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Chapter 2-6

The Unexpected Trajectory of My Career in Education

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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.