

Chapter 7

Room to Grow: Experiences of a Woman Education Leader With No Children

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the life experiences of a woman education leader who is married but does not have children. The chapter describes the author's career journey from beginning stages to current time, detailing her personal decisions and thought-processes around motherhood as well as her professional development over the years as a woman with no children working in a field predominantly populated by those with families. In particular, attention is paid to the experiences of this woman educator as she progressed into leadership roles and how having no children may have presented more opportunities for promotion, growth, and development than other leaders (particularly women) who needed to allocate many hours a day to parenting.

As I write this chapter, I am in the midst of my 20th career year in education and I am a married woman with no children. Throughout my career, I have served as a substitute teacher, a 7-12 Special Education teacher, guidance counselor, assistant principal, principal, consultant for several non-profit education organizations, leadership coach, and now a director of learning experiences for a non-profit that serves educators around the globe. Over the

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course of the latter part of my career, I have vigorously engaged in the work of supporting the field of education as a thought leader by publishing over a dozen professional articles (as well as my doctoral dissertation), speaking at dozens of national, state, and international conferences across the globe, publishing a best-selling book (and currently authoring two more books), been recognized by national professional learning organizations for my work, and launched my own private consulting company. I elevate all of these accomplishments not to boast, but rather to introduce the premise of my contribution to this book: while not having children was a choice imposed upon me and my husband by factors out of our control, it is a distinct feature of my life to which I attribute my disproportionate ability to engage in my work as an educator at a level far deeper than that of countless friends who are mothers and find themselves balancing the demands of both a robust career and the time and attention required by raising a child. Studies suggest that my experience is not an isolated one and, despite societal norms that may promote traditional roles of women as mothers, women who do not have children are not destined for unfulfilled lives of despair (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Griel et al., 2012; Salgado and Magalhães, 2024; Settle and Brumley, 2014).

In my adolescent and young adult years, I developed the idea that I might not be the “mothering type”, based on evidence from failed attempts as a babysitter and other misadventures around children who had been placed under my responsibility for many reasons. Though I adore young people (hence pursuing a career in education), I also was surrounded by numerous individuals in my family and peer group who had children at a relatively early age. Their relationships with partners were volatile and short-lived in most instances, and children appeared to be a pursuit for which the relationship(s) might be salvaged. I was disenchanted with these dynamics and became determined to prioritize my personal interests and goals before even considering bringing a child into the world. I spent two years living in Argentina on my own and, during that time, I missed 11 weddings of various childhood and college friends back in the United States. My emotions towards those experiences were of amusement: I viewed my friends' rushing to settle into “adult life” with bills, careers, and kids as unbelievable depressing compared to the freedom and independence I experienced during these years. My parents, themselves having had children much later than their peer group and who lived a lifestyle characterized by frequent travel and pursuit of adventure-sports, wholeheartedly supported my approach towards this aspect of life.

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