Educator Reflections

The Power of Our Stories

EDUCATOR REFLECTIONS

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Edited By
Pamela Kramer Ertel
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MT Open Press

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Middle Tennessee State University

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MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY.

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Preface

The monograph, *Educator Reflections: The Power of Our Stories*, highlights the diverse professional journeys of various educators within Middle Tennessee State University and their partner schools as they share their experiences in the teaching profession. Contributors represent all educational levels, from preschool through higher education.

Teachers from various levels recount their unique paths to the profession, emphasizing pivotal moments and acknowledging the heroes and mentors who influenced their professional development. These shared experiences aim to inspire and guide individuals at different stages of their careers, including those just considering teaching as a career, preservice teachers, current educators, and those nearing the conclusion of their educational journey who seek to continue making a positive impact.

The book concludes with targeted recommendations and insights designed to propel the profession forward in a constructive direction, motivating readers to engage further with the content and their professional development.

If you have ever considered a career in education at the preschool, elementary, or high school level, aspired to be a college professor, or been inspired by a remarkable teacher, you will find resonance in the powerful stories these incredible educators share. Their experiences highlight the profound impact of teaching and will leave you inspired to embark on or continue your journey in the field of education.

Dedication

This project is lovingly dedicated to the countless heroes and mentors who have illuminated our paths and inspired us at every turn. Your wisdom, guidance, and unwavering support have shaped our journeys, and for that, we are eternally grateful.

Acknowledgments

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who contributed to this monograph project. First and foremost, we thank our contributing authors for their willingness to share their stories, demonstrating vulnerability for the benefit of others. Their ongoing enthusiasm has been invaluable throughout this journey. We are also deeply grateful to the *MT Open Press* editorial team for their patience and expertise, which greatly facilitated our process.

Special thanks go to Karmen Khoury and Hannah Jenkins, our graduate assistants, whose support was crucial to our progress. Lastly, we thank our families for their unwavering support and encouragement during this endeavor.

Pamela Kramer Ertel and Robyn Ridgley

Chapter 1

Introduction to Educator Reflections

Introduction

Educator Reflections

Pamela Kramer Ertel

For a long time, I have imagined this publication serving as a source of inspiration for others to contemplate a career in teaching. This desire was born out of countless discussions with my early childhood colleagues, Dr. Robyn Ridgley, Dr. Seok Jeng Jane Lim, and Dr. Cheryl Hitchcock, about our challenges in igniting interest in teaching as a chosen profession. As we shared our deep passion for this field, the idea of telling "our stories" transformed into a powerful call to action. This first chapter describes how the transformation came to be and introduces the context for the remaining chapters.

A JOURNEY OF PASSION AND PURPOSE

We embarked on a writing retreat at Robyn's lake house, where we laid the groundwork for our book, *Reflections from the Lake House*. Each of us chronicled our unique educational journeys, highlighting our distinct paths. We also outlined additional chapters celebrating our heroes and mentors, pivotal moments, and other significant themes in our journeys. As we worked on our individual stories at the lake house and exchanged updates on our progress, I found myself deeply inspired by each colleague's perspective and experiences in teaching. Joanna Gaines, New York Times bestselling author and editor-in-chief of *Magnolia Journal*, stated, "When you hear how profound and influential sharing your story can be—the connection it can create—it seems almost selfish to keep our own buried inside" (Gaines, 2022, pp. 12-13). This sentiment resonates with the heart of our work, motivating us to share our journeys and invite others into the transformative world of teaching.

The urgency to share our experiences and invite others into the teaching profession has intensified due to a crisis within the field. Many experienced teachers are retiring, while fewer new educators are entering the profession to take their place. In the 2023 school year, there were an estimated 55,000 vacant teaching positions

nationwide, an increase from about 36,000 the previous year (Will, 2023). In response, school districts have been compelled to take drastic measures to fill these vacancies. Tuan Nguyen, a lead researcher and associate professor at Kansas State University, estimated that 9-10% of currently employed teachers lack full qualifications for their roles (Will, 2023). Additionally, the number of teacher licenses issued nationwide has decreased by about one-third from 2006 to 2020 (SCORE, 2023).

A troubling concern for the future is the decline in teacher candidates completing preparation programs. In Tennessee alone, there has been an estimated 40% drop in the past decade (SCORE, 2023). At Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), as with many other institutions, we have witnessed a notable decrease in the number of new students interested in teacher education. Compounding this issue is a significant decline in public perception of the teaching profession. A recent study by PDK (Prothero, 2024) shows that only 60% of American parents support their children choosing teaching as a profession, a significant decline from four decades ago when 75% were in favor. The decline in support is attributed to various factors, including inadequate pay and benefits and challenges related to discipline issues in the classroom. This shift highlights the growing concerns among parents regarding the teaching profession and its viability for their children's future.

INTRODUCING THE POWER OF OUR STORIES

This publication aims to inspire and attract new individuals to the teaching profession by celebrating the impactful work of current educators. As we examine the challenges facing the teaching profession, we consider all levels of education, from preschool to higher education. In light of the current teacher shortage at all levels, exploring creative strategies to encourage individuals to pursue a rewarding career in education is crucial. This effort should also acknowledge and celebrate the significant contributions of those who have devoted their lives to teaching. We can inspire future generations to embark on this vital path by highlighting educators' impact and the profession's rewards.

Our initial focus for this publication was on early childhood education. However, as we collaborated with colleagues across campus and in our partner school districts, we discovered a treasure trove of inspiring stories about diverse journeys into teaching at every level. Recognizing the importance of these unique experiences, we broadened our project to encompass a wider array of voices; thus, we transformed *Reflections from the Lake House* into *Educator Reflections: The Power of Our Stories*. This monograph captures educators' reflections across all grade levels, from early childhood to higher education, including various subject areas such as media, mathematics, literacy, mechatronics, and astrophysics. This approach ensures that the shared experiences are more comprehensive and educational, and appeal to a broader audience of individuals who might be interested in teaching at a wide variety of age levels (preschool through higher education).

This project also serves to inspire and motivate practicing educators to remain committed to their profession while staying open to new possibilities. We hope you discover the passion, competence, and dedication

that drive educators to make a difference in students' lives. Let these reflections motivate you to learn more about the rewarding journey of being an educator.

Chapter 2: The Paths to Teaching

In Chapter 2, you will encounter the remarkable stories of contributors who embarked on diverse paths to the teaching profession. Some pursued their dreams from an early age, while others found their way to education in unexpected ways. Each unique journey serves as a powerful reminder that there is no single route to becoming an educator.

These captivating narratives not only reveal the personal experiences of those who have shaped their careers in education, but they also offer motivation for anyone struggling to see themselves in this vital role. As you read on, you may find inspiration in their stories, encouraging you to explore the possibilities in teaching. Don't miss the chance to uncover how these unexpected journeys can ignite your passion for following the path to teaching.

Chapter 3: Impactful Heroes and Mentors

In Chapter 3, you will discover inspiring stories from contributors about the heroes and mentors who have significantly shaped their lives. These powerful narratives serve as a source of motivation and guidance for individuals at every phase of their educational journey—whether you are a preservice teacher just starting out, a practicing educator navigating the classroom, or a seasoned professional looking for new ways to make a meaningful impact as you approach the end of your career. Follow the journey of these shared experiences to ignite your passion for education and discover the motivation to read more. Let their experiences inspire you and fuel your appreciation and respect for the profession of teaching.

Chapter 4: Pivotal Moments in Careers

In Chapter 4, "Pivotal Moments" are used to highlight experiences that may initially seem like failures but are invaluable learning opportunities. The chapter presents stories of key moments that have shaped educators' careers. Many of these pivotal experiences arose from unlikely events, connections, or situations that resulted in significant outcomes. These moments can lead us into unexplored areas of our careers, enriching our journey. Understanding the significance of these experiences is crucial for all educators. Embracing these challenges encourages us to take risks, experiment with innovative approaches, and gain insights from outcomes that do not match our expectations. These experiences benefit us as individuals and strengthen the teaching profession. As you dive deeper into this monograph, you will discover how these transformative moments can shape your career in education and inspire you to continue growing as an educator, emphasizing the importance of taking risks and venturing into new experiences.

CONCLUSION

We believe this work has the power to motivate those contemplating a career in education by illuminating the joy and profound impact of serving as an educator. This monograph serves to reaffirm the essential role of this vital profession. The monograph wraps up with a clear call to action, encouraging all educators to reflect on their journeys and their potential to influence future generations, whether at the PreK-12 level or higher education.

Our profession stands at a pivotal moment. The public's perception of educators has notably declined, decreasing educator morale. We trust this publication will inspire current and future teachers as the authors recount their journeys, highlighting the challenges and triumphs. Through our reflections, we uphold Joanna Gaines' powerful sentiment: "When you leave something of yourself somewhere tangible, it leaves a mark deeper than what you can see" (2022, p. 15). Sharing our stories holds immense power as we contemplate the people and experiences that have molded our lives. The varied narratives of our paths into the teaching profession and the impact of our heroes and mentors highlight the pivotal moments that define us. These diverse tales enrich our understanding and serve as a testament to the significance of the experiences that shape our journeys. We trust these narratives inspire readers to reflect on their own experiences and acknowledge the individuals who have played a vital role in their growth. For some, we hope this may ignite a passion for pursuing their own teaching journey.

In contrast, others may pause to consider the profound impact of their teaching journey, while others may pause to consider the profound impact of their heroes and mentors. Furthermore, these stories may motivate readers to embrace pivotal moments leading to new and exciting opportunities. Let these stories inspire and unfold, guiding us toward new possibilities.

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Chapter 2

The Paths to Teaching

Chapter 2-1

The Community of Scholars

John Wallin

Finally, I was done. Walking to the stage with my advisor, I felt relieved knowing that my academic journey was finally over. As we walked to the center of the stage, I heard a loud "Hurray!" from the audience. I slightly winced when I realized my mother was breaking the event's solemnity. After five years in graduate school, I was hooded and received my Ph.D. in Astrophysics at Iowa State University. My advisor, Curt Struck, was with me through all the steps. He helped me do my first observation runs at Mt. Palomar and sent me to do data analysis at the Infrared Processing and Analysis Center at Caltech. He guided me through readings and talked me through the development of simulation software which formed the core of my academic work. At the center of the stage, I faced the audience. When Curt threw the hood over my head, I was slightly startled. I might have known it was coming, but it surprised me. He shook my hand, and I hugged him. I would not have been there without his guidance. We walked together back to our seats and watched the other doctoral students walk. After the doctoral ceremony, the provost said, "Congratulations on your accomplishments, and welcome to the community of scholars." At the time, I thought that wording was strange. For undergraduate degrees, they would say, "We welcome our graduates into the fellowship of the alumni." There was a distinction between the degrees that was lost on me at the time.

I thought about everything that had brought me to that moment. I grew up in a small town in Northern Minnesota, perhaps as isolated from universities and science as a community could be. From the time I was a child, I wanted to be an astronomer. However, I did not know how to get there.

When I was in fifth grade, I became very ill. It took nearly a year and five doctors to sort out what was happening, but eventually, I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. The treatment options at the time were limited. I was prescribed an antibiotic to get me out of my acute state, but I had flare-ups off and on for a decade. The

disease sapped my energy throughout the rest of my time in Hibbing, Minnesota. Even when flare-ups were not happening, I often felt exhausted.

In ninth grade, my father passed away from cancer. I watched him struggle with the disease for a year until he finally succumbed to the illness. His death was a blow to me and my mother. Since she had severe arthritis, she could not go back to work. The death benefits from my father's retirement were about one-fourth of his salary, so we were thrown into poverty overnight. Although we had a house and could afford food, my dream of attending an expensive college was dashed. Crohn's disease had hurt my grades, and poverty made it impossible for my mother to help me beyond the meager college savings I had built over my young life.

My father's death was devastating emotionally for my mother and me. She already had some issues with depression and anxiety from her younger life, but this loss is one she never fully recovered from. She also had severe rheumatoid arthritis and could barely walk. I was the last child at home, so caring for her and the house fell on me. It was a lot for a 15-year-old to handle, and there was no support for my emotional needs. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, my desire to become a scientist grew. I wanted to think of a world bigger than my problems and have a life surrounded by ideas.

When I was in Hibbing, I never fully fit in. My emotional and family life was a disaster, and I was still dealing with Crohn's disease. About that time, I learned about the high school astronomy class and club that Dale Gibbs organized. Mr. Gibbs was one of the many science instructors at my high school. He would schedule star parties with the club to let us look through the club telescope. More importantly, he encouraged us to learn more on our own.

A year before I graduated, he organized a club trip to see a total solar eclipse passing through Winnipeg, Manitoba, about 400 miles from my home. I remember driving up to the event. The night before the eclipse, there was snow. I was so relieved to see the clear skies the next day as we finished the long drive to the rest stop, where we were to view the event. The temperature dropped from a cold 10 degrees Fahrenheit to well below zero. The sun disappeared. The corona was beautiful. Although I understood what was happening intellectually, its spiritual impact was profound. The universe was not just intellectually engaging. It was also beautiful. Physics and math were no longer abstract ideas but a shining circle in the sky of million-degree plasma as predicted by complex calculations and then realized by an alignment of celestial bodies. I think this is the moment when my childhood dreams became a direction for my life.

Because my family had so little money, I spent my first year at Hibbing Community College (HCC) after high school graduation. The cost of tuition was low, and I could stay home instead of renting an apartment or dorm. While I was there, I found two new mentors. As a student at HCC, I worked with Don Penn, a physics and computer science professor. I learned calculus-based physics with him and learned how to apply mathematics to solve complex problems. The most memorable experiment was learning how weight, mass, and acceleration were related. Don was a flight instructor, so he brought the class of 12 to the airport. He took three of us up at a time

and shot zero-g parabolas in a Cessna 172. For a few seconds, we were weightless. The scale holding our sample weight read zero as the normal force that caused the weight to be removed. In Don, I caught a glimpse of how scientists thought. It is hard to pinpoint what this was, but his way of viewing the world differed from others I had met.

While attending college, I found a work-study job at the recently constructed planetarium. Both Don and Dale helped create this facility when I was finishing my time in high school. I worked for a fantastic astronomy educator, Bill Long (pseudonym). Bill immediately recognized me as a fellow nerd and gave me my weekly astronomy show at the planetarium. I also worked as a student assistant in his astronomy class. Bill helped me assemble the first few programs and then trusted me to create and present them independently. I learned how to teach and give public talks because of his mentorship.

After my year at community college, I transferred to Minnesota State University in Mankato. Though I had been accepted to the University of Minnesota, I did not attend as I was doubtful about how to afford the higher tuition. Once at Minnesota State University, and perhaps for the first time, I was surrounded by nerds like me. The students and the faculty helped me learn how to solve problems and shaped my thinking about how the natural world worked. Jim Pierce and Mark Klaus (pseudonym), the two astronomy professors, helped me daily over the next three years. Mark pushed me toward doing research, even though it was very preliminary. He got me involved in the Sigma Xi chapter and encouraged me to apply to grad school. Jim was also excellent. During the summer before my senior year, Jim invited me over every week to join his family for pizza night. His 10-year-old son would routinely trounce me in chess, and I had a feeling of family and connection that helped me through that summer. Jim also brought me to his alma mater–Iowa State–to meet some astronomy professors and see the campus that summer. Five years later, I found myself on a stage hooded by one of the people I met on that trip.

When I graduated, my first job was as a National Research Council Research Fellow at the Naval Research Laboratory. After three years, I moved to my first academic position at George Mason University. I spent 18 wonderful years there working between the Department of Physics and Astronomy and the Computational and Data Science program. All through those times, I was guided by colleagues and friends with help writing grants, publishing papers, and developing my teaching. Through mutual friends, I met my wonderful wife, Katharine. She has been by my side to guide me through the parts of life that are not academic. She balances my world and reminds me that it is larger than my office.

For the last 14 years, I have been a faculty member in the Department of Physics and Astronomy and the Director of the Computational and Data Sciences Ph.D. Program at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). My job is now to mentor doctoral students as their advisor and a guide to the profession. A total of 47 doctoral students have graduated from my program. I know that each of them found themselves thinking about how their academic journey was complete as they were hooded, just as I did when it happened to me.

Looking back at my life, I know I would not have succeeded if mentors had not guided me. That little kid in Hibbing would not have found his calling without the help of Dale. I would not have the confidence to teach without Bill, and I would not understand that scientists saw the world differently without Don. Jim and Mark helped me find a path beyond my undergraduate degree toward research and the academic world. Curt helped me develop the research and technical skills I now pass on to my students.

We do not become academics alone; we have mentors and colleagues who guide us. Our parents, friends, and family support us, even if they do not fully understand who we are and what we are becoming. We become who we are because of the community around us that nurtures us through our careers.

Just as we grew from others, we now encourage others to grow. We are part of a chain of academics that goes into the past to our mentors and their mentors before them. We build that chain through our students. The impact of our academic ancestors continues through our academic descendants. We do not do this alone, but with our peers repeating the same patterns that formed us and our students.

Tomorrow morning, I will hood my ninth Ph.D. student, Matthew Swindall. Working with him has been a joy. He has been focused, brilliant, and incredibly productive. I am proud of what he has done and so pleased I was there to help him. I know his academic journey is not over; it is just beginning. He will go on to do meaningful research and mentor others throughout his career, no matter where that career takes him. I know he will not understand the depth of this statement until later, but I am so pleased to welcome him to the community of scholars.

Chapter 2-2

My Path to Teaching

Cheryl Hitchcock

A DIFFERENT BEGINNING

I never wanted to be a teacher. Growing up, I did not "play school" or "teacher" as many of my friends loved to do. My family did not value education, and school was not a positive experience for me. I started first grade when I was only five years old, and as the youngest in my class, I was always socially awkward. Throughout elementary school, junior high, and high school, I never approached school as an opportunity to learn, but as a place I had to go and listen to teachers drone on and on about things I had no connection with nor cared about. The few exceptions were the business-related classes and home economics classes. I had skills in those areas and could transfer the skills and knowledge I learned to my "real" life. When I graduated from high school, I was excited to secure my first job at a local bank as a receptionist. With time and patience, I could work up to my dream job as a secretary! Eventually, I accomplished my goal of becoming one of the secretaries at the bank.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

I married at 19 and became a stay-at-home mom a few years later. Then, I began to take one college class a semester. A nearby university offered the classes I enrolled in in my rural community. For six years, I enrolled in the required general education classes "for the fun of it" and secretly "to get out of the house." I realized that for the first time, I enjoyed learning and expanding my knowledge about the world around me and how it worked. By age 30, I had taken all the general education courses offered in my small town and had enough hours to suffice for the general education portion of a degree. All I needed was a major. How would I ever choose a major, let alone manage the logistics of securing childcare or before and after school care for three children and travel to

and from classes at the university 45 miles away? It took some work and problem-solving, but everything worked out, and I was finally moving forward to becoming a full-time, nontraditional college student at the university.

Home Economics Education was the logical choice of major for me. I knew how to grow, cook, and canned our farm's food. I regularly sewed my clothes and clothes for my children and had experience working with the home extension agent in our county. I had thought a home extension agent could be a job I might qualify for with the proper education. At this point, my dream of being a secretary had fallen by the wayside, and I had a new dream. I knew exactly what classes to take and the degree to obtain, and I was sure that would be the job for me. My interest was piqued when I took a child development course during my required course of study, so much so that I decided to add the Child Development concentration to my Home Economics Education degree.

By the time I completed my degree, becoming a home extension agent was just a fleeting thought. I had fallen in love with teaching! Going into schools and teaching junior high and high school students through my field experiences in home economics, teen living, or consumer economics classes was fun. I found I had a knack for teaching, and I could identify with needing to make the content relevant for the students in my classroom. It was a win-win situation. This did not feel like work; it was a new adventure, growing and learning each day with the students. Best of all, I did not hate school anymore! This was a turning point, and my dream transformed to becoming a home economics teacher in the junior high or high school setting. I was fortunate to complete my student teaching experience in a state model program, consisting of an inclusive preschool in the high school setting in my home county. I learned under a team of teachers and quickly fell into the fast-paced routine of 120 high school students, 40 preschool students, two home economics teachers, an early childhood special education teacher, a speech-language teacher, a teacher assistant, a bus driver, and a secretary. I quickly learned the secretary was the glue that held us all together and kept us organized. In this setting, I confirmed my love for teaching high school students and found joy in teaching young children.

