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AUTHOR

Burden, Paul R.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the perceptions of 15 elementary school teachers on their personal and professional development. In focused interviews, they were asked their perceptions of the characteristics of their personal and professional development and of the major influences on that development. The teachers' experience ranged from 4 to 28 years. The most striking finding was the evidence for stages of teacher career development. The teachers described different characteristics during identifiable periods in their careers. Developmental changes seemed to occur in an ordered, hierarchical sequence with each year characterized by different types of changes. The changes occurred gradually and were cumulative. Distinct characteristics were displayed in the first year; the second, third, and fourth years; and the fifth year and beyond. At each phase or stage, there seemed to be an increase of knowledge, leading to a change in attitude, which increased ability, and subsequently changed job performance. The major influences on professional development were other teachers and prior contact with children. Recommendations arising from this study are provided in the areas of: research, undergraduate teacher education, graduate teacher education, inservice teacher education, and supervision and administration. (JD)

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Teachers' Perceptions of Their Personal and Professional Development

Dr. Paul R. Burden
Kansas State University
Dept. of Curriculum and Instruction
Manhattan, Kansas 66506
(913) 532-6158 or 532-5550

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Abstract

This qualitative study determined the perceptions of selected elementary school teachers concerning their personal and professional development. The sample consisted of 13 women and 2 men who were teaching in suburban public school districts. They ranged in school teaching experience from 4 to 28 years. The data were collected by a lengthy focused interview with each teacher. The data were qualitatively analyzed by the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967, 1970). The most striking finding was the evidence for stages of teacher career development. With some variability between teachers, the first year; the second, third, and fourth years; and the fifth year and beyond displayed distinct characteristics.

Teachers' Perceptions of Their Personal and Professional Development

School teachers are in a profession offering little professional advancement, yet information about human development, career development, teacher characteristics, the occupation of teaching, and teacher career development indicates the likelihood of significant teacher change during the teaching years. But how do teachers develop, personally and professionally, over the years?

Adult development is a product of many forces -- genetic, physiological, ecological, social, and cultural (Clausen, 1972). There is evidence that development through the life span occurs in stages since acquisition of certain abilities must wait on the maturation of the individual (Lidz, 1968, pp. 79-99). When biological and psychological changes occur, there are sequential changes in environmental events in a person's life (e.g. marriage, parenthood, changing eras) which might affect the professional lives of teachers.

Research has been conducted to identify ways in which teachers develop and function in their adult lives. Hunt and his associates (1971) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education have conducted the most comprehensive studies of the adult development of teachers, demonstrating that teachers at more advanced developmental stages were viewed as more effective classroom teachers in several ways. Additional studies are reviewed by Bents and Howey (1981).

Some studies have examined isolated variables in teacher development and thus failed to indicate the context in which the development occurred. For instance, many studies examine teacher career changes in attitudes

and outlooks or the sequence of learnings of necessary job skills or job events. The context is essential for the understanding of the event because the role that the event plays within the context is one of the determiners of meaning of the event (Gurwitsch, 1964). Other studies provide insight into the thinking and behavior but little attention has been given to examining the teachers' changes throughout their entire careers. Some researchers have examined only first year or beginning teachers (e.g. Applegate et al., 1977; Gehrke, 1976; McIntosh, 1976). Fuller (1969) summarized some studies of beginning teachers.

Fuller and Bown (1975) identified four stages in the process of becoming a teacher after reviewing research by Fuller and others.

Fuller (1970) proposed three phases of teacher development. Details about job events, attitudes, and learnings in these reports were sparse.

Newman (1978) obtained middle-aged experienced teachers' perceptions of their career development, reporting that three stages of career development emerged from the teachers' experiences. Three attitudinal phases of teacher career development were reported in a study of 50 retired teachers conducted by Peterson (1978).

The research reviewed above provides incomplete information about changes in skills, behaviors, and attitudes over the entire teaching career. Additional information is needed about the effects of human development, career development, the teachers' own personal characteristics, and the teaching occupation.

