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Introduction

Educator Reflections

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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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