FINDING MY WAY

Little did I realize that graduating with a teaching degree did not automatically open the door to teaching. As a December graduate, I knew I would likely spend the spring semester as a substitute teacher. I filled two interim positions where the teacher of record needed an extended leave. The first interim was in a sixth-grade classroom teaching math and science. Just this short accounting of my path to teaching tells you that I was probably NOT qualified to teach sixth-grade math and science. My saving grace was that most of the time, I knew more about the subjects than the students, and I had taught teen-living in seventh-grade classrooms, so how hard could it be? It turns out I did not love *all* teaching, but I did not lose faith. I knew the next school year would bring good opportunities, so I did my best.

The second interim position that semester was as a special education resource teacher in a kindergarten-eighth grade elementary school. I was sure I might not be adequate in this position, but the principal assured me I would do fine. The Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) were stored in a locked cabinet in the storage closet. The teacher on the other side of the partition in the room would give me access. At that point, here is what I was thinking, "IEP, hmm, that stands for……. umm…what does that stand for? I learned something about IEP in the special education class we had to take a couple of years ago. And what do I do with them?" Honestly, it was that bad. I was fortunate, rather the students were fortunate, that the teacher on the other side of the partition supported me during those first weeks as I recalled information about IEPs and figured out who was on my roster and how I could meet their learning needs.

To say that my first semester of teaching was challenging and included second-guessing my abilities in the classroom is an understatement. It is fair to say that I realized how much I did not know and learned many lessons in flexibility. Before this, I did not have the pleasure of working with students receiving special education services before these experiences. I needed to pursue more learning to teach all students effectively. At that time, I received a call from one of my mentor teachers from student teaching. The teaching team and a few other teachers were taking advantage of a master's level class at the university. It was a free class; I only needed to take a test and get admitted to the graduate program. They needed another person for the class to run, so she asked if I would take it with them. I did, and that became a pivotal moment in my life.

GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

I survived my first two interim positions and was sure I would secure a job for the coming school year. Unfortunately, the state issued a hiring freeze just as I became eligible to teach. Even a few new hires from the previous year were not rehired because of budget cuts. As a result, I spent some time as the director of a migrant Head Start program, and after my day was finished there, I taught a few students in the county who were receiving homebound instruction. At least this was a way to "keep my foot in" the school system's door.

Well into the school year, near the end of October, I got a call from the Director of Special Education. She wondered if I would be available to teach half-time, supporting the teacher of gifted and talented students. She had an overload of students, and the state monitoring process would begin in the spring. The teacher needed someone to teach a few of her classes while she assisted other special education teachers with organizing paperwork and all the things involved with a successful monitoring visit from the state. The timing was perfect. My Head Start position was ending as all the migrant workers were moving south to continue working during the winter months. Once again, I found myself in a job that I felt unqualified to do. Fortunately, again, I had a mentor who supported me through the process, shared her lesson plans, and was available to help with the challenges I faced daily. From this teaching experience, I learned that junior high and elementary school gifted and talented

students are pretty cool people. I loved the energy and ideas they brought to the classroom each day, but I needed to learn more about meeting their needs.

Before the end of the school year, my mentor confided in me that her husband had accepted a new job in another state, and they would be moving over the summer. She advised that I go back to the university and enroll in summer classes, which enabled me to meet the employability standards for the state. At that time, no other teachers in the county were qualified to teach gifted and talented students.

I spent my summer taking classes and learning more about teaching gifted and talented students and all the responsibilities included in that position. At the beginning of the next school year, I was the new "gifted" teacher and, by default, the coordinator of the program in the county since I was the only teacher in the county with the credentials to teach the gifted and talented population. Even though I worked with students in all county schools, my home base was junior high. The junior high was in the process of becoming a middle school. I spent the next ten years of my teaching career teaching classes at the middle school, consulting with teachers at the elementary and the high school, while coordinating the gifted and talented program as the county began to add more qualified teachers. I had found a new love—middle schoolers and gifted and talented students—and I learned immensely from my students and colleagues in that school.

I continued to take a few classes in the summer and one or two each school year, working on a master's degree that I had started earlier with the free class. One free class led to another, which led to a summer institute with three classes. The degree was in special education with an emphasis on early childhood. It seemed like a lifetime ago that I had developed an interest in special education and early childhood because of my early experiences. Early childhood did not pertain to me at that moment, and thus, I stopped pursuing the degree. I felt I was wasting my time when I was happy in my current position in the middle school.

AT A CROSSROAD

My life changed dramatically during the last three years of teaching middle school. My three kids were teenagers, and I had a new baby! Wow! That was a big leap but a joyful one. Watching my baby grow and develop reminded me why I loved early childhood and the wonder and curiosity young children exhibit as they grow and learn. I began thinking it was time for a change. Around this time, I received a letter from the university informing me that I was about to "lose credits" toward my master's degree and that if I wanted to pursue the degree, I should contact my advisor. I was ready to complete this unfinished task and had renewed my interest in early childhood.

After going back to school to complete my master's degree and working on my special education endorsement, I began teaching in the very same program where I completed my student teaching eleven years earlier, with most of the same teachers in place! This time, instead of training to become one of the home economics teachers responsible for a high school class, I was the early childhood special education teacher responsible for preschool students and the successful inclusion of all students in the preschool classroom.

HOW DID I GET INTO HIGHER EDUCATION?

As I began completing my master's degree, my mentor and advisor at the university began sending his doctoral students to my preschool classroom for a field experience in an inclusive preschool. The field experiences involved some travel time for the doctoral students. Still, my mentor thought it was worth the drive because, in our classroom, the teachers were mindful of developmentally appropriate practice and had enough experience that our preschool ran like a well-oiled machine. My mentor and his doctoral students were excited to be a part of our preschool classroom, and I was happy to mentor the doctoral students as they completed field experiences. After I had mentored several students, the university mentor called me aside during one of his visits. He said to me, "You are in the wrong place. You are not doing what you were meant to do." I was devastated. I thought I was doing a good job and everything was going well. After all, he was sending his students to me. I soon learned that I completely misunderstood the meaning of his statement. He had an opening in the Exceptional Learning Ph.D. program and invited me to apply for the slot as a student and graduate teaching assistant.

By taking advantage of this opportunity, I could significantly impact more students by teaching teachers. This opportunity was one I could not let pass. The program's emphasis was on young children and families, and it fit perfectly with my experiences in the preschool setting. I was unsure if I was smart enough or young enough to pursue this opportunity, but I leaped. Completing my coursework as a full-time doctoral student and teaching as a graduate teaching assistant led me to a career in higher education that lasted 16 years.

AND THEN, A FUNNY THING HAPPENED

Just as quickly as the snap of a finger, I found myself with 30 years of teaching and my 65th birthday quickly approaching. As a grandmother of seven grandchildren, I decided to retire. I was tired. I wanted more time to spend with my grandchildren, pursue hobbies, travel, and relax. Retirement was great and all I had ever hoped for. Life was good.

Then, one day, as I made my way through the "car pick up line" to pick up my grandkids at school, I was surprised by the principal knocking on my car window. He explained that one of the special education teachers in the school had been transferred to another school. He needed a special education reading interventionist to finish the school year. He asked, "Would you be interested?" I think I laughed and told him I loved retirement, but we could talk more about it next week if he could not find anyone. As I revisited our conversation for the next few days, I could not shake the feeling that this opportunity was there for me for a reason. I had spent years educating pre-service teachers on teaching and never considered that I would return to a K-12 classroom post-retirement! Even when I tried not to think about it, I thought about it. You see what's coming? I am officially teaching in an interim position in special education in a K-8 school, very similar to the first special education interim position I filled 33 years ago. But this time around, I DO know what an IEP is and how to fulfill the requirements.

Looking back, up until now, I realize every new position and every change brought about the feeling of "unpreparedness" or inadequacy. Early on, I knew I needed to continue my learning journey to do justice to the students with whom I interacted daily. I advise others that you never know where your path will lead. Take a chance on those paths that look too hard, too rocky, or too narrow and those that will force you to learn new skills along the way. I may have needed another year of teaching as much as the school needed a teacher for a year. I have learned much about myself and still have a passion for teaching. I am unsure how long I will travel this path, but I look for joy and success every day and celebrate the opportunity to continue my teaching and learning journey. My path was very nontraditional, but it was perfect for me!

Chapter 2-3

Happy Students, Happy Life

Kenneth George

The first inquiry of the committee that interviewed me for a potential lecturer position was to comment on the opening paragraph of my cover letter, which read, in part:

> "I believe it is the primary mission of education to help people become happy and productive. Sometimes we focus so much on the 'productive' that we forget to reinforce the 'happy.' Business leaders who are positive and earnest in making the workplace a center for creativity, who embrace the humanity of their staff, who look for ways to develop their employees, they are the model for success."

This has become the foundational element of all my classes in my five-plus years at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). The students have responded so positively to this basic message that I now look in amazement at how powerful this simple statement has been. In retrospect, it is easy to see why students are attracted to this sentiment. They are so busy and wrapped up in just trying to get through their college experience that having someone reach out to them as a person and recognize the emotional element we all look for in our interactions with others is something they desire but don't ask for and something they need but do not know how to seek out. My main reason for being an educator is to help them recognize the potential for positive possibilities in their life and the lives of those around them.

Since the beginning of my teaching career at MTSU, we start each class by writing "Happy" on the whiteboard. We write many other things on the board during class, but when we leave, we erase everything but the "Happy," leaving it for the next class. It becomes interesting as the semester progresses to see how often it is still on the board the next time we meet. Students brought the importance of this seemingly insignificant action to my attention during my second semester on campus. As I was leaving the classroom, one of my students from the previous semester was chatting with me and asked how the "Happy" campaign was going. Another student

nearby overheard and was surprised I was writing "Happy" on the board as he had assumed it was just some random student. He said he had noticed it the previous semester, and it would change his attitude if he were having a bad day. He said, "Sometimes I would not be feeling great, but would see that and think maybe I should be happy instead." Now, we even have buttons and stickers that allow students to share our happy message.

My journey into the teaching profession started later in life when I had the opportunity to teach some business classes as an adjunct faculty member for Columbia State Community College during my mid-thirties. I fell in love with the classroom from that very first moment. After a couple of semesters of teaching, it was apparent that I needed to add to my knowledge base, so I enrolled in the MBA program at MTSU. Upon completing my graduate degree, I took a position managing and negotiating Information Technology (IT) outsourcing contracts for IBM and then later for Hewlett-Packard. While still completing my MBA, I was recruited by IBM to go to work with them after graduation. I was grateful for the opportunity to have the job immediately after completing my degree, but teaching was always on my mind. Years later, when I suffered through a corporate downsizing episode, I met with a very wise job coach. After spending time discussing my next move, she offered some advice. She said, "When you talk about your time as adjunct faculty, your time on the local school board, your work as an adult literacy teacher, everything about you lights up. You need a career change." I agreed.

My opportunity to teach at MTSU came when I was 57 years old. I was hired as a lecturer in 2018. That was the start of the most rewarding period of my professional career. Every morning, when I know I will be in class, I wake up excited and happy. When people ask what I do for a living, I tell them I get to be in a room with a group of intelligent, motivated people, and we share ideas. Who else gets to spend their days like that other than teachers? I felt successful in my previous career as a contracts manager and negotiator. It was rewarding monetarily. I worked with many of the best professionals in the business, and my clients were some of the most well-known brands in the world. I was lucky enough to be recognized for my contributions to the company with awards and bonuses. But none of that means more than the rewards I get from working with the students in my classes. To have a meaningful impact that helps a student prepare for their career is more exciting than any work I did as a negotiator.

There has been a learning curve as I have navigated the teaching profession. You never know how each student will react to what you say. Each word is important. Mark Twain commented about the importance of choosing the correct word by saying, "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning" (Twain's letter to Bainton, p. 87-88, as cited in Bainton, 1888). A point that illustrates this is when one of my students emailed me after his graduation to tell me a story. He had some issues during the semester he was enrolled in my class and got placed on academic probation. If he did not make some drastic changes, he would face dismissal. He went on to say I taught him

some valuable lessons that he applied going forward. From then on, he earned over a 3.3 GPA as he completed his undergraduate degree.

I remain unconvinced that anything I say can have that kind of effect. I suspect the student looked within himself and realized a better path was ahead if he diligently applied his talents. It may also be true that something I said helped. And if so, what could be more rewarding for someone than being in a position to help shape stories like that?

It is also true that other students have not had the same experience. The end-of-the-semester surveys usually show that. While most students have enjoyed the classroom experience, a few do not. Seeing comments like "Lectures are booooring" or "Could not hold my attention for two seconds" is humbling. But then, there are others saying, "Best professor ever." That lets me know that I must continue to make changes to work to help every student have the best experience possible.

Our profession is so impactful every day for each of our students. When we create an environment that allows each student to be heard and honor the validity of their thoughts, we give them a powerful tool to leverage to improve their future. When we help them understand the commonality of our human experience and open their eyes to the interconnectedness of our world, we are equipping them to succeed.

Like so many of my colleagues, we have these stories that our students share with us. They are the stories of students sharing credit for their success because of something we, as teachers, did for them or said to them. We may bump into a former student in the grocery store aisle or receive an email out of the blue. The students will tell us of some positive message from us that they relied on when they needed it. We may also get a message through LinkedIn that allows us to look into the amazing things they accomplish in their lives. All teachers have stories of students in a better place because of the skills and ideas we share with them in the classroom. Real impact on real lives: These are meaningful moments that were a part of our time with them.

When I reflect on my teachers' and professors' positive impact on my life, I am humbled to think that I may have a similar effect on the students in my classroom.

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Chapter 2-4

The Challenge and Joy of Growing as a Mathematics Teacher

Terrance Quinn

> Sir Thomas More: Why not be a teacher? You'd be a fine teacher; perhaps a great one.
> Richard Rich: If I was, who would know it?
> Sir Thomas More: You; your pupils; your friends; God. Not a bad public, that.
>
> Robert Bolt, A Man for All Seasons, A Play in Two Acts

This chapter entry is mainly intended for those considering becoming a mathematics teacher in elementary school through K–12 or beyond. I share and reflect on a few aspects of my path to teaching mathematics. I found that to grow in competence as a teacher, I needed to continue my growth and development in mathematics. In a manner that will be indicated later, I also found that I improved as a teacher by making progress in identifying elements of my growth and development in mathematics. I have found that even modest progress along these lines has been remarkably fruitful.

I slowly grew into loving mathematics. A serious interest and a habit of study were already there when I chose it as my major. For me, doing mathematics has never not required a sustained effort. A solution is "clear" only when it becomes so. And there is no formula for when that might happen. But I have found that there can be, as it were, types of joy that have sustained me prior to, during, and consequent to struggling with a problem and eventually "getting it." Over time, I began to appreciate the beauty of mathematical understanding.

Throughout my student years, I also grew to enjoy teaching. Sometimes, this was in a formal setting, such as being a teaching assistant or, later, when I was a graduate student, being the instructor for a course. But often

enough, the setting was informal and included, for example, helping students who were at earlier stages in their mathematics and science programs. I was becoming aware of the pleasure of sharing satisfying moments of insight and development in technique. At the same time, however, my main focus remained centered on the possibility of eventually doing research in mathematics and, perhaps, in the philosophy of science.

Initially, unbeknownst to me, my first university tenure-track position started changing that by nudging me toward the possibility of a larger horizon with kinds of growth that I had not yet envisaged. This growth began mundanely, with me having a higher teaching load than I would have chosen for myself at that stage of my career. Teaching was enjoyable, but it was not my main goal, and it took time away from being able to do research. But I was dedicated to my job. I thus gladly gave myself to the task. And so, it started. Not part of my earlier plan, but slowly, with many missteps along the way and not without considerable labor, I began to grow as a teacher.

My commitment to improving as a teacher started to deepen, I might say, exponentially. I began to inquire into what worked and what did not. I soon realized that these lines of inquiry give rise to fundamental and challenging questions. What does "it worked" or "it did not work" mean? What is "it"? Is "it" a matter of helping students succeed on tests and exams? Of course, there is more to it than that. What was on offer from theories of mathematical learning provided little help. They were mainly developed on the hypotheses of speculative models in general terms remote to human experience. (Unfortunately, I have found that, so far, that remains the dominant ethos in the scholarship of mathematics education.) I needed to learn how to better teach specific results, working with these students in this course, in this program, in this and that instance, in this formula, and in that theorem. Since part of my teaching assignments often included teaching students in the mathematics education programs, I also needed to improve my grasp of teaching others how to teach mathematics.

While faced with these challenges, I realized that a crucial source of reflection on learning and pedagogy in mathematics is my own experience in the subject. Following up on this, the need for and the possibility of what is now called tandem method was becoming evident. I am referring to the possibility of attending, as needed, to two distinct but never separate sources in experience. I took help from the 1975 edition of McShane (2021), which, instead of saying "tandem method," speaks of "dual interest" (McShane, 2021, p. 18). For this chapter, then, the expression "tandem method" can be taken descriptively, that is, in the sense that one can have two focuses of attention. Its origins in the philosophy of science are in the literature that is centered on the works of Bernard Lonergan (1904–1984). (See, for instance, [Duffy, 1996, p. 240]). I started to learn how to advert to, distinguish, and relate not only, as is normal, results of my mathematical thinking (e.g., particular concepts and terms, formulas, theorems), but also distinct sources of these results. For instance, I began to attend to and distinguish shifts in my cumulative contextualizing, diagramming, symbolizing, and technique, and in my wondering, "What is it?" and "What to do?," not to mention my desire for continued growth in understanding.

As you might suspect, and as I found, tandem method is concrete. Part of the challenge is to neither begin with nor attempt to impose speculative models, conceptual orderings, or systems, let alone philosophical views developed from dubious analogies of human understanding. Instead, I began adverting to details of what I do when I do mathematics. The scope of tandem method, then, does not exclude concepts, axioms, and postulates. It is based, rather, on what I, and each of us, find by attending to instances in, and details of, our own inquiry and insight in mathematics, which include, among other things, the emergence of concepts and the development of axioms.

To be sure, this is all too brief. A short chapter entry is not the place to provide a decent introduction to tandem method in mathematics. (For introductory presentations, see Benton & Quinn, 2022; Quinn et al., 2020; Quinn, 2024). However, for the prospective mathematics teacher reading this, glimpses of the potential fruitfulness of the method can be had by considering a familiar result in K–12 curricula.

I am referring to what is often called the Pythagorean theorem. Although, independently of Pythagoras (c. 570 B.C.E.– 495 B.C.E.), special cases were discovered long beforehand in Mesopotamia. (See, for instance, Katz, 2009, pp. 17–22). Early versions were also known in ancient China and probably elsewhere. In the *Elements*, Euclid (c. 300 B.C.E) developed a specialized version of the theorem in an axiomatic system.

In any event, at this stage, the formula $c^2 = a^2 + b^2$, is familiar, as is what it refers to, namely, a right-angled triangle with hypothenuse c and sides a and b. But what does the formula mean? More to the point, what do I mean, but eventually also what might you mean when referring to a diagram, uttering (written phonetically)

[si skwɛrd ˈikwəlz ə skwɛrd plʌs bi skwɛrd]

and writing the symbols '$c^2 = a^2 + b^2$'? We can imagine and name a right-angled triangle. We can know how to use the formula $c^2 = a^2 + b^2$ by plugging in numbers and perhaps also algebraically in conjunction with other formulas. But where does the formula come from in the first place?

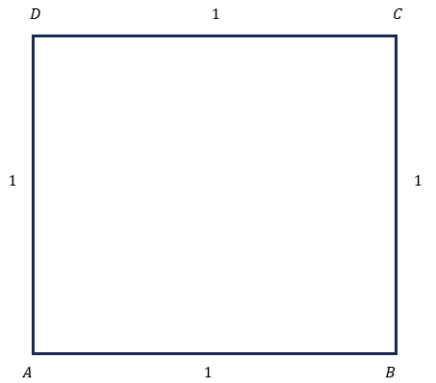
Most current textbooks (from elementary school onward) begin with "the answer" and thus provide little or no direct assistance in that regard. Wonder and insight are effectively short-circuited. Perhaps at some point in high school, you worked through Euclid's proof of Proposition 47 of Book I of the *Elements* (Heath, 2012). But you might notice that this does not get us off the hook. The proposition also starts with the answer. It states that "[i]n right-angled triangles, the square on the side tending the right-angle is equal to the [sum of the] squares on the sides containing the right-angle" (Heath, 2012, p. 349). The statement, then, explicitly presupposes a prior discovery. But if you or I discover a possible mathematical relationship, we can also ask, "Is it so? Is it not so?" Notice that we cannot reasonably answer this type of question with a formula, definition, or result that proceeds from insight in a "What is it?" mode of inquiry. But that is not a problem. For as experience shows, the proof of Proposition 47 is not for that purpose. Rather, it facilitates the occurrence of a different type of understanding

wherein one grasps a sufficiency of evidence so that we can assent provisionally to the proposition in the context of the Euclidean axiomatic system.

