

Major Career Changes from the Perspective of Experienced Teachers

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The research study concerns the lives and careers of teachers in the late stages of their careers. The aim of the study is to describe the teacher's careers, identify the major changes that occurred throughout and in their careers, and investigate how they perceive these changes. The research is based on unstructured and semi-structured interviews conducted with six practicing teachers ages fifty and older with at least twenty years of teaching experience. The research sample included teachers who teach different subjects at both lower secondary and secondary schools in the Czech Republic. It shows that the teachers often perceive changes that occurred throughout their careers negatively. However, in spite of their dissatisfaction in many areas, they are mostly very motivated and perceive their self-efficacy positively.

Key words: *teacher career cycle; experienced teachers; teacher's life history*

Introduction

The late stages of teacher development and careers receive less attention than the beginning of the teacher's careers.¹ The progressive aging of the workforce makes it imperative to take more interest in the last stages of a teacher's career cycle and to understand the changes that occur in those stages in order to recognise and utilise the potential these teachers possess.

¹ Píšová, M. – Hanušová, S. – Kostková, K. – Janíková, V. – Najvar, P. – Tůma, F. (2013). *Učitel expert: jeho charakteristiky a determinanty profesního rozvoje (na pozadí výuky cizích jazyků)*. [Expert teacher: the nature of expertise and determinants of professional development (in FLT perspective)]. Brno: Masarykova univerzita.

Therefore, the research question addressed in this article covers the process of change that occurs through teachers' careers. The aim of the research² was to describe teachers' careers, especially from the perspective of older teachers including the complexity of their entire lives, to identify the major changes that occurred throughout their careers, and to ascertain how older teachers perceive those changes.

Research Problem

Lukas³ classifies approaches dealing with a teacher's career as narrow, enlarged, or wide. Narrow approaches look at a teacher's development from the perspective of specific social science disciplines, for example psychology or pedagogy⁴; enlarged approaches partly connect teacher development with influences that are not directly linked to the school environment or schooling⁵; and wide approaches consider all the factors that have an impact on a teacher's development⁶, which is the approach followed in this research. Burke, Christensen, and Fessler⁷ created *The Teacher Career Cycle Model*, which understands the teacher's career as a cycle rather than a static or fixed set of stages as described by the previously mentioned authors, and identifies the personal and organizational factors that influence a teacher's career, which include categories that may have a favourable or negative influence on the job behaviour and career cycle of individuals, and on their

² Maňasová, K. (2018). *A Teacher's Life History: Major Changes Through One's Career from the Perspective of Older Teachers*. (Unpublished master's thesis). Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic.

³ Lukas, J. (2011). Vývoj a kariéra učitele. [Teacher Development and Career]. (In B. Lazarová, *Pozdní sběr: o práci zkušených učitelů [Late Harvest: on Experienced Teachers' Work]*. (59–72). Brno: Paido.

⁴ Katz, L. G. (1972). Developmental Stages of Preschool Teachers. *Elementary School Journal*, 73 (1). Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED057922.pdf>; Oja, S. N. (1990). *Developmental Theories and the Professional Development of Teachers*. Durham: University of New Hampshire, Dept. of Education; Brekelmans, M., Créton, H. (1993). Interpersonal Teacher Behavior Throughout the Career. In T. Wubbels & J. Levy (Eds.), *Do You Know What You Look Like? Interpersonal Relationships in Education* (81–102). London: The Falmer Press.

⁵ Huberman, M. (1993). *The Lives of Teachers*. New York: Teachers College Press; Long, R. (1999). 20/20 Hindsight: Teacher Change and Advice. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 5(11). Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Long-TeacherChange.html>; Steffy, E. – Wolfe, M. P. – Pash, S. H. – Enz, B. J. (2000). *Life Cycle of the Career Teacher*. Oaks: Corwin Press.

⁶ Lukas, J. (2011). Vývoj a kariéra učitele. [Teacher Development and Career]. (In B. Lazarová, *Pozdní sběr: o práci zkušených učitelů [Late Harvest: on Experienced Teachers' Work]*. (59–72). Brno: Paido.

⁷ Burke, P. J. – Christensen, J. C. – Fessler, R. (1984). *Teacher Career Stages: Implications for Staff Development*. Bloomington: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, p. 10.

growth, stagnation, or withdrawal; these factors were also taken into consideration in our research.

