

# The Dilemmas and Solutions of Career Development for Vocational College Teachers in the Context of Self-leadership Theory

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**Abstract:** The <National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan> and the <Reform Implementation Plan for Deepening the Construction of “Double-Teacher” Teacher Team in the New Era Vocational Education> are double-edged swords for vocational college teachers, which have brought both more development opportunities and dilemmas. This article analyzes the career development of vocational college teachers from the perspective of the ecosystem theory model, highlighting the social dilemma, school dilemma, and personal dilemma which the vocational teachers are facing, then suggests the vocational college teachers to overcome these dilemmas in the guidance of self-leadership theory by focusing on themselves, which is to combine work with interests, adopt a lifelong learning mindset, treasure opportunity of home school co-education, and develop a career development plan and so on, to finally “break out of their cocoons” to become a better selves and pave the way for their career development, ultimately achieving a stronger sense of professional happiness.

**Keywords:** vocational college; teacher career development; dilemmas and solutions; self-leadership

## 1. Introduction

Teachers are the guides for students’ learning and growth, undertaking the task of cultivating and delivering outstanding talents for the country. Vocational school teachers in particular bear the heavy responsibility of nurturing excellent technical talents. Since the introduction of the <National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan> (Twenty Articles on Vocational Education)<sup>[1]</sup> and the <Implementation Plan for Deepening the Reform of Building a “Double-Teacher” Teacher Team in the New Era Vocational Education><sup>[2]</sup>, Chinese society has attached increasing importance to vocational education. For vocational school teachers, it is not only a test of their professional abilities, but also brings more opportunities for personal continuous learning. As a result, the career development planning of vocational school teachers has changed.

Teacher career development refers to the changes in teachers’ professional qualities, abilities, achievements, positions, careers, etc. that occur over time, as well as the

corresponding psychological experiences and developmental processes<sup>[3]</sup>. Faced with the introduction of policies, heavy school tasks, and the complexity of student and parents’ affairs, most teachers encounter difficulties in their personal career development.

The “self-leadership” theory is a leadership theory proposed by organizational behaviorist Manz based on self-regulation theory, social cognitive theory, social learning theory, and intrinsic motivation theory<sup>[4]</sup>. Manz has defined self-leadership as the self-influencing process through which individuals achieve behavioral performance by necessary self-guidance and self-motivation. The theory of self-leadership can help individuals overcome external difficulties and setbacks, focus on what they can do, empower themselves with a positive mindset, achieve self-breakthroughs.

The ecological systems theory model is a psychological theory aimed at explaining the interactions between individuals and their surrounding environment. This theory posits that individuals are influenced by multiple levels of ecological systems, including the microsystem (environments in which individuals directly participate), the mesosystem (individuals’ social circles and communities), and the macrosystem (broader social and cultural environments)<sup>[5]</sup>.

This article will analyze the career development dilemmas of vocational college teachers through the ecological systems theory model<sup>[5]</sup>, and then guide vocational college teachers from the perspective of self-leadership to seek a way out for their career development, ultimately “breaking out of the cocoon” and gaining more professional happiness.

## 2. Career Development Dilemmas Faced by Vocational College Teachers

By analyzing the dilemmas faced by vocational college teachers through the ecological systems theory model, the current dilemmas of vocational college teachers can be categorized into social dilemma, school dilemma, and personal dilemma.

### 2.1. Social Dilemma

The <Implementation Plan for Deepening the Reform of Building a “Double-Teacher” Teacher Team in

Vocational Education in the New Era>pointed out that vocational colleges should establish high-level, structured, and innovative education teaching teams<sup>[2]</sup>. Vice Premier Sun Chunlan stated in <Providing Education that Satisfies the People> that without high-level teachers, there cannot be high-quality education. It is necessary to strengthen the construction of teacher ethics and style, cultivate a high-quality teacher team, and promote the social trend of respecting teachers and valuing education<sup>[6]</sup>. It requires vocational college teachers to have rich and solid theoretical knowledge in their profession, master scientific and innovative teaching techniques, possess noble teacher ethics and style, and have a high level of practical skills, in order to provide students with sufficient and targeted guidance in practical courses. This poses a great challenge to vocational college teachers.

## 2.2. School Dilemma

The construction of a “dual-teacher” teacher team mentioned in the “Twenty Articles of Vocational Education” has, to some extent, put greater competitive pressure on vocational college teachers<sup>[1]</sup>. In the title evaluation, there are limited quotas, difficulty in publishing high-quality journal articles, long periods of publication, etc. leading to most teachers unable to obtain the titles they desire. The starting salary of vocational college teachers is relatively low, with limited room for advancement. The stereotype in society that teachers own high salaries with light workloads has led teachers to have higher expectations for salary. When reality does not meet expectations, it brings a certain degree of blow to teachers.

Influenced by the long-term trend of education development in China, ordinary education occupies the mainstream road of education. Most students in vocational colleges come from working families. Parents believe that after their children enter vocational and technical schools, they can quickly enter society, join the workforce, and contribute to the family's economy. Due to the reasons of low cultural level of most students' parents of vocational schools, they are busy in hard works, lacking of parenting skills, and distant relationships with their children, parents basically do not pay attention to their children's learning and performance in school. They do not actively contact teachers. Even if teachers take the initiative to contact parents to report educational issues of the students, parents may choose to give up communication and cooperation with the school due to reasons such as being busy with work, not knowing how to teach, and lack of communication skills.