Let us try another approach to help bring out some of the key and core issues: instead of beginning with an answer, let us start with a question. Consider a square whose sides are of length 1 (cm, inch, or whatever). The question is, how do we "double the square"? In other words, what are the dimensions $c \times c$ of a square so that the area is twice that of the square whose dimensions are 1×1? Geometrically, how do we determine c so that $c^2 = 2(1) = 2$?

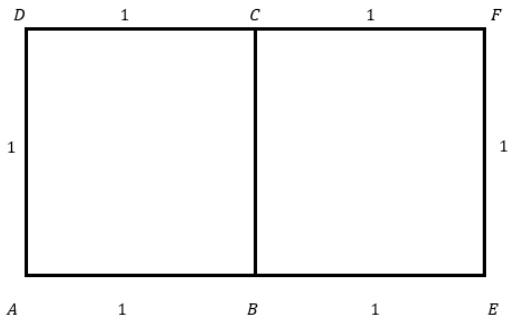
In fact, this is a famous problem that goes back to ancient times. (See, for instance, the dialogue in Plato's book called *Meno*.) But we can pose the problem and solve it here, together. Consider a square, then, such as represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: A unit square $ABCD$, drawn by the author



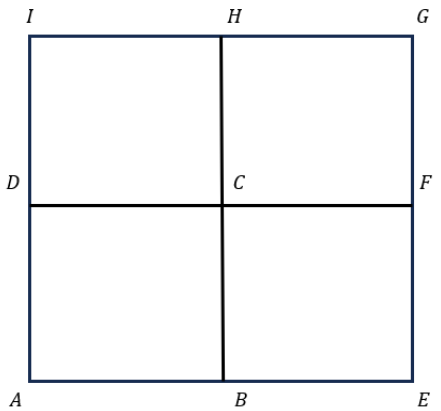
Our goal is to double the area, so one way to begin might be to imagine or draw two unit squares, thus producing rectangle $AEFD$ (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Mere duplication of a unit square, drawn by the author



This does not yet get us to a solution to the problem, but it starts us off in what perhaps is a promising direction for increasing area. Might we add to the diagram? For instance, if we duplicate the rectangle $AEFD$, we get a larger square $AEGI$ (Figure 3).

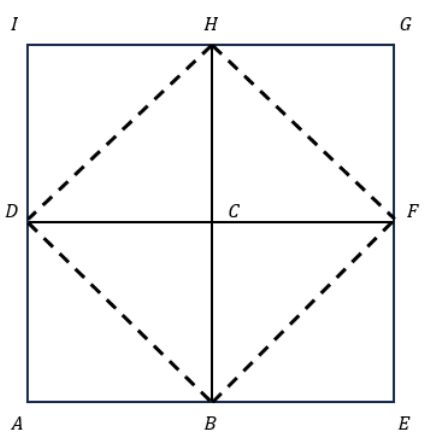
Figure 3: Four unit squares, drawn by the author



The area of the square $AEGI$ is four times the area of the unit square $ABCD$. This is more than we need. But since it is four times the area of the unit square, can we, perhaps, find a square within the larger square that solves the problem?

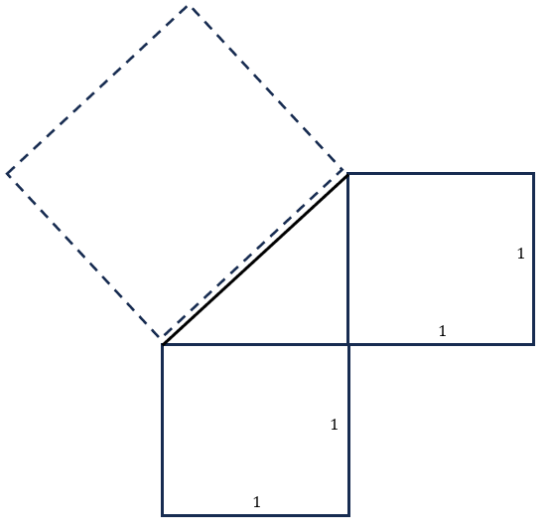
At this stage, the larger square is partitioned by verticals and horizontals. But we could, for instance, introduce a diagonal DB. This produces a right angle triangle DAB, where the perpendicular sides DA and AB are each of unit length. With that clue, you may have now solved the problem. But let us continue with the idea and so introduce more diagonals, namely, BF, FH, and HD, as in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Doubling the unit square, drawn by the author



Behold! A square that is based on the hypothenuse of a unit right angle triangle has twice the area of a unit square. This solution to the problem is represented in Figure 5.

Figure 5: A square based on the hypothenuse of a unit right angle triangle doubles the unit square, drawn by the author



In this way, we have had a key insight and made a beginning in understanding the Pythagorean theorem for ourselves. Notice that we also have obtained the familiar geometric representation indicated in the statement of Euclid's Proposition 47, not as a prescribed diagram but rather *as a consequence* of our insight. With numbers representing lengths and products representing areas, we get $\left(\sqrt{2} \times \sqrt{2}\right) = (1 \times 1) + (1 \times 1)$. Or, more compactly, we can write $\left(\sqrt{2}\right)^2 = 1^2 + 1^2$.

If you have worked through this example, you might pause with me now to notice that something remarkable has happened. We have gotten a hold of something that is in addition to merely imagining and naming and being able to "plug and chug" numbers into a formula given by a textbook. Our understanding is of a possible correlation between three imagined lengths. (More precisely, we have grasped a possible correlation of correlations of correlations. But that is an advanced result [Quinn, 2024]). You might also notice that that correlating in us emerged while attending to and wondering about, but is not reducible to, diagrams and symbols.

Now that we have worked through an example, let us think about how our experience can help in teaching. If you have had the key insight for doubling the square (and perhaps gone on to a similar key insight for the more general case expressible by the formula $c^2 = a^2 + b^2$), you will be able to comfortably talk at length to help others with questions from many perspectives. If, however, when teaching, you find that you are only able to repeat a formula or diagram, or merely reproduce the steps of an established proof, or substitute numbers into a formula, then that is evidence that you are missing a key insight. But do not worry. That happens to every student and every teacher at every level. We are all works in progress. When the need arises, we can go back and, as it were, fill in the gaps or, rather, meet the need for understanding. Thusly enlightened, and then, using tandem method, we will be able to identify details of how we got that further insight. Our ability to help others understand will then also be boosted considerably.

I have provided the thinnest of glimpses of what I have found to be a richness, control, and fruitfulness that can emerge through implementing tandem method in learning and teaching elementary mathematics. Now, imagine continuing as much as possible with the double focus. There are questions and key insights all along the way. And so it has been for me. In good measure, spurred on by a deepening desire to be a good teacher, I started to make progress in a concrete approach to learning about my learning in mathematics. A consequence of this has been a stable basis for ongoing growth in being able to identify elements and cumulative "layerings" in my mathematical development, evidenced in detail in instances in my experience. I should also mention that progress in tandem method has been providing me with a foundation from which to evaluate classroom methodologies that regularly change.

As it turned out, then, without having to give up scholarship, teaching became a second and mutually enriching vocation. The task of teaching pushed me to the need for a double focus or tandem method (that is, the need to make ongoing progress in mathematical understanding and in understanding my ongoing progress in mathematical understanding). While always provisional, my growth in tandem method has also provided me with a verifiable basis for helping others grow in understanding mathematics. I have found that all of this has been both challenging and an ongoing source of joy.

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Chapter 2-5

From Preschool Dropout to College Professor: An Unlikely but Positive Path

Elissa Ledoux

Growing up, I never expected to be a teacher. In fact, I did not even know what school was like, because at the age of four, I dropped out of preschool, never to return. Although my teachers were nice, I didn't like preschool. I didn't learn anything. I couldn't sleep during naptime because the other children were noisy. The bus driver was scary. The school nurse tried (and failed) to give me an immunization shot, and the teachers would not let me bring my baby sister for show and tell. Who would have thought? I returned home, happily believing I would never return to a traditional academic setting.

In 1995, my parents decided to homeschool our family due to a variety of reasons. Apart from my preschool teacher's recommendation, the public schools in south Louisiana were neither safe nor highly academic, and the private schools were unaffordable for our swiftly growing family. By then, there were three kids and another one on the way. My dad was against homeschooling at first, saying "Homeschoolers are weird." But after looking into learning resources and groups in the area, my mom had a revelation: "We can homeschool but not be weird." So, my dad agreed to let her try it, and we never returned.

I thrived in homeschooling, thanks to the organization and efficiency with which my mom ran our household. Our education covered all aspects of life. We would start the day with daily Mass, after which, nice elderly parishioners would praise us for good behavior in church and award dollars a couple of times a week to buy cupcakes at the local bakery. At home, I could read as much as I wanted–*Little House on the Prairie*, *American Girl*, *The Boxcar Children*, *Encyclopedia Brown,* and anything else from our weekly trips to the library. My mom gave us each a 10-book limit, yet we would finish these before the week ended and beg for a second trip. We could do art projects daily, sort candies (or laundry, silverware, Legos, or whatever else needed sorting), draw graphs, and

find change for a dollar by pretending to buy things. My mom would read aloud to us about science, weather, history, and religion. Each new era we learned about became a whole cultural experience. For ancient Rome, we would wear togas, bake focaccia bread, and study Latin. For Greece, we learned about the Olympics and read the myths of the gods. For Egypt, we studied hieroglyphics, made pottery, and saw a real mummy at a museum. These formative experiences during my early childhood instilled in me a love for learning.

As our family grew and my mom took on the additional responsibility of running the county homeschool association, she relied more on me to handle my education and assist my siblings. When I was in the sixth grade, my mom gave me textbooks and had me write the lesson plans. Once I started high school, I was on my own. She gave me the textbook catalog and said, "Figure out what you need to take to get into LSU (Louisiana State University)." While this task was daunting, it empowered me to take charge of my education and gave me experience designing my curricula, which would pay off more than I could imagine.

Throughout middle and high school, I tutored my neighbors, children I babysat, and siblings, but it never occurred to me that I might become a teacher. I liked math, Legos, and building things, and I wanted to be an engineer. My dad, an engineer who believed that was the only field worth pursuing, highly favored this option. By high school graduation in 2009, I was sick of being the oldest child. No longer would I have to teach myself and anyone nearby and figure out everything independently; I would be taught by professors who knew all the answers. Since I already knew how to study, college would be easy.

With this naïve view, I started at Louisiana State University, majoring in Mechanical Engineering. I was in for a rude awakening. There I was, in a classroom with up to 700 other freshmen, listening to a teacher and hastily taking notes from slides that flicked by so quickly. Many instructors were nearly impossible to understand. There were instructors whose handwriting could not be deciphered as we squinted at the chalkboard. Some instructors did not hold office hours, would not answer questions, and told us to "just read the book." There was one professor who would call us "lazy Americans," one who could not make eye contact and never saw a hand raised, one who played YouTube videos during class and then gave impossible homework, and one who would leave us unattended in the machining lab so he could skip out early for happy hour. This is not to say they were all bad–there were many instructors who did care about us, who wanted us to learn, who were happy to explain things, and whose handwriting was legible. I thank them heartily. But still, my classmates and I were struggling.

I started working at the tutoring center on campus to help underclassmen and make money simultaneously. Realizing I could make twice as much tutoring freelance, I hung flyers in the math and science buildings and soon had many clients. I would help my classmates for free–we were all in this together. Some professors were sure I was destined to become one of them. Several of them mentioned it offhandedly, but I did not believe them. What were they thinking? I was not going to be a teacher! I was going to be an engineer! That is why I came to college!

I had a few internships in the oil and gas industry, where most engineers in the Deep South worked. Although the fieldwork was fun, I did not want it long-term. Thinking I needed an advanced degree to do anything else, I signed up for graduate school at an R1 university (top level research institution) in the mid-south to research robotic prosthetics. I was thrilled–not to leave my family and move nine hours away–but for the chance to design prosthetic legs with a full-ride fellowship. I loved running and building things, and I saw this as an opportunity to help people with limb loss be able to run again. Once again, I was in for a rude awakening.

Suffice it to say that this experience opened my eyes to the darker side of academia. My altruistic vision of research as a way to make the world a better place was shattered. The environment and activities were not what I had expected, I was working around the clock to meet astronomical expectations, and the relationship with my research professor was confusing at best and traumatizing at worst.

Apart from daily Mass and my daily run, my solace during this time was in my teaching assistant position. That was where my boss believed in me, my students appreciated me, and I could unleash my creativity. The teaching professor I assisted, Dr. Tom Withrow, was a godsend. Tom was as big and bright as the sun, full of positive things to say, let me develop course material and teach the senior design prototyping lab, and praised all my efforts. He truly loved teaching and showed me the difference between being a teacher and a professor. He demonstrated that a professor can spout knowledge, but a teacher can bridge the gap between your brain and theirs. That is when I realized that I wanted to follow in his footsteps.

However, the conditions in the research lab worsened, crushing my dreams once again. After completing my master's degree, I began working on my Ph.D. research, or so I thought. But each week, when my research professor and I met to discuss progress, I was met with increasingly hostile comments. This came to a head when, in the midst of discussing a conference paper, he suddenly and unexpectedly announced that I should leave the lab, leave school, and leave the state.

I sank to the ground in shock. *This was not part of the plan. Not at all.* I had to cancel the National Science Foundation (NSF) fellowship. Still, I stayed until the end of the semester to finish my teaching responsibilities and tie up any loose ends with research. My lab mates and others in the department were sorry to see me go. They signed a farewell card and presented me with a bottle of mustard, my favorite condiment.

In April 2017, I started working as a mechanical design engineer for Universal Robotics, a startup that integrates vision systems and artificial intelligence (AI) with robots for materials handling activities. My job was to design claws for the robots, plan the cell layout, and do the math that nobody else wanted to do. My new boss was organized and efficient, my coworkers were intelligent and hardworking, and I once again had the freedom to be creative. As is typical for a startup, we were overworked and underpaid, but the fun we had and the memories we made will last a lifetime. I gained more experience in a year in that role than in the four spent in graduate school.

We often hired graduating seniors from Middle Tennessee State University's (MTSU) Engineering programs, and as an interviewer, I met the capstone instructor, Dr. Brian Slaboch. One day, he called me out of the blue and said, "We just had a professor quit, and the semester's about to start. Would you like to come teach here?" I was stunned and hesitant about another career change. "I just have a master's degree," I told him. "That's fine," he said. "Just come interview. I think you'll like it here." I agreed to come–just to see what it was like.

Brian showed me the labs, explained the newly accredited Mechatronics Engineering program, and discussed the courses I would teach: all classes I liked, plus senior design again, and I would get to develop their first robotics course! I started to get excited. I had not realized I could teach with just a master's degree. Here was a second chance.

I left the interview agonizing over a decision. I loved my current job and still had more to learn. Plus, I did not want to overload my coworkers, as it happened every time somebody left. Back at work, I sat in my car in the parking lot. *God, give me a sign of what I should do,* I prayed. Then I got out and walked into the office. As I stepped inside, my boss said, "the company's running out of money, and you need to find another job." That was my sign. I started at MTSU two weeks later, in September 2018.

Teaching was more fun than I had imagined. I loved stretching my brain with creative course design and intellectual conversations with fellow nerds. MTSU felt like home, full of people with whom I could relate. Serving a large percentage of nontraditional students, we had many veterans, technicians, and second-degree seekers. They were focused, driven, and dedicated, bringing so much to the engineering classroom. At 26 years old, I was younger than a quarter of my students, and they enjoyed having a teacher who was helpful, enthusiastic, and easy to understand. On my course evaluations, they would sing my praises:

> "She deeply cares about each and every student."
> "Came from industry with good knowledge."
> "No matter what you need, she puts down her pencil to focus on you."
> "Because of you, I am not a deadbeat."
> "She was the best teacher I have ever had at MTSU."

Brian generously supplied me with lecture notes for two courses, and those years of lesson planning and curriculum design from childhood came in handy for the rest. I was surprised to receive minimal guidelines for course content, but what some might see as a hurdle, I saw as an opportunity. I was free to develop my material and teach students what they needed to know, unhindered by rules and regulations that might impede my efficiency or creativity.

After a year, Brian informed me that to teach permanently, I would need a Ph.D. Surely, graduate school would be easier the second time around, because with age comes experience and intellectual maturity. I already had an idea for a project: applying robot claw design techniques that I had used at the robotics company to develop upper limb exoskeletons for stroke survivors.

In the summer of 2020, I enrolled at Vanderbilt University as a graduate student researching under Dr. Eric Barth in Mechanical Engineering. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, both universities went online, so I could effectively be a teacher at one and a student at another. I thrived in a research environment where my professor wanted me to succeed. Eric had a much more laid-back approach to research than my previous professor, and he gave me the freedom to reach my full potential. As a result, this dissertation project proceeded with far fewer hiccups than the former, and I finished in December 2023 with two hand exoskeletons for stroke survivors.

In contrast to the distaste I developed for traditional learning institutions as a toddler, the joys and challenges I experienced through homeschooling and higher education showed me that (1) there is more than one way to educate, (2) teaching is a talent, and (3) students can reach their full potential when learning is meaningful and others believe in them. Now that I have my Ph.D., I am not tethered to one university. I am qualified to teach anywhere or work for any company. But at MTSU, I have received endless appreciation from my students, support from my department chair, and camaraderie with my favorite coworkers. There is no setting outside of academia in which I would find such fulfillment, use math daily, and see the tangible difference I make in other people's lives. Being an educator is not just a job; it is a privilege. I wake up every day excited to go to work and see the transformation of students into engineers happening before my eyes. I know that God called me to be a teacher, and He called me to MTSU. So, until He calls me somewhere else, I'm here to stay.

Chapter 2-6

The Unexpected Trajectory of My Career in Education

Pamela Kramer Ertel

SIMPLE BEGINNINGS

Reflecting on my childhood, I realize I was just like many young girls who dreamed of becoming teachers. Some of my fondest memories come from the times I "played school." I may have taken it further than most, as I created my own "Little Kids' Club." Each day, I would ring a bell to gather neighborhood children for lessons in the garage of our small home in Boonton, New Jersey.

In my makeshift classroom, I wrote on the gray walls of sheet rock in our garage, where we had our class library, an organ for music, and even a large seesaw for playtime. We would perform special performances for the neighborhood parents, showcasing what my "students" had learned. That passion for teaching ignited over 60 years ago and continues to thrive today. Join me as we explore the journey of teaching and the joy it brings!

After many years of babysitting and working in childcare centers during my teenage years, I nurtured my dream of becoming a teacher by pursuing a bachelor's degree in elementary education at Marian College (now Marian University) in Indianapolis, Indiana. A growing passion for early childhood education matched my love for elementary education. During the summers, I gained valuable experience at local childcare centers and managed my church's nursery during Sunday services.

At that time, my university did not offer a program in early childhood education. However, with the support of my extraordinary and innovative professors, I had the unique opportunity to help create a new minor in early childhood education. This development was accomplished through independent projects that allowed me to delve deeper into my interests. My professors provided me with enriching experiences in early childhood education and encouraged me to take on various leadership roles within the education program. As a student representative, I collaborated with the education faculty on committees and was invited to attend my first national

education conference, the annual meeting of the International Reading Association. This experience ignited my passion for professional development and conference participation, a passion that continues to thrive today.

After earning my undergraduate degree in education, I embarked on my teaching journey back in New Jersey at the parochial school I had once attended from grades 5 to 8. Excitement filled me as I prepared for my first year of teaching; however, I also felt awkward. It was a unique experience to work alongside my former teachers, who once guided me through my education. Transitioning from a student to a colleague was a challenge, but I was fortunate to learn from some remarkable professionals. Their mentorship was invaluable, helping me navigate the early stages of my teaching career and shaping my approach to education.