Wide approaches to a teacher's development and career are mainly represented by qualitative, narrative methods based on the research of a teacher's life story.⁸ An investigation of a teacher's life story can reveal various external and internal factors that may affect one's life development and its understanding and that can clarify the process of 'becoming a teacher'. However, this method is often criticised for putting too much emphasis on subjective interpretations of both the teacher and the researcher.⁹

Research Focus

Changes in teachers' beliefs, opinions, attitudes, teaching practices, and behaviour are an inseparable part of teachers' development.

Richardson and Placier¹⁰ categorize changes in individual teachers into three groups: voluntary and naturalistic changes, which are connected to personal biography, life and professional experience, and learning to teach or a changing practice; changes connected to going through a particular stage of development and movement from one stage to another; and changes connected to teacher education and staff development.

Current approaches to teacher professional development recognize that teachers' beliefs play a central role in their process. They assume that changes in teachers' classroom practices are the result of changes in the teachers' beliefs.

Richards, Gallo, and Renandya¹¹ investigated changes in teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning in a research project involving 112 second language teachers. They found that the most significant change over the teachers' careers was the focus on the student and a greater individualization of the learning process.

The process of teachers' changes was an object of study for Guskey¹², who tried to clarify how the process starts and develops and what it causes. He inquired into

⁸ Lukas, J. (2007). Vývoj učitele: přehled relevantních teorií a výzkumů (1. část). [Teacher Development: Survey of Theories and Research (Part 1)]. *Pedagogika*, 57(1), 364-379, p. 366. Goodson, I. (2008). *Investigating the Teacher's Life and Work*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

⁹ Lukas, J. (2008). Vývoj učitele: přehled relevantních teorií a výzkumů (2. část). [Teacher Development: Survey of Theories and Research (Part 2)]. *Pedagogika*, 58(2), 36-49.

¹⁰ Richardson, V. – Placier, P. (2001). Teacher change. In V. Richardson (Ed), *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (905-947). Washington: American Educational Research Association.

¹¹ Richards, J. C. – Gallo, P. B. – Renandya, W. A. (2001). Exploring Teachers' Beliefs and the Processes of Change. *PAC Journal*, 1(1). Retrieved from <https://www.professorjackrichards.com/wp-content/uploads/exploring-teacher-change.pdf>

¹² Guskey, T. R. (2002). Professional Development and Teacher Change. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*, 8(3/4), 381-391. Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.473.2693&rep=rep1&type=pdf>, p. 386.

changes that are related to the goals of professional development programs. The core of Guskey's concept is that a 'change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs is primarily a result, rather than a cause, of change in the learning outcomes of students.'

In their six-phase model *Life Cycle of the Career Teacher*, Steffy et al. suppose that teachers move from one phase to another through the process of *reflection*, *renewal*, and *growth*. According to them, a teacher's change is caused by the teacher's reflective thinking and a subsequent action referred to as renewal.¹³

Research Methodology

Since our intention was to describe older teachers' careers and to reflect on the major changes that occur throughout, we consider a multiple-case study to be the most appropriate. We focus on the lived experiences and the narrative.

The research sample was constructed on the basis of age, gender, and length of teaching practice. It included six practising teachers, male and female, at the age of fifty or more with at least twenty years of teaching experience. The respondents' characteristics are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Brief characteristics of the respondents

Name	Age	Teaching practice	Type of school (past)	Type of school (present)	Subjects taught (past)	Subjects taught (present)
Adéla	60	27	secondary (grammar school)	secondary (grammar school)	English	English
Eva	56	26	lower secondary	lower secondary	Biology, Chemistry	Biology, Chemistry
Irena	70	46	primary school (3 years)	lower secondary (43 years)	Czech, P.E.	Czech
Jiří	60	34	Secondary School for Civil Engineering	Secondary School for Civil Engineering	Civil Engineering, Buildings Reconstruction, Technical Drawing	Civil Engineering, Buildings Reconstruction, Technical Drawing

¹³ Steffy, E. – Wolfe, M. P. – Pash, S. H. – Enz, B. J. (2000). *Life Cycle of the Career Teacher*. Oaks: Corwin Press, pp. 11, 13–14.

Monika	64	39	secondary (grammar school, 38 years)	Secondary School for Mechanical Engineering (1 year)	English, P.E.	English
Pavel	53	23	primary and lower secondary church school (22 years)	Secondary School for Mechanical Engineering (1 year)	Maths, Physics, ICT, Music, History, Social Science	Mechanical Engineering Technology, Basics of Mechanical Engineering

Note. Respondents' names have been changed.

The main research question (MRQ) was formulated as follows: What are the major changes that occur through teachers' careers?

