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Why I Teach: A Content Analysis of Eight Early Childhood Teacher Vignettes

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Why I Teach: A Content Analysis of Eight Early Childhood Teacher Vignettes

By Josh Thompson, Vivien Geneser & Karen Walker

Early childhood teachers belong to a unique subset of the teaching profession, with distinctive skills, competencies, and dispositions. As teacher educators, we have often wondered: *What attributes distinguish early childhood teachers from other educators?* Then, after collaborating on the "Why I Teach" section in "Pathways to Becoming an Early Childhood Professional (2016)," which was a special issue of *Early Years: Journal of the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children*, we discovered common themes. To explore further, we conducted a content analysis of the eight vignettes using a mixed method approach. Ultimately, we identified five terms that portray the distinctive attributes of early childhood educators: compassion, competence, connection, creativity, and curiosity.

Introduction

Just as some prospective educators have adverse reactions to teaching teenagers, others think kindergarten is daunting. Although this contrast in "goodness of fit" (Keogh, 1986)

matters, it is not well defined in the literature. To explore further, we studied the work of Erik Erikson, who elaborated on the concept of self (Erikson, 1950) and conducted research on identity. In sociology, identity is viewed as how the self relates to society as well as the roles we play in social contexts (Stryker, 2002). Other researchers have also investigated the concept of early childhood teacher identity (Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016; Mann, 2018; Wright, 2020).

Additionally, we studied Lavina (2020), who chose a cultural identity lens with place-based aspects to draw connections between the personal and professional self of the early childhood teacher. In an earlier work, Lavina and Lawson (2019) explored an aesthetic frame to understand their own auto-ethnographies as teachers. In contrast, Bowles and O'Sullivan (2020) chose athletics to explore teacher identity.

Literature Review

Identifying the characteristics of early childhood teachers could facilitate wise

choices for preservice teachers as they make important decisions about their chosen profession (Geneser, 2016; Keogh, 1986; Morrison, 2018; Sluss, 2019; Walker, 2016). We looked at: 1) the role of teaching and learning as a general construct, 2) the elements of early childhood education as a specific discipline, and 3) how early childhood educators perceive teacher identity.

Teaching and Learning

The study of teaching and learning is timeless (Ackoff & Greenberg, 2008). Evidence of ancient cultures acknowledging the powerful role of teachers exists in an early injunction to Hebrew parents; "Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:7). The passage enumerates the dire consequences of failing to teach the next generation, failures that will impact the future society. Similarly, the Bhagavad Gita instructs families in the benefits of emphasizing the transitory nature of some things and the eternal aspect of others (Wilkins, 1785).

Thus, we can assert that some form of informal, familial training that pertains to guiding the next generation has persisted for millennia, in all cultures, based on religious doctrine, cultural norms, family needs for survival, or trade. Moreover, formal and widespread expectations for teacher preparation have proliferated since the eighteenth century, with scholars like Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Montessori publishing work that has been increasingly utilized in education preparation programs in Europe and the United States (Wolfe, 2002).

Currently, the expectations for teacher education programs in the United States are comprehensive in scope and breadth, in both curriculum and instruction. In alignment with the principle that there is no teaching in the absence of learning (Ackoff & Greenberg, 2008), teaching effectiveness evaluations have shifted away from teacher performance to focus more on student achievement. For example, the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) (Texas Education Agency, 2016), accentuates student-centered actions over teacher-centered ones and student progress is included in measures of teacher effectiveness. Furthermore, efforts to promote teaching and learning have shifted towards an emphasis on the preparation of the teacher's psychological state, citing transformation as a target in teacher preparation and professional development (Huang, 2016).

Throughout her extraordinary career, Montessori (1949/1995) addressed the link between teacher fulfilment and effective instruction. Whitescarver and Cossentino (2007) assert, "In Montessori teacher training, 'preparing the adult' emotionally and spiritually is fundamental to the education of future teachers" (p. 2). Likewise, in *Nurturing the spirit in non-sectarian classrooms*, Aline Wolf (1996/2017) recognized this internal component as she charted her own career trajectory. She outlined the power of trained, focused observation as a tool for transforming the adult from a "doer" to a "being," thus illuminating the significance of the life of the spirit in a teacher's experience with children.