I taught at this parochial school for three years with a different principal each year. While my time there was enjoyable and filled with excitement, by the end of my second year, I recognized the need to explore other employment opportunities. One significant factor influencing my decision to leave was the low salary; I started at just $5,000 a year. This amount was insufficient for me to live independently, and staying home with my parents was becoming increasingly unappealing.

Additionally, I found myself at odds with my new principal's educational philosophy. During my second year, I began pursuing a master's degree in early childhood education at Kean College (now Kean University) in New Jersey. The experience of returning to school was invigorating, as I could learn concepts that I could immediately apply in my classroom. Balancing full-time teaching with part-time graduate studies was challenging, but it illuminated my teaching practice like a light switch turning on. However, I quickly discovered that my principal's approach to learning contrasted with what I learned in graduate school. While my studies emphasized the importance of hands-on, experiential learning in a rich and stimulating environment, my principal favored a sterile setting focused on rote memorization. This fundamental disagreement made it clear that my teaching philosophy did not align with the school's philosophy, so I heightened my efforts to find a teaching position elsewhere.

BREAKAWAYS

By the conclusion of my third year in teaching, after diligently submitting numerous job applications and engaging in various interviews, I received an exciting offer for a new teaching position at a public school in Quakertown, New Jersey. Throughout the interview process, I felt a deep philosophical alignment with the more progressive ideas of my prospective principal, who would later become an invaluable mentor in my career.

I spent six transformative years teaching at Franklin Township School, instructing students in grades 2 and 3. This period was marked by significant professional development, as I seamlessly integrated the knowledge and skills I acquired from my master's program into my teaching practices, enhancing both my effectiveness as an educator and the learning experiences of my students.

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to have the guidance of a remarkable mentor, Dr. Frank Spera, who served as both my principal and a significant source of motivation. His unwavering support inspired me to strive for professional growth and excellence.

At the outset of my career, my aspiration was clear: I aimed to become a college professor after obtaining several years of experience as a classroom teacher. Initially, I envisioned myself teaching at a local community college, feeling uncertain about my qualifications for any role beyond that. However, while working full-time as an elementary teacher, I seized the opportunity to explore higher education by taking on a part-time position as an adjunct professor at a four-year private college in New Jersey.

The birth of my daughter prompted a pivotal decision in my life. I chose to leave my tenured teaching position, a difficult choice, to focus on raising her while continuing my work as an adjunct instructor. I discovered my desire to transition into higher education full-time during this time. Recognizing that a doctorate was essential to achieve this goal, I enrolled in the doctoral program at Lehigh University. This decision began a transformative chapter in my life, steering me towards a fulfilling academic path.

WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

During my journey toward earning a doctorate, I faced a significant challenge when my adjunct position was eliminated. This shift prompted me to seek other faculty opportunities, leading to a full-time temporary faculty position at East Stroudsburg University in Pennsylvania for two years. This experience was both exhilarating and demanding, as I balanced full-time teaching responsibilities alongside my doctoral studies, all while fulfilling my roles as a wife and mother.

One notable challenge of being a temporary faculty member is the necessity to work with the same dedication and commitment as a permanent faculty member while understanding the limitations of your temporary status. The pressure to continually demonstrate my competence and worth was constant during this time. As I approached the completion of my doctoral program, I applied for a tenure-track position at the university.

By this stage, I was navigating a new reality—my marriage had ended, and I was now balancing the demands of being a single mother, a dedicated doctoral student, and a temporary faculty member, which was no small feat. Each role required my full attention and resilience, making this a transformative time filled with challenges and growth opportunities.

MY JOURNEY TO TENURE-TRACK FACULTY MEMBER

I was fortunate to be hired as a tenure-track faculty member, with a contract that required me to complete my doctoral degree within two years. While the timeline felt daunting, it fueled my commitment to finish on time. I

diligently worked towards this goal and completed my doctoral degree within two years. The relief of finishing was immense, yet, like many who achieve a terminal degree, I occasionally questioned the legitimacy of my accomplishment, worried someone might challenge it. Thankfully, that has not happened (at least not yet!).

For 18 years, I taught in the Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education at East Stroudsburg University. My passion for teaching and dedication to serving students brought me immense joy, and I continually sought to grow as a scholar. A highlight of my career was serving as the faculty advisor for two student groups, where I developed meaningful personal relationships with my students. Living close to the university allowed me to invite groups of students to my home, which I thoroughly enjoyed. This experience created a space for us to connect on a deeper level. I fondly recalled how one of my professors had invited me to her home during my undergraduate studies—an experience I cherished as a student. In many ways, I felt I was paying it forward by creating similar opportunities for my students.

A NEW DIRECTION ALONG THE PATH

I had always envisioned my career as deeply rooted in teaching and university life, an environment I cherished. However, everything changed when I received an unexpected call from the provost requesting a meeting. To my astonishment, he proposed that I be the Interim Dean of the College of Education. The idea of stepping into an administrative position was daunting; I had little interest in such a role and felt unqualified. Despite my reservations, I promised to consider it.

My experience in administration was limited to a brief stint as an interim department chair, and the university's strong faculty union often led to tense relationships between faculty and administration. As someone who prefers to avoid conflict, this was not an appealing prospect. I knew many individuals in the College of Education, including close friends, who were far more qualified for the role. These thoughts weighed heavily on my mind as I deliberated my next steps. Ultimately, I accepted the position, reassured that it would only last for the summer. How challenging could three months be?

To my surprise, I thoroughly enjoyed that summer. Although the steep learning curve presented many intriguing challenges, I found the experience rewarding. By the end of the summer, I felt a sense of satisfaction as I returned to my role as a full professor, a position I had worked hard to achieve.

As the fall semester ended, I was again invited to serve as Interim Dean. The current Interim Dean was facing health issues, and there was a need for someone to step in until a permanent dean could be appointed. This time, I took on the role more confidently but was equally eager to return to my professorship once the new dean was in place. These unexpected experiences taught me that stepping out of my comfort zone could lead to personal and professional growth, enriching my academic journey.

REFLECTING ON LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

The unexpected departure of the new dean created a wave of uncertainty at our institution, leading to my third appointment as Interim Dean. As the search for a permanent dean commenced, I found myself at a crossroads, contemplating whether I should throw my hat in the ring for the position. Engaging in deep self-reflection, I weighed my options carefully. As a full professor, I cultivated a fulfilling career that brought me joy and satisfaction. However, having stepped into the interim role multiple times, a nagging thought persisted: perhaps this was my true calling.

The rapid turnover of leadership had undoubtedly impacted our faculty, creating an atmosphere of instability. Yet, through my experiences as Interim Dean, I gained valuable insights and felt more prepared than ever to embrace the challenges ahead. With a new chapter in my personal life—having recently remarried—I considered the potential stress this position might impose on my marriage. Thankfully, my husband wholeheartedly supported my aspirations, encouraging me to pursue this opportunity. With renewed determination, I submitted my application for the dean's position. To my delight, the university offered me the position. While this career path was unexpected, I embraced the journey with enthusiasm, eager to tackle the new challenges and responsibilities that lay ahead.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my role as a dean was enhancing the experience for faculty and students. I found great joy in cultivating my leadership skills and exploring innovative approaches to education. However, my tenure was not without its challenges. The economic downturn significantly affected the university, leading to severe budget constraints. Such challenges resulted in difficult decisions, such as reductions and other adverse financial measures. Additionally, a shift in the university's leadership brought about further complications, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty.

TURBULENCE AND A NEW TRAJECTORY

While I cherished my role as dean for almost seven years, the growing tension between faculty and administration made the position increasingly demanding as the animosity between the faculty and administration escalated, along with the stress level of my life. I kept feeling a spiritual nudge to leave, but my loyalty to the university was holding me back. Nonetheless, these experiences paved the way for new beginnings and opportunities ahead.

After much reflection and introspection, I recognized the necessity of moving on to safeguard my health and rekindle my passion for the profession. The negativity in my work environment had taken a significant toll on me. Taking a courageous leap of faith, my husband and I felt drawn to Nashville. Once we made that decision, there was no looking back. I was assured that we would find employment in the Nashville area, and I determined that returning to my first love—teaching—would bring me the greatest joy. I successfully secured adjunct

positions at Belmont University and Middle Tennessee State University. My long-term aspiration was to achieve a tenure-track faculty position, though none were available then.

Working part-time turned out to be a hidden blessing, as it allowed me to step back from my previous role as a dean and realize the extent of the stress and unhealthiness that had permeated my life. Eventually, I obtained a full-time position at Middle Tennessee State University, but the journey was fraught with some challenges and heartaches. Ultimately, the struggle proved worthwhile when I was offered a tenure-track position in the early childhood education program, allowing me to reconnect with my roots.

Today, I am happier than ever in my professional life. With 45 years of diversified teaching and leadership experience, I am equipped to prepare new educators for a profession I cherish and respect. While my teaching journey did not unfold as I initially envisioned, it emerged as my ideal path, leading to a life filled with fulfillment, success, and gratitude.

Chapter 2-7

Fifty-One Years in Education

Patricia Nelson

When I was young, school was important to me. I started to write poetry when it was taught to me, beginning around the sixth grade at the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Campus school. This affinity for poetry continued until I was a senior in high school. I wanted to be a poet as my chosen profession. My wise father, in 1969, tactfully told me that poetry did not pay well but that since I was an avid reader, perhaps I could major in English and secure an education degree. He also encouraged me to pick up a music minor since I loved to sing and played the French horn for eight years. He implied that I could write poetry on the side as an English major, perhaps setting the lyrics to music.

Thus, I began my university studies where I had some excellent MTSU professors in the early '70s: Dr. N and Dr. W (Education), Dr. B. (English), and Drs. N and M (Music). All of them contributed to my maturity as I grew into young adulthood. Graduating a semester early back then was relatively easy, but finding a teaching job was much more difficult.

The following August, a middle school hired me to teach choral music. I was able to do that for two years on an interim basis. Meanwhile, I was taking classes in the summer to secure an elementary education certification, as teaching English to high school students proved challenging. Had there been more field experience requirements as there are these days, I would have learned earlier that teaching high school was not what I wanted to do.

Not deterred from teaching but struggling to figure out what I wanted, I was hired to teach the sixth grade in rural Wilson County at Watertown Elementary School. When the principal took me to my classroom, he told me I would have 39 sixth graders that year! He said that if more came and there were 40, he could hire another teacher. (That never happened, as I ended the school year with 38 students.)

After that very challenging year, I was able to find my footing with the wide variety of students within my school. I taught sixth grade for 11 years while securing a master's degree in Curriculum and Development at MTSU. We were a Title One School, and my students needed caring teachers' support. The Career Ladder program was underway, and I applied and achieved the highest level, a Career Ladder 3 teacher. This program enabled me to develop a program during the summer focusing on music, art, and physical education. With the Career Ladder money under our Tennessee governor in the '80s, my arts enrichment program was wildly popular and filled up quickly for many years. I understood the need for a complete arts program in Wilson County.

During that time, we needed a physical education program to be developed and utilized at Watertown Elementary. I approached my principal about starting that program. He only agreed to do so if I would teach music two days a week and physical education three days a week. (That music minor came in handy once again). After a couple of years, I took a year off from teaching, borrowed money from my wise dad (I paid him back) to return to MTSU, and majored in physical education. I had recently completed my Ed.S. degree in Administration and Supervision. Once again, MTSU allowed me to pick up more classes to add a major to my teaching resume: physical education, K-12.

Luckily, upon my return, my school hired an outstanding music teacher, and she and I worked well together for many more years as a team in music and physical education. (I would not advise combining choral music and physical education for teacher candidates today as the two areas are physically exhausting if done well).

One of the highlights of teaching physical education for me was applying for and receiving a grant that enabled our school to acquire rollerblade skates as part of our curriculum. That was a great challenge for me, but the students enjoyed it. I included it in our summer arts program, too, and the students enjoyed skating down the hall, through the cafeteria, outside in the parking lot, and the gym!

I also incorporated the Presidential Physical Fitness Test into our curriculum. One of its components includes running a mile. With help from the students' parents and the mayor of our small town, Watertown, we closed Main Street twice a year to have a one-mile fun run. It included the local ambulance at one end, the police at the other, and numerous parents lined up along the course route. Each class from third to sixth grade would come out to run after having qualified ahead of time during PE (Physical Education) class time to do a 15-minute mile. Because I ran races in Nashville, Murfreesboro, and Middle Tennessee, many runners gave me their winning trophies to use for my students in our race. I had them refurbished, of course, to fit our students. This event helped to start a running trend with a few of my former students, who are running today as adults.

I had many fantastic education professors from MTSU. Without their guidance, I would have possibly stayed with just a bachelor's degree and taught elementary education. But they inspired me to keep studying and advancing my education.

In 1998, I was hired as an interim administrator to finish the spring semester when the serving principal became ill, and later that year, I was asked to be an assistant principal. After one year as an assistant, the principal retired, and I became the school principal. I wish I had more training as an administrator at that time, but I spent my last few years as the principal, learning on the job. I knew it was time to retire when the children of my first sixth graders grew up and started having their children! Retirement came in December 2004.

After one semester of retirement, I realized I was not ready to quit working with young people. I then became an elementary program supervisor of student teachers at MTSU in the fall of 2005. This program has developed tremendously since 2013. I have watched teacher candidates pass TPA (the state-mandated licensure assessment) and learn the TEAM rubrics for evaluation purposes, modeled after the state of Tennessee's requirements for educators. Several former student teachers are currently mentor teachers and are working with today's teacher candidates.

Even after 51 years, it is still a thrill to have a former student from elementary school or a former student from the university come up to me and tell me that I have made a difference in their lives. I know that they have made a difference to mine. (They always want me to guess who they are; for the most part, I can produce their name). I could not have done it without the outstanding leadership of the excellent professors at MTSU who were part of my early journey into teacher education.

Chapter 3

Impactful Heroes and Mentors

Chapter 3-1

Throwing Away the Syllabus

Carla Swank Fox

A haunting quiet filled the classroom on a Wednesday afternoon at Robert Morris College, just outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as we waited to begin our Television Production II class. I remember sitting in my chair along with my classmates and feeling uneasy. Our professor, Dr. James Seguin, walked into the classroom in that uncomfortable stillness. He, too, seemed unsettled. But he put down his folders and books, calmly moved the trash can from the corner of the room, and placed it in front of us. "I want you to put your syllabus in here," he instructed as he pointed to the bin.

It was September 12, 2001. We did not know it then, but that simple moment of walking to the front of the room and dropping a packet of paper in the trash can began an experience that changed many lives. That experience affected not only those of us in the classroom that day but many other college students, faculty, and alums, all thanks to Dr. Seguin's leadership and courage. Domenic Burello, a recent graduate of Robert Morris College and working as an assistant in the school's Academic Media Center at that time, revealed to me years later that he remembers that day vividly. "[Dr. Seguin] pulls me aside and said, 'I need your help. The world changed, and I can't just sit here. I don't know yet, but we have to do something,'" Burello wrote. "We walked into the class and…out came the trash can! What an amazing thing to be part of" (Burello, 2023).

Dr. Seguin instructed us to split into small teams, grab cameras, and disperse to talk to people about the previous day's events. My team of four left campus—without permission, I might add—and drove to a nearby blood bank, where the line of people waiting to donate reached into the parking lot. There, we met a man who told us a chilling story as he fought back tears:

> "At 9 o'clock yesterday morning, I was telecommuting to the 67th floor of the World Trade Center, working for a brokerage firm headquartered there. Half an hour later, I had no client" (Robert Morris University Documentary Center, 2008).

When we returned that footage to the edit bays for review, Dr. Seguin was shaken yet determined. He told us that this was what our class would do that semester. We would talk to everyday people and capture their thoughts, feelings, and reactions for historical records. Immediately, we returned to the classroom; Dr. Seguin started putting a plan together on the whiteboard. Who could go to Washington, D.C., on Saturday? And that is how, four days later, I found myself interviewing tourists at the gates of the White House, standing in stunned silence in a parking lot overlooking the Pentagon, and speaking what would eventually become the opening words of our documentary while walking down the steps of the U.S. Capitol: "September 11, 2001, was a day that will live in infamy."

From there, the rest of the semester was a whirlwind of scheduling trips and shoots and editing into the early morning hours. We traveled to Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and New York City, the sites of the other plane crashes. We talked to students on campus, senior citizens at a local bingo hall, and musicians participating in a benefit concert. The result of our work would be a 45-minute documentary titled *America Talks*, released in January 2002. It won awards, received national attention, and sparked the creation of a center for documentary study at Robert Morris University. None of it would have happened without Dr. Seguin's willingness to trust his instincts and throw away his plans for the semester. As time passes—and now as an instructor myself more than 20 years later—I am even more appreciative of Dr. Seguin's teaching and leadership that made this life-changing experience possible.

First, Dr. Seguin showed his vulnerability by asking us to discard our syllabi. He was equally as confused and shaken as the rest of us by the situation we found ourselves in. But that simple act did something quite profound—it flattened the traditional hierarchical structure of the classroom. He was no longer the professor, nor we were the students. We were a team, learning together and collaborating to solve a problem. His demeanor carried throughout the entire project, as Dr. Seguin often stayed late with us as we edited, pitching money into the "pizza pool" so that we could order food. We had many deep conversations as we tried to structure the narrative and flow of our interviews, attempting to craft a story out of the words we had captured. He did not instruct us to create this documentary and then leave us to assemble it ourselves. He was in the trenches with us every step of the way. We spent so much time together that he told us to stop calling him Dr. Seguin because it felt too formal. We could not bring ourselves to call him by his first name, so we affectionately nicknamed him "Gwinney," a name he still embraces. We were all on the same team.

Next—and this was something I did not realize until many years later—Dr. Seguin offered a safe place for all of us to process our feelings. Working on a documentary about a traumatic subject can challenge a person's mental well-being. To hear the tragic stories, witness the devastation, and watch the horrific footage over and over again is emotionally exhausting and draining. So, when we needed silence, Dr. Seguin offered us that space. When we needed to laugh at an inappropriate time, he showed us grace and allowed us to do so. He laughed at himself when we got dreadfully lost in Washington, D.C., and laughed at us as we sang "Row, Row, Row Your

Boat" while waiting for lighting to be adjusted during a studio shoot. He often joked our documentary needed a companion satire short film created using our outtakes and bloopers from our creation process. Those moments of levity and space made creating the documentary an enjoyable experience despite the challenging subject matter. I did not understand that then, but I now admire and appreciate his leadership.

Finally, Dr. Seguin leveraged his personal and professional connections to enrich our experience. When we needed professional assistance in our editing, he invited former colleagues to help us. When we traveled to New York City, we stayed with members of his extended family, so we did not have to pay to stay in a hotel. Because he had a connection with a high-ranking official in the New York City Department of Transportation, we had the stirring experience of receiving an escorted tour through Ground Zero, which, while we were not allowed to record, was one of the episodes I remember most vividly to this day. Dr. Seguin was not afraid to share his deep wealth of connections with us, and we all benefited from his generosity.

After we completed the documentary over the semester break, we found ourselves in January 2002—an entirely different semester at the newly renamed Robert Morris University— on a crazy media and publicity tour. We screened the documentary more times than I can remember, including an incredibly moving evening in Shanksville I will never forget. We were overwhelmed with newspaper and television interviews, and Dr. Seguin and I had the opportunity to return to New York that month to appear on the *CBS Saturday Early Show*. A new semester had begun; we were all juggling new schedules and unexpected demands, but Dr. Seguin again was unwavering. He was with us every step of the way, happy to take a backseat and let his students take their moments in the spotlight while coaching us in media training.

While those of us who worked on the project had a sense of the impact it was going to have, I do not think any of us grasped the effect it had on Dr. Seguin himself until well after the fact. "Creating *America Talks* was a life-altering experience for both my students and me," Dr. Seguin wrote in a press release celebrating the documentary's fifth anniversary in 2006. "We jumped headfirst into the project in an attempt to create something positive from a devastating event. I don't think any of the students will ever forget their involvement with it" (Robert Morris University, 2006).

He was right. We have not. Every year, on September 11, many of us who participated in the project send notes to each other via social media to check in and remember. Dr. Seguin created so much more than a typical classroom experience. Those lucky enough to be a part of the creative process became a family, which we remain even to this day.

