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Career Ladders:



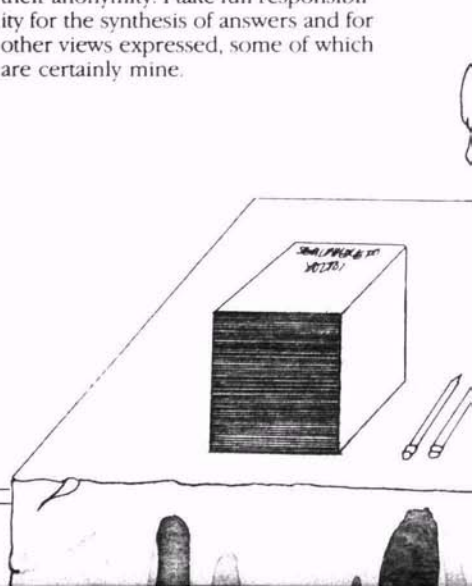
Roughly 15 years ago, there was a movement in American schools called differentiated staffing. It was not sustained, yet in scope and structure it was related to today's master teacher, mentor teacher, and career ladder programs (hereafter referred to as career ladders). Differentiated staffing and career ladders represent two recurrent thrusts to improve schools and school personnel and to upgrade teaching as a profession. Those are noble goals, but why didn't the earlier attempt succeed? Are the chances for success better this time?

To answer those questions and others, I interviewed 13 people who have been deeply involved with differentiated staffing, career ladders, or both.[1] I sought their opinions about current and past attempts to distinguish among teachers and about the similarities between differentiated staffing and career ladders. Many have changed jobs since the days of differentiated staffing, but they still represent schools, colleges, universities, state departments of education, and teacher unions. They are practitioners and bureaucrats, teachers and administrators, planners and implementers, managers and employees.

Since differentiated staffing patterns do not exist in most schools, I assumed that most differentiated staffing efforts had failed. What went wrong? Was it too expensive, or were educators and the public not ready for reorganizing schools? How do the goals of differentiated staffing compare with those of career ladders? If they are different, how so?

