

Mature Teachers Matter

by Patricia Scallan Berl

Recent census data points to a fundamental shift in the composition of today's workforce, foretelling of a continuous and serious shortage of skilled workers. Demographers predict that an

estimated 76 million baby boomers, (individuals born between 1946-1964) will plan to exit their professions within the decade, but fewer than 48 million workers will be waiting in the wings to replace them (Barbian, 2004). Along with those who are planning to retire by 2005, over half of employees hired within the past eight years will

either change their current jobs or voluntarily leave their organizations. Women's participation in the workforce will steadily climb with an increased focus on jobs outside the traditional career paths of education, health care, and social services (Simmons, 2005).

Like the familiar television commercial, center directors might well pose the question, "What's the cost of losing a

mature teacher due to voluntary separation or retirement?" The answer: "Priceless!" Future trends in teacher turnover are expected to place additional burdens on directors as costs associated with hiring and training continue to escalate. More importantly, the consequences of losing the knowledge and skills of mature employees will be significant for many organizations and may seriously impact their capabilities to achieve their mission or to maintain a competitive advantage.

Carol Hymowitz of the *Wall Street Journal* writes that when mature employees leave employment due to retirement or voluntary separation, there can be a loss of institutional memory as well as an abrupt culture change for the organization. The loss of a senior teacher can create a void, like a family break up or the end of an era. When a dearly loved employee leaves, there is a sense that "a chunk of the organization's culture and history is walking out the door." Forward-thinking directors recognize the value of mature teachers and their contributions in preserving the knowledge, skills, and cultures of their organizations.

Mature teacher's mindset

Mature teachers are colleagues over 45 years of age, possessing significant

experience in the field. Their motivations and behaviors differ from younger teachers in a number of ways. First, they are more experienced and confident, preferring to "teach on their own terms." Second, mature teachers act more autonomously. They are less likely to seek the input of others, tending to draw upon their vast experience and knowledge base to guide classroom decisions. Third, they are less interested in social aspects of work that frequently fuel the energy and passions of younger teachers. Mature workers, across the spectrum of professions, readily admit that they "are more interested in the work itself" (Simmons, 2005).

Center directors may at times feel unsuccessful in their efforts to lead mature teachers in implementing changes in curriculum, classroom environments, or child assessment protocols. Mature teachers may be skeptical, question, or even ignore proposed center innovations, viewing such changes as "cyclical" in nature, the "whim of center management," or the practice "du jour." They may perceive new programs or procedures to be less important to their role as teachers than the day to day interactions and relationships they cultivate with families. Furthermore, mature teachers can appear less eager than their younger

Patricia Scallan Berl is a division vice president of



mid-Atlantic operations for Bright Horizons

Family Solutions. She is known nationally as a conference presenter and author of articles in child care center management and supervision. She has been a regular contributor to *Exchange* since 1978. In addition to her lovely family, Patricia has a passion for orchids, Springer Spaniels, and travel.

colleagues to implement changes in teaching practices because the expectations of reaping future rewards (such as promotions or external recognition) are less important to them, mattering much more to younger employees who are focused on moving up the career ladder (Hymowitz, 2001).

Among their key findings in *The New Workforce Reality*, Simmons School of Management concluded that as organizations rely more on mature workers, it will be important to make sure that these employees feel challenged, are provided with varying responsibilities and projects, and have control of when and how their work gets done. In study focus groups mature workers across a number of professions stated that they desired to work for organizations that are not overly rigid in their policies and structure, allowing them to focus on the work itself. What matters most to mature teachers is the “content of their work” — what they do, how they do it, and where and when they do it, and the “relationships they keep” with children and families. The intrinsic value mature teachers place on teaching and caring for children and families is what motivates and sustains them.

Mature teachers on the career continuum

Building upon previous articles in this series (Berl, 2004; Berl, 2005) principles of life cycle theory form the basis for individualizing the professional development of teachers across the career continuum. From this framework adult development is viewed as a continuous process of maturation, progressing along fairly sequential stages from birth to death. Maturity is never entirely a constant characteristic, but rather a state of continual progression through a series of developmental stages throughout an individual’s life cycle. As people develop and mature, pursuing autonomy, competency, personal

meaning, and satisfaction, their outlooks and commitment to life, work, and relationships continually evolve and change. Patterns of personal and career growth become interwoven as age and common experiences influence motivation and productivity of individuals throughout the life cycle.

Lillian Katz, noted researcher in teacher education, has applied life cycle theory to delineate stages of teacher career development. She labels senior teachers approaching the final phases of their careers as Stage V — Maturity teachers. These teachers Katz defines as more experienced, independent, and confident in their judgments. As professionals they are more accepting of their shortcomings. In Katz’s observations, “they feel more secure about their teaching.”

