they report a continued desire for meaningful professional development and recognition of their experience through leadership opportunities (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007).

## Successes

The literature on teachers' self-described successes or breakthroughs is negligible. Early studies found that teachers defined success in terms of student behavior—not their own actions or learning outcomes—and that the successes reported were affective rather than cognitive in nature (Harootunian & Yarger, 1981). Placek (1983) articulated this as equating success with students who are “busy, happy, and good [compliant].” (p. 54). More recently, Romano and Gibson (2006) and Romano (2008) found beginning teachers experienced success most frequently in classroom management and content/pedagogy.

Given the void in this literature, we explore beginning, mid-career, and veteran teachers' perceptions of successes *and* struggles in their own teaching. We posit that a clear understanding of how teachers conceptualize successes and struggles at different points in their careers can serve beginning teachers especially well, and that the framing used by more experienced colleagues who remained in the profession may be more constructive than the initial frames used by beginning teachers who are at risk of leaving the profession.

## Conceptual Framework

Teacher development theory serves as the framework for this study, locating teachers' descriptions of successes and struggles within their life-career, job-specific development, and expertise. Early models viewed teacher development as a relatively abbreviated process. For example, Katz (1972) theorized that survival is the focus of the first weeks of teaching as teachers navigate urgent needs, issues, and events. Consolidation occurs within the first year, as teachers begin to see a bigger picture and focus on student needs. Veenman (1984) also found that beginning teachers frequently cope with the most immediate and basic needs, but these patterns extend beyond the first year of teaching. Katz (1972) recognized teachers as fully developed by year five—a year commonly identified in teacher literature as the last of the beginning years.

More complete models, such as Huberman's model (1989) and the Life Cycle of the Career Teacher model (Steffy & Wolfe, 1997; Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, & Enz, 2000), view development as continuous from teacher preparation through retirement, where early years are a time of learning and experimentation. Huberman's model, however, theorizes that mid-career teachers can face monotony, self-doubt, and frustration in their attempts to improve practice, while, veteran teachers may become dogmatic and resistant to change as they begin to withdraw from the profession emotionally and physically. Alternately, the Life Cycle model theorizes that mid- and late-career teachers extend their professional roles through tutoring, substituting, or mentorship, illustrating the potential for veteran growth. Likewise, expert-novice research reveals that expert teachers rely on deep features (e.g., principles, beliefs) to conceptualize problem representations, focus on student behavior rather than their own teaching, and take a broader approach when analyzing classroom instruction (Sabers, Cushing, & Berliner, 1991).

Studies of world champion chess players reveal that it takes extensive deliberate practice to develop expertise (de Groot, 1946/1978), with some arguing a minimum of 10 years (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). Although not all veteran teachers are expert teachers, expert teachers may be more likely to be experienced teachers. Using this framework,

we hypothesize that beginning teachers think in qualitatively different ways than their more experienced colleagues.

## Method

This cross-sectional analysis includes selected data from a larger study examining teachers' beliefs about the profession. Participants were asked to respond to two broad, open-ended prompts as part of the survey: 1) *Please describe the biggest breakthrough or highlight you have experienced during your time in the teaching profession*, and 2) *Please describe the greatest struggle or low point you have experienced during your time in the teaching profession*.

## Participants

Seventy-five teachers, grades K-9, from a large, suburban district located in the Midwest participated in this study. Teachers were primarily Caucasian/White (87%) and female (91%). The majority of participants held a Master's degree (69%). Teachers in the sample had between 1 and 37 years of experience ( $M = 10.7$ ,  $SD = 10.1$ ) and were organized into three categories based on the conceptual framework: beginning (1-5 years,  $n = 32$ ), mid-career (6-10 years,  $n = 16$ ), and veteran (10+ years,  $n = 27$ ).