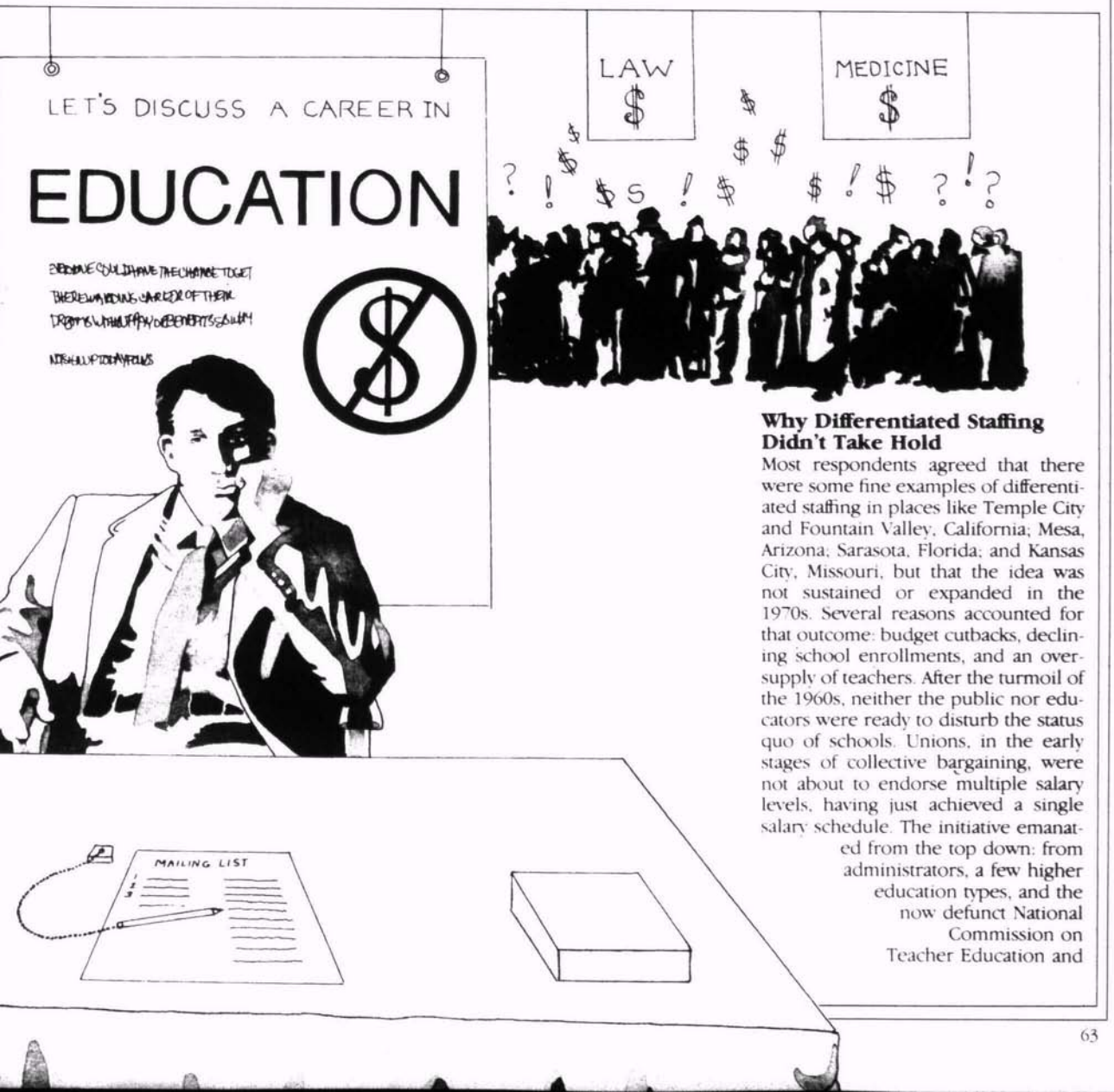
I also wanted to gather views about the initiators of past and present plans. Does today's support come from more quarters? Are the lessons of nonsuccess being applied by new advocates? Finally, is change possible this time around? The ultimate test, of course, is whether schools and the teaching profession are improved, and it is too early to make that judgment.

The interviews were enlightening. There was considerable agreement, but not on all questions, and an interview often took a direction I had not anticipated. To obtain candid responses from the participants, I assured their anonymity. I take full responsibility for the synthesis of answers and for other views expressed, some of which are certainly mine.



Then and Now

Today's career ladder programs resemble the differentiated staffing experiments of the late '60s and early '70s. This time, however, conditions may be right for success.



Why Differentiated Staffing Didn't Take Hold

Most respondents agreed that there were some fine examples of differentiated staffing in places like Temple City and Fountain Valley, California; Mesa, Arizona; Sarasota, Florida; and Kansas City, Missouri, but that the idea was not sustained or expanded in the 1970s. Several reasons accounted for that outcome: budget cutbacks, declining school enrollments, and an oversupply of teachers. After the turmoil of the 1960s, neither the public nor educators were ready to disturb the status quo of schools. Unions, in the early stages of collective bargaining, were not about to endorse multiple salary levels, having just achieved a single salary schedule. The initiative emanated from the top down: from administrators, a few higher education types, and the now defunct National Commission on Teacher Education and

Professional Standards of the National Education Association. Major financial support issued from the federal government under the Education Professions Development Act.

The idea was too comprehensive. It not only ranked teachers, but also teamed them, assigned them responsibilities according to their competence, and paid them based on the roles they assumed. It called on educators to invent different categories of teachers. It included flexible and modular scheduling, different uses of space, and close coordination between teacher education at colleges and universities and the assignment and functioning of school personnel. It encompassed both prospective and practicing teachers and challenged school people to think differently about curriculum.