Shortly after my experience in this project, I decided I wanted to become a professor someday. I earned my master's degree (also from Robert Morris University) on May 9, 2009; during the same ceremony, the university awarded Professor Emeritus status to Dr. Seguin. It was not a literal passing of the mantle. Still, Dr. Seguin's leadership in the *America Talks* project is now the foundation of my own teaching philosophy statement:

"It was pretty clear to me even back then: When I became a professor, I wanted to teach from the same heart as Dr. Seguin and have the courage to throw away the syllabus when necessary" (Fox, 2023).

Dr. Seguin could have made the safe choice as he walked into the classroom on that fateful Wednesday afternoon. He could have stuck with the known quantity, a familiar syllabus filled with projects he had designed months in advance. He could have simply ignored the uneasiness in the room that day and pressed on with the day's scheduled agenda. Instead, he showed us how to lead and teach with vulnerability and courage. He chose the path of uncertainty, listening to his internal need to "do something." In the process, he taught us how to respond to uncertain times with a sense of resolve. Because of these things, Dr. Seguin will always be my hero and mentor. I have not yet had my opportunity to throw away a syllabus, but if and when I do, even in my fear, I will smile a knowing smile as I reach for a trash can of my own and think about the person who inspired me to take the uncharted path: *Thanks, Gwinney. I could not do this without you.*

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Chapter 3-2

Memories of My Favorite Heroes and Mentors

Pamela Kramer Ertel

INSPIRATION FROM HEROES AND MENTORS

Throughout my journey, I have encountered numerous heroes and mentors who have profoundly shaped my life. Their guidance has influenced my professional path and enriched my growth in ways I could never have imagined. Each lesson they imparted has left a lasting impression, and I am deeply thankful for their contributions.

Join me as I share stories about some remarkable individuals who have inspired me as an educator. Their stories and insights may ignite a spark within you and encourage you to reflect on the heroes in your own life. Discover how these influential figures have made a difference and continue to motivate us to strive for greatness.

MRS. J: A HERO IN EDUCATION

One of my earliest heroes was my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. J. When I entered her classroom, she had already become a legend in our town. She is a hero because she inspired my dream of becoming a teacher, surpassing even Miss Barbara from Romper Room!

Mrs. J had a unique way of turning every lesson into an adventure. Even over 60 years later, vivid memories of her classroom remain fresh. I recall how she meticulously cut paper napkins into four sections for our snacks, showcasing her commitment to conservation long before it became a popular practice. Her respect for books was remarkable. Each time she shared a story, the sound of the plastic covers protecting our treasured books echoed in my ears, highlighting her care for these valuable resources. One of the most unforgettable moments of my kindergarten experience was the Mayfair Festival. On this joyous day, Mrs. J invited our entire

class to her home, where we danced around a maypole and enjoyed delightful refreshments and games. Her enthusiasm for learning ignited a passion within me that has lasted ever since.

SISTER CLAIRE WHALEN: A LASTING INFLUENCE

Sister Claire Whalen served as my advisor and professor during my undergraduate studies at Marian College (now Marian University) in Indianapolis. Initially, I found her presence somewhat intimidating; however, her warm smile and unwavering passion for teaching quickly transformed her into one of my most significant role models.

One of Sister Claire's most remarkable qualities was her deep understanding of effective teaching practices. She emphasized the importance of developing a conceptual understanding of the material, teaching us that authentic learning comes from grasping concepts rather than rote memorization. She consistently challenged us to present information in ways that would allow our future students to understand and connect with the content meaningfully.

Early in my college journey, Sister Claire played a pivotal role in shaping my leadership skills. She invited this shy girl from New Jersey to take on various leadership positions within the teacher education program, providing me with invaluable experiences. Observing her in action as she chaired the education program taught me priceless lessons that have remained with me throughout my life.

More than 45 years have passed since I graduated from college, yet I remain connected to Sister Claire and deeply indebted to her influence. The lessons she imparted are timeless and continue to resonate with me. Even in her nineties, Sister Claire actively serves her religious community and has recently been recognized as an advocate for renewable energy in her local area. She embodies the spirit of a lifelong learner and servant leader. Sister Claire's impact on my life is profound and unforgettable; her mentorship has shaped me in immeasurable ways.

DR. FRANK SPERA: A LASTING INFLUENCE IN EDUCATION

Dr. Frank Spera served as the principal of the K-8 school where I taught in Quakertown, New Jersey, a quaint, rural community characterized by its middle-upper-class residents. His enthusiasm for hiring younger educators was palpable, particularly since many staff members had long tenures at the school. I consider him a true mentor, as he consistently encouraged me and motivated me to pursue growth in my career.

During classroom observations, Dr. Spera offered timely and constructive feedback, always framing his suggestions positively. His encouragement extended beyond immediate teaching practices; he inspired me to explore new books and professional journals, enhancing my knowledge and skills.

A few years after I stepped away from my tenured teaching position to welcome the birth of my daughter, I had the privilege of collaborating with Dr. Spera on a writing project. It was an honor to be included

in this endeavor, showcasing his recognition of my expertise. Since we both had transitioned into a faculty role in higher education, we continued to share our experiences in teacher education.

Dr. Spera's belief in my abilities instilled a sense of self-confidence in me. He championed my teaching position during a period of teacher retrenchment, ensuring I felt valued as a colleague. He embodies the Cambridge Dictionary's definition of a mentor as "a person who gives a younger or less experienced person help and advice over a period of time, especially at work or school." (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). I will always be grateful for the profound impact this exceptional mentor has had on my professional journey.

DR. K. (PSEUDONYM)

While feeding my infant daughter one day, I happened to channel surf and discovered a fascinating show titled "What Every Baby Knows." The program featured a Harvard pediatrician renowned for his deep passion for babies and families, alongside a wealth of pediatric expertise. The series documented his visits with various patients and included training sessions for new parents. He was like a rock star to young parents, embodying the warmth of a loving grandfather and Solomon's wisdom. His show captivated me, and I explored his books and other writings. His research soon found its way into my early childhood education classes.

A significant highlight in my life was attending a conference where Dr. K was the featured keynote speaker. The excitement of meeting him in person was profound, and he truly lived up to my expectations! He exuded warmth and charm and demonstrated a genuine commitment to families. He also had a masterful way of engaging with his audience, techniques that I still use in my teacher education classes. I regard Dr. K as one of my heroes, as he has deeply enriched my journey as a parent and a professional. Much of my love and understanding for young children and their families originates from the passion he instilled in me.

CONCLUSION

Mentors play a crucial role in shaping the career paths of those they guide. I am grateful for the profound influence that four exceptional individuals and many others have had on my career journey. My appreciation for my heroes and mentors runs deep, and I recognize that the most meaningful way to express my gratitude is by paying it forward through mentoring others. It is both a privilege and an honor to step into this important role, helping to guide the next generation as they navigate their own paths through the profession of teaching.

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Chapter 3-3

The Winding Path

Ernie Reynolds

As I reflect, the greatest literary influence of my life was a man who could not read. My grandfather's Christmas gift each year was a two-dollar bill stuffed inside a white bank envelope; my name poorly misspelled on the outside. I recall thinking, in a child's way, that this was odd, but I kept that notion to myself. I also recollect the musky scents of tilled earth and tobacco that clung to his overalls. Mostly, though, I remember his silence. He died of lung cancer, bent in body from the great efforts of growing the very leaf that consumed him. His passing left behind only one of six children, land in fallow, and a stubborn mule who would know another man's yoke.

I am not sure my quiet grandfather ever read a bedtime story, was encouraged by a kind teacher, or experienced the magic of the written word in his tender years. Robbed of childhood, he learned as a farm boy that one could not consume more than the dust or mud and his sun-freckled hands might yield. I always felt he wanted something more for me, to give me something he could not. And more of me, as I did of him.

As a schoolboy, I gravitated to the adventures of Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and the sentimentality of Gipson's *Old Yeller*. Entering college, I supposed these early reads and others like them had led me onto the literary path. Now a late careerist, I know that my dusty grandfather most inspired my desire to share the gift of literacy in classrooms. Teaching can be a difficult task, something like farming. Arduous, filled with lonely failings, consuming. To those I have studied with, I owe much debt and gratitude. Yet, my formal education did not germinate into my compulsion and that excited, little nervous feeling I get before each semester's first class, each newly planned lecture, and the anticipation of our 16-week journey. No, that feeling comes with the energy of wary students entering a new setting and the powerful responsibility I embrace—the responsibility to convey that their most important technological tool is the effective use of language.

I am guided in my classroom journeys by the sensibilities and work ethic handed down by the laconic farmer who quietly passed on the belief that there is goodness in the soil and hope in spring's verdant wood. I think of him some predawn mornings when the alarm rings too soon, and a groggy voice in my head wants to hit the snooze button, but I rise. Because he did, work would not wait on a farm, as in the classroom. There must have been hundreds of stories he could have told from that depression era, "early to bed and early to rise" farm days. Snakes in the corn field, the sweet green smell of barley just topped, a breech calf saved. The first kiss he stole from grandma. All those stories were never told, never written. Lost.

I was lucky to be born better off. I have only feared the poverty and urgency my grandfather knew every day, and my interests have been allowed to grow beyond soil and seed. Yet, the work is still about the harvest. My college journey has wound through Nashville, Franklin, Sewanee, Murfreesboro, Greenville, Tampa, Tallahassee, and recently back to Murfreesboro. This winding path has morphed from sidewalk to interstate, from job to passion, and introduced me to hundreds and hundreds of fellow teachers and students. Diverse, yes, but just like me, too. Every one of them has stories to tell. Everyone has but 26 letters and a few punctuation marks to tell stories of love, joy, fear, and pain.

I believe that good stories need good storytellers. Under the shallow surface of my grandfather's silence was the love and humor he could not verbalize but that I now can for him and for me. I am his harvest, and the students I am privileged to teach are mine. I trust that poverty and violence will always exist and thrive in places where truth and education do not. And that good will grow if we keep planting hope.

Chapter 3-4

Echoes of the Past: A Mentor's Voice Never Goes Silent

Kendra Miller

The road to education is a winding road for many, myself included. I was the quiet kid in the back of the class who often did not have her homework and would not dare look up for fear of being called on. I often laugh when I think back to the girl who graced the halls of Bellwood and Riverdale in the 1990s as I now push forward in my career, finishing my master's degree and dreaming of a Ph.D. So that begs the question, *How did a shy, insulated girl who graduated high school with a 2.0 grade point average turn into a champion for education*?

There was not a singular shining light. There was not a moment in my life where I came to grips with how I was wasting it all. Nothing striking like that. Instead, I am so passionate about my career because of the people who poured inspirational moments into me while I was still quiet, shy, and unwilling to look up. Most of these teachers had no idea how they changed me in small ways daily while I was in their classes. That is what makes them heroes. They worked day in and day out, never knowing or seeing any results. They showed up when it seemed I was not listening. They were there when I pushed them away. Now, almost 30 years later, I see them for who they are: heroes and mentors. I hear these voices daily in my classroom, even though we have not spoken for years. Their influence has been with me since I began teaching in 2007, and I hope to pass it on to my students today and tomorrow.

Mr. Bridger (pseudonym), my sophomore history teacher, was five foot six inches tall, with a long gray ponytail pulled low in the back. His front pocket had the indention of a habit he warned us about almost daily, and his laugh would bounce off the walls in all the best ways. On the back wall of his classroom was a Pink Floyd flag, along with many other artistically inspired, mismatched knickknacks. Walking into his room, I felt at home. I felt like I had space to breathe and to be seen, and, heaven forbid, I did not hate school quite so much.

This room is where I first felt my heart break into shards of broken glass when my first real boyfriend broke up with me. This room is where I threw paper balls across the room at my friend so we could play "baseball." This room is where I learned about real courage in the face of evil as I saw my teacher's eyes water with his chest puffed out at the stories of Poles who chose to ride out on horses into battle on September 1st, 1939, against an invading army of Nazis, set on their destruction in their armored tanks. I cried when my teacher described the six ways men died in Vietnam, and I felt justified in my search for truth as he encouraged us to seek out knowledge, trying on different roles, voices, and ideas until we found the true source of all happiness. Mr. Bridger taught me I loved history, that empathy was a superpower, and that everyone deserves dignity.

Across the school parking lot, in a classroom annex, was my senior English teacher, Mrs. Fox (pseudonym), who I thought was my greatest nemesis at age 17. Tall, erect, and stern, she demanded our best and welcomed us to her class by extending her open hand, barking that she, and she alone, held our high school diplomas in her hand. I called her horrible names when I went home that day and every day for two weeks. Our crowded room dwindled from 27 students to 13, and I watched as she tore off the witch's mask she had worn so well. Down went the angry, curt, and thorny disposition, and in its place was a woman who knew her self-worth while reminding us to fight for our own. She did not accept late work, openly scorned the use of "very" in our writing, and taught us to use the local university's library for research. Mrs. Fox taught me the value of persistence, hard work, and never taking excuses from myself or others.

Coach Smith (pseudonym), my middle school health coach, was a basketball coach fresh from college. He was tall and already showing a bit of softness from his former athletic days. Coach Smith was new to the world of education, and it showed every day. He fought to maintain order in our classroom as he was quick to laugh at our antics while still learning how to walk that balance between a teacher and his students. But he loved us. His class was a reprieve from math, science, and history. His class is where we moved our bodies and learned to respect them. For example, he taught us how to throw a football and make healthy food choices. Coach Smith taught us that he would always be there for us, and I saw him as a mentor, coach, and teacher. Most importantly, Coach Smith taught students about self-worth, and I learned to love myself.

Mrs. Hickson (pseudonym) was the woman who taught me to question the world around me and did not back down when I openly challenged her. As my eighth-grade Science teacher, she gave me space to speak in honest conversation while also learning what respect in debate truly meant. She kept an emotional distance but never demeaned us; instead, she showed us what respect between an adult and a child should be. Free to speak, free to think, free to be ourselves, we wanted to respect her even as she ran her classroom as a well-oiled machine. Mrs. Hickson taught me freedom of expression.

Ms. Green held up a textbook to my 20-year-old self to put on a shelf in her new high school classroom. She watched me patiently as I flipped through the pages, asking questions about how she presented various topics, and I offered up suggestions on what she should add or leave out. Her words were simple and direct: *Have*

you considered becoming a teacher? I thought that was a strange comment, given my dedication to the path of pre-law, yet the idea did not leave me. For her, teaching was a noble profession. One where students came to learn about history and geography and explore the world around them. She was young, still early in her career. She was a smile in a sea of scorn. She was the teacher every student secretly hoped to have. Ms. Green, my big sister, taught me to believe in myself and the power of the classroom teacher.

My sophomore history teacher. My Senior Honors English teacher. My middle school health teacher. My eighth-grade science teacher. My big sister. These teachers fed into my life in both big and small ways. Each one impacted me uniquely, shaping me to become the woman I am today. I mention them in my classes all these years later, as they still mentor me today with their stories, examples, and the light they shone throughout my childhood. It is easy to dismiss the small moments, but it is, in fact, these little pieces of connection that have helped to create the classroom my students inhabit today. I am forever grateful to my heroes and mentors. Some are living while others have passed on. Some are still teaching, and some have retired; their legacy continues just like a good book. I only hope to do the same in the lives of students entrusted to me day after day.

Chapter 3-5

The Scraper on the Gravel Road

Seok Jeng Jane Lim, Christine Chen, and James L. Hoot

> "As human beings, our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us is, that each of us has something that no one else has—or ever will have—something inside that is unique to all time. It's our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression."
>
> Mister Rogers' Neighborhood

The former First Lady Michelle Obama shared that "people are really hungry for stories" (CBS News, 2019). Through narrative storytelling, I would like to share my life experiences and how two heroes and mentors helped shape my life as an early childhood professional. My path to teaching has been like traveling on a gravel road with its ups and downs. A scraper will pick up the gravel and dirt, smooth the high and low points, and make it even. I have been privileged to be evened by two scrapers, Dr. Christine Chen (Singapore) and Dr. James Hoot (Buffalo, NY, USA), who also became my lifelong friends. I hope you can identify with my nontraditional route to higher education through my successes and failures and how these experiences shaped who I am today.

As a child, people often asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I thought I could be a nun, a social worker, a zookeeper, or a *teacher*. Having been raised in a Taoist family in Singapore, I knew I could not be a nun. Although I love animals, I did not think I could handle the poop and the smell. These reasons narrowed my career prospects to either social work or teaching. Having completed my General Certificate of Education Advanced Level certificate (equivalent to high school in the United States) at 18 years of age and waiting impatiently for my results to be posted in three months, my father chanced upon an advertisement for a childcare teacher opening in the Chartered Industries of Singapore. They had an open position in a daycare workplace. My father drove me to my interview, and I got my first job as a childcare teacher. I never knew this would be where I met my first lifelong mentor and friend, Dr. Christine Chen.

In the early 1980s, teaching in childcare was considered a "nanny job" in Singapore. Teachers in this profession received low wages, worked long hours, and were poorly trained. Dr. Chen had a progressive view of early childhood education. She founded the professional organization for early childhood education in Singapore, now known as the Association for Early Childhood Educators, Singapore (AECES) [https://www.aeces.org/]. Dr. Chen used ideas from her education at Bank Street College of Education in New York City and from working there for several years. She implemented these ideas in the first childcare workplace in Singapore. At a time when Singapore classrooms were highly structured and teacher-directed, Dr. Chen provided interest centers in each room and allowed the children to explore centers through play-based and child-initiated approaches consistent with research-based insights of global thinkers like Piaget and Vygotsky. Another progressive idea of Dr. Chen was encouraging teachers to group children of mixed ages into classrooms. Mixed-age grouping taught me to differentiate instruction for various developmental abilities and interests. Finally, Dr. Chen believed strongly in lifelong learning and encouraged teachers to pursue higher qualifications to become even better teachers. To help poorly paid teachers pursue such learning, Dr. Chen was constantly sourcing funding to support the teachers' professional development. She is a dreamer who instills that we should share knowledge because you will gain new knowledge once you give it away. She was my role model, showing me how to be a leader and mentor.

In the late 1980s, the Singapore government realized the importance of employing better-educated early childhood teachers since children increasingly spend more time (often around 12 hours a day) in childcare centers when both parents work. Because of this, the government started providing incentives and funding for teachers to become better professionally equipped. I took advantage of such incentives and completed all the certification courses offered by the National Institute of Education to the level of a certified director. I was working and studying simultaneously and had the opportunity to implement what I was learning through courses in the classroom with children. I needed a new challenge after working with children ages two to 12 for six years. I was offered a position as the director of a welfare childcare center that collaborates with the Family Service Center to cater to disadvantaged and at-risk families. My mentor, Dr. Chen, told me it was time to take on this new challenge as she noticed I was 'rusting out' in my current position. With her encouragement, I took up a new challenge, which was a rough start. Katz (1972) described that preschool teachers go through four stages of developmental growth in their professional life: Stage 1- Survival, Stage 2 - Consolidation, Stage 3 - Renewal, and Stage 4 – Maturity (pp. 50-53). Although I was considered a teacher at stage 4 maturity by the time I left the Chartered Industries of Singapore, being a center director required a new set of skills compared to working with young children. I felt myself drowning in these deeper responsibilities, often transitioning from a teacher to a director and managing a center. Do not be discouraged if you are at this transition stage; you will rise above these challenges.

As I began this new position, Singapore started accepting students for its new Diploma in Early Childhood Education. I was privileged to be accepted into this pioneer program in 1996. Being a director of a full

daycare and attending classes part-time is not easy. I was often the first to open the center before 7 am and close the center after 7 pm.

After three years as a center director of a welfare daycare in Singapore, I was offered the position of principal of a kindergarten in Jakarta, Indonesia, catering to upper-income families who wanted their children to have a bilingual opportunity to learn English and Indonesian. Since I had mentored the senior teachers for leadership positions in the welfare daycare, I decided to take up this new overseas position. I promoted the senior teacher to replace me as center director in Singapore and became the kindergarten's principal in Indonesia. Being immersed in a completely new culture, I realized that what worked in Singapore might not transition as well due to cultural differences. Indonesian teachers appeared more laid back and less self-directive than those I worked with in Singapore. Since there was no professional training for preschool teachers in Indonesia, I conducted weekly meetings and training and started daily checklists to ensure task completion. This position required much handholding and learning about different cultures and systems.