Clearly, the child will persist in her passion to learn, especially through play, regardless of teachers' presence, competence, preparation or effectiveness (Brown & Vaughan, 2010; Geneser, 2022; Nell & Drew, 2013). In *Free to Learn*, Peter Gray (2013) describes the child's capacity to learn through play. He begins with a documentation of the historical perspective, and then explains how play provided ancient cultures with an appropriate forum for training progeny with the tools, habits, and language to survive and thrive.

The Early Childhood Profession

Recent efforts on behalf of national entities reflect a growing awareness of the need to support the early childhood profession. For example, in 2015, the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council released *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation*, which highlighted the need for educators to develop agency, self-determinism, and nurturing. The authors stated, "Young children thrive and learn best when they have secure, positive relationships with adults who are knowledgeable about how to support their development and learning and are responsive to their individual progress" (p. 19).

Subsequently, members of the Power to the Profession initiative, produced *Advancing the profession: Power to the profession*, which represents "a shared framework of career pathways, knowledge and competencies, qualifications, standards, and compensation that unifies the entire profession" (NAEYC, 2016, p. 1). As a result of this initiative, NAEYC was able to identify and acknowledge that a lack of continuity in early care would have detrimental effects on the working conditions for caregivers as well as the overall outcomes for children.

Eventually, by collaborating with 15 national organizations, and sifting through a series of eight decision cycles, the data from the input of more than 11,000 professional educators was used to craft *Unifying framework for the early childhood education profession* (Power to the Profession Task Force, 2020). The publication portrays a need for clarifying language in the early childhood profession.

Later, the editors of *Early Years* collaborated to produce a special issue of the journal, *Early Years*: "Pathways to Becoming an Early Childhood Professional," which highlights four themes: Professional Development: Pathway to Quality Early Childhood Education; Credentials and Degrees: Pathways to Advancing Your Career; Future Directions: Pathways to Leaving a Legacy; and Why I Teach: Early Childhood Teacher Vignettes (TXAEYC, 2016).

Early Childhood Teacher Identity

Identity as an early childhood teacher lies at the heart of our work. Despite the oft heard remark, "You are good with children," teachers often feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities. Teaching young children requires specific expertise, and the disposition of early childhood teachers tilts towards the learner (Katz, 1993). Thus, we felt called to look at teacher attributes.

Thompson (2016) identified the following perspective:

> The work of an infant, toddler, or preschool caregiver is clearly at the intersection of the *physical* work carried out by a skilled tradesperson and the mental work characteristic of a professional. Teachers in high-quality centers are more likely to have nurturing interactions with children, positive interactions with families, offer richer language experiences, and utilize developmentally appropriate practices in supportive learning environments. (emphasis in original, p. 8)

Goffin and Washington (2019) also pursued the clarification of the role of early childhood professionals in *Ready or not: Leadership choices in early care and education*. They utilized a favorite hide and seek game tagline, in which the seeker covers their eyes

Table 1. Six field-defining questions (Goffin & Washington, 2019, p. 25)

Purpose
1. What is the early care and education field's defining intent?
2. Does the field's intent vary by setting or by auspice (e.g., center and schools; regulated family child care; license-exempt family, friend, and neighbor care)?
3. What chronological span describes the ages of children served (e.g., birth to the start of kindergarten; birth through kindergarten; birth to age 8; pre-kindergarten through grade 3)?

Identity
4. What is the field's distinctive contribution and competence as a collective entity?
5. Is early care and education a single/unified field of endeavor or a field comprising subfields (such as health care, for example)?

Responsibility
6. To what extent are we, as a field, willing to hold ourselves accountable to one another and to be held publicly accountable for results in return for the autonomy to deliver programming based on the field's knowledge base?

for a countdown while other players find their hiding places. As the countdown concludes, "3 – 2 – 1 – ready or not, here I come" the pursuit engages. Goffin and Washington deftly apply these rules for hide and seek to our pursuit of identity as a profession, with a list of questions (see Table 1).

Additionally, in *Professionalizing early childhood education as a field of practice: A guide to the next era*, Goffin (2015) structures "conversations with intent" as a way for all of the voices of early childhood professionals to be heard. In the spirit of "conversations with intent," we invoked the pedagogy of listening, prodding, and prompting as part of the process of scaffolding in our work.

Research Question

Joining in the use of "conversations with intent" contributed to the development of our research question. After honing the wording of the inquiry through a lengthy process of iterative review, we ultimately developed a single research question for this analysis: *What attributes distinguish early childhood teachers from other educators?*

Figure 1. *Early Years* (2016) "Why I Teach" Table of Contents

Methodology

For the methodology component, we utilized the work of Dell Hymes (1972), who provided an organizing template useful for exploring the data:

- Discover a relevant frame or context;
- Identify the items which contrast within it; and
- Determine the dimensions of that contrast.