This MRQ was subsequently divided into four specific research questions (SRQ):

- Do teachers experience changes in their ideas about the teaching profession as they become older? (SRQ1)
- What are the perceived changes in their relationships with students, colleagues, and parents? (SRQ2)
- What are the changes in their perceived work effectiveness? (SRQ3)
- What are the changes in their professional goals and willingness for further development? (SRQ4)

These specific research questions were further divided into narrower categories to provide a more detailed plan for the research and to prepare a basis for formulating interview questions (see Figure 1).

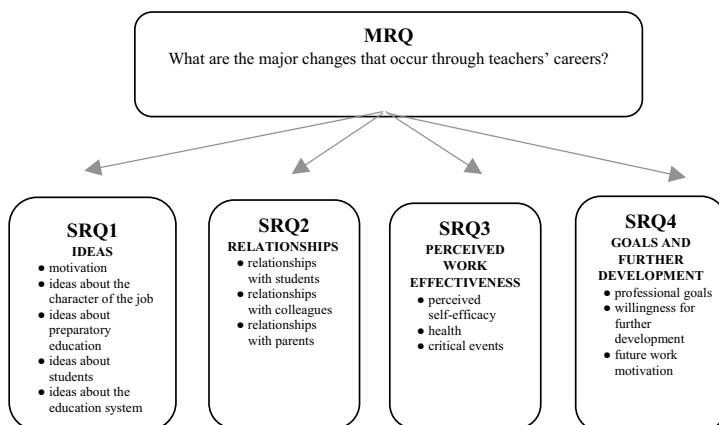


Figure 1. Research questions.

The data were gathered in three steps. First, teachers were asked to map their careers in unstructured interviews. Second, teachers were asked to name the matters they perceived as most important for each career phase; Sikes's division of a teacher's career cycle was used for this purpose.¹⁴ Third, a semi-structured interview was conducted.

The interviews were recorded with the consent of the respondents and lasted from 1:10 to 2:00 hours.

All the interview recordings were transcribed and the open coding technique was used to analyse the data. The semantic fragments were subsequently reorganized so as to thematically correspond with categories that had been set within specific research questions.

Research Results

This section contains the interpretation of data obtained from the respondents. However, since the research was rather complex¹⁵ only selected findings are presented with no citations from the interviews, and the main focus is on the crises the teachers experienced in their careers.

All of the interviewed teachers expressed initial concerns about maintaining discipline, being accepted by students, and being able to explain the subject matter in a comprehensible way. However, only half of them think their ideas about the character of the job changed after their career entry or during their life. Those who mention changes refer to the fact that they did not expect teaching to be as mentally demanding, stressful, and time-consuming as it was (Eva, Adéla, Jiří).

Older teachers are rather pessimistic when reviewing changes that have occurred in the quality of students' work through their careers. The most serious change the respondents perceive is that they are forced to decrease the amount of subject matter covered. Some teachers note that students are less willing than in the past to invest time and effort into complicated things.

The only respondent who opposes decreasing student workloads and fights to maintain education standards is Pavel. However, his strong and well-founded beliefs raised conflicts between him and his younger colleagues and resulted in a move to teach at another school.

Other changes that the teachers note are an unhealthy increase in self-confidence and a loss of diligence in completing work. Regarding students'

¹⁴ Sikes, P. (1985). The Life Cycle of the Teacher. In S. J. Ball – I. F. Goodson (Eds.), *Teachers' Lives and Careers* (27–60). London: Falmer Press.

¹⁵ Maňasová, K. (2018). *A Teacher's Life History: Major Changes Through One's Career from the Perspective of Older Teachers*. (Unpublished master's thesis). Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic.

behaviour and respect for authority, only Pavel mentioned worsening conditions. Adéla and Irena are of the opinion that technology has had a negative impact on students by increasing aggression and causing social isolation.

Nonetheless, not all teachers feel negative about the changes in students. In comparison with teachers of other subjects, both English teachers are of the opinion that their students' English levels have improved and most students show interest in the subject.

Concerning the education system, positive changes such as the removal of ideological beliefs in subject matters, freedom of thought, travel, and expression, and the students' ability to master languages are mentioned by the oldest teacher and both English teachers. These changes indisputably reflect certain positive effects in education from the fall of Communism in 1989.

Nonetheless, more recent changes in educational politics are often perceived as ill-conceived. Topics that older teachers criticize are: the School Educational Programme, the state school-leaving exam at the end of the secondary education, inclusion, neoliberal trends, squandered money, and bureaucracy.

