Plateauing As an Occupational Phenomenon Among Teachers and Administrators

Miki M. Milstein
University of New Mexico, Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, Albuquerque, NM 87131

Over the past decade there has been a growing interest in business organizations about a unique form of career stall. This phenomenon, which is referred to as plateauing, can occur if one has been in a long period of work stability. Stability can be comforting and we may actually seek it out, but over time it can lead to a sense of sameness and stagnation. If we perceive that our jobs are replete with routine and repetitive tasks, or that we are blocked from desired promotions, we are likely to feel an intrinsic sense of loss and become skeptical about ever finding fulfillment in our careers. In other words, we will be plateaued.

Teachers and administrators are as susceptible to plateauing as managers and workers are in industry. In fact, in some ways they may be more susceptible. Many of us choose education as a career because we believe there will be opportunities to achieve growth and professional status. However, it is not long before we realize that we are in a "front-loaded" occupation (Lortie, 1975); i.e., we obtain professional privileges and advantageous working conditions when we first come into the profession, but these privileges and conditions are not likely to improve noticeably over time. We may try to find ways out of this bind through such responses as changing schools; or seeking promotions which, if attained, can delay the feeling of being plateaued; or channeling our energies toward our family and social relationships; or leaving the profession.

As noted, the longer we remain in a job, the more likely we are to plateau. Over the past 25 years we have become a highly senior profession. An early 1960s survey (Charters, 1970) showed that only 35 percent of the teachers studied were in the classroom after four years. By 1972 a similar study (Mark & Anderson, 1978) found that 59 percent of the teachers surveyed remained in the classroom beyond the fourth year. By 1984 Harris (1984) found that median classroom experience was 12.7 years. Further, attrition rates among teachers are presently low, particularly among those in the 30- to 55-year-old range (Grissmer & Kirby, 1987), indicating that most remain and try to cope with plateauing as best they can.

The point is that, given the demographics of our work force, plateauing is probably a greater problem now than in the past. Further, it is as much an issue for
educational organizations as it is for the teachers and administrators who experience it. We may remain competent—i.e., do an adequate job, but if we conclude that our jobs are rote, routine, and uninteresting, and that there is not much likelihood that opportunities exist for learning and growth, our attitudes and our productivity will inevitably be affected negatively.

The intent of this article is to clarify the meaning of plateauing and how it can affect us. After initial definitions, the literature on plateauing will be summarized, and some preliminary findings about the extent of educator plateauing and ways to cope with it will be presented.

The essence of plateauing

A physical plateau is a flat expanse of land that extends for a long distance. In human terms, a plateau represents a long period of stability, which is a goal most of us strive to achieve. For some it may provide continuing satisfaction but, as noted, after some individually defined time span, stability begins to feel more like sameness and stagnation for many of us. Bardwick (1986) identifies three forms of plateauing:

*Structural plateauing,* which occurs when promotions are viewed as unobtainable. This is inevitable, given the hierarchical pyramids found in complex organizations. There is, as Levinson (1978) notes, only room at the top for a few; about 1 in 20 executives who seek promotion to the top of their organizations will make it. The rest will get little or nothing. Similarly, Bardwick (1986) states that only about 1 in 10 who are qualified for promotion will even make it to middle management ranks and that only 1 in 100 will make it to the top.

*Content plateauing,* which sets in when there is a sense that little or no challenge is left in one's job. If we think that there is nothing new to be learned, it is inevitable that a feeling of routine and boredom will be encountered: "The information we have says that it is difficult to have a sense of learning if your work remains essentially the same for more than three years. Most complex jobs are mastered in that time. If we expand the number of years from three to five, in order to account for the different time clocks in people's heads, then that tells us how long it usually takes for the sense of mastery to be replaced by the feeling of boredom if work is static" (Bardwick, 1986, p. 74). However, content plateauing, unlike structural plateauing, is not inevitable: "No one ever knows everything; no one has ever done everything. There are no limits to change and challenge except those created by personal fear or organizational laziness" (Bardwick, 1986, p. 7).

*Life plateauing,* which represents an overall sense of routine and sameness about all aspects of life. Life plateauing, although beyond the scope of this article, is important for policy makers to recognize because it affects how individuals respond to work situations.