

# Where Learner and Educator Intersect

Estee Aiken

*University of Montana Western, USA*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This chapter examines the impact that one's experiences as a learner can have on one's role as an educator. The author reflects on her own education as a gifted student and the ways in which her past influenced her work as a teacher of the gifted. While there were ways that past and present were intertwined, there were also many situations in which the author's experiences could not fully prepare her for the challenges she faced as a teacher. The author explores the interplay between learner as teacher and teacher as learner in an ongoing process for growth.*

## INTRODUCTION

There is one thing that all teachers have in common; they were once students. This simple fact can be underestimated. Being cognizant of the ways one's own past shapes present choices can be a useful practice for teachers as their roles as learners and educators meet in their classrooms. Acknowledging when personal experience has not offered enough preparation is also very important. While memories of being a student can certainly shape the way one teaches, background alone will not fully prepare a teacher for the classroom. In fact, one's window into education as a learner could hinder the ability to see beyond the familiar in order to find what works best for students. Consequently, teachers need to remain committed to being learners throughout their careers.

In order to illustrate my own ongoing learning and how it applies to my development as an educator, it is important to provide a bit of my background before recalling my early-career challenges and successes. For me, preparing to be a teacher entailed far more than attending classes. From my earliest years as a student to my later experiences learning from my students, much of my development to be emotionally responsive is grounded in my learning, both prior to and during teaching.

## **BACKGROUND**

I grew up in a small town in South Dakota, and have many vivid and fond memories about school. I distinctly remember learning to cut a square into a circle by rounding the corners and celebrating “Green Eggs and Ham Day” in my preschool. During Kindergarten, I learned the alphabet via the Letter People and mastered tying my shoes. Unbeknownst to me, it was during my kindergarten year that I was identified for gifted services.

What did this identification mean for me? It meant a variety of accommodations were provided by my elementary school teachers to meet the goals of my Individualized Education Program (IEP). While IEPs are specifically required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), many states have also used IEPs to specify accommodations for gifted students (National Association for Gifted Children, 2015). In an effort to meet my IEP goals, I participated in Odyssey of the Mind (a creativity completion), met with other advanced readers to explore *Junior Great Books*, and was allowed to work on independent projects. Some of my teachers did very little for me while others seemed to recognize my needs and worked to address them in personalized ways.

When I transitioned to middle and then high school, my parents were not invited to IEP meetings, and no specific services were offered. I self-selected the most challenging courses available through my high school, including “Math IV” (which I would describe as pre-algebra), and the first Advanced Placement (AP) class every offered in my high school, AP Literature, during my senior year. I also participated in many artistic endeavors, including band and choir, theatre productions, and dance lessons. I played several sports, worked multiple part-time jobs, maintained high grades, and even had time to spend with friends.

Knowing that I felt comfortable and flourished in a small-school setting, I looked for universities that would offer this sort of learning environment. A college in St. Paul, MN, fit the bill, and I spent my four years there continuing my exploration of the arts and earning a bachelor’s degree in Music. During my college years, I worked for two summers at an all-girls camp in upstate New York, and these summers would completely change my career trajectory. It was during my time working and living with elementary-aged girls that I realized where my true passion lived. I wanted to be a teacher.

## **FROM LEARNER TO TEACHER**

Two weeks after graduating from college, I moved 1,000 miles to begin a master’s program for initial licensure in elementary education. The program I chose was compact—two summers and one school year. The first summer was consumed with methods courses and assisting with summer camps. By the fall, after just three months of preparation, I was student teaching in a first-grade classroom. That spring, I transitioned from student teacher to intern; my mentor teacher was reassigned as a reading coach, and I had full responsibility for 24 first graders. I spent the summer finishing up coursework and searching for jobs. After a whirlwind teaching program, I received my teaching license and was hired to teach fourth grade that fall.

My first full year of teaching found me in a Title I school with a high English Learner population and 31 fourth-grade students. The school had controlled curriculum and utilized a “walk to” approach for both reading and math, which meant that my students were ability grouped and walked to their reading and math classes; no group had more than seven students to allow for small-group instruction every day. Because my students went to leveled reading and math instruction and had daily specials classes (weekly

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