

CAN YOU SEE ME NOW? READY TO BE VISIBLE THROUGH QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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MY UPBRINGING THROUGH A GENERATIONAL LENS

Growing up in the conservative, West Texas city of Lubbock during the seventies and eighties, I was the Generation X daughter of a Depression-Era father and Veteran-Generation mother. Because my dad grew up during our nation's toughest times and my grandmother raised my dad and uncle by herself, my dad was a hard-worker. He was a World War II veteran and spent his life making sure that his family never went without. As a result, he worked a great deal while I was growing up, but I had whatever I needed. My mother was eleven years younger than my dad. She was a stay at home mom while my brother and sister grew up but went to work as a teacher in Title I schools after I was born. We went to my maternal grandmother's house every Friday night, and I listened to my mother and aunt discuss their jobs in education while my dad and uncle discussed world events and my grandmother listened in. My parents had traditional, middle-class, White, conservative, Christian values, believed children should be seen and not heard, and insisted that children should do as directed without question. This mindset was a struggle for me, because as a Gen X-er who was experiencing the beginning of MTV and cable shows much different than what was available to previous generations, I experienced a whole new approach to life. I always wanted to know why, and "because I said so" was just not good enough for me. This need often resulted in some conflict and frustration from my parents.

Another interesting dynamic in my house as I was growing up was having two, Baby Boomer siblings. My brother and sister, who are fourteen and twelve years older than I am, respectively, often saw themselves as a second set of parents having a say-so in my life. Because they were so much older, they entered adulthood and began their own families while I was still a child. Sometimes, the excitement around the newness of their first-time-adult experiences left me feeling invisible. As a result, I had this inner force pushing me to do things differently than they did. I intentionally chose the magnet high school in Lubbock, rather than attending the zoned school they attended. When it came time for college, I was expected to go to Texas Tech, as did the rest of my family. However, I chose West Texas State, a university in a city that I knew nothing about, just because of desire to forge a different path.

MY VIEW OF THE WORLD DEFINED

Since both parents worked and my siblings were out of the house, I was your typical Gen X latchkey kid. I spent a lot of time alone and fended for myself. When I was six, the seventeen-year-old brother of one of my neighborhood friends molested me. This event preceded many years of some pretty intense bullying at the hands of peers at school. I felt devalued, judged, and invisible as a human.

Because my mom was a teacher, she believed I was ready, and started me in school early. I could not attend public school at my young age, so I began a private, parochial school in first grade when I was not yet five-years-old. I think there is a great deal to be said about being not only academically ready for school, but also socially and emotionally ready. I spent the better half of the first semester crying.

Maybe I cried about little things, or maybe it was because I was scared. I really don't remember. All I know is that a very big deal was made on the first day that I didn't cry. Apparently, the whole class applauded. Somehow, I don't really believe that this was done in a complementary way. I think it was a celebration of the outcast not annoying those who somehow seemed to fit in when I, clearly, did not.

The next year, I began second grade back at my public elementary school. I'm not sure I was anymore equipped for public school, being that I was so young, but I managed. It was in third grade that I remember the torment beginning again. I wasn't prepared for the academics. Back then, we were working on long division. I was barely passing, and that was through looking onto others' papers, which I, obviously, was no better at than when I tried on my own. What was worse, however, was the verbal torture of one of the boys in class. On the playground, he called me terrible names. I still have no idea why this boy had it out for me, but his intent was to ensure that I was isolated, and he succeeded.

As an older elementary student, I was bussed to my mother's school. Even there, I couldn't escape the bullying. This time it was a teacher who exclaimed to me that I wouldn't get any special treatment just because my mom was a teacher in the school. There was even one time when he encouraged some boys to pick on me. I can't imagine such behavior would be acceptable in schools today. I could feel myself swirling deeper into my desire to be invisible. I didn't speak out. My goal was just to become invisible to my peers, my teachers, my world.