## Thematic Development

Data were analyzed using an interpretive approach to qualitative content analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994)—a multi-step process using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). From themes, a coding system was developed and refined. The system organized into two overarching codes that were designed to capture subtlety in teachers' responses—complexity and content. *Complexity* was used to capture the richness of thinking present in participants' responses. A response was coded 'simple' if it was composed of a single theme or multiple themes that offer little or basic reflection, limited in length without elaboration, or contained a list of themes. 'Complex' statements included contrast or comparison, cause and effect, were analytical or reflective in nature, or discussed the interconnectedness of two or more themes, people, or perspectives. The responses were also examined for patterns in topical themes that could be used to capture the focus of teachers' struggles and successes. The *content* themes focused on self, profession, students, parents, workplace, and technology. Additional sub-codes were created to capture nuance. See Table 1.

## Findings and Discussion

As a whole, teachers' *successes* were most frequently 'professional'-themed and 'student'-themed, while their *struggles* indicated equal concerns about the 'profession,' 'students,' and the 'workplace.' Alternately, comments about parents were nearly absent in teachers' descriptions of success, but were present in their description of struggles (see Table 1). Teachers' responses were more frequently crafted in simple statements that focused on singular themes (61%) than more complex statements that integrated ideas or themes (38%).

## Successes across Career Phase

**Complexity.** Results indicate that teachers become more complex in their understandings of success across the three time points (see Table 2). Thirty-nine percent of

beginning, 50% of mid-career, and 91% of veteran teachers' successes were coded as complex. For veteran teachers, these complex successes often included the realization of important beliefs, or addressed ways in which teachers saw themselves as vital to student learning. For one veteran teacher, this happened with the help of a colleague:

During my 2-3 year of teaching, a teacher at my second school took the time and energy (without salary stipends) to help me understand the American Education system. She helped me direct my knowledge to become an effective teacher.

Although beginning teachers more often conceptualized their success in simple terms, complexly described successes often described specific and concrete ways their teaching practices yielded student outcomes. For example, one teacher noted: "I am beginning to understand that many kids are not fully engaged in my classroom. This is probably because I am not engaging them at the right level."

**Content.** *Professional* and *student*-related themes were the most frequently reported successes for all teachers, but to a lesser extent by mid-career and veteran teachers. The description of *professional* and *student*-related successes followed a consistent, downward trend across the three career points, with less than half of veteran teachers discussing these themes in their responses (see Table 2).

A substantial percentage of mid-career teachers noted *self-focused* themes in their successes—more than veteran teachers and beginning teachers. These *self-focused* successes included the realization of particular beliefs or perceptions about learners (e.g., setting high expectations). Veteran teachers' successes were the most varied and more evenly distributed across themes than their less experienced peers.

Despite the changing focus of teachers' responses across career points, successes were largely described across all career phases in terms of *professional* and *student*-themes, with *instruction* and *teacher pride* as the most frequently highlighted *professional* success. *Instructional* successes included the benefits of structuring curriculum to foster student motivation. For example, one teacher "discovered that if you make the curriculum have relevance, students will always want to learn more than time allows for." These types of student outcomes were often illustrated in the form of 'teacher pride'. One teacher noted that, "Helping students to achieve their academic goals is rewarding. All of my students have excelled in my classes. I take pride in this achievement!"

When teachers reflected on *student*-related successes, *learning* was the most frequently noted. Teachers often described these successes as student growth, but rarely provided richer explanation. When teachers did expand upon concepts related to student learning, the comments were fairly sophisticated. One teacher noted the value of both "aha" moments and application:

My breakthroughs are not humongous moments, but rather instantaneous sparks in a child's eye when he/she understands a concept. Other important moments are when a student relates a recently learned concept to the real world and is capable of expressing his/her new learning.

In sum, the qualitative ways in which teachers conceptualize their successes support existing theory and research. Beginning teacher responses are simpler, narrower

conceptualizations that primarily focus on teaching. Patterns in self-described successes indicate that across career phases, teachers develop broader and more varied conceptualizations of success, and these successes are described in more complex ways.

### **Struggles across Career Phase**

**Complexity.** Despite career phase, teachers were similarly skillful in reflecting on their struggles. Approximately 33-40% of teachers described their struggles in complex ways, with beginning teachers most frequently doing so (see Table 3).

