

## The Application of Career Theories in Teachers' Professional Development: A Literature Review

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**Abstract:** This literature review aims at exploring two career theories, one career model, and their applications to facilitate the comparison of their advantages and shortcomings in understanding contextual and personal factors influencing teachers' career choices. It first examines the chosen career theories and models in teachers' professional development, namely, Fuller's Concern Stage Theory, Fessler's Eight-stage Teacher Career Cycle Model The Social Cognitive Career Theory. Through a discussion of those teachers' career theories, models and their applications, this literature review probes into the importance of examining the interplay between personal and environmental factors in order to understand how and why experienced teachers become demotivated and frustrated in different career stages. It also provides a more holistic view and insight on retaining experienced in-service teachers and alleviating the global teacher attrition and shortage problem.

**Keywords:** Career Theory, Teachers' Professional Development, Concern Theory

### 1. Introduction:

Teacher shortage has become an alarming global issue [1-5]. Undoubtedly, many researchers [6-9] endeavoured effort in an attempt to alleviate such a problem by understanding more on teachers' professional development and career decision. Research studies were done in hopes of identifying factors influencing teachers' professional development and career choices. A hurdle that researchers have been facing is that teachers were coming from diverse backgrounds, particularly countries like Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States [1-10].

Currently, research studies [11,12] on teachers' professional development and career choices showed some limitations in alleviating the shortage problems. Researchers [13-16] oversimplified factors or reached one-size-fits-all solutions too quickly. Some researchers

[7,9,17] acknowledged teachers' background and previous experiences impact their professional development and career choices; however, they focused more on pre-service and early-career teachers rather than in-service highly competent experienced ones. Some researchers [18,19] identified factors influencing teachers' different professional development in different stages but did not address how factors synchronically and diachronically influence teachers' career decisions of entering or exiting their teaching career in relation to their sense of identity. In fact, teachers' backgrounds and prior experiences comprise a broad spectrum of factors and elements, which include personal, cognitive and contextual factors [20]. Interestingly, these factors, to different extends, influence their perception of success or failure in their teaching career, as well as their motivation, satisfaction, a steady commitment to

teaching, goals or chances at their different professional development stages [19], and hence influence teachers' decision moving in or out their teaching career [20,21].

### **1.1. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore two career theories and one model and how they are applied to teachers' professional development and career decisions. First, it will point out how those theories and models depict teachers' professional development stages or cycles. Second, it will encapsulate some common factors pointed out by different theories which influence teachers' career choices at different professional development stages. Third, it will examine to what extent teachers' personal factors are taken into consideration in their professional development and career choices in those theories and models. Finally, it will highlight some current research gaps on the inadequate explorations on experienced in-service teachers' mid-career change of leaving a teaching career as previous researches mainly focus on one status group of teachers, namely pre-service teachers.

The following parts will examine Fuller's Concern Stage Theory [22,23], Fessler's Eight-stage Teacher Career Cycle Model [24,25], and the Social Cognitive Career Theory [26,27]. These theories and models are chosen because of their significance and substantial impacts on later development and perception of teachers' professional development models [28]. First, the checklist developed based on Fuller's Concern Stage Theory is still applicable and used in current research studies [29]. There has also been a continuous effort in modifying the theory to overcome its shortcomings [30]. Another reason for choosing these theories and models is that these theories and models have incorporated various psychological or adult growth theories into teachers' professional development. Fessler's Eight-stage Teacher Career Cycle Model adopts a social system approach and gives a historical perspective to life-cycle research. Similar categorization of teachers' career stages can be seen in works from Huberman, Skes and Day [31,32]. As for the Social Cognitive Career Theory, it adopts a constructivist approach and embraces career and psychological counselling into the theory to highlight humans can actively influence their development and surroundings [27,33]. Examining these theories and models can provide a holistic perspective on how teachers' career theories develop diachronically. Thirdly, these theories demonstrate different priorities when examining teachers' career choices with respect to personal and contextual factors. This can facilitate a comparison between the advantages and shortcomings of each theory and model to give a better idea of understanding individual teachers' career decision process in the similar educational or social setting.