Nevertheless, teachers bonded and learned quickly, and I soon saw their professional growth. I worked in Indonesia for one and a half years until the May 1998 riots in Indonesia consisted of mass violence, demonstrations, and civil unrest targeting ethnic Chinese. Being an Asian, I returned to Singapore for my safety as advised.

When I returned from Indonesia, a private country club approached me about becoming the program director for a playgroup, planning educational programs for families in the club. Since I thrive on challenges, I took up this new position and started a playgroup for toddlers 13 months to three years of age. During this time, the highest qualification attainable in early childhood was at the Diploma level in Singapore. I knew that I had to keep learning to grow professionally. Being an active member of the early childhood professional organization where Dr. Chen was the President, there was an initiative to start a Degree in Early Childhood Education in partnership with a university in Perth, Australia. I was privileged to be in this pioneer group again and had the opportunity to complete my bachelor's degree in early childhood in 2000. I also realized that I needed to leave the program director position at the country club as the club's vision and philosophy did not align with mine. Although the remuneration was higher, I felt this was not my calling. Dr. Chen supported my decision and offered me the role of professional development secretary at the Association for Early Childhood Educators Singapore (AECES). I took up the position and started providing professional development training for teachers taking their required early childhood certifications in Singapore.

While providing adult professional development training, I needed to be more equipped. Dr. Chen encouraged me to write to the Lee Foundation for financial support to take up my master's degree in early childhood. I was blessed to be funded, allowing me to complete my master's degree in Sydney in 2013. All these globetrotting educational pursuits gave me a unique opportunity to have a blended perspective of education in the East and West. Coming from an Asian educational perspective in class, where you speak when called upon and

transitioning into collaborative learning, problem-based learning was a massive change for me. I began to learn from keeping my voice in my head to speaking up to be heard. This aspect is still a work in progress as I am often afraid that my ideas might be submerged by more vital voices who may think my ideas are not good enough. If you are feeling likewise, do not be scared, as we each have unique perspectives and thoughts, and we need to speak up to be heard.

After completing my master's degree in Australia, I became the executive director of the Association for Early Childhood Educators, Singapore (AECES). This position allowed me to work with leaders and professionals in Singapore and countries such as Vietnam, China, Cambodia, Indonesia, Australia, and the United States. AECES invited a professor from the State University of New York at Buffalo to speak at one of our international conferences in late 2007. At this conference, I met my second mentor and lifelong friend, Dr. James Hoot. Although it was a one-week interaction, he saw something in me and offered me a scholarship for my Ph.D. in Early Childhood in Buffalo, New York. Would you believe it? I told him "No" because I was at the point when I thought I wanted to go into missionary work. He continued encouraging me for a month, even after returning to Buffalo. I told myself that I would consider it, and after praying and encouragement from family and friends, I embarked on my next journey in Buffalo.

It was a massive change for me from a tropical, warm country, Singapore, to a cold Buffalo. I remember flying and arriving on January 1, 2008, in cold, snowy winter Buffalo after about 26 hours of flight. This journey was an educational pursuit and a personal growth experience from dependence to independence, which began my next phase of life, living in the United States. Dr. Hoot became my advisor, guided me throughout my educational pursuit in Buffalo, and became another lifelong friend. After completing my Ph.D. in Buffalo, New York, in 2012, I started my career in higher education at Middle Tennessee State University.

From my story, you can see that each mentor had a different impact on the various seasons in my life. Below, I wanted an update on the voices of my two mentors and to thank and share with them how they have impacted my life.

VOICES FROM MENTORS

Dr. Christine Chen (Singapore)

Jane's story brings me back to when she, as a childcare teacher, held her voice in her head. Every afternoon, when the children were asleep, another new teacher who started working at the same time as Jane would come into my office and blurt out her experience for that morning and seek my input. But Jane was always in the classroom, and I had to go to her to ask for her reflections. Jane learned to speak up more; you would hear her voice before you saw her appear now.

When Jane went to Indonesia, I humbly learned from her. For example, my methods of relating to the teachers in Singapore did not work for the teachers in Indonesia. I would visit Jane in Jakarta occasionally and share a bedroom with mosquitoes. Jane was very good at catching mosquitoes. As for me, I murmured a monotonous voice like the mosquitoes and exposed my legs so that the mosquitoes would land on them. At that point, Jane would slap the mosquito! This way, Jane was a leader, guiding and caring for me. We had different roles in our journey; we had fun and used our strengths. Mentoring is reciprocal, and learning works both ways. We are both heroes and mentors.

Dr. James Hoot (Buffalo, New York)

I have always believed that children deserve the best this world offers. Our best chance of reaching this goal is to find a way for teachers of the world to share their successes and failures and develop research-based dispositions to become superb global teachers.

This philosophy greatly influenced my time at the State University of New York at Buffalo (SUNY Buffalo). In 1986, I accepted the position of Director of the Early Childhood Research Center at SUNY Buffalo. There, I had the honor of controlling eight assistantships for graduate students to pursue doctoral studies in Early Education while teaching in our childcare program. To achieve my global aspirations, I always tried to award most assistantships to promising students from countries outside the USA. In 2007, I was invited by a global powerhouse from Singapore (Dr. Christine Chen) to share my work at a conference organized by the organization (AECES) she founded. Having admired Dr. Chen's leadership in the global community, I was honored to accept her invitation. It was at this conference that I first met Jane Lim. From interactions with her in Singapore and the strongest recommendation I have ever received from a colleague, I began my quest to bring Jane to Buffalo. At our research center, Jane quickly earned the respect and admiration of students and faculty. Because of her competence and dedication to teaching, Jane was promoted to lead assistant and invited to teach one of our Child Development courses, where her student evaluations exceeded those of our regular faculty.

In addition to academic and leadership success at my university, Jane became active in the New York State Association for Childhood Education International, where she quickly became an inspiring leader. Through this organization, Jane became involved in the Association for Childhood Education International, the world's oldest professional organization for children. Jane's competence and global expertise in this organization resulted in her being elected as an officer of the Executive Board, and her leadership moved the organization in an even more global direction. From there, her legacy as an exemplary early childhood educator has continued to blossom.

The absolute best part of my 45-year teaching career has been the opportunity to play a small role in assisting promising students in obtaining positions that will allow them to impact hundreds of teachers in training who will have a lasting impact on the lives of the world's children. I will forever cherish the opportunity to get to know my *magnum opus*, colleague, and friend, Dr. Jane Lim!

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Chapter 3-6

It's All About the Framing: How Mentorship Shaped My Perspective as an Early Career Teacher

Rehab Ghazal

So, tell me about a time you failed.
Can it be personal?
Sure.
I failed to lose weight.
And what did you do?
I tried again and again.
Why do you consider it failure?
Because I haven't been able to reach my goal.
But you still try?
Yes.
Well, I see this as persistence, not failure.

Mona, personal communication, 1995

I had just graduated college with a degree in English, and during the interview for my first full-time job as a fifth-grade teacher, I learned a couple of lessons that I carried with me through my professional and personal life: First, I will only fail when I stop trying. Second, sometimes success and failure are a matter of perspective. During the interview, Mona, at the time a CELTA (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) trainer and consultant for the school I had applied to, helped me understand the importance of framing. At the time, she and her business partner, Aleya, were retained by the school to provide teacher training and supervise the English department faculty. Mrs. Aleya and Mrs. Mona, as my colleagues and I used to call them, continued to be part of

my personal and professional life, first as mentors and then as friends for over 15 years after that first interview. They are why I remained an educator for almost three decades, and I continue to use the techniques they showed me all those years ago. As I reflect on why my relationship with them had such an impact, I realize a few key factors: they allowed me the space to learn, make mistakes, and grow, they were a resource and always available, and we had shared trust.

We all know that the first years are crucial in forming our professional identity as teachers. After graduating college, we navigate a new career, experiment with pedagogy, and struggle to understand our new work environment (Eick, 2002; Flores, 2001). Not only did Mona and Aleya train me and my colleagues in lesson planning, classroom management, and correction techniques, but they also helped me explore my identity as a teacher and allowed me to better understand my strengths and areas of growth through classroom visits, questions, dialogue, constructive feedback, and constant encouragement to reflect, adapt, and then adopt new practices; I was able to find my space.

So, how were they a resource, and what did I learn from them? As a new teacher, my biggest challenges were classroom management and linking student engagement to outcomes. With minimal work experience and basic pedagogy, I designed lesson plans with activities I thought were interesting for the students. When the students failed to show the outcome I had intended, I felt that the lesson had failed; however, Mona and Aleya used reflective techniques and self-assessment questions that allowed me to focus on how to link the input to outcomes. This reflective process was new to me since I did not have formal teacher training before accepting the position. During one of the visits, while teaching *Around the World in Eighty Days*, I divided the class and gave each group a map to follow the route. The activity was successful; the students engaged with the material and had fun. I had not thought about anything other than it being interesting. However, in my follow-up conversation with Aleya, she asked what else the activity added to the lesson—How did it help the students better understand the text or engage with it on a deeper level? The questions were meant to engage me in reflective practices without criticizing my approach or crushing my spirit. It was one of those "aha" moments as a 22-year-old teacher. Mona and Aleya were the textbook definitions of mentors, according to Barrera and colleagues (2010). They were there not only to provide the support that would help me settle into the school, but they also provided structural support for me as a young professional to reflect on my classroom and teaching style and help me systematically develop an understanding of what works and what does not and determine why.

The first few years in one's career are critical in determining whether we, as new teachers, will remain or leave that position or the teaching profession. This contemplation was true for me. During my junior year in college, I was offered the opportunity to teach seventh-grade English. At the time, I had a great rapport with the students but no formal training or mentorship. A couple of my colleagues took me under their wings and supported me as I learned my way as a new teacher. Because of this experience, I decided to continue in the classroom.

Many of us choose education because we want to make a meaningful impact on the lives of our students (Taylor et al., 2014). This calling was especially true; I wanted to support my community and positively influence future generations. However, recent research reveals a growing challenge—fewer teachers enter and remain in the profession. Teacher retention has become a critical issue, particularly during the early years of one's career when many educators feel unsupported and unprepared to face the demands of the classroom. According to Redding and Henry (2019), only 38% of teachers remain in their positions after their third year. However, adequate support, observations, feedback, and positive professional development ethos result in new teacher retention. With appropriate mentorships and support, new teachers can shift from student teachers to career professionals (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

After that first year under Mona and Aleya's mentorship, I developed a stronger sense of self-confidence with a deep desire for learning and experimenting. I also committed to being an educator and started volunteering in teacher training programs Mona and Aleya ran that helped other teachers better understand their abilities and potential. Without proper mentorship and guidance, talented educators can become discouraged, feeling overwhelmed by the profession's demands.

New teachers must be allowed to experiment and explore innovative pedagogical approaches (Qadach et al., 2020). This exploration allowed me to grow and continue my career in education. This growth cannot happen without deep trust between new teachers, administration, and mentors, strong professional communication, and a safe work environment. My experience with Mona and Aleya shows the immense value of early mentorship. Their support helped me develop critical classroom management skills and reflective practices and transformed how I viewed teaching as a profession. They created a nurturing environment where experimentation was encouraged, learning from mistakes was seen as part of the growth process, and collaborating with colleagues was a sign of strength. This approach was crucial for my long-term commitment to teaching. New teachers can thrive through this structure—combining trust, feedback, and continuous professional development—ultimately ensuring their retention.

The mentorship I received extended beyond technical skills. Mona and Aleya were role models who embodied the qualities of effective leadership—compassion, communication, and collaboration. In addition, they, directly and indirectly, helped me to reframe challenges as opportunities; this ability to perceive obstacles differently allowed me to grow as a teacher and professor later on. As Tiplic (2015) points out, these characteristics play a vital role in teacher development and retention when paired with a supportive professional environment. By giving new teachers the space to explore, make mistakes, and grow, mentors can profoundly impact their mentees' careers and the entire educational ecosystem.

Mentorship does not just transform individual teachers; it has the potential to address larger systemic issues, including teacher shortages and burnout. By investing in the mentorship of early-career educators, avoiding pointing shortcomings, and encouraging reframing, schools, and districts can cultivate a more resilient, innovative,

and dedicated workforce. Mona and Aleya did not just shape my career trajectory; they demonstrated how impactful mentorship could be in sustaining teachers in the field for the long term. As we look at the future of education, I believe that fostering these mentoring relationships is key to addressing the ongoing challenges in teacher retention and ensuring that teachers like me continue to find fulfillment and purpose in their work.

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Chapter 3-7

Teaching is a Work of Heart

Christina Oats

It has been said that "We teach who we are" (Palmer, 1997, p. 15), and I could not agree more. When around others, especially students, they catch who we are as teachers and people. Yes, we teach students standards, skills, and curriculum as directed by state mandates. More importantly, I have found that students also grasp the personal nature of our identity, which they see throughout our daily interactions: our smiles, interest in their day, sharing of hobbies, mutual regard for sports, music, etc. Each of these interactions can be an entry point of connection made with students, showing care for them beyond that of only being a student and seeing them as a whole person.

Simon Sinek (2009) often says, "People do not care what you do, but *why* you do it" in his discussion of The Golden Circle. For me—a strong *why*—began very early in my childhood. I only recently realized that my first inspiration to teach came from my mother. Though not a teacher by trade, she instead worked several jobs as a single mother—from humble beginnings in the deli of Kroger to human resources at Centennial Hospital—she was indeed a teacher in heart, spirit, and approach. Always looking for the wonder in the world and ways to explore it with my brother, sister, and me, my mother had a keen and intuitive sense of knowing how to make learning fun. She knew how to connect it to our personal lives and thus made learning natural, active, and everyday occurrences. Learning should be experienced, sometimes by trial and error. My mother had a unique way of creating space for my siblings and me to fail forward in a safe environment. The space was not condescending; she approached failures with understanding and encouraged us to try and try again.

Regarding setbacks or heartache, my mother often said, "In every garden, a little rain must fall." I printed that quote on my first teaching binder as a reminder that unexpected pain or setbacks will happen. It is not a matter of *if* the pain will come but *when,* so the approach that I take in my response to pain is that it is the key difference maker.

I believe that it is my mother's heart, spirit, and love of learning that became the catalyst for my teaching career. Despite our heavy loss when she passed away in 2022, her inspiration still carries on deep within me and motivates me to serve students well—always rooted firmly in a place of love. My mother genuinely lived out her faith while being 'unnecessarily kind,' often quoting, "Kindness is love with its work boots on" (Wolf, 2008). Her impact on my life is remarkable, and I hope to continue translating and applying her lessons to benefit my students. In this way, I hope to be a champion for student success, both academically and at a more human level—in bolstering their sense of self and nurturing them with the confidence they need to move mountains they encounter throughout life.

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Chapter 4

Pivotal Moments in Careers

Chapter 4-1

Taking a Chance on Honors

Bonnie Barksdale

Education was never a priority in my home growing up. We did not grace the doors of the local library, nor did we engage in any summer enrichment activities within our southern, small-town community. I was told "if" I went to college, I would have to figure it out myself. Though never labeled as a "natural" or "passionate" about learning, I performed well in school. In high school, I had done well in one of my math courses and had the opportunity to take an honors class, so I decided to try it. That was when I met Mr. Watson (pseudonym), my new Algebra 2 honors teacher.

Mr. Watson was the essence of care. He was the teacher who looked me in the eye when he spoke and talked to me because he cared. Those conversations were not just to pass the time before the class started; they made me feel seen. He took time to explain the why of mathematics and not just the procedures. He invested his time in me, asking me about my future career or passions and making suggestions. Because of those questions and conversations, I learned and felt seen and cared for. Let me be clear: I not only learned, but I also flourished. Learning became fun, and I was encouraged to stretch my wings and accomplish more than the path set for me by my parents. I longed to stretch beyond my small town.

Mr. Watson's influence helped drive my passion for learning, leading me to who I am today. Although none of my degrees are in mathematics, he inspired me to learn and share my passions to inspire others. He saw me as that lost teenager, unsure of herself or her path in life, and he saw my potential. He was that trusted adult and mentor that I needed at that point in my life. Mr. Watson listened to me and suggested pursuing teaching after listening to how much I enjoyed working with children. He encouraged me to think beyond myself and to make an impact on the world.

As a novice teacher, I did my best to make it through the day, getting all the lessons taught and assessments completed. I did not think I did a good job making connections, or so I thought. A few years ago, a former first-grade student reached out to me on a social media platform after more than twenty years in education. He was about to graduate with his master's degree in mathematics and get married. He thanked me for being one of his favorite teachers, for seeing him and encouraging him to find answers to his questions. Using what I learned from Mr. Watson, I was able to help a young student realize that he could drive his learning and rise to his dreams.

When I think about our MTSU (Middle Tennessee State University) slogan of *Difference Makers,* I always think about Mr. Watson. He made a difference in my life, and I use that influence even with my current students to inspire them daily. He taught me to see people for who they are (as he saw me) and make connections, so I start each class with "celebrations." Such connections are an opportunity for students and teachers to share anything in their lives that is noteworthy or significant, like having a birthday or adopting a new dog. I can learn many things about my students through celebrations and develop a sense of community in the classroom. He also taught me to look to others for help or inspiration. I often share inspirational quotes in class to make deeper connections with students. Many students print out the quotes and put them on their laptops! This action is a visual example of the impact that has been made on students' lives through the mentorship and teaching of Mr. Watson through me. I hope my teaching makes students feel seen, heard, and valued. I want to be the teacher for others that Mr. Watson was for me.

The last time I saw Mr. Watson was my wedding day. Many years after graduation, I tracked him down and asked him to perform my wedding ceremony. It was an amazing experience to have my mentor perform this ceremony, joining me and my spouse, the love of my life, while I was in college pursuing my teaching degree. Upon my graduation, I sent him an announcement and got a sweet letter back from him with words of encouragement and pride. He sadly passed away before I was able to tell him that I earned my doctorate in education, but in my heart, I know he already knows.

Chapter 4-2

Pivotal Paradigms

Beverly Joan Boulware

At the beginning of my teaching career, my goal was to help children learn. I focused on outcomes and wanted to see my students grow academically. I lived and dreamed of the "aha" moments from each student. I desired to see my students' excitement in learning to read texts, examine maps, discuss places they wanted to explore, and use resources to find answers to problems. As I reflect on my career, three pivotal paradigms have shaped the educator I am today. My initial goal remained, but in what follows, I share these stories to frame pivotal moments that may be lessons for others.

PARADIGM 1: IT IS NOT THE GIFT; IT IS THE LOVE OFFERED

As a teacher, the stakeholders I served included my employers, the community, and my students' parents. These groups wanted the learners to grow and master all subject areas each year. Specifically, parents wanted their children to excel and perform at grade level and above. On the other hand, the elementary learners in my classes often did not seem to understand that, as their teacher, I was focused on their academic success. They were often distracted but intent on pleasing me rather than producing the work I had assigned.

My initial teaching experiences were with classes of first and second graders. The students were precious and took immense joy in creating things for me. In fact, instead of completing their assignments, some would draw things for me that I could display in the classroom or at home. I struggled with this dilemma. I needed to know how to affirm the children while impressing them on more important things. I wanted them to focus on the academic tasks I assigned rather than work on artwork to give to me. Meanwhile, I smiled as I graciously received their gifts. However, in my heart, I knew my job was not to inspire them to create but to motivate them to learn the assigned content.

One day, as I was talking to my friend Bill (pseudonym), a professional clarinet player, he told me he had a similar problem. Practicing his instrument was essential to him. He spent hours alone with his musical scores to master the difficult part he needed to play in orchestral concerts. His problem was people who loved and cared for him were intent on distracting him from practicing by bringing him snacks and/or drinks during his work sessions.

Those who play the clarinet understand the instrument's keys have pads that can stick, rot, and need replacement if food is blown into the horn. It was important for Bill not to eat during practice sessions so the pads on his instrument would remain in stellar condition when he played the clarinet. A clear, lovely sound needed to proceed from the instrument, which would only be possible if no muck or dirt were allowed to accumulate inside the instrument.

As Bill and I shared, we discovered a common theme. The people, my primary-age students, and his friends wanted to let us know they cared. Bill and I focused on the products important to us, not the people who gave us something they thought would make us happy. As Bill and I talked, we realized that those around us, the children in my class, and his friends were trying to give us something from their hearts they believed would bless us. Their gifts were well-meaning. In this pivotal moment, we both learned to affirm the love offered.

