

Chapter 10

To Live and Die as a Teacher: Life Lessons Learned

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ABSTRACT

There are many pathways and motivations in the decision to choose education as a career. For some, teaching is an innate quality that seemingly comes naturally. This chapter tells the story of this author's identity development as a teacher and lifelong learner from playing pretend schoolteacher to professor of graduate teacher education candidates. Told through the eyes of the author, and contextualized with memories and perspectives of others, this is the story of the early influential experiences that led to education as a career pathway, the loneliness of being a beginning teacher, the tribulations of young children cracking the code of literacy in elementary classrooms, the growing awareness of the inequities in our education system as a teacher leader, and the struggle to maintain an identity as a practitioner in academia. Along the way, the author highlights life lessons learned in each phase and how they aided her along her career path to higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Some say I was “born to be a teacher.” Looking back, I think teaching was an innate quality I began to develop as a young child. Magnuson and Starr (2000) posit that life career planning begins in infancy and develops in a spiraling process as individuals discover more about their interests, strengths, aptitudes, skills, and preferences throughout childhood and adolescence. Thus, individuals develop career sub-skills from their experiences as they explore a variety of careers during childhood play and shift to more intentional, systematic, and vocationally relevant exploration during adolescence, which inform later phases of life career development (Hartung et al., 2005; Magnuson & Starr, 2000). Despite my early play and learning experiences, I never dreamed about having a career in education until I was forced to decide on a major in the third year of my undergraduate education.

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Many tried to guide me into education, or at least a career serving children, given my aptitudes and skills. However, I had big dreams of becoming an astronaut or veterinarian with my interest in space exploration and my love of animals. Education was valued in my home; yet, at the time, I viewed teaching as a mundane career path that was unrecognized and undervalued by others. I longed to become someone who made a difference. Little did I know how many misconceptions and assumptions I held in that perspective, how fulfilling a career in teaching could be, and the ways in which my experiences would shape my lifelong career development as an educator.

Nowadays, “teacher” is my strongest personal and professional identity and one I’m proud to wear as a literacy teacher educator in academia. Throughout the development of my teaching identity, I was and remain a lifelong learner taking away many valuable life lessons at each phase. As I begin, I acknowledge my pathway to academia was ripe with privilege. I grew up in a middle-class family and currently identify as a white, cisgender woman in a feminized profession. Thus, I have not experienced oppression firsthand. Yet, my trajectory and identity as a teacher has been filled with everything from doubt and difficulties to discovery and satisfaction, feelings relatable to many who have traveled along this path. From pretend play as a schoolteacher to 2nd grade teacher to teacher educator of mainly graduate students, this is my story of the trials, tribulations, and life lessons I learned as I developed my identity as a teacher and lifelong learner. It’s also the story of my ongoing mission to maintain those identities in academia. To contextualize my experiences throughout my story, I embed memories and perspectives from others.

INFLUENTIAL EARLY EXPERIENCES

By four years of age, I was an early reader and writer and wanted to share my skills with others. According to my mom, I began displaying teaching and leadership skills at a very young age while playing with neighborhood friends.

One day, Jennifer set up little kid chairs in front of a stand-alone chalkboard and told Robby, his brother, and two other neighborhood children that she was the teacher and would teach them how to read and write. She stood in front of them and wrote letters and three letter words on the board, having the children say the letter names and sounds and read the words. It was that day that Robby’s mother told me Jennifer was definitely going to be a teacher.

When I was seven years old, my sister, Heidi, was born, and as she got older my mom claimed that I had my own “in-house student.” When we played “school,” I was always the teacher, whether in the house, the yard, or other places in our community, imitating the instructional approaches used by my teachers. I instructed her to sit tall at my desk, trace the letters of her name, and identify the letters of the alphabet. Occasionally, our role playing as teacher and student even involved field trips. For example, I turned our weekly grocery shopping into a learning experience by pushing my sister around in a shopping cart, naming fruits and vegetables in the produce department, and examining their characteristics. My sister explains that these early experiences sparked her imagination, curiosity, and love of literacy. “Whether it was role playing teacher/student, learning my alphabet, writing my name, or simply reading a book to me when I snuck into her room at night, . . . moments like this encouraged me to enjoy reading and learning.” Apparently, teaching was “in my bones” early in my life as I had begun to broadly explore the role of a teacher in my early childhood play.

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