Even though teachers in the schools that tried differentiated staffing were prepared for their new assignments, teachers outside those schools were virtually unaware of the concept. Unlike the teacher center movement of the late 1970s, the differentiated staffing movement was not an American groundswell with teachers as the main actors.

The challenge of differentiated staffing was unsettling. Years of habit made it difficult for teachers to see themselves in circumstances other than a classroom with 25 students. Most had not considered alternative ways to organize a faculty or school. Teachers who were not informed or adventurous were frightened by the idea, and some were hostile. Responsive union leaders, by then in an adversarial role with school administrators, were quick to articulate teacher apprehensions.

Differentiated staffing appeared at a time of recession and regression; everything was tightened up and buckled down. The easy mobility of teachers from the end of World War II through the 1960s had disappeared. Except for a few growth areas in the country, teachers with jobs and tenure were holding fast, hoping they wouldn't be RIFed. Where differentiated staffing was operable, the upper rungs in the career ladder were filled, and there was little or no movement at the top to accommodate those seeking promotion.

In many places, differentiated staffing programs were characterized as running on "play money": federal grants that required no local contribution and often little local commitment. There also was not enough political support. Many school boards thought differentiated staffing would be too expensive; most local and state boards and legislatures, preoccupied with school integration, declining test scores, and union lobbying for collective bargaining, were unaware of the idea; and governors were uninformed or impervious to the concept. Nothing in particular went wrong. It just wasn't the right moment in history. Perhaps the lessons of a prior reform attempt can be instructive to reformers in the current career ladder movement.

More Different than Alike

Both old and new notions of a promotion system for teaching careers are similar in several ways, but today's concept is more limited and stems from different motivations. The focus has shifted toward competency and salary differentials and, as a result, teacher evaluation and staff development are centerpieces of most plans. In career ladders most teachers, regardless of rank, remain solo performers in self-contained classrooms. Master and mentor teachers are paid more than other teachers for doing the same job and receive additional incentives and recognition.

Heavier responsibilities usually entail nonteaching tasks such as mentoring new teachers, conducting inservice workshops, and serving on committees to review and select teaching materials. Extra duties often require a longer work week and year, for which teachers receive added compensation. The practice is to improve some teachers' salaries by paying extra and to acknowledge high-quality performance with the master or mentor teacher designation (Astuto and Clark, 1985). One respondent facetiously characterized the situation as inventing the master teacher role *after* deciding to designate someone as a master teacher with added pay; others recognized that policymakers are currently concerned with teacher quality, the number leaving the profession, the few college students preparing for teaching careers, and the teacher shortage in key subject areas.

Business and industrial leaders have developed renewed interest in education. They are intent on improving schools, particularly in the sun belt and in growth states, recognizing that good schools are essential to attracting economic development and the educated people such development requires.

The Power and Consensus Behind the Effort

It is no surprise that political leaders and policymakers, sensitive to public opinion, have instigated and championed career ladders. They are copying the reward system of the marketplace where precise job descriptions are common and outcomes, products, and cost effectiveness are bottom lines. The management mind in government and the private sector endorses applying such principles to education, believing that schooling will foster economic effectiveness (Education Commission of the States, 1983).

The media have communicated an urgency about education to political leaders and the public (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), and elected leaders sense the political value of action in education. The increased support packs a wallop because it comes from legislators and governors, the people who mandate change and appropriate money.

Many boards of education support career ladders, which is helpful because these boards allocate local monies. The public has also come to believe in career ladders; although the subtleties of teaching may escape them, they recognize that some teachers are more able than others. Hence, they are an easy target for media blasts about teacher incompetence. They have come to support plans for testing teachers, which they assume will weed out the poor ones and reward the better ones. The simple logic is that career ladders will accomplish it all.

School administrators, particularly principals in schools where they participate in mentoring, also support career ladders. They recognize the realities of their working world: teachers are not all alike, neophytes need induction, teaching assignment makes a difference, context influences performance, some teachers are leaders and some followers (and some loners), and different periods of life

and in the teachers' personal lives affect competence.