Many psychologists view Stage V — Maturity as a transitional phase that begins with a period of career renewal and recommitment in the late thirties that leads to an intrinsic confidence and self acceptance about the meaning and significance of their work. Katz believes that often the efforts of the mature stage teacher are more intrinsically satisfying, educationally stimulating and psychologically rewarding (Katz, 1991).

Working with mature teachers

Six principles can facilitate directors working with teachers on or approaching the mature career cycle.

■ Appreciate their experience and frame of reference

Directors support teachers in the mature stage through supervisory relationships that are built on collaboration and non-directive supervision. Staff development goals for mature teachers should ideally provide opportunities to expand or apply their expertise in related areas of interest to them. Examples would include

opportunities to pursue classroom research in teaching techniques, classroom observations, evaluation or development of curriculum, data gathering, journaling, conference presentations, leadership roles in professional organizations, child and community advocacy, the development or evaluation of curriculum, and mentoring teachers.

Mature stage teachers should be seen as knowledgeable experts in aspects of child development, teaching, or family communications. They are ready and available resources to colleagues and parents on a variety of topics including separation anxiety and child transitions, developmental stages, family communications, and school readiness.

■ Encourage their transfer of knowledge and skills in the organization

Within the early education field, directors are seeing racial and ethnic diversity growing at unprecedented rates, requiring enhanced communication, cultural sensitivity, and training as newly hired workers replace aging employees. Mature teachers are a valuable resource that can bring insight and extensive experience to directing the learning process of others. Directors elevate the stature of mature teachers by giving them a context for sharing experiences, perspectives, and history through coaching and mentoring. Through observations, discussion, role playing, creative problem solving, and brainstorming, mature teachers can help younger faculty exchange ideas and evaluate their experiences, encouraging more effective teaching practices or self-reflection.

Coaching is an excellent role that affirms the value of experience among mature teachers as they help younger teachers build specific competencies. As mentors they can promote teacher development and succession planning by strengthening competencies of younger teachers in

many areas including teaching practices, classroom organization, classroom observations, designing room arrangements, assembling anecdotal information, conducting learning assessments, evaluation, and parent communications. Their insights are important vehicles for transferring knowledge and training in the organization.

Often it is easier for a younger teacher to modify a teaching practice, attitude, or belief while working with an experienced coach, rather than the immediate supervisor who carries the added responsibility of evaluation. As coaches mature, teachers often relay stories about their own successes and set backs, thereby encouraging younger faculty members not to give up. By possessing many years of experience, often in a variety of classroom settings, mature teachers are open to identifying mistakes along the way. By sharing their thoughts and experiences, mature teachers help affirm and validate the experiences of their younger colleagues. Younger teachers learn from them and begin to view the career path as an adventure in lifelong learning.

■ Value their knowledge of organizational history, culture, and change

Rich in history and experience, mature teachers are “keepers of the past,” helping to preserve vital knowledge and keep cultural aspects in check. They can be instructive to a director in implementing change processes within a center, facilitating the balance between what is worth keeping and what should be discarded, between adopting a new approach or retaining an existing one. Mature teachers can often provide perspectives on a change process orchestrated earlier,

helping a newer director avoid future mistakes. In addition to their insights, mature teachers can help determine accountability among those who promote change within the organization.

■ Acknowledge trends among mature employees to work longer into their career cycle

A recent article in *The New York Times* reveals that among a growing number of senior employees, “The option to retire or not to work full time is slipping away. Many would-be retirees cannot afford the pension hit and must continue to work. Others must continue to work to attain sufficient incomes to pay for what they consider basic expenses or to offset the loss of one income due to company layoffs, forced retirement, or medical issues.” Author Louis Uchitelle, cites that employment among those over 65 years old has continued to rise, increasing to 14% from less than 12% since 1995; and, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, this trend will likely continue.

In responding to the increase in older workers, employers will need to provide more flexibility in schedules and tasks. For directors, classroom schedules and activities may need to be modified temporarily or longer term to assist mature teachers in meeting the physical demands of working with younger children.

■ Respect personal boundaries and changing dynamics of work/life balance

Healthy environments respect the importance of maintaining work/life balance in sustaining the mental health and well being of employees. For directors it means respecting the privacy and personal boundaries of teachers outside of work. Flexibility may be required to help them meet both work and family priorities. As managers, we must be willing to accept that there will be times when an employee may need to temporarily change schedules or reduce work loads to meet family priorities.