Beginning teachers complexly described struggles that were often related to school, but not necessarily their classrooms. Some beginning teachers noted the challenges of policy, high-stakes testing, or collaboration with colleagues. Others noted challenges with students and lack of administrative support. While beginning teachers' challenges varied, veteran teachers' complex responses described how students' outside-of-school issues affect their teaching and the impact of their instruction on student learning outcomes. One veteran teacher noted:

The biggest struggle has been finding ways to reach reluctant readers who have little support outside of school. Instilling a sense that education has value and that it can make a difference in their lives is so important and often times hard to demonstrate in a real life manner.

**Content.** *Professional*, *student*, and *workplace*-themed struggles were the most frequently noted across career phases (see Table 3). For beginning teachers, *professional*-related themes dominated their struggles. This was crystalized in the responses of some beginning teachers who described the task complexity inherent in the job, such as seemingly unrealistic performance expectations:

One great struggle is planning instruction and gathering high quality materials for each lesson (at each grade level) to include all the required objectives (learning objectives, oral language objectives, individual student objectives), strategies reflective of best practice, on-going assessment and data gathering, and writing it up in formal lesson plan format. I love the kids, and want them to have the best, but I simply can't keep up.

Mid-career teachers' descriptions of struggles were spread evenly between *professional*, *student*, and *workplace*-related themes. Veteran teachers, however, described *student* themes most frequently at the center of their struggles. The following self-described struggle of a veteran teacher highlights the difficult task of educating students well despite competing foci:

I struggle with the outside stressors students are living with daily, and how it impacts their ability to learn. Sometimes they just don't care about school because of the overwhelming issues in their lives. A teacher can care, and hope to inspire a student to care, but a teacher can't MAKE a student care about learning.

Professional sub-themes of *classroom management* and *teaching assignment* were described as struggles across all career phases. However, *instruction*—the dominant *professional* sub-theme in beginning teachers' struggles was less frequently noted in mid-career teachers' responses and was absent in veterans' responses. In teachers' student-themed struggles and across career phase, teachers shifted away from behavior-related struggles.

As with successes, the ways in which teachers describe their struggles across career phases support existing theory and research—a shift from teaching to students. Yet, contrary to expectations, beginning teachers in this study are particularly skillful in describing their struggles in complex ways. There are a number of possible explanations. Assuming that veteran teachers in this sample might be experts, these findings might suggest that expertise evolves differently in negative and positive experiences of a teacher’s life and work. A second hypothesis is that beginning teachers experience more struggles than successes (Romano, 2008), and as a result, become particularly accomplished in reflecting on their struggles.

### **Conclusion**

In the current study we asked: Is there a way of thinking about struggles and successes that buffers teachers from their environmental stressors and supports retention? We proposed that understanding how teachers think about successes and struggles at different points in their careers may serve beginning teachers especially well. More experienced colleagues who remain in the profession have likely stabilized in their ability to demonstrate student achievement gains (Henry et al., 2011; Rivkin et al., 2005). Their framing of successes and struggles may be more constructive than the initial frames used by beginning teachers who are at risk of leaving. Taken together, valuable insight for teacher education and induction can be gained by conceptualizing study findings (or teachers’ ways of thinking) as a potential function or by-product of teacher effectiveness or retention.

Three key findings are particularly noteworthy. As expected (Gonzales & Carter, 1996; Sabers et al., 1991; Steffy et al., 2000; Steffy & Wolfe, 1997), teachers’ responses became increasingly more complex across the three career phases, illustrating a shift from teaching to students. Second, teachers’ understandings of their struggles were less complex than their successes, though beginning teachers were slightly more skillful in reflecting on their struggles than their more experienced peers. And, third, few teachers (9%) noted the interconnectedness between teaching and learning, contrary to the expectation that veteran teachers may be particularly attuned to this component (Gonzales & Carter, 1996; Sabers et al., 1991).