Even some unions (in Tennessee, for example) have supported testing and distinguishing among teachers. The president of the American Federation of Teachers publicly endorsed a national teacher exam earlier this year. The NEA has reassessed its position on testing teachers and has been forced to examine a hierarchy in teaching more closely as some of its affiliates have agreed to support state career ladder plans. Political pressure on the unions from a conservative national administration has been intense, and the public clearly wants more rigorous teacher standards to justify the higher salaries. The combination of influence and urgency coming from many quarters has changed some teacher union rhetoric and may force modifications in positions and action as well.

Teachers may also recognize that the structure of their work assignments in today's schools is inadequate to provide quality education and foster a viable profession. They may sense that the complexity of teaching warrants changes in assignments, scheduling, quality control, and reward systems (Goodlad, 1984).

Was Differentiated Staffing a Complete Failure?

Not all aspects of differentiated staffing have flopped or disappeared. Teacher aides, for example, continue to work in schools across the country. In some places, including New York City, teacher aides are the first rung in a career ladder. Some teacher aide programs have provided opportunities for teacher education to minorities who otherwise might not have gained access to traditional collegiate preparation programs.

In Oregon, the residue of differentiated staffing can be seen in a mentor program directed at the induction of new teachers. Placing its best teachers in the role of trusted guide and coach, the system buffers neophytes against the usual pressures of survival and permits them to preserve their best college training and ideals. Often the working arrangement involves teaming, and there are different expectations for the greenhorn and the pro.

In a North Carolina school district, a few schools experimented 15 years ago with teacher assistants, school day planning time, open-concept and open-space schools, teachers working in nongraded teams, and the use of student teachers and teacher interns. Even though continuance of such programs has been sparse, the ideas persist. Perhaps most important, because some of the main actors in the earlier attempts have survived and prospered in the district, people now in its top echelons can apply the lessons of the past to the current career ladder program.

The Prognosis

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, education received much attention and support. One interviewee called it "a wonderfully expansive time, from Washington right down to the local level." Educators were on a high and that nurtured creative thinking. There was probably a little too much blue-sky thinking and considerable naivete. Almost anything seemed possible, including revamping the entire education system.

Today the mood is different. There is more realism, and educators sobered by lean years are more savvy about change as well as about the many contextual factors that need to be considered in any change. "The window is open; we better get through it," said one of my experts. Another opined that educators had better get rolling because today's initiators are political leaders who will be gone in five years.

When predicting success this time, my respondents fell into three categories: the skeptics or pessimists, the ambivalent fence sitters, and the optimists. The four skeptical or pessimistic respondents said that they hold no greater hope this time than last, they think the chance of success is no different than before, they believe the prospect is not bright for something comprehensive, and they feel the tendency to seek instant answers will be detrimental.

The first of three ambivalent respondents thinks that if planners don't consider the complexity of teaching, career ladders won't work. The second feels that program success will depend on the local people in power and the support of their boards of education. The third believes that there will be some success, but not rapid improvement.

"... differentiated staffing programs were characterized as running on 'play money': federal grants that required no local contribution and often little local commitment."

Of the six optimists, four think chances are a little better this time but don't see a revolution in the offing, and two are quite positive.

Higher Education Involvement

The six respondents who are higher education personnel report that education professors where they work are more involved with schools. In one institution, professors *must* spend a certain amount of time in schools, and in another, faculty members must work in some public school capacity every five years to be promoted or tenured. At that college, a distinguished teacher chair has been established (a different classroom teacher each year), recognizing that higher education requires different people in different roles (this could be called differentiated staffing at the college level). In still another institution, two professors will work in the schools, and two school people will work in the college next year. Faculties are functioning differently. Several informants say a different mentality toward career ladders exists; others, however, are concerned that there is too little higher education involvement with them.