A focus group participant in The New Workforce Reality collaborative study by the Simmons School of Management and Bright Horizons Family Solutions states:

“At a certain point in your career, people really know how to put a good day’s work in . . . And I think they are motivated to do that by having the flexibility to do what they need to with their family . . . To take care of personal business when they need to . . . understanding they’re paying back the organization with whatever time they have taken.”

(Focus Group Participant over 45 years of age)

Avenues that support work/life balance and flexibility needs for mature employees include:

- Employee support groups and EAP options
- Job sharing/co-teaching among tenured teachers
- Modified work schedules or compressed work weeks
- Multiple avenues for in-service such as journals and book discussion groups, computer based training, videos, participation in advocacy / research or community projects
- Part-time clerical resources to assist in completion of administrative work (classroom newsletter, child assessments, lesson plans, and staff training) at home, online, or with flexible schedules.
- Limiting scheduling of evening staff meetings
- Recognize mature employees’ contributions to the profession

Mature teachers are not only mentors to younger teachers but to the early childhood profession as well. Lillian Katz writes of mature teachers and caregivers who are committed to quality early life experience for every child. She observes that a limited number of mature teachers may actually achieve a final career plateau referred to as “the influential

stage” characterized by many years of experience in multiple roles in child care work. Teachers in the influential stage are often recognized as state and national leaders. They are self-directed and feel comfortable with leadership and authority. These are the teachers who set the pace, first in their own thinking and then in their professional endeavors. They are often actively engaged in professional organizations, governor task forces, social service boards (Zeece, 1991). In advocacy work, they often become the movers and shakers of the profession.

Whether publicly acknowledged through a leadership role in the community or as a single professional dedicated to caring for young children at a particular center, the mature teacher warrants recognition and acknowledgment.

Final thoughts

Responding to future labor shortages is a complex but strategic imperative no industry can ignore. Meeting all teachers’ professional development needs as a tool for staff retention is crucial. And as compelling as it is to create work cultures where younger teachers thrive, one cannot overlook the professional development needs of mature staff, who must also be affirmed and valued in the workplace.

As the number of talented teachers leaving the early childhood profession remains on the rise, it may well be up to mature and tenured faculty to preserve the reputation, history, and ideals of our programs. Recognition and respect is owed them. Professional development programs that incorporate the interests and needs of mature teachers validate and affirm their importance in our workplace.

Engaging mature teachers in staff development fosters a stronger center

culture, supporting the training of others and positively impacting morale and staff turnover. Mature teachers deserve professional development programs that incorporate respect for their experiences, transfer of their knowledge and skills, flexibility, recognition of their contributions, and a healthy respect for work/life balance.

Truly, mature teachers are a treasure to the profession, by whom our center’s history, culture, and mission are entrusted.

Sources

Barbian, J. (January 1, 2004). *Training*.

Berl, P. S. (March/April 2005). “Developing Early to Mid Career Teachers.” *Exchange*, 162(6-10).

Berl, P. S. (January/February 2004). “Insights Into Teacher Development: The Emergent Teacher.” *Exchange*, 155(8-11).

Hymowitz, C. (2001). “A Manager’s Challenge is to Respect the Past While Moving Forward.” *Wall Street Journal*.

Bloom, P. J., Sheerer, M., & Britz, J. (1991). *Blueprint for action: achieving center-based change through staff development*. Lake Forest, IL: New Horizons.

Katz, L. (1977). “Developmental Stages of Teachers.” Presentation at NAEYC National Conference, Washington DC.

Simmons School of Management, Bright Horizons Family Solutions. (January 2005). “The New Workforce Reality: Insights for Today, Implications for Tomorrow.” Collaborative Study.

Uchitelle, L. (2005). “Were the Good Old Days That Good?” *The New York Times*.

Zeece, P. D. (July/August 1991). “How Did You Manage That? A Closer Look at Staff Guidance.” *Exchange*, 80(34-37).

10 ideas for recognizing and acknowledging mature teachers

- Share positive parent and colleague feedback in center communications and performance reviews
- Send thank you notes, acknowledging contributions/accomplishments
- Encourage leadership roles in staff committees
- Seek their insight on past initiatives, what worked, and what didn’t
- Provide opportunities for networking with other mature colleagues in areas of professional interest
- Offer two week or one month sabbatical to pursue a special teaching interest or develop a training program on a successful initiative
- Sponsor attendance at conferences appealing to their special interests
- Gather their input when redesigning staff orientation
- Assist them with forming linkages to community and technical colleges, sponsoring student interns, or presenting to ECE classes
- Celebrate their personal, professional, and family accomplishments