



7 The Emeritus Teacher

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Viewing the Emeritus Phase Through Case Study

Mary, Clara, and Harry are part of what they call “the gray brigade.” They met 6 years ago at a Retired Teachers Association meeting, warmed up to one another immediately, and began a lasting friendship. The trio has reached the emeritus phase of the Life Cycle of the Career Teacher model. They cared passionately about their profession when they were teachers, and that passion continues today. All are actively involved in helping schools improve and children succeed. Each of them goes about this quest in a very different way. Mary is a political activist well known in the halls of the state legislature. Clara, who volunteers in a fourth-grade classroom at a neighborhood school, knows how to provide underachieving students with the gift of resilience. Harry is known for achieving a 100% success rate in mentoring teachers through the apprentice phase. All of these emeritus teachers continue to make significant contributions to the field of teaching, yet on their own terms and in their own ways.

For Mary, Clara, and Harry, teaching is not work. It was—and still is—a chosen lifestyle they will continue to pursue as long as their health and energy levels permit. Though they are pursuing very different paths, each feels rewarded.

Mary gets a "high" from seeing her ideas reflected in the language of proposed new legislation. She knows every member of the State Education Subcommittee on a first-name basis. When a new member is appointed to the committee, she makes it her business to develop a personal profile of the legislator, set up an appointment with him or her, and provide the individual with historical information about the structure of education at the state level. She has a reputation for being savvy, direct, and knowledgeable about national trends in education. Mary has a strong education advocacy network statewide that she can activate quickly. When she speaks, legislators and aides from the governor's office listen. Rumor has it that she has been part of closed-door discussions when delicate educational issues were on the agenda. Mary knows she is influential, yet her guiding principle is always the same: "How will an action, statute, or regulation enable more children to meet high academic expectations, develop a sense of worth, become resilient, and internalize a personal passion for knowledge?"

Clara is 75 years old and has been retired for 13 years. For the past 10 years she has been a fixture at a local elementary school, arriving each day at 7:30 A.M. and staying until well after the children have gone home. Not only does every student in the school know Clara, every parent and teacher knows her too. She has touched every one of their lives in some special way. Though the fourth-grade class is her home base, Clara goes wherever the school needs her most. She particularly bonds with fourth-grade boys just when they develop reputations for misbehaving. She seeks them out and spends informal time with them—chatting before school, eating with them in the cafeteria, and just "hanging out." Kids listen to her because she listens to them. She has become a second parent to dozens of children who lack a vital anchor in their lives.

Though age is taking its toll on Clara, her step stays lively and a twinkle remains in her eye. Clara keeps up on all the latest crazes, TV shows, and computer games. She has a knack for using examples from the current kid culture to serve as models for long-term goals. The district board of education recently presented her a special volunteer-service award. Clara says she will stay with the school as long as she is wanted. The children, teachers, and parents hope there are many years ahead for the wonderful gift she brings to their lives.

As a teenager, Harry enjoyed teaching children how to play sports. When he became a Little League baseball coach, he knew his profes-

sion should be that of a teacher. Upon completing his undergraduate teacher education program, Harry applied for a position in a school district that needed male teachers for coaching jobs as well. With a healthy interest in the outdoors, he worked with Boy Scouts, church groups, and other organizations. All these things helped Harry land a job as a fifth-grade teacher.

Like most new teachers, Harry was not confident and comfortable. The novice thought he could answer parents' questions adequately but felt some parents did not accept him due to his lack of experience. After a few years of success with students, Harry gained confidence in his teaching abilities, and acceptance increased in the eyes of parents, administrators, and fellow teachers as he grew professionally.

Harry utilized his diverse extracurricular interests and activities to make his classroom "come alive." At the midpoint of his teaching career, he began his formal studies of outdoor education, involving students in exploring the environment and integrating this learning into other units. This innovative work demanded commitment and energy, yet it also required a degree of trust from the administration. Harry's supervisors knew that he would address "the basics" by using an outdoor education approach. The students always performed well on a variety of assessment measures. Nominated for "Teacher of the Year," Harry was honored his peers chose him for the award, knowing that, in accepting it, he was representing a deserving group of other teachers. He perceived the award as a statement of acceptance and an acknowledgement of his desire to excel.

