

2018

## Easy as ABC?

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### Recommended Citation

Bickerstaff, Allison (2018) "Easy as ABC?," *Quest*: Vol. 2 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/quest/vol2/iss1/2>

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# The Profile Essay

*Research in progress for English 1301: Composition 1*

Faculty Mentor: Lisa Roy-Davis, Ph.D.

The following paper represents research work begun by students in English 1301, the first course in the two-semester composition sequence at Collin College. Students in English 1301 are introduced to the concept of academic research by learning to ask research-focused questions and then use the library resources to find sources that provide answers.

In the following profile essay, Allison Bickerstaff merges her research-based understanding of the elementary education field with her subject's experiences of teaching at a local elementary school. By focusing on the experiences of an actual teacher, Allison is able to use the anecdotal evidence of her interview process to test and productively question ideas, facts, and observations about a career in elementary education that she gained through research. By focusing on inquiry in the writing process, she is able to observe and confirm many of her findings, while also using her research to raise further productive questions. This focused approach to research shapes her continued interest in the field and helps to provide direction to her own future academic work.

The researched profile essay represents an alternative approach to the traditional research paper often required in composition classes. By locating an interest in a career field and narrowing their research to intersect with and amplify the experiences of a specific worker, students learn valuable research writing skills and gain working knowledge of the careers they aspire to.

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Professor Davis

English 1301

19 November 2017

### Easy as ABC?

The smell of old library books and crayons was fragrant as ever as I entered the artwork-littered halls of Reinhardt Elementary, leaving me with an uneasy feeling of nostalgia paired with a sense of unfamiliarity. A tall woman, especially in comparison to her surroundings, walked up to me with a warm smile and big blonde hair. Autumn Quinton, a kindergarten teacher at Reinhardt, greeted me with a hug and began to lead me back to her classroom. I could immediately feel warmth from her as she led me down the narrow school halls that she was far too familiar with after teaching for nineteen years. Autumn had a bubbly personality that made the conversation feel comfortable. "I stayed home with my kiddos for nine years when they were born," she said as she urged me to take a seat in a tiny chair meant for humans half my size. She continued, "Having a family was always important to me." Teaching is a job that can be far more flexible than others, and Autumn is a good example of that. As she said, "I never really intended on coming back to teaching, but I volunteered and it just worked out."

Autumn's choice to teach was a fairly simple decision for her. As she leaned back into her fluorescent yellow chair, she recalled, "You know, I always say I didn't really know...but I think I did. I think if you want to be a good teacher, something in you has got to be a caretaker." Autumn started her path to becoming a teacher at Stephen

F. Austin State University but moved back home to transfer to Richland Community College after realizing she did not like being away from home. There, she finished her basics and then moved on to completing her degree in elementary education at the University of North Texas. After receiving her bachelor's degree, her parents urged her to get a master's. Autumn transferred to Texas A&M University and got a Master of Education, specializing in early childhood. Today, Autumn is the head of her department, and rightfully so, since she had been teaching kindergarten for nineteen years. She recalled a conversation from when she came back to teaching after taking care of her son. She asked the principal, "Are you going to put me in sixth grade?" Principal Lavene replied, "Autumn, you cannot handle sixth grade; you're made for five-year-olds." I found this interesting because most people would take this type of feedback as a blow or an undermining of their capabilities, but Autumn understood exactly what Principal Lavene meant. Autumn said, "I think it's where my heart is, and I know five-year-olds."

A huge part of teaching is being able to multi-task and take on several roles to get the job done. When I initially entered the room, it was oddly quiet compared to the vibrant colors and toy bins littering the room. A behavior color chart hung on the board with names of children written on pins. That day, most of the pins fell on red, representing the students' bad behavior. Managing children is a task in itself—a task that comes with balancing all the other responsibilities that come along with teaching. "A lot of people think, 'Oh, you teach kindergarten. That's so easy.' But it's really not," Autumn said. Today, teachers are finding themselves having to manipulate the curriculum to "boost student engagement in the elementary classroom" (Johns 53). This

means that teachers have to constantly stay on top of modern tools to use in the classroom. “Although the district is wonderful at providing materials for us, you always want something new,” Autumn said as she gestured to the behavior color chart. “It’s very physically draining; I mean, I’m up and down all day long. Today was just one of those bad days.” Engaging students is difficult to accomplish, especially with the age group Autumn teaches, and some teachers neglect the responsibility altogether, thus letting students fall behind. I could tell it was important to Autumn to make sure every student was actively learning.

