

Chapter 23

Becoming Academics and Mothers: Making the Journey From Public School Teacher to Academic Mother

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ABSTRACT

Through a chronological exploration beginning with their experiences as energetic and passionate K-12 classroom teachers and ending with their procurement of tenure-track positions, the authors share stories from their journeys of transitioning into both academia and motherhood simultaneously. These stories are part motherhood, part doctoral student—juxtaposing the competing demands of an aspiring scholar alongside the realities of being a new mother. The stories touch on topics such as inspiration for leaving K-12, work-life balance, pregnancy, breastfeeding, childcare, and self-care in the context of navigating teaching in higher education, building professional relationships, writing a dissertation, and searching for a tenure-track position. The chapter concludes with a series of takeaways that were illuminated for the authors through their own reflections of these experiences, and that, ultimately, helped them feel empowered in their roles as both academics and mothers.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the experiences and shifts in identity of two different women as they navigated the transition from teaching in K-12 school environments to being full time doctoral students and teaching in higher education classrooms. This chapter also shares the tensions these same women felt as they found their way as first-time mothers while working in an academic culture of high expectations and how these experiences impacted each of them while moving toward tenure track positions. The academic

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and social context in which women in academia live and work is a critical component of understanding their experiences, both as doctoral students and as faculty (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018). Thus, it would be remiss to share these women's' stories of moving from K-12 teaching to higher education positions without including this role change.

The female authors of the chapter are former K-12 teachers with three-plus years in self-contained elementary school classrooms who left their full-time teaching positions to become full-time doctoral students. Both authors had proven success as classroom teachers and teacher leaders within their respective districts and had opportunities leading professional development and teaching their peers. Like many other educators that transition to higher education settings, both women had positive experiences in their K-12 careers that ultimately inspired their desire to teach in higher education settings and broaden their influence with pre-service teachers (Fischweicher, McAtavey, & Kopp, 2015). In addition, they were curious about children's literacy learning and sought opportunities for research in the educational settings where they were employed and understood that a career in academia would provide more scholarly and creative endeavors. Though years of experience and locations differed, both women chose a similar path at almost the same time, finding themselves as doctoral peers and departmental colleagues.

Almost instantly, the two authors became friends who commiserated over the late nights of writing for doctoral coursework and celebrated publishing milestones and positive remarks on student opinion polls from courses they were adjunct teaching. Many hours were spent in local coffee shops conversing about their new identities as academics, exciting projects in the works, course preparations, and how they relished the opportunity to learn from their mentors. Both women prided themselves on presenting as tireless workhorses able to juggle rigorous demands.

Representation is low for doctoral student mothers, especially those with young children. Although the statistics differ by discipline, a mother with a young child is 21% less likely than a childless male and 16% less likely than a father to obtain a tenure-track position (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018). Both women were aware of the difficulty of balancing work and family against the demands of flourishing in a tenure-track position. They shared uncertainties about having children; instead, both were eager to concentrate on their careers and enjoy travel with spouses.

About the time each woman embraced her new identity as a teacher and scholar in the academy, she found out she was pregnant, a position that almost instantaneously changes a woman's identity (Reichel, 2012). Once again, the two leaned on each other as they determined the best way to break the news to department and dissertation chairs, how to take or not take maternity leave, and how to continue to progress in their teaching and scholarship. Moreover, the two learned together, how to make room for another identity, that of mother, to take shape while developing as an academic.

TIME FOR GROWTH

Historically, career transitions have been linear, with individuals moving up a hierarchical chain, usually for an extrinsic reward (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). While the move from a K-12 learning environment to a higher education setting may seem like a hierarchical move with a monetary gain, it is a false assumption. Teacher education programs within higher education institutions have a chain of command within themselves and faculty are often dependent on partnerships with local and regional school districts to move forward with research endeavors. Additionally, salaries are comparable depending on state pay scales. Thus, the transition to a career teaching in a teacher education program was not driven

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