The frequent dissatisfaction of older teachers with changes in the education system corresponds with research conducted by Christopher Day et al.¹⁶, who concluded that 86% of teachers in the professional life phase of 31+ perceive the influence of policy changes negatively. Older teachers' criticisms may be partially clarified by the fact that 'expert teachers are able to "filter" fashionable trends and their populist promotion due to their experience, their familiarity with the education system, and their theoretical facilities.'¹⁷

The research shows a central theme in that older teachers perceive worsening social cohesion due to major changes in their relationships with colleagues. It seems that strong social cohesion, which used to be common twenty or thirty years ago, is something older teachers miss nowadays.

Current research in the Czech Republic and in other countries shows that relationships between teachers and parents are getting rather worse.¹⁸ Eva, Jiří, and Pavel confirm this and express disapproval of parental actions, specifically that their excessive support of their children is damaging for both students and schools. The English teachers and Irena feel either no or positive changes

¹⁶ Day, C. – Stobart, G. – Sammons, P. – Kington, A. – Gu, Q., Smees, R. – Mujtaba, T. (2006). *Variations in Teachers' Work, Lives and Effectiveness: (VITAE)*. Nottingham: DfES Publications.

¹⁷ Pišová, M. – Hanušová, S. – Kostková, K. – Janíková, V. – Najvar, P. – Tůma, F. (2013). *Učitel expert: jeho charakteristiky a determinanty profesního rozvoje (na pozadí výuky cizích jazyků)*. [Expert teacher: the nature of expertise and determinants of professional development (in FLT perspective)]. Brno: Masarykova univerzita.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

regarding parents. Pavel is convinced that parents have started to influence the direction of education, and that parents' and students' desires have taken supremacy over professionalism and respect for teachers.

Since a teacher's work effectiveness is linked to students' performance, which is impossible to measure with the qualitative approach used in this research, this research focused only on the teachers' own perceptions of their self-efficacy. Bandura defines self-efficacy as 'judgement of one's capability to accomplish a given level of performance'.¹⁹

Respondents perceive their self-efficacy as increased due to many factors. Their statements refer to teaching skills; professional insight such as increased ability to improvise, to estimate, and to motivate; and classroom management. Monika is the only teacher who feels her self-efficacy has decreased.

Critical events in teachers' lives lead to important changes in teachers' careers. It is essential to mention that whether a crisis occurred depends on each individual's subjective perception. Experts on coping with strain in the teaching profession refer to the concept of *hardiness*, mental ability or individual disposition that plays an important role in coping with difficult situations.

Adéla is the only teacher who does not report any crises in her career. Adéla's method of coping with difficult situations may be related to the fact that she has always tried to find spare time for her hobbies, especially hiking. Recent research suggests that physical activity enhances physical and mental health and teachers who are physically active are less prone to burn-out.²⁰

Eva reports three periods of time that were very hard for her and that she subjectively perceives as crises (see Table 2).

Table 2. Eva's crises.

Eva	Teaching practice	Age	Type of crisis	Cause	Consequence
Crisis 1	-5	25	professional	overwork, disgust at schooling	pursuit of a different career
Crisis 2	0	30	professional	reality shock	mastered discipline
Crisis 3	24-27	53-56	personal	Mother's illness, death of mother and brother	searching for the point of teaching and life, exhaustion

¹⁹ Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J: Prentice-Hall, p. 391.

²⁰ Sane, M. A. – Devin, H. F. – Jafari, R. – Zohoorian, Z. (2012). Relationship Between Physical Activity and It's Components with Burnout in Academic Members of Daregaz Universities. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 46, p. 429. Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042812019787>

All of Eva's crises brought changes that influenced the further course of her career. The first one postponed the start of her career, the second one made her learn to master classroom management, and the third one caused her to burn out. It is difficult to predict how her current crisis is going to develop and if she can get her energy back. However, she believes it is just a temporary period.

There were two crises in Irena's career. Both of them happened at quite an advanced age and were connected with the demanding character of school work (see Table 3).

Table 3. Irena's crises.

Irena	Teaching practice	Age	Type of crisis	Cause	Consequence
Crisis 1	36	64	professional	mental strain	heart attack
Crisis 2	37	65	professional	problems with discipline	exhaustion

The first crisis was caused by attempting to resolve a difficult institutional incident. At the age of sixty-four, Irena had a heart attack. She is sure it was caused by the effort of mental exertion. The school planned to open the first class for Roma children, a plan that was severely criticized. As Irena was a school counsellor at that time, she had to communicate with the media and the public.

