

Chapter 19

Identity Shifts: From ESOL Teacher to Adolescent Literature Professor

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores one high school teacher's journey of becoming a university professor and the identity shifts that occurred along the way. From realizing his own identity of unquestioned privilege to recognizing the often xenophobic forces at play in public schools that serve to demoralize immigrant students, the author describes the events that influenced his decision to leave his high school job and seek a position in higher education. In doing so, the author documents the transformative experience of doctoral studies, the unspoken, hectic process of getting a university teaching position, and the potential that adolescent literature holds for encouraging future teachers to question identities of privilege, teach empathy, and understand the innate humanity of their future students.

AN INVITATION TO CHANGE

On the first day of graduate school as a doctoral student in education, one of my professors said something that resonated with me and probably with others as well, “Well, class. As the saying goes in graduate school: get a divorce, get a dissertation.” While I have no recollection as to what prompted her to make this statement, it stuck with me. There I was, sitting in an awkward environment in the evening after having just left the high school where I still worked, and my professor—one with whom I would have several courses and conversations during my graduate studies—proclaims this would-be truth to the class. I, too, had recently gone through a divorce, and this professor’s comments not only made her more human in my eyes, it reminded me that everyone in that introductory seminar to the doctoral program had personal lives hidden from view and came to be where they were due to various life circumstances. Almost everyone in that class was currently or had been high school English teachers. They had identities that had been shaped by years of teaching and were looking for something different. Perhaps we all

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missed being students, having presided at the lonely side of the teacher's desk for too many years. I was there because I needed some type of catharsis to rattle me from the doldrums of my career as a teacher and expand my thinking beyond the works that I taught to my students each year.

As teachers, it's easy to slip into comfortable routines and forget the power of learning new knowledge, especially when that new knowledge contradicts ingrained ways of knowing ourselves and the world. There was no one pivotal event that brought me to graduate school; rather, it was a slow crescendo of realizing the limitations of life as a public school teacher, of the growing challenges of connecting with my ESOL students and their lived experiences, and of a longing for change in my own life. My divorce may have set things in motion, but I needed fuel to sustain such change. Graduate school provided that fuel, and the graduate school experience proved pivotal in making me feel that I was in the right place and making the right decision to change careers and the course of my life by doing so. In this chapter, I will address what led me to leave public school teaching for graduate school, the struggles I encountered as a teacher educator-in-training, the uncharted terrain I navigated to obtain a university teaching position, and how I found my identity as an adolescent literature professor.

THE HIGH SCHOOL TEACHING YEARS

Not only is teaching often passed down in families, but the actual subject matter tied to teaching is handed down from one generation to the next. My mom taught ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) as a second career (her first was eighth grade English teacher in the 1960s). As a teenager, I would observe her on the weekends, with her stacks of papers, not just inking a score on a wrinkled piece of paper and penciling it in her gradebook, but truly taking the time to provide meaningful feedback to her students. It was also in the validating way that she spoke of student success stories that inspired me to investigate the field of TESOL. As was common in many undergraduate education curricula when I attended college in the 1990s, my training in diversity and with diverse learners was limited. In looking to my teaching life ahead, I decided that I could either become an English teacher with tangential knowledge of how English is learned as another language, or I could take courses, have some field experience, and tutor ESOL students at local high schools to enhance my understanding of what it meant to be a teacher of English, regardless of where students are in the language learning process. Hence, although my primary teaching license was in secondary English language arts, I taught ESOL at the high school level for six years. It was also another connection to my mom, and I looked forward to the conversations we would one day have about teaching. In fact, I began my high school teaching career the same year my mom retired, and I attended the retirement party that the high school hosted for her, which had several of my former teachers in attendance, many of whom were beloved and revered. As I looked from cafeteria table to cafeteria table, where everyone was seated during that retirement event, I could see that metaphorical torch being passed from mother to son. As enchanting as that sounds, a Hallmark greeting card come to life, the naive stops there. Little did I know the political hotbed of the subject matter that lay before me, the xenophobia my future colleagues would casually share with me, and the seemingly insurmountable hurdles I would observe immigrant adolescents endure as they worked against strong odds to earn a high school diploma from an American high school (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

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