More examples

Through the years, I have received numerous gifts, including one from a precious elementary student who brought me the plastic bride and groom from her parents' wedding cake. Her mother gave it to her to save for her wedding cake when she married. The child wanted me to have it so I could put it on my wedding cake. In all honesty, I did not want to take the gift, but I graciously received the love she offered, for she genuinely wanted me to have this figurine. I took the gift and stored it out of sight for the entire year. At the end of the year, I gave the plastic bride and groom figurine back to the child. She was sad because she thought I needed it. I then thanked her for letting me keep her lovely gift until the end of the school year. I told her I was giving it back to her because it was important to her mother for her child to use it on her wedding cake when she grew up.

On a separate occasion, another elementary student came to class and told me her mother had made the best apple pie for dinner the previous night. She asked her mom if she could take some to her teacher (me). Her mom said there was not enough for anyone else, so the child hid a few handfuls in her pocket to share the delicious pie with me. When the child pulled the crumbled pieces out of her pocket, they were sticky and messy. The girl was incredibly sad because the pie pieces did not look nice. In her sadness, she apologized and told me she thought the pie would still taste great. Again, I accepted the love offered and thanked the child for bringing me part of her dessert. I displayed the pie pieces on my desk for the rest of the day and told her I would save the pie for later.

A third incident occurred when a third-grade boy brought a diamond ring to class. Yes, it was a real diamond. I was aghast. Now, dealing with this situation was touchy. I acknowledged the child's love and his feelings. I told him this gift was inappropriate as the expensive wedding ring belonged to someone. In questioning him, I found out he had taken his mother's diamond ring from the dresser in his parents' bedroom. In my call to his mother, she told me she was relieved the diamond was no longer missing. This treasure had been given to her by her husband and was of the utmost importance. As I talked with the little boy, I affirmed his good intentions and let him know his actions were not good because he had stolen from his mother.

It is not the gift; it is the love offered

I believe most teachers of elementary children find themselves in similar situations. We tell our students about the importance of their work and emphasize the necessity of continually building on what they are learning. We instruct them in critical thinking skills and encourage them to try new and diverse ways of doing things. However, as teachers, we provide our students with instruction in many subjects, and they also desire to give something back to us. To summarize pivotal paradigm one, I learned to graciously receive my students' gifts and, more importantly, accept the love they offered.

PARADIGM 2: NOTHING LEARNED, NOTHING TAUGHT

Being a performance-orientated teacher, I thought through lessons, wrote my plans, and attached sticky notes to the text I planned to emphasize. On the way to school, I often rehearsed what I would say about the concepts I would teach that day. In addition, I was intent on securing all the materials I would need so they would be available for my lessons. All the above is good, but the emphasis was off. In my mind, teaching revolved around me and how I would deliver the content I believed the students needed at any given time.

This pivotal moment came one day as I was listening to the radio in my car to a former headmaster of a school in Africa. As this headmaster shared one of his teaching experiences, he talked about a time when he felt he had planned the greatest lesson, used incredible visuals in the context of the lesson to illustrate the concept taught, and thoroughly enjoyed delivering his lecture. Great disappointment followed because after the headmaster assessed his students, he saw they failed the exam portion related to what he thought had been taught.

It is so easy for us as teachers to work hard and develop something that looks good. We can use beautiful supplementary materials and keep our students' attention while delivering lessons. If our students cannot show us they learned from our instruction, we have taught them nothing.

You have only taught when they learn

My focus shifted that day as I listened to this wise man share his story. From that day on, the lessons I planned were not about how I would deliver content or even the great resources I would bring to the class. My instruction

changed as I intentionally targeted the students' learning rather than my teaching. Delivery of lessons remained important to me, but intentional time was spent on constructing activities involving oral and written responses that would produce evidence of the students' understanding of the concepts taught. In addition, anecdotal notes and checklists were added to document students' learning. To summarize pivotal paradigm two, I learned education is not about the teacher but about imparting and then documenting what students learned.

PARADIGM 3: I AM AN AUTHORITY ON WHAT I KNOW

There has been an inner struggle in the beginning years of my teaching career and, to some extent, even now. As the years have passed, I have become increasingly confident the knowledge base I have acquired and used in teaching others is usually effective. However, in saying this, there is always more to learn. Musings sometimes happen when I ask myself: "Do I really know enough to teach this or that? Is there enough mastery of the concepts I am assigned to teach that I will be able to answer all the questions my students may ask?"

Some years ago, while talking with one of my mentors, who is now deceased, I shared my insecurities. She peered over her reading glasses at me and said, "You are an authority on what you know. Just share what you know. If you do not know something, do not pretend to talk about what you do not know." In her matter-of-fact way, this teacher, who I respected, spoke words that made an essential adjustment in my life. I learned from her that I did not need to be ashamed of what I did not know. I needed to be confident that I was an authority on what I knew. This realization was pivotal for me as I began my teaching career.

Reflecting one day on the above paradigm of being an authority on what I know, I realized I am not an authority on what anyone else knows. This perspective, too, is an important truth to impart to learners of all ages. I have paired young people together and asked them to look into the eyes of the person sitting next to them. I then told them to speak to their neighbor, "I am an authority on what I know." Next, I instructed their partner to repeat the same words to their classmate. The following part of the exercise included asking the pairs of students in the class to tell each other, "I am not an authority on what you know."

Without exception, each time I have done this activity with learners, they seem to enjoy telling their peers about what they know. On one occasion, a youngster was able to share about different kinds of tractors with the girl sitting next to him. His classmate did not know the specific names of the vehicles but was impressed and wanted to learn more. Another child told his friend about insects he had collected. He followed up by bringing his box of dead bugs to class so all his friends could see his bugs.

I am an authority on what I know

Wonderful discussions can arise as students become increasingly free to share what they know and to receive knowledge from their teachers and classmates. We are all authorities on what we individually know. To summarize pivotal paradigm three, our learners need to value what they have learned and respect the knowledge

their teachers and classmates carry. As our students internalize paradigm three, they can understand the importance of listening and even, to some extent, honoring what others know. Our students can learn, "I am an authority on what I know."

FINAL THOUGHTS

In sharing three of the pivotal paradigms from my teaching career with readers, it is my wish that these stories may benefit you. Likewise, may the stories that have occurred or will happen during your careers in education be lessons for others.

Chapter 4-3

Enacting Compassion in the Classroom

Melody J. Elrod

Docendo discimus: to teach is to learn. The two are intertwined. Teaching is a calling, a vocation. Teaching is how I earn my living and who I am as a person. Effective teaching requires continuous learning. I have learned from every class I have taught. Sometimes, those lessons have been simple: a new way to think about a problem or concept. Other times those lessons have changed me at a deeper level. These more profound lessons have made me the teacher I am today. Three such lessons stand out as pivotal moments in my development as an educator.

Each of these lessons is associated with a specific person(s) whose experiences triggered a paradigm shift in my thinking about learning and teaching. In the following sections, I tell those stories to frame my work as a teacher. I present these experiences as stories because stories are at the very heart of our existence, connecting us with one another. "The call of stories… inspires us to find language that is adequate to the darkness and obscurity of experience. We narrate to make sense of ourselves and our experiences over the course of time" (Bochner, 2001, p. 154-155). These stories make sense of my pedagogical beliefs and actions.

In the telling of these stories, I have responsibilities to the reader, to myself, and to the participants in those stories. To the reader, I must disclose the possibly triggering content of one or more of the stories. As they are based on the story of my life and have been painful to me, I recognize they may be equally painful to others. I included them, however, because despite their upsetting content, these experiences have taught me invaluable lessons and will also hopefully have value for the reader.

To the reader, to myself, and to the participants who have taught me much, I also have the responsibility of portraying stories truthfully, even when a story is not portrayed literally (word-for-word) (Clough, 2002). In telling these stories, I cannot seek objectivity, and so I must seek authenticity. I must recognize story ownership

and, when possible, gain agreement about the veracity of the story told. "One of the key questions about research is the political one: Who owns the knowledge, and thus who can define the reality?" (Reason, 1994, p. 325). To honor the ownership of the stories and the anonymity of their owners, I have used pseudonyms for the first two stories, both of which occurred more than 25 years ago and whose participants no longer have any connection to me. The last story (about my own children) required me to gain agreement from my participants, not only for the telling of the story, but the veracity of its content. Even if I were not a participant in the story, my attempt to tell it introduces my own bias (Bochner, 2001). After writing my first draft, I sent the story to my sons to read and asked if they were comfortable with its content and with it being shared under my name. Both agreed freely and agreed that it was truthful.

MATTHEW

Early in my career, I began working as a mentor for a university office that provided services to students with disabilities. In that role, I began to understand that all students need educators who think deeply about instruction, modifications, and accommodations. Later, I worked as an academic mentor to Matthew, a student with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Though labels such as ADD or ADHD are often used to explain the behavioral and academic challenges of students of all ages, I learned through my work with Matthew just how severe that particular disorder can be. For Matthew, his all-encompassing attention to everything caused him to be unable to filter out unneeded or distracting information and stimuli to focus on the essential elements of academic work. Though there are medications to help manage this condition, those medications often have unwanted side effects like the dulling of one's thinking and creativity. Matthew was unwilling to take medication that would dampen such abilities. Instead, I was assigned as his mentor to help him meet deadlines, coordinate his schedule, and generally assist him in meeting his academic goals.

One year, an arsonist started a fire just down the hall from Matthew's dorm room. The other boys on his floor looked out into the hall, saw the smoke, and retreated to their windows, where the fire department rescued them. Matthew, however, was unable to filter out all the stimuli, fear, and anxiety and proceeded into the hallway. Unable to see through the dense, black smoke, he could find neither the stairwell door nor his bedroom door and collapsed in the hallway, overwhelmed by the smoke. Matthew died in the hospital later that day. I know I am not to blame. The authorities ruled the fire as arson and prosecuted the perpetrator. Still, I have often wondered whether he would have survived if we had been able to focus more on the life skills he needed to filter stimuli and focus on the critical information rather than only working to catch up on the work he inevitably missed due to all the distractions. That year, I learned that academic work is not the most important. I also learned that every student deserves a teacher who can look beyond her subject and see her students as people.

MÙCHÉN

After graduating with my bachelor's degree, I began a master's program in Special Education, not necessarily to be a special educator, but because I believed all teachers should have a grounding in the different ways students think and learn. My work experience with disability services showed me how destructive it can be to students' confidence, motivation, and life skills when teachers lack the training to empathize and implement needed accommodations and modifications. While pursuing that degree, I worked as a middle school mathematics teacher. During that year, I had a student from Asia, Mùchén, who had moved to the U.S. only weeks before. My heart went out to Mùchén. He had changed countries, cultures, languages, and parents (transitioning from life with one parent to another), and, as if life were not confusing enough, his birth name, which would likely be difficult for many Americans to pronounce easily, was changed to an American name. I could not imagine how it must feel for a young boy to undergo all these changes simultaneously. Even as a bystander, I was overwhelmed. I arranged to meet with him and his mother outside of school hours. I began by asking him what he would prefer to be called. When he indicated a preference for Mùchén, I asked him to teach me how to say it correctly and invited him to use his native language to write his name on his papers. I also asked him to help me create some multilingual posters for our classroom that included the notation and vocabulary for the mathematics we would do that year. I do not know whether my efforts made a difference in Mùchén's life. I do know that he was never teased or ridiculed in my classroom. I also know that other students asked him intelligent questions about the posters and symbols we hung on the walls. For those reasons, I am glad I took the time to work with him.

My time as Mùchén's teacher taught me that many students need accommodations, not only students who qualify under special education labels. Even as I was studying learning and behavioral disorders in my graduate program, I was learning from Mùchén that students' difficulties in school originate from more than labeled disorders. I learned that students who are hurting, anxious, or afraid will often be unable to advocate for themselves. Every student deserves a teacher who is also an advocate open to ways she can create a safer space for all students. Through my graduate program and my work as Mùchén's teacher, I became more aware of the individual needs of each student, regardless of labels assigned by counselors or special educators.

MY BOYS

About five years ago, I undertook a new role in my personal life. I became a foster parent. I have always wanted to be a parent. Because my life has not led to a traditional route in becoming one, I decided to take on the role of temporary parent for adolescents who are no longer living with their biological families. In caring for–and eventually adopting–these young men, I have learned a lot about how they interact with their world and the many obstacles they face due to how the world interacts with them. Though it came as no surprise that victims of abuse and neglect have behavioral and mental health problems, I learned that they are also more susceptible to physical

illness, especially in their digestive tracts and nervous systems. As a foster/adoptive mother, I spent a lot of time in school administrative offices, hospitals, doctor's offices, and pharmacies.

There are many stories I could tell to illustrate how my kids interacted differently with the educational sphere, but one in particular always comes to mind. I was called to the principal's office of my oldest son's high school. Finishing work a little earlier than I intended (and somewhat frustrated about that), I drove to the school and checked in at the front office. My son sat in the reception area, so I sat beside him. I asked him what happened, but he would not talk to me. This response was not unusual for him, so I left it alone and waited quietly with him. When the principal called us to his office, I listened as the principal told me what happened. My son had been called to his office earlier that day for a verbal altercation with another student. When the principal tried to confront him, my son called him an inappropriate name and left the office. When the principal called him back, he would not return, and instead, he kept walking through the halls. The principal informed me that this type of behavior could not be tolerated in their school.

What I heard in his telling of the story was that my son chose distance over violence. He decided to walk away. I knew his gut response would be to strike out physically, as his early experience had taught him. I knew that he experienced extreme anxiety and paranoia in educational settings due to the multitude of disciplinary experiences he had in past schools. I also knew that he had not yet developed the words to explain himself rationally and calmly, so walking away was remarkable progress for him. I told the principal, "What I just heard you say was that he chose to gain distance rather than reacting violently. I'm really proud of him." The principal was not impressed, nor was he empathetic. My son did not last much longer in that school. Regardless, I hope (then and now) that my son heard me stand up for him, even if I did not have the power to change things for him at that moment.

What I learned (and am still learning) through this part of my life is that everyone has a story—sometimes a hard, painful, or harrowing story–that I cannot possibly fully understand.

Indeed, I still do not know all of my sons' stories. These stories are not mine to know, just as my sons' backgrounds and traumas could not (and should not) be told to everyone they encountered.

Every student deserves the dignity of their own story and the right to tell that story or not. Further, every student's story alters their reactions, social interactions, and academic behavior. When I encounter a behavior or reaction in an academic setting that seems outside the norms I am familiar with, I need to zoom out from my own experience and consider that this student's perspective may be one I cannot understand.

LESSONS LEARNED, COMPASSION ENACTED

Through all three of these pivotal lessons in my life, I have learned that teaching transcends subject matter. As a teacher, it is my job to be compassionate and not allow bias, stereotyping, or discomfort to affect how I work

with the students I encounter. I do not need to know every story, but I need to recognize that there is always more to a student than what I can see in a classroom. Though my subject is mathematics, my pedagogical beliefs and actions move beyond mathematical study. As such, I design instruction and assessments carefully and compassionately.

Because I believe every student has a unique set of experiences that endow them with meaningful and useful ideas, mentalities, and knowledge, I do not lecture. Lecturing creates a classroom hierarchy that "labels students as successful or unsuccessful and provides little room for change" (Boaler & Staples, 2008, p. 629). When the only voice heard in the classroom is my own, I become the central mathematical figure. Likewise, when my understanding becomes the only acceptable understanding, students whose thinking or organization differ from mine can feel unsuccessful or incorrect. Instead of setting myself as the central mathematical mind in my classroom through lecture, I carefully choose mathematical problems that students can access from multiple points of view and levels of experience. I also seat students in groups so that their diverse intellects and experiences can complement one another in solving those problems. In doing so, I acknowledge the understanding and problem-solving skills students have already developed through previous experience. By becoming a class moderator—rather than a lecturer—I also recognize the disparate ways students organize information in their minds and use that thinking to build our whole-class discussions.

Every student also has a personal level of comfort in social and academic settings and a need to express themselves mathematically within our learning community (McKeachie, 2011). When teaching a class that included Mùchén, I needed to recognize that he was mathematically able and socially limited because English was not his first language. Though my son struggled with classroom norms, I have seen at home that he is intelligent, curious, and willing to work. For both boys, multiple modalities are needed in the classroom to gather information about their understanding.

To accommodate the bold, extroverted student and the anxious, quiet student, and all those in between, I collect students' thinking using multiple platforms. I invite students to contribute to whole-class work on an interactive screen or whiteboard in our classroom. They can also contribute information anonymously through a collaborative electronic platform. Other students may be more comfortable sharing only within their groups and allowing others to speak for them. I consider these contributions equally when assessing students' participation and understanding during instruction. Outside class, students also have in-person, electronic, and anonymous means of communicating with me to ask questions, make suggestions, or lodge complaints.

University life in 2024 differs greatly from university life when I was a student. In the current educational climate, it is common for students to work full-time jobs, support their families, struggle with mental health issues, and grapple with their physical health. As a society, we have made university degrees a necessary part of many jobs, so students who might have chosen another path often find themselves working towards a degree amid many other responsibilities or challenges. This type of divide between the personal and the academic was

evident when working with Matthew. Though he did not work or have responsibility for a family, his mind would not allow him to focus only on academics, and he missed deadlines and classes, even when he worked hard to dedicate himself to school. Because I cannot (and should not) know the needs and stressors of every student, I work to balance grading policies that make missing a few classes or assignments less impactful and stressful. In this way, I strive to help students achieve a healthy work, life, and school balance.

In all of my pedagogical decisions, I work to be compassionate, fair, and willing to work with all students, honoring the complexities and vagaries of their lives. The stories of Matthew, Mùchén, and my boys shaped how I view my students and vocation. I will be ever grateful to them. It is my job, and my dearest hope, to continue teaching compassionately, actively learning about my students and my subject, and seeking ways to make my classroom a safer, more accessible space.

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Chapter 4-4

You Are Not Alone

Heather K. Dillard

I stood alone in my very first classroom, unsure where to begin. The ninth-grade students were coming the following day, and I had no idea what I would teach. I had spent the past week preparing my classroom. The previous teacher had retired and left everything behind for me. Instead of walking into an empty room, I had inherited another teacher's left-behind career, and it was overwhelming. I chose a corner to begin clearing and threw away more things than I kept. Little by little, I progressed and began uncovering the contents of my moving boxes. Now I stood in my newly decorated classroom, excited to be here finally, and I had no idea where to begin teaching. It seems funny now. I had done so much work to prepare for this day but had given so little thought to the contents of the lessons I would be teaching. I picked up the geography textbook assigned to this course. Opening chapter 1, I thought, "I guess I will start here."

I made my next decision very haphazardly, yet it set me on a path that would ultimately shape my professional career. I walked next door to the other new teacher and asked, "What will you teach this week?" Although I do not recall what she said, what we did in that moment profoundly affected me. We began to co-labor.

It was August 1998, and neither of us knew of the work of Rick DuFour and Robert Eaker or the book they had just released outlining the Professional Learning Communities at Work model. We did not think we needed to focus on learning rather than teaching. We had no idea how to focus on data rather than on good intentions. What Michelle and I knew was that we needed one another. That day, we began building a collaborative culture that would dominate my career. This one element has propelled me to any success I have had in this career.

ALONE IN A CROWD

Throughout my teacher preparation courses, I do not recall hearing about the loneliness that can occur for teachers in the classroom. Having been employed since I was 15, I have a very strong work ethic. But this was my first professional job. At age 23, I was unprepared for the overwhelming pressure of responsibility for other people's success. I was surrounded by people every day, just as I had been in my fast-food job, but as the teacher, I was the only authority in the classroom. When the door closed, I was alone in a crowd. I could not have remained in that state had I not consciously decided to work with others. Although I enjoyed my time with the students, those moments of collaboration with my peers fueled me to carry on when I struggled.

THE COLLABORATIVE JOURNEY BEGAN

When Michelle and I began co-laboring, we walked across the hallway to invite the veteran teacher to work with us. It did not take long for us to recognize that he had no interest in collaborating with us. He had made lesson plans for the year. I was too green to become offended by his words. We walked back across the hallway and got to work. Although that school year was stressful and exhausting, it was manageable because I decided to work interdependently with my colleague. We created common goals for our work and held one another mutually accountable for those goals.