I can say things didn't improve much through junior high or high school. Of course, there are lots of people who don't look fondly upon these periods in their lives. Through junior high, I was mostly ignored. Of course, there were the occasional times when I was picked on by the tough kids, but I was completely non-existent to the cool kids. Sometimes, it was hard to decide which was worse, being invisible to those from whom I wanted acceptance or being visible to those whom I wished would disappear.

I chose to go to Lubbock High School, the magnet school for academics. I made the varsity basketball team at a young age, and that apparently didn't sit well with the older members of the team. We returned from a road trip one night, and my car had been vandalized by some of their boyfriends. Another time, my car had red paint thrown across it as it sat in front of my house. I realized that I couldn't be invisible while also being on the basketball team, so I ended up quitting the team before my senior year. I think these experiences, specifically, have resulted in me wanting to be an advocate for underrepresented or oppressed populations. I might not have been able to stand up for myself, but it left me with the desire to stand up for others.

While these bullying experiences have had a profound impact on who I am, there were other aspects that shaped me as well. Because I was a product of busing (whether it was I who was bused away from my home campus or my classmates who were being bused away from theirs) during all of my elementary and junior high years, I was exposed to diverse populations. My invisibility made me highly aware of the different types of people and those who seemed to be invisible, like me, even if it wasn't by their choice.

My mother always taught in a Title I school. I witnessed, firsthand, her love for her students who looked very different from me. She loved her students unconditionally. She did not see them as different than her, but as children to be loved. She provided her students with an excellent education, and she was one of those teachers who students always went back to visit.

Going to Lubbock High provided me with experiences with diversity in ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, and probably for the first time, differences in sexual orientation. I think all of these factors resulted in helping me to become relatively comfortable with people very different than myself. I'm not sure it led to necessarily being at a level of cultural proficiency. I just saw people who were different, decided it was not my place to judge, and felt comfortable believing we were equal. I do not think that, back then, I appreciated the value of the diversity in those I encountered, nor did I see that, while my background presented significant challenges, I still had many privileges afforded to me that were not readily available to some groups.

ADULT PERSPECTIVES

Growing up, I never wanted to be a teacher, and I was certainly not going to be a principal. However, sometimes things are just meant to be. When I graduated from West Texas State University, my first teaching position was in Lubbock, in the far northeast section of the city, at a high-poverty elementary school. I encountered populations I had never experienced directly when the mother of one of my first students came to school with a monitoring bracelet circling her ankle. Not understanding generational poverty or its consequences, I flippantly judged her choices. I encountered students with learning disabilities and, again, criticized parents and their decisions of not seeking help for their children. It wasn't until my first child was born that I experienced humility with the enormity of parenting and the realization that everyone sends the very best child they have to school each day, and everyone parents the best way they know.

Early in my career, I received my Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a minor in Special Education from Texas Tech. This coursework satisfied that inner desire to know "why," because I had always thought special education policies and procedures were crazy. But, being the mom of my own "twice exceptional" child, I had to understand. It also ignited my passion for action research, and I published my first article in *Teaching Children Mathematics* regarding a study I did with my class on the topic of math anxiety. I guess publishing became another way for me to become visible.

After graduating, Texas Tech accepted me into the Curriculum and Instruction doctoral program, and I was happy to continue my education. However, my husband's job relocated, and I was not able even to begin. I decided then that it just might not be in my vision for the future. Distance learning wasn't an option back in 2000. Even when I finally decided to become a principal, I took the alternative route, receiving my certification from the regional service center, rather than a university.

I finally believed in my ability to be visible and make a difference in the world. It was then that I experienced bullying as an adult. A new superintendent was hired in the district where I was employed. He made quick work of cleaning house. He was definitely the type of leader who believed his ideas were best, and anyone with a differing opinion needed to go. I tried for some time to make it work and be the type of campus leader he was looking for, despite the fact that the district administration seemed to think I was invisible. The breaking point for me was when, in a meeting, the superintendent proudly announced to us that our city had "finally gotten smart." He said the city had finally raised minimum housing prices. "That's how your raise test scores," he said, "You have to limit the number of single moms and lower socio-

economic families.” At that point, I could no longer sit by, content to be invisible. While I didn’t have the power to fight this belief, I knew I had the ability to stand up and say I would no longer participate.