In this instance, the term, *relevant frame*, refers to the ways that early childhood teachers talked about themselves within a collection of teacher vignettes in a special issue of *Early Years* (see Figure 1). The dimensions of items of contrast were derived through weighted (frequency) comparisons (Krippendorff, 2019).

Participants

The educators who participated in this study represent professionals with experiences that range from mid-career, mature career, to recently retired. Two are male and six are female. One identified as African-American, one as Hispanic, and six as White. Some were still teaching in classrooms, others served at an administrative level, and two were higher education faculty.

All three researchers are White, and, as such, their ability to apply a racial lens to examine data is compromised. However, their perspectives were influenced by participation in ongoing anti-racist and anti-bias training, as well as a commitment to promote racial identities (Geneser, 2018; Thompson & Araujo, 2016; Walker, 2016).

Content Analysis

The "Why I Teach" vignettes afforded researchers access to cogent statements about teacher identity. We triangulated our interpretive readings (Bengtsson, 2016) and discussed:

1. In your own words, what is the Big Idea of this text, the manifest meaning?
2. In the author's words, what are some direct quotes that support your interpretation of the Big Idea in this text?
3. What are some keywords, or themes, that emerge from this text?

By effectively applying the framework of Nowell et al. (2017) to establish trustworthiness, the researchers became familiar with the data, generated initial codes, searched for themes, reviewed those themes, and then

Table 2. Twenty-one keywords emerged from initial set of keywords

advocacy	on behalf of children and childcare, for the ECE profession
child well-being	child's interest is raised, more important than teacher, family, adults
competence	teacher's abilities to teach, to tackle academic and education challenges
family connection	teacher's interest and efforts to involve families in school life of child
goodness of fit	Goodness of fit is the compatibility between environment and a child's temperament (Thomas & Chess, 1977).
interaction	active interaction between author and child(ren)
interaction: phatic dyad	Phaticity is a multidimensional potential for talk in many social settings, where speakers' relational goals supersede their commitment to factuality and instrumentality.
job satisfaction	about JOY in teaching, fulfillment, sense of satisfaction (separate from 'purpose')
journey	pathway to becoming an EC education, including 'AHA' moments of discovery, trek through training, schooling, and certification, and fulfillment, e.g. retirement
men	men in the lives of children, fathers, fatherneed, and men as teachers in early childhood education
mentor	new teachers use of other, more experienced teachers to navigate new protocols, strategies, methods, and mannerisms
mentoring: lateral	instead of a more experienced teacher, this author described collaborative relationships with peers
profession	in line with NAEYC power to the profession, clarifying identity for EC educators, training and certification, relations with other groups of educators, and families
profession: worthy wage	EC educators claim on worthy wage for professional service rendered
purpose	meaningful work, life goal, fulfillment
quality	identifying elements of ECE that fulfill quality standards such as accreditation
quality: DAP	developmentally appropriate practice
quality: transformation	work of quality ECE to transform learners, rather than 'additive' information or transaction
role model	primarily between teacher/family and child (for influence on new teachers, use 'Mentors')
social expectations of women and men	cultural norms
strategy	a teaching word, meaning how teachers work in schools and classrooms to instruct and teach young children

defined and named themes in order to compile a report. The initial readings generated 67 key words, with 17 terms being used more than once. Comparing notes generated a set of coding categories useful in the next step, which was coding at the sentence level unit. Unitizing, as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is the smallest part of information about something that can stand alone. After deconstructing the eight texts, the 6,337 words in 341 sentences, forced new coding categories to emerge (Hamad et al., 2016). The new coding categories contained 21 keywords and a working definition suitable to this dataset (Table 2). These were charted, weighted by frequency, and placed in cross-comparison across the eight vignettes.

Finally, researchers triangulated data for explicit themes summarizing the corpus of vignettes as a whole (Nowell et al., 2017), seeking theoretical frames to describe the data, diagramming to make sense of theme connections, documenting the formation of hierarchies of concepts and themes, and providing thick descriptions of context for interpretations. Afterwards, the poster documentation panel was shared at six different conferences in the form of poster sessions, which stimulated even more conversations and feedback loops. Final analysis of the

input from conference attendees enabled us to condense and revise the content (original data available upon request).