The purpose of this study was to determine teachers' perceptions of their personal and professional development for their entire careers

by conducting focused interviews with experienced teachers. Specifically, this study obtained teachers perceptions of:

1. Characteristics of their personal and professional development
2. Influences of the professional environment on development
3. Influences of the personal environment on development
4. Influences of supervisory practices on development
5. Preferred types of school environment and supervisory practice to facilitate development

The focused interview allowed the teachers to reflect on any variables they thought were important to their careers. They could relate key variables that affected their personal and professional development and discuss how those variables might have changed over the years. Giorgi (1967) said the essential phenomenon as it was lived and experienced by the subjects should be captured in an interview; otherwise the research would lose much of its value. The focused interview allowed for this phenomenon.

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 15 public school teachers from eight suburban school districts in central Ohio. The thirteen women and two men were teaching at the elementary level (K-6). The teachers ranged in school teaching experience from 4 to 28 years.

Because of the relatively small sample size, a number of criteria were established for this exploratory study to narrow the range of variability for the teachers interviewed. The sample included only regular

classroom teachers who had their entire teaching experience at the elementary level, those with limited delays from the end of high school and the start of teaching, and those with few breaks in service once starting to teach.

Interview Guide

The focused interview's distinguishing characteristics made it particularly useful in uncovering a diversity of responses which were salient to the teachers as they described their careers.

An interview guide was developed which followed the focused interview guidelines proposed by Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956).

There is inherent flexibility in the interviewer's conduct due to the necessity of responding to new emerging data. After the teacher completed the description of the first year, the investigator provided a transition so the teacher would discuss the second year in a similar manner. Each successive year and each school setting was discussed.

Six experimental interviews were conducted to: (a) test the design of the interview, (b) improve the interview skills of the interviewer, and (c) develop consistency in the interviewer's approach.

Procedures for Data Collection

The teachers who agreed to the interview were sent a letter which outlined the objectives of the study, reminded them of the tape recorded interview, and assured them of anonymity. With the letter was a school data sheet which the teacher was asked to complete prior to the interview. The data sheet was used as an aid to the investigator during the interview but also as a means of stimulating the teachers' memories of specific

details or general patterns of their careers. Also included with the letter were ten sample questions to give the teachers some idea of the topics that might be addressed in the interview.

Data Analysis

The audio tapes of the interview were transcribed onto note cards and were later typed consecutively on typing paper. Definitional guidelines were developed which served as a basis of decision when coding the ideas provided by the teachers. The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis proposed by Glaser (1965) and Glaser and Strauss (1967, 1970) was used to analyze the data. This method involved the comparison of the ideas which were coded into each study objective and the determination of topical categories.

Results

Perceptions of Personal Characteristics

Compared to their first year of teaching, the teachers at the time of the interview noted growth in the following ways:

1. Growth in Confidence and Happiness: more self-confident, happy, comfortable and positive with themselves compared to their first year of teaching
2. Growth in Maturity, Capability, and Affability: more mature, capable, considerate, and understanding compared to their first year
3. Growth in Flexibility: more easy-going, down-to-earth, relaxed, and gentle compared to their first year
4. Growth in Open-mindedness: more open to ideas and activities, more willing to try new things, and more willing to share and give ideas as compared to their first year
5. Growth in Assertiveness and Expressiveness: more opinionated and more willing to express those opinions compared to their first year

6. Growth in Egocentrism: more concerned with the personal effect of certain issues compared to their first year
7. Unchanging Qualities: some fundamental personal characteristics were unchanged since starting to teach (shyness, dependence, independence, etc.)

Perceptions of Professional Characteristics

Information that the teachers revealed about professional characteristics resulted in the yearly stages and categories listed below. There were qualitative differences in the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors in the first few years.

The first year. The first year seemed to be distinct because it presented unique conditions and experiences for the teachers. The information the teachers provided are reported in the topical categories listed below.

1. Limited Knowledge of Teaching Activities: limited knowledge of teaching methods, lesson planning, learning problems, record keeping, motivating and disciplining students; unorganized
2. Limited Knowledge of Teaching Environment: limited knowledge of children's characteristics (personalities, behavior, attention spans, achievement levels, interests), school curriculum, subject matter, school rules and regulations, discipline limits
3. Conformed to an Image They Held of Teachers: adopted an image of what a teacher should be and conformed to that images, taught in a traditional manner, did not want to complain
4. Limited Professional Insight and Perception: too wrapped up in their own activities to see other aspects of their professional environment, unable to identify causes of student misbehavior, unable to see themselves objectively
5. Subject-centered Approach to Curriculum and Instruction: teaching the subject and preparing the students academically seen as main goal; limited personal contact with the children