### **2. Fuller's Concern Stage Theory**

Fuller's classic Concern Stage Theory [22] gives an understanding of the progression of beginning teachers' concerns in their different career stages and has persisted unchanged to the present time [34]. These phases of concerns are sequential and accumulative [22]. This theory attempts to explain the perceptions, anxieties, problems, frustrations, and satisfactions teachers experience as they progress through a teacher education program. Earlier Fuller [22] dichotomized data of various studies and categorized concerns into concerns about self and principal concerns which are related to students. According to Fuller (1970), there are three

stages of concerns – Concern about Self, Concern about Teaching Task, and Concern about Impact. Concerns can be generally defined as the perceived problems of teachers [22]. To put it short, it is something teachers think about frequently and would like to do something personally.

### **2.1. Concern about Self**

The first stage of teaching is Concern about Self [22,23]. Fuller [36] indicated that compared to their teaching career, teachers are more concerned about their own feelings and personal problems. Such inclination is due to a lack of knowledge about both the teaching and education realm. Even though teachers may have reported some concerns about their teaching, those concerns are generally amorphous and vague as most of those teachers do not know what to be concerned about [22]. Fuller [36] positively addressed such concerns as expected, accepted, and normal part of everyone's experiences.

### **2.2. Concern about Teaching Task**

The second stage is Concern about Teaching Task [22,23]. At this stage, teachers are more concerned about what students have learnt and their success in the classroom and their satisfaction and gains [36]. When teachers first enter a teaching career, they are more concerned about how to look smart and well-prepared in front of their students so as to control them better and answer their questions more confidently [36]. Teachers at this stage are also becoming more concerned about effective methods and instructional designs of lessons to boost their teaching effectiveness [36]. They may try to estimate how much support they can receive from the school principal or supervisors and how to build working relationships with school personnel [22]. Fuller [36] suggested that teachers' concern about their teaching tasks is out of personal concerns as the effectiveness of teaching directly affects how students perceive them. As for this aspect, Fuller [22,36] addressed vocally that such concerns are "survival concerns" and they are still not mature concerns. Nevertheless, teachers at this stage are ready for some teaching-related content but not methods of evaluating students' gain.

### **2.3. Concern about Impact**

The third stage is Concern about Impact [22,23]. Fuller [36] highlighted that such concerns are more mature than the previous ones. Teachers at this stage have become concerned about students' gain and their influence on such gain. They also reflect on their previous teaching experience to see how their teaching can be done better, such as guiding, challenging, and meeting the diverse needs of students [36,37]. However, Fuller [36] also suggested that such concerns are rare and not common among novice teachers.

The development pattern of concerns can be summarised as a general movement from inward to outward (Fuller, 1970). Fuller [36] suggested teachers' concerns occur in a fairly regular sequence from an early concern about oneself to later concern about students, and they tend not to appear simultaneously. It also fits the normative expectation that teachers' ultimate concern ought to be about students and student learning rather than self or situations [38].

### **2.4. Application of Concern Stage Theory in Teachers' Professional Development**

One interesting finding of the application of Concern Stage Theory is that Fuller [22] pointed out that teachers who retained in their early concerns about self are more likely to leave their teaching career. However, later researchers [39,40] pointed out that even though there was a decrease in the survival concerns and an increase in concerns about teaching tasks, but the teachers' concerns about their impact remained stable between pre-service and in-service teachers. Nevertheless, Concern Stage Theory has remained highly influential and was adopted by various researchers in fields related teachers' professional development, ranging from early career and pre-service teacher training [36], teaching methodologies of subject teachers [41,42], different educational reforms, and integration of groups of students with special educational needs [38]. The model has also been found useful in teacher preparation and professional development by addressing their needs and concerns according to a trajectory of professional development [41]. Some researchers [34] pointed out that after years this conceptualization has persisted unchanged to the present time because practically, many teachers have noticed a similar progression of concerns in their professional development [38].

### **3. Fessler's Eight-stage Teacher Career Cycle Model**

Fuller's Concern Stage Theory [25] consists of a shortcoming that it neglects how mature teachers continue to grow and develop. Some researchers [30] suggested there is a need to extend the theory. Inspired by the Chicago school's developmental psychology, consideration of the social system and social psychological perspectives is incorporated [31]. Fessler [24,25] proposed Eight-stage Teacher Career Cycle Model in an attempt to conceptualize a teacher's career cycle within the context of a dynamic and flexible social system. Unlike Fuller's model [22,23], Fessler's Eight-stage Teacher Career Cycle Model [24] stresses that progression through stages is not in irreversible lockstep, linear fashion. Nevertheless, Fessler [25] still recognized the regularity on the course of changes by specific problems, preoccupations, and attitudes towards job and learning activities. According to Fessler [24], teachers move through those developmental stages not necessarily in a pre-determined trajectory or predictable chronological sequence. Instead, it is a dynamic manner reflecting responses to personal and organizational environmental factors. This model makes such a dynamic manner possible because it has incorporated theories in social psychology, human development, and management. It illustrates how development proceeds through the interplay and resolution of conflicts between the needs of individual teachers and the demands of the organization.