Growth in expertise and confidence opened other teaching opportunities. Harry began to mentor novice teachers for a local university. During the latter part of his career, he worked intensively with 16 student teachers. To ensure their success, Harry slowly phased them into the classroom work. Students first would observe, then teach a lesson on spelling or reading. Eventually, they would assume the entire class load to gain experience with all the teaching responsibilities. All 16 of Harry's protégés landed teaching positions. Interacting with them helped him reflect upon and improve his own teaching.

Most aspiring teachers were receptive to Harry's mentoring approach. Along with the strategy of easing them into the teaching role, he believed they could use small failures as focal points for reflection, renewal, and growth. Having experienced his share of failure, he understood the necessity of learning from mistakes. Harry credits several

great role models, coaches, teachers, and peers who helped him learn from such experiences. These were people who provided support when he needed assistance.

After his formal retirement, Harry decided to expand his involvement with novice and apprentice teachers. He worked with the local university to write a grant to provide transition services to apprentice teachers through the induction period. The program has been so successful in providing support for newly hired teachers that the state legislature is considering providing funds for other districts to implement the model. All of the teachers involved in his program have continued in their positions as teachers. After 32 years in the teaching profession, Harry has found a niche that gives him almost more pleasure than when he was a regular classroom teacher. He has discovered how to minimize the impact of withdrawal during the apprentice phase and enable these new teachers to continue and expand the reflection-renewal-growth process.

Defining the Emeritus Phase

As we mentioned in Chapter 1, those educators who retire after a lifetime of teaching during which they achieved the skills of an expert or distinguished teacher deserve society's thanks and praise. Their efforts have prepared the way for thousands of students to enter the world of work and adulthood ready and inspired.

For some teachers, however, retiring is not enough. Emeritus teachers are those who have formally retired but, due to their expertise and devotion, continue to be active and involved contributors to the profession (Steffy & Wolfe, 1997). Individuals entering the emeritus phase make excellent candidates for mentoring the next generation of teachers. Retirement from the teaching profession is the most clearly defined transition in the Life Cycle of the Career Teacher model, with the exception of the important step novice teachers take when they accept responsibility for their own classrooms. United States Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley (in Watson, 1998) has warned that, in the next decade, public schools will need to hire 2.2 million teachers to keep pace with rising enrollments and to replace a generation of retiring teachers. This projection has important implications for teachers already in retirement, especially those at the emeritus level.

In her book *New Passages—Mapping Your Life Across Time*, Gail

Sheehy (1995, p. 373) asks, "What association first comes to your mind when you hear the word retirement? Reward? Release? Being put out to pasture?" Retirement and the emeritus phase can take on many different meanings and definitions. Moreover, it is usually planned during an entire career. Emeritus teachers choose to remain active contributors to the profession, even in retirement. Though retirement is generally not a spur-of-the-moment decision, factors such as age, health, finances, and family status also influence this decision.

The question of financial security is usually a major consideration in deciding when to retire. Strategies and mechanisms such as personal-savings plans and pension funds provide the financial resources when employment income is terminated. If attention is not paid to the issue of financial security far in advance, a teacher's options may be severely limited. Financial insecurity could lead even distinguished teachers into complacency and withdrawal.

People generally do not retire in their twenties or thirties. Arriving at the conclusion that "all that could be accomplished in the profession has been successfully achieved" requires the wisdom and insight of experience. Aging also prompts health considerations. Declining health is a condition that can weigh heavily on a teacher, perhaps prompting a decision to retire at an earlier age.

Familial relationships can also affect an individual's retirement. Spouses take on new interests or change careers. Once their formal education has been completed, children leave home to begin their own lives. These events offer opportunities to reflect upon life changes and renew one's commitment to teaching. During such times, career teachers can develop new interests and opportunities, such as working with younger teachers in "helping" roles. The emeritus teacher shares the same conditions facing any retirees; but he or she chooses to stay active and involved in teaching.