6. Feelings of Uncertainty, Confusion, and Insecurity: feelings of inadequacy; uncertain and confused about many aspects of the job; worried about how to teach and about not teaching correctly
7. Unwilling to Try New Teaching Methods: unwilling to try teaching methods they were unfamiliar with while they were still trying to master initial methods

Second, third, and fourth years. The information the teachers provided about the second, third, and fourth years included a number of common professional characteristics which are presented below:

1. Increased Knowledge of Teaching Activities: refined and improved teaching techniques, more knowledge in planning and organizing subject matter, more knowledge about different teaching techniques, more knowledge to anticipate and relate subject matter
2. Increased Knowledge of Teaching Environment: more knowledge of children's characteristics, increased knowledge and ability to anticipate events, more knowledgeable and comfortable with subject matter, better understanding of what does and does not work in the classroom
3. Gradually Abandoning the Image They Held of Teachers: gradually stopped conforming to an image and started using the teaching techniques that worked best for them, allowed their own personality to come out more
4. Gradually Gaining More Professional Insight and Perception: more insight into the complexity of the professional environment; saw children in more complex ways and were able to respond to their needs more capably
5. Approach to Curriculum and Instruction: Starting to See the Child as a Person: learned more and became more concerned with the child's self-concept, tried to deal more with the individual
6. Gaining Confidence, Security, and Maturity: more comfortable with what they were doing, with the subject matter, and with the teaching techniques they used; more relaxed and sure of themselves
7. Willing to Experiment With New Teaching Techniques: willing to experiment with different teaching techniques after mastering some initial skills; saw the need to use more teaching techniques to meet the needs of the children

The fifth year and beyond. The information the teachers provided about the fifth year and beyond included a number of professional characteristics as presented below:

1. Knowledge of Teaching Activities: good command of planning and organizational skills; knew many aspects of the job well; more able to adjust teaching to accomplish more; knew different ways of teaching
2. Knowledge of Teaching Environment: knew the children, curriculum, and teaching methods quite well; much knowledge due to cumulative value of teaching experiences
3. Continuing to Abandon the Image They Held of Teachers: gradually stopped conforming to the image and started using the teaching techniques that worked best for them; continued to let their own personality come out more
4. Continuing to Gain More Professional Insight and Perception: continued to become more perceptive of the complexities of the professional environment; viewed the children in more complex ways and were able to respond to children's qualities more capably
5. Child-centered Approach to Curriculum and Instruction: concerned with teaching the individual child and with relationships with the children; more personal emphasis in instruction; more concern with establishing and maintaining a good classroom environment so warm relationships could exist
6. Feelings of Confidence, Security, and Maturity: sensed they could handle most situations they might encounter; confident and secure feelings; willing to try new things; feelings of being a mature teacher
7. Continually Willing to Experiment With New Teaching Techniques: willing to continually experiment with new teaching techniques to increase their competence, passively accept change, and keep their teaching interesting for them

Most teachers indicated that their personal lives affected their teaching and, in turn, their teaching affected their personal lives.

Influences of the ProfessionalEnvironment on Development

The teachers provided information about the conditions which existed in the professional environment during their teaching years.

These conditions are listed below in descending order of frequency:

(a) other teachers, (b) the school building, (c) the children, (d) parents and the community, (e) workshops and inservice days, (f) the school district, (g) society, (h) the curriculum, (i) teachers' duty, committees, and extra-curricular activities, and (j) the teaching profession.

Influences of the PersonalEnvironment on Development

The teachers provided information about conditions in their personal lives that affected their teaching. Influences prior to teaching included: (a) prior contact with children, (b) reasons for going into elementary education, (c) their teacher training, and (d) family experiences.

Influences since starting to teach included (a) their interests and activities outside the school, (b) spouses, (c) relatives, (d) their own children, (e) friends and other teachers, (f) non-teaching jobs, and (g) other circumstances of life.

Influences of SupervisoryPractices on Development

Supervisory practices which existed in the schools were discussed by the teachers. They mentioned principals, other supervisory personnel, and the absence of administrators or supervisors. While discussing the principals, the teachers talked about such qualities as personality,

professionalism, helpfulness, supportiveness, affability, dogmatism, and judgment.