### **Teacher education and induction support**

Drawing upon teacher development theory (Steffy et al., 2000; Steffy & Wolfe, 1997), reflective practice should begin as early as students have access to the classroom. Assuming that veteran teachers’ conceptualizations are adaptive and productive ways of thinking, teacher education programs and induction programs should support reflective practice that address both successes and struggles with a strong emphasis on inputs, outputs, and their relationship. The goal would be to develop teachers who understand the complex ways their teaching practices are related to student learning, yielding teachers who are equipped with the strategies needed to improve their practice and be effective (Calderhead, 1989). Connecticut’s induction program, highly ranked by the New Teacher Center (2012), is an example of such a program (Bozack, Freilisher, & Salvaggio 2012).

Mentors also serve a critical role in new teacher induction and retention (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). And, findings from this study suggest that more experienced teachers can offer unique contributions as mentors. The reduced frequency by which more experienced teachers noted ‘instruction’ and ‘student behavior’ as struggles suggests that these teachers have

successfully overcome the challenges that beginning teachers traditionally confront (Hong, 2012; Kauffman et al., 2002). Likewise, mid-career and veteran teachers in this study demonstrated an increasingly complex understanding of success, mirroring findings from other teachers who have also remained in the profession (Hong, 2012). With this in mind, mid-career and veteran teachers may be particularly helpful in providing interventions that help beginning teachers improve their reflection and instruction (Hogan & Rabinowitz, 2009; Pretz, Naples, & Sternberg, 2003). Furthermore, beginning teachers may benefit from observing how mid-career and veteran teachers interpret their successes and struggles. Because ecological support from colleagues can support first-year teacher assimilation (Alhija & Fresko, 2010), working with mentors to foster adaptive coping mechanisms may help retain and sustain beginning teachers, particularly during a time when they are most likely to leave (AEE, 2004) and are establishing their effectiveness (Henry et al., 2011; Kersting et al., 2013; Rivkin et al., 2005).

Future research should consider context in exploring how teacher development and the development of expertise are related to teacher self-efficacy, teacher effectiveness, and retention. For example, exploring the frequency, magnitude, and comparative nature of teachers' struggles and successes (Boyd et al., 2011) may reveal why there were contradictory trends in response complexity across career phases. Although open-ended responses (like those used in the current study) offer an important understanding of how teachers interpret breakthroughs and struggles, it is limited. In-depth interviews may offer a richer illustration of how context matters. Finally, it is valuable to note that this study was conducted prior to Race to the Top and the Common Core State Standards. A follow-up study may reveal to what extent current reform is shaping the ways teachers think about the world and work of teaching.

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Table 1

*Overall Frequencies by Type of Response*

Codes	Success		Struggle		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Complexity						
Simple	45	60.00	46	61.33	91	60.67
Complex	29	38.67	28	37.33	57	38.00
Content						
Self-focused	10	13.33	5	6.67	15	10.00
Professional	2	2.67	2	2.67	4	2.67
Teaching Practices: Instruction	6	8.00	2	2.67	8	5.33
Teaching Practices: Classroom Management	2	2.67	4	5.33	6	4.00
Teaching Practices: Social/Emotional Support	3	4.00	0	0.00	3	2.00
Teacher's Role in Specific Student Issues	5	6.67	2	2.67	7	4.67
Teaching Practices: Assessment	1	1.33	2	2.67	3	2.00
Teaching Assignment	1	1.33	8	10.67	9	6.00
Professional Development	2	2.67	0	0.00	2	1.33
Teacher Pride	10	13.33	0	0.00	10	6.67
Total Professional	32	42.67	20	26.67	52	34.67
Students	7	9.33	1	1.33	8	5.33
Learning	12	16.00	3	4.00	15	10.00
Social-emotional	5	6.67	1	1.33	6	4.00
Behavioral/Individual Dispositions	3	4.00	15	20.00	18	12.00
Total Students	27	36.00	20	26.67	47	31.33
Workplace	1	1.33	4	5.33	5	3.33
Administration	0	0.00	11	14.67	11	7.33
Coworkers	3	4.00	5	6.67	8	5.33
Physical Environment	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Resources	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
School-related Activities	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Roles and Responsibilities	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
School and District-Level Politics	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Total Workplace	4	5.33	20	26.67	24	16.00
Parents	1	1.33	6	8.00	7	4.67
Technology	4	5.33	0	0.00	4	2.67
Other	2	2.67	7	9.33	9	6.00