Participation from Business, Industry, and Government

Several respondents reported partnerships with outside groups, government and union leaders, and most often with the business community which, in one state, was particularly interested in the jobs training program. Several noted greater sensitivity

to involving these stakeholders in education, but voiced both pros and cons about the interest of business people, legislators, and citizens in the output of the schools. Some, moreover, expressed apprehension, even resentment, about the unions' reluctance to support career ladders.

There were cheers and fears about the participation of groups outside the school. All agreed on the value of public awareness and understanding, and many endorsed participation in school goal setting, but they resisted or resented intrusion. They opposed using business models of accountability, for example, which equate the outcomes of schooling with products.

Will There Be Success This Time?

Although career ladders are more narrowly defined than differentiated staffing, they may open the door to broader school reform. Teacher salaries should probably be raised across the board before career ladders can function effectively in a school system. To attract and retain its share of the most able college graduates, teaching must pay salaries comparable with other professions that require a college degree.

Whenever we make predictions about the potential success of career ladders, we must consider the three conditions necessary for their success:

- Legislators and school boards must provide the necessary financing.
- The public must allow educators enough time to plan and perfect career ladders.
- Teachers (individually and collectively) must be adventurous and creative.

There are lessons to be learned from experience with career ladders and differentiated staffing. Educators may have more control over how these lessons are applied than they do over the above conditions. The lessons that come to mind, stimulated by interacting with the 13 respondents representing several hundred years of experience, may be of value. They are expressed in Figure 1 as a series of questions that might serve as a continuous guide for planning and implementing programs (see also the Association of Teacher Educators, 1985). Some of them apply well beyond career ladders and should remind us that no single change or innovation will remedy the shortcomings of our schools.

The privilege of interviewing colleagues with wide knowledge and experience in career ladders convinced me that there is a prospect of something new and exciting. But as one of my respondents said, "Don't just assume it will work. We're not there yet. We may blow it."□

Figure 1. Checkpoints for Reformers

1. To what extent is the career ladder plan consistent with other school goals?
2. Have the tenor of the times and the context of the situation been adequately assessed?
3. Has sufficient time been allocated to achieve the progress desired?
4. Is financial support adequate and sufficiently stable to sustain the projected improvements?
5. Have all the stakeholders been involved appropriately in the decisions that affect them? Is there sufficient ownership of the plan for change?
6. Are too many changes occurring simultaneously? Have enough routines and procedures been preserved to keep participants adequately comfortable and secure?
7. Has there been adequate attention to all the research relevant to the idea being tried?
8. Has the new idea been tested in pilot settings?
9. Have the people involved received adequate preparation to carry out the planned change?
10. Is sensitive, competent supervision available to provide supportive guidance to those who are to carry out the change?
11. Are there adequate incentives and rewards for involvement?
12. Are both the science and the art of teaching addressed in the plans to improve instruction?
13. To what extent are evaluation criteria for a planned change linked directly to student achievement? Are the many factors that influence student learning considered?
14. Are school principals on board, informed, and part of the team?
15. Does the plan provide opportunities to explore higher levels of teaching performance and the hierarchy of difficulty in teaching tasks?
16. Are the rights, responsibilities, and prerogatives necessary for professional practice guaranteed to the teachers involved? Do teachers have recourse to due process, including impartial hearings, to resolve disputes and conflicts?
17. Are all the factors that determine school quality reviewed periodically so that career ladders are examined in the context of the total school enterprise?

[1]Don Barbee, San Francisco State University; Richard Clark, University of Massachusetts; James Cooper, University of Virginia; Deane Crowell, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools; Fenwick English, Lehigh University; William Fielder, Oregon State University; Marshall Frinks, Florida State Department of Education; Marilyn Johnston, National Education Association; Alvin Lierheimer, New York State Department of Education; Bernard McKenna, National Education Association; Marjorie Pike, Nashville Public Schools (past-president of the Tennessee Education Association); Don Sharpes, Weber State College; Eugene Wolkey, Kansas City Public Schools.

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