I vividly recall the afternoon Michelle called me to say, "You are not holding up your end of the deal." I do not recall what specifically she spoke of, but I remember my next actions. I hung up the phone, put on my shoes, and walked immediately to the car. I arrived back at the school within minutes and completed the task for which she expressed her concerns. We never had cross words about that event. Instead, we trusted one another enough to speak candidly with one another. I grew exponentially in my content knowledge that year. Not only did we benefit from this arrangement, but our students also learned more as a result.

THE COLLABORATIVE JOURNEY FORMALIZED

Job changes separated Michelle and me a few short years later, and I found myself in a brand-new school in a different district. I hurriedly found the other seventh-grade Geography teacher and introduced myself to him. I was a bit more reserved as I approached Rick. I wondered if he would respond to me as Michelle had done or "What's His Name" across the hall. I found him to be a kind and willing partner. Neither of us needed a collaborative partner at this point in our careers. We knew how to fill the space of time provided for each class. Occasionally, we would offer one another a needed resource or idea, but that was the extent of our collaborative efforts.

Then came the day the school introduced us to a 3-letter acronym, letters carefully cut out by the die-cut machine hanging above the library door. Our principal explained we have one day each week to collaborate in a

PLC (Professional Learning Community). But what did the letters mean, and why were we asked to visit this room to do it?

We dutifully met there each Thursday, answering the questions on the minutes page as expected. I enjoyed this time because Rick was one of the funniest teachers I knew. Collectively making our quizzes and tests was helpful to both of us. However, I still had no depth of understanding of the PLC process. Nor did I realize that one of the two men who developed this process lived only minutes away from us.

THE COLLABORATIVE JOURNEY EXPANDED

Growth in our school brought a brand-new teacher to our team. The school asked Rick to teach seventh and eighth-grade classes, and Rachael moved into his old room. I instantly liked Rachael's fun and bubbly spirit. Rick's planning period did not align with ours that year. It was a rarity for all three of us to work collaboratively during Rachael's first year. As the first few weeks passed, I noticed a decline in Rachael's spirit; she seemed stressed, and I wanted to help her. Sitting together, I began giving her everything I had planned for each week. Although the school only required us to meet one day per week, we started meeting every day during our second-period planning time. As the students left for their elective period, we would gravitate toward either of our classrooms and discuss how the previous period had played out. Each of us taught five sections of World Geography. Therefore, the first period was a "practice" period to try the plans we had developed the previous day and refine the process in the second period.

During Rachael's first year, her struggles began to lessen as her confidence grew. She returned in year two, ready to be an equal partner in our co-laboring efforts. We could reflectively look at our plans from the previous year as we considered our plans each week. Little by little, our trust in one another grew. I recognized her strengths as a teacher and often complimented my weaknesses. We joined our students during class time for a joint lesson on several occasions. Even though the classroom was not technically large enough to accommodate that many students, they did not complain. They seemed to enjoy the atmosphere we created as we co-taught in those times.

THE COLLABORATIVE JOURNEY ORGANIZED

By this point in my career, I had worked in a school that identified itself as a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for several years. Other than the three letters on the wall, I had not been formally trained in the *PLC at Work*® process (for details on this approach, see DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Having benefitted from the process, I wanted to understand it better and began to steer my doctoral studies toward that goal. As I read more about this approach, I could see elements of the "Three Big Ideas" of a PLC at Work in what Rachael, Rick, and I were doing. Although it would be years before I understood how much deeper we could have gone, we would stress the importance of the Focus on Learning, Big Idea number one, to the best of our ability. We were experts at Big

Idea number two, Collaborative Culture, and strived to grow our understanding of the third Big Idea, which is to be Data Driven.

We collectively decided upon our weekly learning targets and gave a quiz at the end of each week. When we gave a common formative assessment, we collectively analyzed the data and never grew competitive with one another. Rather, we used the data to drive our future decisions for learning. The school had one period per day for teachers to meet with students. One day per week, each core teacher was given priority to pull their students for remediation and enrichment (R & E). After looking at the data, we would divide the students into three lists: students who needed extensive remediation, those who only had a few misconceptions on a specific topic, and those who needed enrichment. It made no difference if the student was officially enrolled in my class, Rachael's class, or Rick's class; we drew from all three roll sheets when we made these lists. During the R&E period, students went to one of our three rooms to receive what they needed. This system worked beautifully for teachers and students alike.

THE COLLABORATIVE JOURNEY DIVERTS AND EXPANDS

As I completed my doctoral work, I recognized that one of the *PLC at Work*® founders, Dr. Robert Eaker, lived in my hometown. After an initial meeting to gain clarity for my dissertation, I began to meet with Dr. Eaker periodically for more insights. He agreed to serve on my dissertation committee and was instrumental in preparing me to transition from the K-12 classroom into higher education. I joined the Womack Educational Leadership Department faculty at Middle Tennessee State University in the fall of 2013. I began teaching the Schools as Professional Learning Communities course the next fall.

Now, I am blessed with opportunities to work with pre-service teachers, new teachers, veteran teachers, and school-level and district-level administrators. Regardless of their years of service or position, the need to work collaboratively in this profession remains. When groups of professionals learn in a community, the students directly benefit from it. Twenty-seven years have passed since that first day with Michelle, and "What's His Name" and I wonder where his path led him. I am thankful I chose not to walk his path alone but to co-labor in a community with several amazing educators. That pivotal moment in time thoroughly enriched my life and career.

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Chapter 4-5

Grow From What You Go Through

Christina Oats

"Every expert was once a beginner."

Rutherford B. Hayes

What a humbling phrase as I reflect on my 11th year of teaching. At this point in my career, I feel blessed to have served over 1,500 students and their families. Yet, that is not to say the journey was easy or without struggle. Despite the challenges, the rewards have been well worth the growing pains. Many trials and triumphs have been woven together in this beautiful tapestry of adventure in self-discovery, developing confidence, and building relationships that last a lifetime.

Everyone starts somewhere. I firmly believe that the place in which one starts is equally as important as one's posture during the process of growth. My teaching journey was certainly one of humble beginnings. My journey began not in a designated classroom of my own but in several classrooms and school buildings across the county as a substitute teacher. Most students graduate in the springtime. However, as a December graduate (and one with a non-typical major: Interdisciplinary Studies K-6), I had a unique entry point into the teaching profession. I had resolved to bloom where I was planted—starting as a substitute teacher—even if that meant starting in a position I had not previously considered. The opportunities that substituting gave me outweighed any other, even those in a classroom of my own, as I was able to fluctuate between grade bands, spend time in various school climates, and ultimately decide which school community would be one in which I could see myself contributing as a full-time teacher. As I continued to serve faithfully in the capacity of a substitute teacher (and actively applying for teaching positions, of course), a door of opportunity began to swing open, thus inviting me to teach fifth grade the following school year in the school in which I had student taught and thankfully had a fabulous mentor teacher.

Eager to begin teaching, I gladly accepted the position that, at the time, was contingent upon the timing of the teacher's maternity leave. As the teacher was not due until November, I would continue substituting. When the time came, I would eventually take over as the classroom teacher for the remainder of her maternity leave. Or so I thought. August began, and since substituting vacancies then were virtually non-existent at the beginning of the school year, I asked the principal if I could shadow the teacher for which I would be covering the maternity interim for the first days of school to get a feel and bird's eye view of how a school year began. He kindly agreed, and from that point on, the teacher and I continued in close contact in preparation for her maternity leave. September came, and everything changed, but not as poetically as seasons. I received a call from the teacher, who informed me that her doctor had placed her on early bed rest and asked if I would meet her at school to review plans. Shocked but still yearning to teach, I agreed. After substituting that Friday, I drove to school that afternoon, which eventually turned into late evening as we prepared for the upcoming weeks. From updating the teacher website to following IEPs (Individualized Education Programs), I quickly got up to speed on the logistics of *what* expectations awaited me in her absence. While she assured me that we would remain in close contact throughout her absence, I wondered if and *how* this would all still be possible to accomplish given the abrupt notice and expedited change of plans. As I drove away from school, well past 11:00 p.m., my head was swimming with the reality of what Monday would bring. And, boy, did it bring a lot.

I arrived at school early that following Monday in September. The air was beginning to become crisp with the much-anticipated autumn. I felt like this was my moment, and I became determined to make this a successful year despite the unpredictable circumstances that placed me there. Standing at the doorway, I greeted students as they entered. Some students exchanged smiles with me, while others still seemed concerned about whether their beloved teacher was gone or, perhaps, she was just out for the day. As students settled into their seats, I introduced myself and could feel the tsunami of their nerves and mine. I assured them that I would care for them and that their teacher was resting at home to prepare for her new baby. I immediately sensed that their teacher was irreplaceable in their hearts and lives. I empathized with their sentiment and tried to serve them well through many trials and errors. I hoped that one day, my students would hold such high regard for me as their beloved teacher, but I quickly learned that the students' admiration of their teacher is one of deep cultivation, starting from day one. This cultivation took time, and I desired to learn more about the process to develop it. By the end of my time there that year in February, I had an entirely different outlook on approaching my classroom: relationships before rigor. But *how*? I knew firsthand now that this was an important piece to effective teaching, yet the starting point remained elusive.

I continued to substitute from February until May while applying for teaching positions in a very competitive season. I attended teacher career fairs and updated my résumé, but the full-time teaching position I thought intended for me did not come to fruition as expected. So many interviews. So much anticipation. So much hope. My heart sank more and more with each rejection. So many other teacher friends of mine were receiving their first full-time teaching position, beginning their second, or perhaps even their third. I felt so

behind. Why was this happening to me? What did I do wrong? Am I not called to teach? These questions plagued me for some time, but I persevered through spiritual guidance and patience. Then, as if smiling in anticipation like a child at Christmas, I finally received the calling I was waiting for: a job offer. There were two. The first position was a long-term substitute teacher position, which then turned into an educational assistant for math in the special education department of a middle school. The second position included serving as a Reading Specialist and homework tutor for Power Hour at the Boys and Girls Club. As I was living on my own, I desperately needed both jobs to be able to stay afloat financially. I had thought it best to work full-time as an educational assistant during the school day and then work part-time in the afternoons at the Boys and Girls Club.

Middle school *and* math? Helping with homework after an already taxing day? Not exactly what I had envisioned, but I would take the opportunity to evolve as an educator and eventually as a person. During my time in these roles, I learned to see students more wholly. In working with small groups, I gained the necessary tools to engage with learners on a one-to-one basis and meet them where they were academically and, oftentimes, emotionally. This was it; I truly started to feel the connection I sought and knew was possible. I loved interacting with those students and will always carry their impact with me. While serving at the Boys and Girls Club, my heart became lighter and more childlike as I saw what students were like after the school day: just kids. Kids who are silly and messy seek connection just as adults do but may do so in different ways. What a delight to lead the Club Code for children each day before Power Hour and eventually have children volunteer (sometimes reciting the Club Code with pretend finger mustaches). I still have some pictures they created for me, and I keep them at my school desk as a reminder to always see students as kids, too. Not only were the students and Club kids pivotal to my evolution, but the school and club environments also contributed to this metamorphosis.

Of particular intrigue was the school climate that sought to meet all needs of students—starting from the basics of food and safety to a sense of belonging, empowerment, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Some of my best memories of that experience included the annual Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) lock-ins (a statewide assessment program), culture food festivals, and awards day that encompassed more than just grade point averages and instead highlighted grit, growth, and various personalities, too. Similarly, the Boys and Girls Club would host gift giveaways at Christmas, fall festivals, and community events like fishing outings and field trips, and they would provide dinner twice a week for all children at the Club. Beautiful times. This part of the journey was truly Maslow before Bloom[1] in full action, and my heart was full. Little did I know this season of my career would soon launch me into my official teaching career at the same school as a seventh-grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher the following August. In retrospect, both bookends of serving in a middle school and being involved in the social cultures of the Boys and Girls Club were necessary to embed within my teaching practice.

The next school year was about to begin. I tearfully said goodbye to my math intervention and Boys and Girls Club children. It was now time to take what they had so graciously and preciously given me and to build my

classroom using all the tools and experiences I had acquired. It was mid-July, and my mother had volunteered to help me set up my classroom—complete with homemade owl curtains. I looked forward to creating a sound environment where students could learn, grow, and fail safely. Before I planned any curriculum, I knew I needed to craft a place that children wanted to abide in each day. Once the last drop of hot glue had dried, I stepped back and admired how far I had come. What a journey. What a growing process. What determination and humility I had to get me to this point. But the journey was just beginning.

Seventh graders. What a fun bunch! They were the perfect blend of not being afraid to be silly and wanting to be treated like grown-ups. It is such a balance to uphold but an exciting challenge. While the year began with optimism and fresh eyes, it was nothing short of a baptism by fire. Oh, the preconceived notions that I had of teaching and student learning! That notion quickly vaporized once I stepped into my very own classroom where it was just me and them. Slowly but surely, I began connecting with my students and did my best to provide the ELA curriculum accurately. I spent many evenings after school past 6:00 p.m. After Christmas break, I eventually had to set my timer to leave by 4:15 p.m. as staying that late consistently was not serving me (or my newlywed marriage) well. By 4:15 p.m., I would head to the gym, giving my body and mind a change of scenery and space to grow and reflect. My energy increased, and my classroom management became less of a strain as I could work out most of my frustrations through movement at the gym. Spring came, and with it, TCAP testing. While a daunting task to facilitate, I had a supportive team all year and an administration willing to assist. May came, and while I felt accomplished, I knew there was still so much to learn. Overall, it was a great first year, which I think about often.

I was promoted to Writing Department Chair the following year and received my first Residency II teacher candidate. I had neither asked for nor inquired about either position and thus felt gratitude for being considered for such leadership roles. During my first year of teaching, I made it a point to seek out strong teachers who displayed positive rapport and made connections with their students. I became a student of these teachers, gleaned everything they could teach me, and contributed as actively as possible with activities and ideas. As this was only my second year, I maintained the same posture and sought out these same teachers and other leaders in the building to seek their input and perspectives on authentic leadership. I also knew that much of what I would need to lead would come from research, so I invested my time and energy into pursuing servant leadership and best practices for teaching writing. I continued to evolve and grow in my teaching practice, always trying my best to learn from mistakes gracefully and to stay committed to my *why* each day, regardless of title or perceived influence. Throughout the years, I have continually felt blessed with leadership positions such as Grade Level Chair, Department Chair, Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Lead, In-service presenter, hospitality committee member, Ask Me Squad member, and mentor teacher.

Fast forward to today, I am blessed to continue to serve in consistent leadership as ELA Department Chair, Curriculum Lead, PLC Lead, Resilient Schools Team, and In-service presenter. I have taught as an adjunct

professor for at least two semesters. I have also presented at national conferences sponsored by the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) and the American College Testing (ACT) Southeast. I recently completed my Ed.D. in Assessment, Learning, and Student Success: Higher Education Concentration from Middle Tennessee State University. I genuinely believe that each path I have taken up to this point has led me to where I am today. I encourage anyone who is considering teaching or who is currently in the field to 1) surround yourself with positive influences, 2) take pride in what you do, as your students will take notice, and 3) be willing to learn from those around you—seek out others who are better than you and who will challenge you to be your best. Our students deserve it.

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Endnote

[1] A concept that bridges together Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives and is often used in education, psychology, and leadership contexts to emphasize the importance of addressing basic human needs before focusing on higher-order learning or cognitive goals.

Chapter 5

Conclusion and Power of Stories

Conclusion

Robyn Ridgley and Pamela Kramer Ertel

As described in Chapter 1, our intention with this monograph was to compile a collection of educators' stories that would inspire new individuals to the profession while celebrating the work of current educators. To this end, the authors provided valuable insight into the varied paths to entering the profession, impactful experiences influencing their career trajectories, and what they have learned from mentors, their students, and others. Reflecting on the authors' words and experiences offers several key ideas that individuals considering entering or leaving the profession should contemplate to inform their decision.

THERE ARE MANY PATHS TO THE PROFESSION

Robyn Ridgley

In Chapter 2, several authors shared their stories about their journey into the teaching profession. A key takeaway from their stories is that individuals can enter the profession at varying times of life and in various ways. Individuals who have never experienced formal education through public or private schools can consider and become successful teachers. Life events may interfere with attending college to become a teacher immediately after high school, but individuals find their way to the profession over time. Individuals may choose to embark on other occupations yet find that teaching is their true calling. Challenges within other careers may inspire one to become a teacher. These are common paths to the education profession, but everyone's journey is unique.

Furthermore, individuals sometimes "fall into" teaching. For example, opportunities can arise that encourage one to explore the profession. No matter the prior experience, life journey, or encouragement provided (or not) by others, people who feel teaching may be an option should find ways to explore this profession. As demonstrated by our authors, educators may experience joy, personal satisfaction, and numerous other intangible benefits from teaching.

THE POWER OF HEROES AND MENTORS

There were many stories about heroes and mentors in Chapter 3. The field of education has built-in systems to provide mentors and mentorship for new teachers. However, these educators told stories about mentors who emerged from daily interactions, including those outside the workplace. These interactions were with other educators, family members, employers, and others who modeled, encouraged, and inspired. The stories demonstrated that one person mentoring and inspiring another can change the trajectory of a life. Listening, asking questions, and providing opportunities were specific actions taken by mentors. These stories should encourage current educators who are not mentoring others to do so. Prospective educators should feel comforted that people are willing to mentor and support them as they embark on the complex teaching profession. When starting new positions or working in new settings, educators should look for those willing to mentor and seek their support and inspiration.

IMPACTFUL EXPERIENCES AND PIVOTAL MOMENTS

Throughout the stories, especially in Chapter 4, the authors discussed impactful experiences that influenced their decision to become teachers or encouraged them to continue teaching. The teaching profession encourages educators to both teach and learn. Teaching students, hearing their stories, and striving to support them with learning content requires educators to be learners themselves. For example, to meet the needs of students, teachers must learn the latest research-based practices, curricula, and approaches for addressing the unique needs of students or curricula.

Teachers also must be adaptable. Multiple authors shared that they had changed specialty areas, grade levels, or schools throughout their careers. Similarly, some were involved in situations where the curriculum changed or were asked to take on a new responsibility. These changes were unplanned but energizing. Being open to change and "going with the flow" provided new growth opportunities. These opportunities translated into pivotal moments, which shaped the trajectory of many educator careers.

One author noted the power of intentionally working with others. When teachers identify a colleague (or two or more) who can work alongside them, they realize the power of community. The community supports problem-solving, managing stress, and realizing that, as educators, we are better when we work together. Educators must share these stories of impactful experiences to highlight how teaching is a profession centered on students, is ever-changing, and is best done in collaboration with others.

Finally, through the collection of stories, this monograph provides many windows into the world of education. The lived experiences shared by the authors provide readers with details about what the life of a teacher can encompass. We encourage current teachers, higher education faculty, and education leaders to use this monograph to motivate themselves and others to enter and stay in the profession. We hope other educators will

tell their stories about why they entered the profession and what inspires them. Stories help us connect with one another and learn things we do not know or have not experienced.

It is essential to share educators' stories widely with all who will listen. By doing so, we can help others recognize and appreciate the invaluable contributions of those who teach. This effort aims to enhance the public's perception of the education profession by highlighting the benefits alongside the risks and challenges. It is essential to provide a clear understanding of the viability of the teaching profession by highlighting both its rewards and challenges. This approach will help foster a robust community of educators who are dedicated, compassionate, and effective—qualities every student deserves. By presenting this balanced perspective, we can inspire and support those entering the field, ensuring a bright future for every student, as well as every educator.

A CALL TO ACTION

Pamela Kramer Ertel

If you had a teacher who positively affected you, I strongly encourage you to reach out to that teacher and share your story of how they impacted your life. You will be glad you did, as will they. In authoring my story, I contacted two of my favorite heroes and mentors. One was Dr. Frank Spera, a former principal who had a tremendous impact on my life. While we have managed to stay connected intermittently over the years, he was very moved by my decision to write about his influence on my life. The other person I contacted was one of my former professors from Marian College, Sister Claire Whalen. It took some effort to locate her, but she is now 95 years young and still actively engaged in teaching and learning. She was humbled and pleased that I even remembered her and was happy to learn of her impact on my life as an educator.

If you are a teacher, take a chance, tell your story, be honest, be vulnerable, and know that YOUR story matters! If you are thinking about becoming a teacher, start talking to teachers about their stories and prepare to begin drafting your own story!

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