Autumn likes to maintain a strict schedule because a routine ultimately helps students remain focused and eases the communication process between her and the parents. “This is my planning period,” she said and began to go over her day with me. There is playtime and then recess, which both develop motor skills, followed by lunch and specials to give the students a break; specials include music, PE, or art class, depending on the day. The curriculum is divided into several different activities; some examples are class reading, math, science, and stations, which allow Autumn to work with children in groups based on their level of ability. “Structure is so good. They need to know this is what we are doing every day,” she said. When I observed Autumn, it was interesting how different and dynamic this career is compared to others. There is a significant level of planning prior to actually partaking in a lesson. Teachers have to be able to integrate district policy and maintain the functionality of the class. For example, Autumn said, “We have one set of triplets and two sets of twins. One set of twins is in the same class, but the rest are separated.” With this in mind, it is very important to

have communication between the three teachers in Autumn's grade level so the students do not take home different work.

Lesson plans include multiple elements, so this clearly comes with a lot of work on the teacher's end. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports, "While students are away from the classroom" teachers may need to "meet with other teachers and staff" (Bureau of Labor Statistics). Since the planning period may be occupied with tasks, a majority of teachers' work is done outside of classroom hours. "I usually come up, outside the work day, every Saturday morning from eight to noon, just getting things ready for the next week," Autumn said. Extra work is something incoming teachers do not take into account—spending extra hours "in the evenings and on weekends grading papers and preparing lessons" (Bureau of Labor Statistics). "I take stuff home every night," Autumn said as she smiled. I could tell she appreciated some acknowledgment of how much work actually has to be done because most people do not notice.

Lesson plans are a huge part of a teacher's workload, but there has also been some debate lately about the way government interference may negatively affect teacher-student relationships. "All grade levels go by TEKS," Autumn said, trying to think about how to best answer one of my questions. TEKS stands for the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills standards that mandate required curriculum. "We have some leeway on how we want to teach that," she added. I understood that this topic may be a little touchy, but I did want to address it due to the current conversation in the education field. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, standardized testing has been implemented to track student progress as well as to oversee teachers' classroom success. "We don't have any input on that," Autumn said. "The state dictates the testing

we have to give.” Granted, she is a kindergarten teacher, so she does not grade or test, but it was odd that such a popular topic in education did not spark conversation with such a talkative and open person. Some debaters argue that “using test scores for evaluation measures typically shows correlation, not causation” (DeNisco), meaning the use of standardized testing to track teachers’ classroom success is not only an inaccurate measure but also puts unnecessary accountability and consequences on teachers’ backs for measures that may be out of their hands. Through Autumn's reaction to the topic, it was evident she did not want to discuss standardized testing, but I was not sure if her reticence was due to the fact that it is so controversial or if she just did not have an opinion.

What I understand now about early education that I did not before is the amount of investment and drive that goes into this career. After meeting Autumn, it was clear to me how sure she was in her career. “I was always the teacher's pet,” she said, recalling her time in elementary school. “I just like to take care of people.” Autumn’s dedication revealed a paradox between the clarity of her career and her unfamiliarity with where it all originated. She was guided by intuition and natural characteristics, saying “It’s just kind of where [my career] worked.” I can only hope one day that I am as self-assured in my choice of career as Autumn.

It is important to recognize the work of teachers because they are ultimately the children's first impression of what it is like to receive an education. The career, in general, is often looked at as an easy career and is frequently underestimated by politicians. It is easy to forget about education workers because students are done with school after high school or college until they start a family of their own. For me,

education will not stop after my college experience. It is potentially my career. After doing research and speaking with Autumn, I have had some doubts about my ability to carry out some of the responsibilities of an elementary teacher. However, I have not been completely driven away from teaching; instead, I'm looking at older grade levels because there is more of a balance of responsibilities between the teachers and students. The whole interview process was a great inside look at what teachers' work is like, and my conversation with Autumn helped me work through some doubts about my own plan for a future career in education.

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