

Chapter 15

My Journey as an Educator: Balancing Motherhood and Academia

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reflects how the author's students and children shaped her journey as an educator, how becoming a mother has informed her teaching, and how these experiences have continually inspired her to refine her craft as a teacher educator. Through a series of vignettes, the author reveals her evolving philosophy of education and her multifaceted journey from an elementary teacher to a teacher educator who has learned to thrive by balancing the ever-changing demands of motherhood, academia, and life itself.

MY PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE AND TEACHING

Over the course of my life, I have been influenced by numerous texts and life experiences that have guided me to become the educator, scholar, and mother that I am today. As I reflect on my philosophy of teaching and parenting, multiple themes become evident as significantly impacting my journey. Throughout the varied aspects of my life, I employ a constructivist approach since I believe that individuals construct their understandings of the world by assimilating new experiences into their previous knowledge and understandings. I also consider learning to be an active, social process; therefore, I believe that knowledge is constructed interdependently as individuals socially and dialogically interact with one another within a collaborative learning environment (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Dewey, 1933/1998, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, I believe developing a respectful, collaborative learning environment with authentic, engaging activities is essential for effective learning (Donovan et al., 1999; Guthrie & Klauda, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 1995, 2009; Short, 1992).

As a culturally responsive teacher, I believe it is crucial to establish a respectful, collaborative environment for learning with curriculum and instruction that celebrates students' diverse funds of knowledge while simultaneously building upon their lived experiences (Au, 2009/2010; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3460-4.ch015

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1995, 2009; Moll, et. al, 1992). This environment increases engagement in the classroom since I foster and highly value students' diverse perspectives and opinions. Within each of my courses, I consistently model culturally inclusive practices and differentiated instruction to guide my pre-service teachers to employ culturally responsive, differentiated instruction within their future classrooms (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Delpit, 1995/2006; Gay, 2000; Tomlinson, 2017; Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005). Moreover, I share a wide variety of children's literature encouraging my students to critically read and examine books for cultural authenticity and social justice issues (Fox & Short, 2003; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Throughout each semester, I provide my students with many opportunities for interaction and discussion, engage my students in meaningful reading and writing experiences, challenge my students' assumptions about teaching, and engage my students in inquiry projects. A multitude of experiences in my life journey have reinforced these underpinnings in my teaching and have highlighted my evolving focus on student engagement, providing culturally responsive, differentiated instruction, and multicultural education.

A Look Inside my "Me Bag"

On the first day of class, I share my "Me Bag" that includes five to seven items demonstrating where I have been, where I am, and where I am going. As I share my "Me Bag," my life-long journey as an educator and a mother becomes evident to my students. They learn about where I came from and the experiences that have shaped me as an educator, mother, colleague, partner, and person. The students in my class learn about what resonates within my heart inside and outside the classroom and what has informed my teaching practices. Students hear my own story as I share my experiences through my five to seven items in preparation for each student to share their own "Me Bag" during the following class period. As I share my "Me Bag," it reveals my multifaceted journey as an educator who has learned to thrive by balancing the ever-changing demands of motherhood, academia, and life itself. The following passages include vignettes of my experiences that comprise the contents of my "Me Bag."

From as early as I can remember, I wanted to be a teacher and a mother more than anything in this world. While my friends dreamed of becoming an astronaut, fire fighter, or President of the United States, my goal was always to become a teacher and a mother. I dreamed about reading aloud to my son or daughter like my own father enthusiastically read aloud to me. I imagined how I would teach a child of my own about our ever-complicated world, share the importance of kindness and love, and engage him or her in hands-on learning in the same way my family took the time to educate me. In my mind, being a teacher and a mother fit seamlessly together. I viewed being a teacher as an integral part of being a loving mother, and vice versa.

My journey of becoming a teacher began at my Fisher-Price kitchen table by teaching my brother, Christopher, who is six years younger than me, to write his name. Standing behind him as he sat in the little yellow chair, I began by placing my hand over his and guiding his hand very slowly and carefully to help him perfectly form each of the letters of his name. It didn't take long for him to get frustrated with his sister's commanding hand on top of his as he was spelling out C-H-R-I-S-T-O-P-H-E-R. So, rather than giving up in frustration, I tried another teaching strategy. I decided to take a piece of paper and spell his name out in dots so that he could write his name independently by using the dots as his guide. Furthermore, after tiring of repeatedly writing his entire 11-letter name in dots, I realized that there was a shorter five-letter name, Chris, which would be much easier for him to spell. As I reflect, this instance was my first successful experience scaffolding and modifying my instruction to better engage and meet

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