Preferred School Environment

During the discussion of their careers, some teachers suggested ways to change or improve the school environment. In descending order of frequency they mentioned principals, other teachers, the administration, students; sources of assistance, lunch and recess duty, supplies, the school building, parents, class size, inservice programs, recognition, and salary.

Discussion

The most striking finding was the evidence for stages of teacher career development. The teachers described different characteristics during identifiable periods in their careers. The changes seemed to occur in an ordered, hierarchial sequence with each year characterized by different types of changes. The changes occurred gradually and were cumulative. (See Table 1 on page 22.)

Year phases seemed to apply to each teacher's development. The first year; second, third, and fourth years; and the fifth year and beyond displayed distinct characteristics, with some variability between teachers. At each phase or stage, there seemed to be an increase of knowledge, leading to a change in attitude, which increased ability, and subsequently changed job performance. Many of the professional characteristics exhibited at each phase were intertwined.

In the first year, many of the professional characteristics exhibited were intertwined. For example, it appears that because the teachers did not

recognize the complexity of the environment and had limited knowledge and skills, they taught the subject rather than the child. Teachers also recalled their first year as a time of concern about themselves in relation to their professional responsibilities. They were primarily concerned about their adequacy in: (a) maintaining classroom control, (b) teaching the subject, and (c) improving their teaching skills (e.g. lesson planning, grading, organizing units and materials).

Several teachers approached the early years as a trial period. They were not certain if they wanted to make a career of teaching and used their experiences to determine their future course of action.

The second, third, and fourth years brought several notable differences in the teachers' professional characteristics as compared to their first year. The teachers were much more comfortable with their teaching in this second phase of development. They were more relaxed and not as nervous as they were the first year. They stopped worrying about themselves and started looking at larger concerns in the teaching situation. As they started to see the complexities in the children, they sought new teaching techniques to meet the wider range of needs they were beginning to perceive. The teachers expressed more of their own personalities in the classroom in the second, third, and fourth years by letting themselves be more open and genuine with the children. Their experience increased their knowledge and abilities, and the teachers felt they were developing skills and meeting the children's needs more capably. There was less concern in the second, third, and fourth years with the teaching situation as a problem area.

The teachers in the fifth year and beyond were concerned with meeting the needs of the children and their relationship with the children. At this point, many teachers felt like "mature" teachers. They had a good command of teaching activities, understood the teaching environment, and felt more mature and secure. They used what worked for them and abandoned the image of a teacher they thought they had to fulfill. They were willing to try new teaching methods since they had mastered many initial teaching skills. As they became more perceptive, they recognized the complex needs of the children and adopted a more child-centered approach to curriculum and instruction.

Teachers in their fifth year and beyond generally became more committed to their careers and were satisfied with their chosen profession. They also accepted change as a gradual process rather than a threat.

There was a relative lack of change expressed by the teachers in the fifth year and beyond as compared to the first four years. Most changes in job events (grade levels, schools, districts) occurred in the first several years, after which the teachers made relatively fewer changes. Most changes in acquisition of necessary job skills and behaviors were also reported for the first four years of teaching. Most changes in attitudes and outlooks came gradually; again, more changes were identified in the first four years.

Other teachers profoundly influenced the development of the teachers in this study by being a source of ideas and materials; they were people the teachers could go to and discuss educational ideas and philosophies to challenge and clarify their own positions.

The teachers' accumulated experience appeared to significantly affect their personal and professional development. As they increased their knowledge of children, the subject matter, teaching techniques, and other aspects of teaching, the teachers had more resources to draw upon when confronting new situations.

The teachers' development was significantly affected by the interaction between their personal lives and their professional lives. Supervisory practices had less impact on the teachers' development than might have been expected.

Recommendations and Implications

Information obtained in this study about teachers' developmental characteristics may be a useful guide for undergraduate, graduate, and inservice educators, and for supervisors and administrators so they may better meet teachers' needs at different stages. This study also has implications for research methodology when examining teacher career development.

Implications of the research and recommendations are provided in the following areas: (1) research, (2) undergraduate teacher education, (3) graduate teacher education, (4) inservice teacher education, and (5) supervision and administration.

Research

Several investigations would lead to substantiation and interpretation of the major findings of this study.