The second crisis came one year later, when she was sixty-five. She recalls a school year that was very demanding for her because of problems with discipline in one of her classes.

In spite of the fact that these two crises must have been hard, she managed to overcome them. Now, at the age of seventy, she is still very committed to her school and motivated to work as long as her services are needed.

Jiří describes two crises that are thematically interconnected (see Table 4).

Table 4. Jiří's crises.

Jiří	Teaching practice	Age	Type of crisis	Cause	Consequence
Crisis 1	15	43	professional	routine	promotion
Crisis 2	26	54	professional	overwork	return to teaching

The first crisis resulted in a job promotion and the second one in a subsequent return to the post of an ordinary teacher. After fifteen years of teaching, Jiří started to view teaching as monotonous, and he had little job satisfaction. Therefore he agreed to work as the deputy headmaster of the school. The novel character of the work was refreshing for him and filled him with feelings of satisfaction. Nevertheless, after some time, he realized he felt overloaded. After eleven years of working as a deputy headmaster, Jiří declined the post of the school headmaster that was offered to him, because he was convinced that teaching in a classroom was what suited him best. He is very positive about the consequences of both of his crises. He says he realized that teaching itself, being in close contact with students and preparing them for competitions, brings him more satisfaction than being a part of school management.

There was one major crisis Pavel had to face in his career (see Table 5). His crisis appeared in his late forties and lasted for almost four years. He describes how he started to feel bad at school because his opinions differed from those of his colleagues, especially the younger ones.

Table 5. Pavel's crisis.

Pavel	Teaching practice	Age	Type of crisis	Cause	Consequence
Crisis 1	20–23	49–52	professional	disagreement with school practices	change of workplace

Having a professional identity was a crucial value for him. His dissatisfaction lasted for a long time. He was at the founding of the school and felt responsible for it. Finally, he decided to find another workplace and he says that now he feels as mentally fit as prior to the crisis.

Discussion

It is not possible to draw a conclusion about the career stage in which teachers are most likely to face crises, as the research sample is small and varies regarding years of practice. However, it is evident that the professional and personal lives of teachers are closely linked.

Four teachers are highly motivated and express their desire to continue working even at retirement age. This fact confirms Day et al.'s findings²¹ that

²¹ Day, C. – Stobart, G. – Sammons, P. – Kington, A. – Gu, Q. – Smees, R. – Mujtaba, T. (2006). *Variations in Teachers' Work, Lives and Effectiveness: (VITAE)*. Nottingham: DfES Publications, p. 117.

a clear majority of the teachers in the final phase of their professional lives 'demonstrate a high level of motivation and commitment and a strong sense of "active" engagement in the teaching profession'. However, it contrasts with Long's statement that teachers who find themselves in the last career phase, which he calls *disengagement*, are mostly frustrated or burned-out teachers.²² The findings correspond rather with Lukas, who claims that teachers can work successfully even at advanced ages.²³

Since the Czech Republic faces a challenge in terms of the low numbers of novice teachers interested in teaching at schools, a high drop-out rate of novice teachers, and high numbers of teachers retiring, it seems important to investigate the reasons for the high drop-out rates and to introduce changes against this trend, as well as to examine ways to support practicing teachers in the later stages of their careers and to develop a system of professional support for them in the critical events of their lives and careers.

Conclusions

The aim of the research was to investigate the late stages of teachers' development and careers with a focus on critical events in their lives and careers and ways of coping with these events. The teachers from our sample perceive their self-efficacy positively due to their mastery of teaching skills, professional insight, and classroom management. However, four teachers revealed negative changes in their mental and physical health. Frequent tiredness, the inability to manage as many duties as in the past, physical pain, and even mental exhaustion and burn out were reported. It is not possible to generalize about the crises that the respondents went through over their careers; nonetheless, it is apparent that professional crises have an impact on personal lives and personal crises are reflected in the professional world.

A system of good-quality professional support for practicing teachers needs to be developed, maintained, and updated in order to introduce and sustain conditions to motivate, retain, develop, and support the teaching workforce in the Czech Republic.

²² Long, R. (1999). 20/20 Hindsight: Teacher Change and Advice. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 5(11). Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Long-TeacherChange.html>

²³ Lukas, J. (2011). Vývoj a kariéra učitele. [Teacher Development and Career]. (In B. Lazarová, *Pozdní sběr: o práci zkušených učitelů [Late Harvest: on Experienced Teachers' Work]*, pp. 59–72. Brno: Paido.