Table 2

*Frequencies for Successes by Career Level*

Codes	Beginning		Mid-Career		Veteran	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Complexity						
Simple	19	61.29	7	50.00	1	9.09
Complex	12	38.71	7	50.00	10	90.91
Content						
Self-focused	2	6.45	4	26.67	4	13.79
Professional	2	6.45	0	0.00	0	0.00
Teaching Practices: Instruction	7	22.58	2	13.33	3	10.34
Teaching Practices: Classroom Management	0	0.00	1	6.67	1	3.45
Teaching Practices: Social/Emotional Support	2	6.45	0	0.00	2	6.90
Teacher's Role in Specific Student Issues	4	12.90	1	6.67	1	1.33
Teaching Practices: Assessment	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	6.90
Teaching Assignment	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	1.33
Professional Development	1	3.23	1	6.67	0	0.00
Teacher Pride	7	22.58	4	26.67	4	13.79
<i>Total Professional</i>	23	74.19	9	60.00	14	48.28
Students	1	3.23	3	20.00	3	10.34
Learning	12	38.71	3	20.00	5	17.24
Social-emotional	2	6.45	1	6.67	2	2.67
Behavioral/Individual Dispositions	3	9.68	0	0.00	0	0.00
Student Pride	4	12.90	0	0.00	2	6.90
<i>Total Students</i>	22	70.97	7	46.67	12	41.38
Workplace	1	3.23	0	0.00	0	0.00
Administration	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Coworkers	1	3.23	1	6.67	3	10.34
Physical Environment	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Resources	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
School-related Activities	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Roles and Responsibilities	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
School and District-Level Politics	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
<i>Total Workplace</i>	2	6.45	1	6.67	3	10.34
Parents	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	3.45
Technology	1	3.23	0	0.00	3	10.34
Other	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	6.90

Table 3

*Frequencies for Struggles by Career Level*

Codes	Beginning		Mid-Career		Veteran	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Complexity						
Simple	18	60.00	10	66.67	18	62.07
Complex	12	40.00	5	33.33	11	37.93
Content						
Self-focused	1	3.23	0	0.00	4	13.79
Professional	1	3.23	0	0.00	1	3.45
Teaching Practices: Instruction	5	16.13	2	13.33	0	0.00
Teaching Practices: Classroom Management	4	12.90	2	13.33	1	3.45
Teaching Practices: Social/Emotional Support	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Teacher's Role in Specific Student Issues	1	3.23	1	6.67	2	6.90
Teaching Practices: Assessment	3	9.68	0	0.00	1	3.45
Teaching Assignment	4	12.90	1	6.67	3	10.34
Professional Development	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Teacher Pride	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Total Professional	18	58.06	6	40.00	8	27.59
Students	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	3.45
Learning	1	3.23	2	13.33	2	6.90
Social-emotional	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	3.45
Behavioral/Individual Dispositions	9	29.03	4	26.67	5	17.24
Student Pride	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Total Students	9	29.03	6	40.00	9	31.03
Workplace	1	3.23	1	6.67	2	6.90
Administration	6	19.35	4	26.67	1	3.45
Coworkers	2	6.45	0	0.00	4	13.79
Physical Environment	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Resources	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
School-related Activities	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Roles and Responsibilities	0	0.00	1	6.67	0	0.00
School and District-Level Politics	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Total Workplace	9	29.03	6	40.00	7	24.14
Parents	2	6.45	1	6.67	5	17.24
Technology	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Other	2	6.45	2	13.33	3	10.34