Recommendation: that research be undertaken to describe the characteristics of teachers' personal and professional development and the influences on that development

Recommendation: that research be undertaken to determine whether stages expressed by the fifteen teachers apply to other teachers' experiences

Recommendation: that teachers' developmental characteristics be compared with evidence on adult development

Recommendation: that teachers' developmental characteristics be compared with career development in other occupations offering horizontal advancement

Methodological modifications might prove helpful in identifying teachers' personal and professional characteristics. The teachers in this study were interviewed once for an average time of two hours and 10 minutes. Longer, more detailed interviews may provide a fuller view of teacher development. Focused interviews would allow teachers the opportunity to express issues during the interview which were important to them rather than being confined to a rigid set of structured questions predetermined by the investigator.

Recommendation: that investigators of teacher development increase the length and depth of teacher interviews

Recommendation: that investigators of teacher development use focused interviews to allow teachers the opportunity to express issues important to them

In this study, teachers were the only source of data on themselves. Teachers in future studies could be asked to collect photographs, notes, lesson plans, diaries, or other pertinent records which would refresh their memories of details of their development. As these materials are obtained, the teachers would begin to think about their development prior to the interview. Richer, more detailed interviews would result.

Recommendation: that investigators of teacher development have teachers collect pertinent records prior to the interviews

The fifteen teachers were interviewed at a single point in their careers. A cross sectional sample such as the one used in this study does not have uniform historical, cultural, and social influences for given points in teachers' careers. A longitudinal study would overcome this variable and provide richer information for the development of individual teachers.

~~Recommendation: that investigators of teacher development undertake longitudinal study following teachers from their first year to retirement~~

The listing of characteristics and influences on the teachers' personal and professional development in this study did not reveal the context in which the changes occurred. To illustrate the context, the data were presented in several ways, including the use of topical summaries, a case study, and idiosyncratic examples. Future studies of teacher development would provide a more meaningful view of the development if they also illustrated the context in which the development occurred.

Recommendation: that investigators of teacher development report data to reveal the context in which the development occurred

Most teachers in this study completed their teacher training a number of years ago when there were fewer field experiences in teacher education programs compared to recent requirements. Most teachers reported difficulties due to a lack of knowledge and skills during their first year. Many teacher education programs today include a great deal more field experience. Future studies could compare teacher education programs with and without extensive field experience to determine which program better prepared teachers for their first year of teaching.

Recommendation: that investigators of teacher development study the relative value of field experiences in preservice teacher education

The teachers interviewed in this study had committed themselves to a teaching career. Teachers who dropped out of teaching were not interviewed and their developmental characteristics and influences are not known. Future studies could identify characteristics and influences on the development of the teachers who dropped out to identify reasons why teachers resigned their positions.

Recommendation: that investigators of teacher education examine the developmental characteristics and influences of teachers who resigned their positions

▼ Undergraduate teacher education

Teachers who had more field experience in their teacher training programs felt better prepared in their first year of teaching than those who had less preservice field experience. Many teachers reported having limited knowledge and skills when they started teaching, and felt they struggled through the first year. More extensive contact with children in a classroom setting -- before the first year of teaching -- might produce better teachers. The merits of a one-year internship with a cooperating teacher should be examined.

Recommendation: that preservice teacher educators examine the merits of more extensive field experience to better prepare their students for the first year of teaching.

The teachers in this study reported their primary first year concerns and deficiencies to be with: (1) maintaining classroom control, (2) teaching the subject, and (3) improving their teaching

skills (lesson planning, organizing units and materials, grading, and knowing the curriculum and what to teach). Preservice teacher educators could examine and revise content in teacher training programs to better prepare the students for the problems of their first year.

Recommendation: that preservice teacher educators examine and revise content in teacher training programs to better prepare students for the problems of their first year

Graduate teacher education

The teachers in this study took most of their graduate courses in their second through fifth years of teaching. Teachers at these years of service were looking for alternative teaching methods and were in the process of committing themselves to educational philosophies. Teacher educators who conduct graduate courses should consider the characteristics and needs of teachers who enroll in their classes and design their content accordingly.