Findings

For the findings from both the content and the thematic analysis of the vignettes, we extracted manifest and latent meanings. The authors provided vocabulary that was mined for corroborating evidence to address our research question: *What attributes distinguish early childhood teachers from other educators?* The reduction of text from eight vignettes, condensing the thoughts expressed in 6,337 words in 341 sentences, down to the five keywords: compassion, competence, connection, creativity, and curiosity was prodigious.

Discussion and Implications

In exploring keywords, we implemented a variety of lexical devices, employed alliteration, and agreed to the aforementioned terms. Many of these keywords are also listed as attributes in P21's Frameworks for 21st Century Learning (Scott, 2017), the "6Cs" of how families should be raising children (Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016), and the 7Cs that contribute to child resilience (Robertson, 2014).

Compassion

Administrators, professors, and educational researchers agree that instructional methods can be taught, but a person's basic disposition plays a key role in developing the skills for effective teaching (Katz, 1993). Effective teachers have compassion for others and it is considered an integral component of teacher identity (Goldstein, 2002). Jacobson (2016) recognized compassion, "love for the children," as a result of engaging in relationships with young children:

> At the beginning I was quite anxious, because I really did not know how to interact with young children, but as the days and weeks went on I began to fall in love with each and every child in the group. (p. 36)

Jacobson deemed her experience as a source of personal healing when she stated that "working with young children was a way of working through what I went through as a young child" (2016, p. 36). Recognizing compassion as an element of self-care is also a theme that echoes throughout her book, *"Don't get so upset!" Help young children man-*age their feelings by understanding your own (Jacobson, 2008).

Additionally, in the vignette "See them beautiful," Lisa Thompson expressed her perception that a love of learning is interlaced with relationship and regard, the child for the teacher and vice versa: "The children may be smiling because they love to learn and the lessons in their classrooms are interesting and engaging, or they may have a teacher this year who makes them feel treasured and special" (Thompson, 2016, p. 56).

Competence

Familiarity with the tenets of developmentally appropriate practice, as outlined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020), is also featured in descriptions of high-quality early childhood teachers. One component, the value of play, is a consistent thread throughout the works of many major theorists (Brown & Vaughan, 2010; Geneser, 2022; Wolfe, 2002). Teachers must be cognizant of the need to function as a listener and an observer; a guide on the side instead of a sage on the stage (King, 1993). Additionally, they must be able to demonstrate cultural competence by implementing culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; NAEYC, 2020).

Susan Montana described her competence with teaching older children as insufficient preparation for early childhood education:

> "After teaching for nine years my principal informed me that I would be teaching Pre-K the following school year. Although I thought the idea was slightly insane, I didn't think it would be that difficult. I even had to take an additional certification test, which I passed with ease, so how hard could it be? Not so easy, I soon discovered. As it turned out, I found that working with 4-year-old students is a whole new ball game" (Montana, 2016, p. 62).

She elaborated on her newfound competence: "Once I gained confidence in my ability to serve as an effective early childhood educator, I began to look forward to teaching again. The rewards of teaching our youngest students are innumerable" (p. 62).

In her treatise on "Fifty Years" of teaching, Dr. Mary Ruth Moore celebrated both the heart and head. Along with emphasizing the importance of building relationships, Dr. Moore identified numerous instances of significant teaching, where competence facilitated her success. "Following the example set by Lucy Wheelock, we were working together to *inspire a world of good*" (Moore, 2016, p. 77, emphasis in original).

Connection

Connection was another recurring theme. Each educator communicated a deep commitment to connecting with the learning community. Alexander described an epiphany he experienced when the parent of a 4-year-old student commented, "He talks about you all the time" (Alexander, 2016, p. 7). Only then did Dr. Alexander grasp how his impact could carry over into the child's home life.

In describing the connection between her grandmother's influence and her subsequent impact on children and teachers, Lynda Cavazos articulated the concept of a "Full Circle." When she was with her grandmother, "we would engage in *platicas* or conversations about life" (Cavasos, 2016, p. 65). Correspondingly, as a teacher trainer, she noted, "I love sitting on the floor with them and discussing how to guide language and sensory exploration for infants through play." Cavazos also described her doctoral dissertation work as "Full Circle" because she was connecting with people from her past and present, as well as the future children that her student teachers will encounter.