## 2.3. Personal Dilemma

With the rapidly updating of educational information technology, teachers often encounter shortcomings in education and teaching. However, due to the heavy workload of school work, teachers often have no enough time to participate in continuing education or training for professional growth. If colleagues around them also lack of this awareness, without the atmosphere of collective learning, it is difficult for teachers to persevere in independent learning.

In the teacher career development model proposed by American scholar Steffy<sup>[7]</sup>, it is mentioned that teachers in the third stage, the withdrawal stage, rarely devote themselves to educational innovation. They use the same teaching materials year after year, resulting in average teaching effectiveness. During this period, teachers are often silent, passive, and have poor interpersonal relationships. Some teachers may criticize the school, students, parents, or education administration, exhibit a sense of powerlessness in teaching, and may even harm the students.

Due to the heavy workload of school work, teachers often have to spend a lot of time dealing with school matters at home after work. The heavy workload of school tasks clashes with the complex tasks of family care, leading many teachers to be overwhelmed with family responsibilities. Especially after the implementation of the national policy of allowing the birth of a second or third child, teachers have to spend more time on the family and have more pressure in conceiving, giving birth, and raising children.

## 3. Career Development Paths for Vocational College Teachers

Facing the challenges of society and schools, teachers can explore career development paths through “self-leadership” theory. By starting from oneself, focusing on one's own strengths, and being present in the moment, teachers can change their mindset, continuously strengthen themselves with a positive attitude, achieve self-breakthroughs, clear their career development paths, and gain more professional happiness. Therefore, based on the theory of “self-leadership”, vocational college teachers can improve their current challenges through the following practices.

### 3.1. Combining Work with Interests

The <Code of Ethics for Vocational School Teachers (Trial)> has stated that “teachers should love vocational education, they should be loyal to the cause of vocational education, dedicated to their work, and educate students.”<sup>[8]</sup> Therefore, teachers should have a clear understanding of themselves, including their personality, interests, abilities, and values. Teachers should have a positive attitude towards their work, realizing that if they have chosen the education, they should love their position and enjoy being a teacher. When a person can combine their personal interests with their work, doing more work will bring happiness. When there are breakthroughs in work, personal professional happiness will also increase. Teachers can also engage in in-depth discussions by sharing interests and hobbies with colleagues, and establish joint teaching or research projects. By participating in professional training and academic conferences related to their interests, teachers can continuously improve their own abilities and levels.

Teachers can choose a work environment that suits their personality and interests by understanding the educational philosophy, organizational development model,

requirements for staff, and interpersonal relationships in different schools, allowing themselves to work smoothly.

### 3.2. Adopting a Lifelong Learning Mindset

Faced with the intense competition in workplace, teachers should firmly establish the concept of lifelong learning, actively strengthen their own professional abilities, and continuously improve themselves. Teachers can choose to explore and research in fields they are good at and interested in, make breakthroughs in a certain field, and publish articles. This not only contributes to the field of education but also keeps oneself in a learning attitude. In 2022, the newly revised <Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China> once again emphasizes the practical experience and skill level of teachers<sup>[9]</sup>. Therefore, teachers in vocational colleges should strive to improve themselves, actively participate in training at "dual-teacher" teacher training bases, and move closer to becoming "dual-teacher" teachers. Steffy's teacher career development model mentions in the "renewal career stage" that teachers can pursue professional growth by participating in seminars, taking further courses, or joining teacher organizations to absorb new teaching knowledge.<sup>[7]</sup>

### 3.3. Treasuring Opportunity of Home School Co-education

Teachers can use theme class meetings, We-chat and so on to popularize the relevant provisions of the <Law of the People's Republic of China on the Promotion of Family Education><sup>[10]</sup> and corresponding guidance methods to parents through content explanation and case analysis. Teachers should also maintain smooth communication with the students' parents, letting parents know about the dynamics of students at school (including progress and shortcomings), the work teachers have done for their children's growth, so that parents can better understand the development status of their children, understand the difficulties of teachers, and then generate empathy for teachers, and respect the hard work of teachers, in order to better cooperate with the teachers in their educational work.

In the process of continuous professional development, teachers can consciously choose training courses on home-school co-education and communication, comprehensively improve the communication and cooperation skills between teachers and parents, and provide more help for their educational management work.

### 3.4. Developing a Career Development Plan

Teachers can develop a career development plan for themselves using the "3W-1H" approach<sup>[11]</sup>: (1) Who am I? (2) What do I want to do? (3) When will I do it? (4) How will I do it? When setting specific goals, teachers can use the SMART principle proposed by Peter Drucker to make their goals specific, measurable, achievable, relevant to other goals, and have a clear deadline<sup>[12]</sup>. By setting short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals, teachers can make their plans and development paths clearer, make their professional growth smoother, persevere when feeling lost, and gain motivation, confidence, and gradual

growth in their teaching careers. In addition, teachers can also assess their professional skills, interests, and career strengths to more clearly identify a development path that suits them. Teachers can communicate and exchange ideas with colleagues and leaders to seek career advice and support.

## 4. Conclusion

Vocational college teachers may deal with the social dilemma, school dilemma, and personal dilemma in their career development by embracing the theory of self-leadership by focusing on themselves. They can combine work with interests, adopt a lifelong learning mindset, treasure opportunity of home school co-education, and develop a career development plan, teachers can gradually pave the way for their career development, ultimately "breaking out of their cocoon" and experiencing a stronger sense of professional happiness. In the following research, scholars can share methods and cases of combining work with interests, analyze and discuss high-quality home-school co-education case for the teachers, and further discuss career development planning, in order to provide more comprehensive resources to help vocational college teachers to have a better development and improve their own career in the guidance of self-leadership theory.

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