Recommendation: that teacher educators who conduct graduate courses consider the characteristics and needs of their students when selecting course content and designing learning experiences

Inservice teacher education

Several teachers in this study did not participate in inservice programs yet acquired knowledge and developed skills by other means. Many teachers appreciated the variety of inservice program topics and participated regularly. Most teachers obtained new ideas from other teachers during informal times or during formal meeting

times arranged by supervisors or administrators. Each teacher developed professionally yet there were many paths to that development.

Recommendation: that inservice programs be designed with the recognition that there are many patterns of professional development

The teachers in this study reported many problems with maintaining discipline, teaching the subject, and improving their teaching skills the first year. They reported that they were seeking new ways of teaching in the second, third, and fourth years and that they were in the process of committing themselves to educational philosophies. Fewer needs were expressed for the later years of service.

Recommendation: that inservice programs deal primarily with the needs and concerns of teachers in the first four years of teaching

Teachers in this study reported that they learned from other teachers. The needs and skills at various years of service could be considered and teachers could help other teachers.

Recommendation: that inservice programs give teachers the opportunity to formally and informally interact

Recommendation: that inservice programs use experienced teachers to assist teachers in their first four years of teaching

Many teachers expressed problems when dealing with tension which resulted from their professional activities. The tension was often released in some form in their personal life, sometimes with negative consequences.

Recommendation: that inservice programs help teachers understand and release tension generated in their professional activities

Many teachers had not examined their teaching careers in detail until the interview provided them the opportunity. Teachers may have a better understanding of themselves and may be able to facilitate their own development better if they had information about the characteristics of teacher career development.

Recommendation: that inservice programs allow teachers to learn about the characteristics of teacher career development and allow them to reflect about their own development

Supervision and administration

Many supervisors and administrators described in this study did not provide support, and if they did, it often was not the right kind of support or it was delivered at the wrong time.

Recommendation: that supervisors and administrators receive training about the characteristics of teacher career development and the influences on that development

Many supervisors and administrators described in this study did not challenge the teachers to develop further. Nor did they provide the teachers with the support they needed. William Perry (1970) suggested that a balance of challenges and supports is needed to facilitate development.

Recommendation: that supervisors and administrators provide a balance of challenge and support for each teacher to facilitate development

Recommendation: that supervisors and administrators provide differentiated experiences and planned intervention when designing inservice programs or developmental activities

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine teachers' perceptions of their personal and professional developmental characteristics and to identify influences on that development. This study adds to the data base for building a theory of teacher career development. Others have called for the development of this theory (e.g., Schutes, 1975; Ryan, 1979; Sprinthall, 1980; McNergney and Crook, 1980; Sprinthall and Theis-Sprinthall, 1980). In a review of teacher education and theory development, Schalock (1980) focused on the absent research. This study provides rich, detailed data about developmental characteristics of and influences on the teaching career.

TABLE 1

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR
PROFESSIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

PROFESSIONAL CHARACTERISTICS	FIRST YEAR	SECOND, THIRD AND FOURTH YEARS	FIFTH YEAR AND LATER
KNOWLEDGE OF TEACHING ACTIVITIES	limited knowledge	increasing knowledge of planning and organization	good command of teaching activities
KNOWLEDGE OF TEACHING ENVIRONMENT	limited knowledge	increasing knowledge of children, school curriculum, and teaching methods	good command of teaching environment
CHANGING IMAGES OF TEACHING	conformed to perceived image of teaching	gradually abandoned image they held about teaching	
PROFESSIONAL INSIGHT AND PERCEPTION	limited insight and perception	gradual increase in perception and insight	
APPROACH TO CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION	subject-centered curricular approach	transitional period finding that students are people	child-centered curricular approach
PROFESSIONAL CONFIDENCE, SECURITY, MATURITY	uncertain, confused	gradually more confident about subject matter and teaching techniques	confident, secure
WILLINGNESS TO TRY NEW TEACHING METHODS	unwilling to try; still mastering others	willing to experiment with new teaching methods	continually trying new teaching methods

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Footnotes

1. This paper is a condensed form of the original research report.

That report is:

Burden, Paul R. Teachers' perceptions of the characteristics and influences on their personal and professional development (Doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1979). Dissertation Abstracts International, 1980, 40, 5404A. (University Microforms No. 8008776)

2. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to:

Dr. Paul R. Burden
Kansas State University
Dept. of Curriculum and Instruction
Manhattan, Kansas 66506
(913) 532-6158 or 532-5550