

Chapter 2-2

My Path to Teaching

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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!