After fifteen years in the district, my family sold our home and moved to a district where our taxes did not fund this elitist type of belief. At the time, I thought my twenty-year career in education might be over. It took a great deal of courage, but I did my research on surrounding districts and found a district with beliefs like mine. I found a district that believed that all children deserve access to quality education built on engaging learning, not test scores, to prepare them for a twenty-first century world. This move was hardest on my youngest son, who had attended Title I schools with me and was in seventh grade at the time. However, when I explained why we couldn’t just sit back and be invisible, he understood.

MY VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Throughout my career, I continued to conduct action research on topics ranging from twice-exceptional students, school culture, and trust, to the impact of teaching grit and a growth mindset to students from poverty, and subsequently published my thoughts and informal findings in educational journals and magazines. After my experience with my previous superintendent, I started a blog to share my ideas on the importance of grit, grace, and a growth mindset as an instructional leader. Then, two years ago, I saw that Texas Tech had created a blended doctoral program for Curriculum Studies and Teacher Education. At that time, they were not accepting new candidates, but I began working on getting my records in place. When I was finally able to apply and was admitted to the program with a grant, it seemed that I would be able to finish a journey I envisioned long ago.

When considering Hall’s “Iceberg Concept of Culture” (as cited by Stith-Williams, 1995), my background only provides a surface layer view regarding the personal development of my own cultural beliefs, as well as my understanding of others. What we know about icebergs is that nine-tenths of an iceberg is below the surface. During my school years, while many believed it was okay to judge others who were different, I believed in tolerance—a “just accept everyone for who they are” attitude. But, looking back, this is not showing appreciation for others. We tolerate that which annoys us. We put up with what we cannot control, not taking the time to go deeper. We see a difference without seeing the difference it can make or the benefits it includes.

I am intrigued by the idea of telling the story behind the data and bringing a new perspective to improving the conditions of underrepresented populations and best practices in public education through qualitative research. I believe the depth of my knowledge is already growing through literature studies over general practices in research and diversity and know it will increase as I narrow my topic and focus, while confronting misconceptions. Moving from action research to formal research and continued publication in scholarly journals are priorities.

Over my twenty-six year career, as a teacher, educational diagnostician, curriculum coordinator, and campus administrator, I have seen injustices with students from poverty, minority groups, and students with disabilities. I see how the judgment of these groups results from lack of understanding and a desire to conceal differences and background experiences that may make the majority uncomfortable. I see the impact on the world where majority groups have chosen to remove themselves from

public education and transfer to homogenous schools with those who appear to have similar traits, resulting in people who are fearful of those different than themselves due to lack of interaction. Separation always seems to make the group left behind feeling invisible and angry, thus, creating a continuing cycle, with two groups who are either angry or fearful, that eventually erupts in violence.

I want to do research that includes a qualitative approach, immersed in social justice theory, that helps demonstrate that, when we educate students from diverse backgrounds and teach them twenty-first-century skills, including communicating and collaborating with people different than ourselves, the result is a much more peaceful world. With a generation focused on improvement, rather than maintaining the status quo or creating isolation, we make progress in social justice. I believe that to accomplish this vision, significant weight must be given to teacher preparation and professional learning in order to provide them with the skills they need in their classrooms to create the learning situations and dynamics needed to develop our future citizens and leaders. Twenty years ago, I envisioned myself teaching at the college level, and I finally can see this dream coming into focus.

Beginning on this doctoral path is a little scary. It has been twenty years since I completed formal scholarly work. While I feel proficient in technology, technology in the realm of university work is unfamiliar. It is a challenge communicating only through text and not having visual contact with instructors or peers. I cannot see them, nor can they see me. Regardless, my past experiences and my inherent desire to understand “why” create the perfect picture of a researcher who will have a visible impact on the world and its future generations.

References

- Stith-Williams, V. (2015, September 21). *Acknowledging the cultural uniqueness of students and their families*. Presentation given at the Connect for Success Symposium, Virginia Beach, VA.