Creativity

Each of these eight teachers were lauded for their creative capacities because they strived to transform learners with innovative lesson plans and clever strategies. For example, when asked about problem solving, Cavazos identified a challenge that she overcame, when she used stitchery to hide a stain. "The confidence I gained from overcoming this dilemma and receiving my grandmother's approval helped convince me that I, too, could be a creative and innovative teacher" (2016, p. 65). Karen Rodman also identified the role of creative expression: "I enjoy developing projects to do with my students, and I take pleasure in seeing how they respond to new ideas" (2016, p. 13).

Curiosity

Love of learning was a determinant for each of the vignette authors, and, in their passion for the profession, they often identified curiosity as the motivating force. Whether, like

Montana, they had to learn an entirely new skill set, or like Rodman, they were continuously updating their knowledge of standards for the purpose of accreditation, each of the authors mentioned the quest for knowledge as one hallmark of their career. Josh Thompson (2016) specifically identified curiosity as a motive for their life with young children:

> The profound respect and appreciation for the young child remains with me today. I'm still curious – how does the young child grow and develop? How does language work to promote growth and drive development? What happens when childhood is not valued, when children are not appreciated or respected? How can we harness the powerful appetite for learning of the young child and activate that interest in the school-age child, or in adult learners? I'm curious – that is why I teach (p. 82).

Overlapping Intersections

Identifying five attributes of early childhood teachers is a worthy endeavor, but none of them exist in isolation. In fact, they overlap and engage each other in dynamic ways. Consider how early childhood teachers are valued as caregivers, activating compassion in their character identity as teachers. How does compassion overlay with competence?

Another intersection of interest occurs between creativity and curiosity. Curiosity could be simplified as wanting to know what is, an "a posteriori" frame, whereas creativity promotes a worldview centered in the unknown. Malaguzzi explored this contrast in his poem, "No way, the hundred is there" (1993/2012): "They tell the child to discover the world already there", in original Italian: "Gli dicano: di scoprire il mondo che giá c'é."(Malaguzzi, 1993/2012).
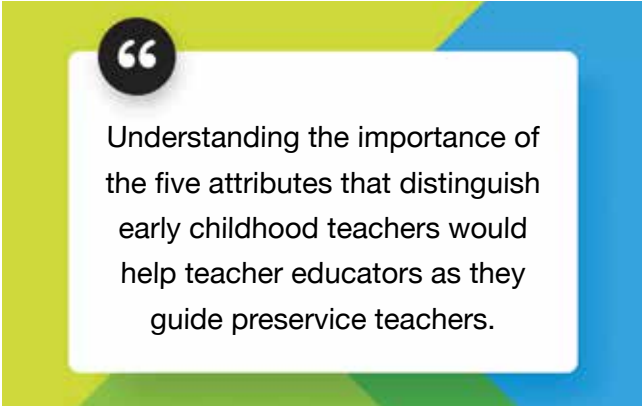
Conclusion and Implications

Understanding the importance of the five attributes that distinguish early childhood teachers would help teacher educators as they guide preservice teachers. By identifying salient features, educators can utilize compassion, competence, connection, creativity, and curiosity to shape conversations about professional goals.

In addition to the question, *What attributes distinguish early childhood teachers from other educators?* we also wonder: Who can identify these attributes? How could identifying these attributes help preservice teachers select their optimal grade level to teach? One area to apply this research is to wonder how they might affect men in different ways than women.

The larger question looms regarding young children and their care and education. Understanding more about the phenomenal people who call themselves early childhood educators can help us join the young child in growing up strong and well, curious and competent, caring and loving.

> "
> Understanding the importance of the five attributes that distinguish early childhood teachers would help teacher educators as they guide preservice teachers.

JOSH THOMPSON, PHD, is a Professor of Early Childhood Education at Texas A&M University-Commerce and a former co-editor of Early Years. As a certified Montessori teacher (AMS E1), he serves as a trainer for Dallas Montessori Teacher Education Program, and writes about Montessori, play, and other topics related to early childhood education.

VIVIEN GENESER, PHD, has served the early education profession for many years, most recently as an Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education at Texas A&M University-San Antonio. She is the editor of Scholarly Snapshots: The importance of child play as a human right, which is scheduled for release in May of 2022. In her current position, Dr. Geneser serves as an Instructional Interventionist for Prairie Lea Independent School District.

KAREN WALKER, PHD, is an Assistant Professor of Child and Family Studies at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, LA. Her research focuses on early literacy and play. She has presented at early childhood education conferences locally, regionally, and internationally – including the United Kingdom, Kenya, and Ireland.

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