

#whyIteach: A Content Analysis of Eight Early Childhood Teacher Vignettes

Statement of the Problem:

A new Pre-K-Grade 3 certificate alongside existing EC-Grade 6 certificate in the state of Texas challenges undergraduates to choose their teaching range. How can teacher educators help them choose wisely?

Literature Review:

The NAEYC Power to the Profession seeks “a shared framework of career pathways, knowledge and competencies, qualifications, standards, and compensation that unifies the entire profession” (2016). The special issue of *Early Years* (TxAEYC, 2016) focused on four aspects of this endeavor: professional development, credentials and degrees, future directions, and early childhood teacher vignettes.

Identity as an early childhood teacher lies at the heart of our work with young children, and must infuse the Power to the Profession initiative with substantive evaluation of the hallmark characteristics that distinguish EC professionals from other educators. Walker (2016) identified a set of perspectives on teacher identity (p. 8):

“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.”

Goffin (2007; 2015) has led the early childhood education field in systematically pursuing this clarification and identification. The first book poses questions to challenge the field, the second structures “conversations with intent” for all early childhood professionals to be heard.

Research Questions:

1. What characteristics distinguish high-quality early childhood teachers from high-quality elementary teachers?
2. Who knows and can identify these characteristics that distinguish high-quality early childhood teachers from high-quality elementary teachers?
3. How can identification of characteristics of high-quality early childhood teachers help new teachers select their preferred age/grade level?

Participants:

At the time of the publication of the special issue of *Early Years* “Pathways to Becoming an Early Childhood Professional”, the experience of the eight authors ranged from mid-career, mature career, to recently retired. Two are male, six are female; one identifies as African-American, one Hispanic, and six Anglos. Some are still in classrooms with young children, some in administration of programs for children, and some are higher education faculty. All had extensive time in Texas schools and classrooms.

Methodology:

Researchers triangulated interpretive readings of eight vignettes, noting manifest and latent meanings (Bengtsson, 2016). Coding categories (Lincoln and Guba 1985) emerged from deconstructing the eight texts, the 6337 words in 341 sentences (Hamad, et al, 2016). These were charted, weighed by frequency, and placed in cross-comparison. Finally, researchers triangulated data for explicit themes summarizing the corpus of vignettes as a whole (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017), seeking theoretical frames to describe the data, diagraming to make sense of theme connections, documenting formation of hierarchies of concepts and themes, and providing thick descriptions of context for interpretations.