#### **3.1. The Eight Stages in Teacher Career Cycle**

Fessler's model [24,25] outlined an eight-stage teacher career cycle model: pre-service, induction, competency building, enthusiastic & growing, career frustration, career stability, career wind-down, and career exit.

**3.1.1. Preservice** This phrase is the beginning period of preparation for a specific professional role, including an initial study in a college or university. Apart from initial teacher training, it also involves retraining for a new professional role.

#### **3.1.2. Induction**

In the first few years of service, a teacher strives to adapt to this role and be accepted by the social surrounding. Teachers at this stage started to socialize into the professional and social fabric of the school and community. They have developed some strategies recommended by their colleagues to be in sync with the more traditional teaching practices.

### **3.1.3. Competency Building**

Teachers at this stage have been socialized in the system and become highly motivated to participate in professional development programmes. They want to acquire more work-related knowledge, develop work-related skills, and become more acquainted with different teaching materials. Fessler [25] perceived this stage as a crossroad – if teachers succeed in these attempts will enter the Enthusiasm and Growing stage, while failure will lead to Career Frustration.

### **3.1.4. Enthusiasm and Growth**

Teachers at this stage have reached a high level of competence in their jobs and continue to progress as professionals [25]. They demonstrate a positive affective attitude: they love their jobs, look forward to going to school, to being involved in school activities and classwork, and to interacting with their students. They are constantly seeking new ways to enrich their teaching and to contribute more to the institution where they are employed. Some of them are more willing to be served as peer coaches, and their excitement about learning new things and their commitment to the profession can be influencing and rippling among the other workmates.

## **3.2. Application of Fessler's Eight-stage Career Cycle Model**

There have been some research studies examining teachers' career development characteristics in general and special schools in different countries by adopting this stage model. Various personal factors related to career choices like emotions, gender, age and family duties have been identified in various researches. Moreover, an understanding of career stages has also become more crucial in teacher leadership as it suggested teachers in particular stage to take up more responsibilities like being role models or mentors at schools. In the scope of school leadership, some researchers extended beyond the professional development of teachers to principals' career life stages to understand how principalship develops in terms of time perspectives and environmental influences. Based on the observation of Fuller's Concern Stage Theory [22,23,36] and Fessler's Eight-stage Career Cycle Model [24,25], although there is no consensus on the number of teachers' professional development stages, mostly teacher professional development is related to changes in teachers' experience in (1) job skills, knowledge, and behaviours; (2) attitude and outlooks; and (3) job events [18]. One significant difference between earlier and later models is that the earlier models tend to consider teachers' careers as a progression through stages [18,19,22] while later models tend to incorporate adult growth and development onto teachers' career stages [24,49]. In short, professional development is a life-long project which promotes changes in a teacher's knowledge base and actions through sets of activities designed to promote personal, professional change [4]. Fuller's Concern Stage Theory [22,23,36] and Fessler's Eight-stage Teacher Career Cycle Model [24,25] have brought insight on understanding how personal and contextual factors were identified in earlier and later stage model theories.

#### **4. Conclusion:**

This literature review first looked at two different career theories, one career cycle model, and their application to understanding teachers' professional development and career decisions. Then it moved to an examination of common factors influencing teachers' career choices. Next, it looked into how personal factors are taken into consideration in different models. Finally, some current research gaps on the career choices and professional development of in-service teachers were addressed. Teachers' professional development is a complex interplay between personal and environmental factors, and there are no one-size-fits-all solutions to teachers' retainment. While teacher shortage has become a global issue [1-3], investigating how highly skilled teachers become demotivated and frustrated can lead to an understanding of how personal and contextual factors influence teachers' postulation of their professional development outcomes. These postulations of failing or successful outcomes can either positively or negatively influence teachers' perception of professional identity, and their sense of identity can lead to retaining or exiting their teaching career. Therefore, an understanding of the interplay of these factors influences their career decisions and can get into the crux of the teacher attrition and retainment problem.

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