Threads of Continuity

Mary, Clara, and Harry have successfully progressed into the emeritus phase. Having invested many years in the profession, achieving a high level of expertise and wisdom, and perhaps achieving expert or distinguished status, these teachers are clearly special in many ways. Yet, like others who retire from teaching, they reflect on nurturing and supporting family members, developing vital networks of friends and

colleagues, establishing a sound personal finance plan, and exploring new avocations. As a teacher begins to reflect about retirement, the direction a teacher takes may depend upon what phase of the life cycle has been achieved prior to retirement. The strength of factors leading to withdrawal can propel a teacher to reject the emeritus phase. Continued commitment to reflection, renewal, and growth can naturally lead the teacher to the emeritus life-cycle phase. Teachers who have consistently employed the reflection-renewal-growth process throughout their career appear more likely to continue contributing to their profession in some unique capacity. If individuals reach a retirement decision in withdrawal, they most likely will not choose to enter the emeritus phase.

Emeritus teachers are willing to continue helping others while staying interested in their own learning. This commitment is the underpinning of emeritus status. In no other phase do teachers have as many growth options. Emeritus teachers can choose pathways that build upon their expertise and experience.

Volunteering at the local library to help people learn to read, tutoring students in mathematics, coaching soccer or Little League baseball, training individuals in the use of technology, or mentoring novice and apprentice teachers—all are possibilities for emeritus teachers. Renewal occurs when one “commits” to assuming the responsibility for helping others.

Professional-Development Strategies

Emeritus teachers may be invited to teach methods classes at a local university and share their wisdom and time-tested teaching practices. Students relate well to veteran teachers who continue to reflect, renew, and grow. Additional opportunities include acting as a supervisor of student teaching. Student teachers benefit greatly from the sage advice and feedback of an emeritus teacher who also can play a part in the induction of new teachers into the profession. In this role, the emeritus teacher can reflect on the complete career life cycle and prepare new teachers to anticipate and cope with unexpected challenges.

Teachers reaching the emeritus phase also become tutors for young students needing special learning assistance. Emeritus teachers may choose to tutor individuals or small groups of students so they can maintain a level of academic achievement perhaps impossible without this intervention.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

The cadre of emeritus teachers has been largely underutilized as a valuable resource. Research studies could supply valuable information that predicts the impact of emeritus teachers. For example, which state-mandated teacher-induction mentoring programs have successfully capitalized on the skills and experience of emeritus teachers? This type of research should ensure that the ultimate purpose of professional development is less to implement a specific innovation or policy and more to create habits and structures that make continuous learning a valued and endemic part of the school culture (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991).

Recent research conclusions also suggest possibilities for further study on this issue. Dagenais (1990) found that strong matches between mentor and protégé were positively correlated with successful mentoring experiences. Further research could identify what characteristics were most important in successful matches between emeritus teachers and novices. This study could generate information crucial to the implementation of successful mentoring experiences for these individuals.

New teachers have reported that the time they spent with their mentors was not as great as they expected (Dagenais, 1990). Research could document the amount of time emeritus teachers spend with teachers in the apprentice phase and the quality or usefulness of the interaction. This type of study could determine how time was spent, what concerns were discussed, and what information was shared, providing guidance for emeritus teachers considering a mentoring role.

Emeritus teachers have many choices to make concerning how they will continue to serve the profession. Like Clara and Harry, some emeritus teachers may choose to continue to work with children. Some may choose to write journal articles, books, or other types of print materials. Some may be technologically inclined and participate in Internet communication. Some may lead or direct university programs designed to help new teachers grow. Like Mary, some may decide to become politically active for the benefit of students.

Drawing on the work of Erikson (1968), Palmer (1998, p. 49) noted that renewal "suggests the endless emergence of the generations, with its implied imperative that the elders look back toward the young and help them find a future that the elders will not see." The emeritus teacher has a role in ensuring that teacher development follows such energizing pathways.

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