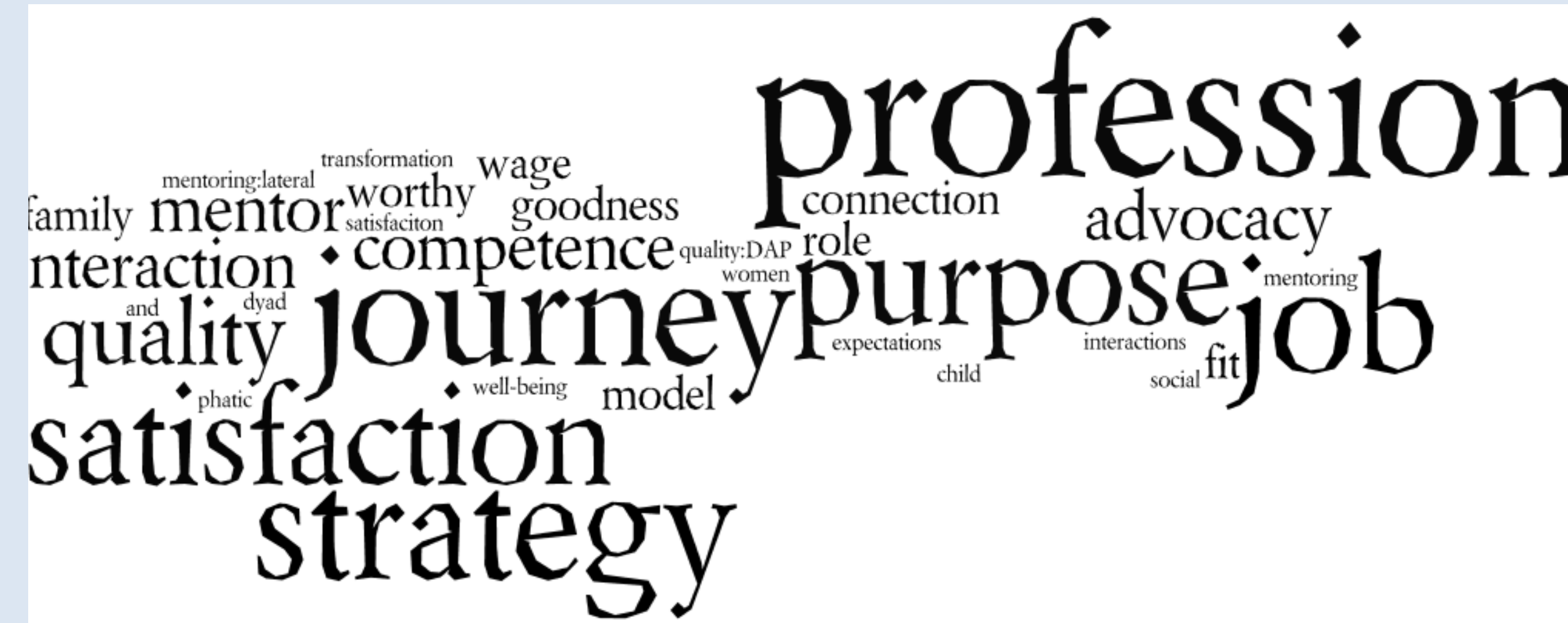
Dell Hymes (1969) provided an organizing template useful for analysis of these data:

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

The relevant frame is the collection of teacher vignettes written by eight early childhood educators, collected together in a special issue of *Early Years*, all on the theme “Pathways to Becoming an Early Childhood Professional”. The items of contrast were ferreted out by the researchers, and the dimensions of contrast were derived through robust analysis and weighted comparisons.

Results:

More than 100 keywords were recorded on the first, overt analysis of the eight vignettes. Manifest meanings were transcribed from quotes taken directly from the authors. After segmenting at the sentence level, researchers coded 21 categories.



Discussion:

Data analysis acknowledged the role of disposition, patience, and fortitude to endure the challenges of working with this particular age group (Colker, 2008; Geneser, 2018; Sluss, 2018). Familiarity with DAP (NAEYC, 2015), the importance of play, the need to function as a listener and an observer, prepared to implement culturally relevant curriculum, and guidance strategies (Bailey, 2015; Berk, 2017; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

The analysis indicated that the authors all cited a love of learning as a determinant in their passion for the early childhood profession. 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 wealth of knowledge that they acquired during their career.

Commitment was also a recurring theme. Each of the educators communicated a deep commitment to young children, their families, the learning community, their colleagues, and to the profession as a whole. Alexander discussed the epiphany he experienced when he first realized his impact on students. Jacobson is committed to enhancing the thinking skills of her students as they enter the profession. Rodman shared the longitudinal joys of her long career. Montana appreciates the collaborative spirit of her colleagues. L. Thompson was committed to enhancing self-esteem throughout the community. Cavazos works tirelessly in support of worthy wages. Moore is committed to supporting play in all of the educational environments and J. Thompson encourages us to revere young children as they explore their interests, engage in self-talk, and learn through play.

Conclusion:

There is no single definition of an early childhood professional. The work of this analysis of eight teacher vignettes did produce a robust discussion around various themes and keywords. Identifying compassion, competence, collaboration, creativity, and curiosity as five salient features of the early childhood professional helps to future the conversation, perhaps with elementary teachers, to contrast their identities around these five components.

WalkerKa@nsula.edu
Josh.Thompson@tamuc.edu
Vivien.Geneser@tamusa.edu



Karen Walker, Ed.D.
Northwestern (LA) State University



Josh Thompson, Ph.D.
Texas A&M University-Commerce



Vivien Geneser, Ph.D.
Texas A&M University-San Antonio