Chapter 4
Passion, Perseverance, and Purpose: How Wanderlust Fueled One GATE Teacher’s Journey

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ABSTRACT
This chapter is about a multicultural GATE teacher, Jennifer Waldron, and her circuitous journey on becoming the educator that she is today. Having lived on three continents by the age of 13, she struggled with cultural identity exacerbated by the inevitable awkwardness that accompanies key developmental junctures. Central to this piece are acculturation, assimilation, self-determination and self-efficacy, and learning to manage the awareness of belonging nowhere, yet everywhere at once. This is an educational journey of finding, appreciating, and using one’s strengths and growth mindset in the pursuit of re-educating oneself to become a more empowered person and educator. This chapter underscores the relevance of cultural competency and the need for tolerance of difference at all levels of education. Jennifer Waldron embraces research based and innovative approaches to thinking and learning. She strives to break down barriers through design and creative thinking so as to find relevant connections between seemingly disparate subjects.

INTRODUCTION
Becoming a teacher was the last profession Jennifer Waldron ever wanted to consider despite (or on account of) her multigenerational educator family background. Her parents, grandparents and great grandparents taught and even owned and managed a school of their own. Schools, however, had not initially been welcoming places for Jennifer. After all, she was a visual learner and typically, and correspondingly, a late bloomer. For this reason, she often felt both overlooked and ignored in the classroom. Having lived on three continents by the age of thirteen, Jennifer struggled with cultural identity exacerbated by the inevitable awkwardness that accompanies key developmental junctures. Part of her unseen self-education
involved acclimatizing herself to undefined and unfamiliar sets of cultural and intellectual norms. In this way, acculturation became her subliminal focus and it spurned more than a decade’s worth of travel that was more about self-discovery than the physical places she immersed herself in.

After graduating college, Jennifer gave in to her nonconformist inclinations and embarked upon a journey that took her far enough away from all that was familiar to her in order to challenge her sense of self in the world. While her friends were securing internships and employment she was preoccupied with which country to call home. Through self-determination and self-efficacy, she learned to manage the awareness of belonging nowhere, yet everywhere at once and, therefore, inhabit a space without a country to call home. After years of seeking, living, studying and working in Europe, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Fiji among other places, she became a naturalized citizen of the United States, eventually making her adopted country her home.

With her cultural milieu resolved she turned her intensity of focus, passion and idealism towards her career. It was not until her late twenties that she finally entered the field of education, embarking upon a unique Master of Education collaborative internship program in which she attended graduate school while working as a teacher in a Cambridge, Massachusetts private school. Embracing her ‘outsider’ status and combining it with her idealistic nature, Jennifer carved out a niche for herself in educational technology, a virtual frontier where she was well versed in creative and independent thinking, risk taking and embracing a growth mindset. Drawing upon her diverse life experiences and her continued commitment to personal growth, Jennifer continues to connect social and emotional learning with intellectual endeavors in both her professional and personal realms.

BACKGROUND

South Africa: Self-Imposed Exile

Jennifer Waldron is a third generation South African of British descent whose great grandparents, on both sides, emigrated to South Africa from England and New Zealand after fighting in the Boer War. Seeking a better life, they consciously stretched their comfort zones, boarded ocean liners and departed for a new world. It was as if the family moved back in time since South Africa was not nearly as advanced or industrialized as their places of origin. Despite South Africa being Jennifer’s home from her earliest days, she never quite felt settled there. She remembers sensing her impermanence there mostly due to her father’s restlessness and impatience with the country’s apartheid regime. South Africa was essentially a police state in which the government controlled all news, both print and radio. Later she would learn that the government also limited the money ex-patriots could take with them. Suffice to say that the government did not make it easy for those wanting to leave the country. It was at this young age that Jennifer first remembers feeling like an outsider, a pariah of sorts. In 1973, by the time she was five years old, her father found their exit ticket. An opportunity arose to move to England with a multinational corporation. Given that most of her family’s ancestors were British, they stood a greater chance of gaining British citizenship, an important goal for South Africans seeking a new life.

Her family left behind extended family, friends, and a way of life. Many more would leave the country in coming years, particularly after the Soweto Riots of 1976. Jennifer has memories of her father ranting about South Africa only to be silenced by her mother saying, “Shhh, the neighbors might hear!” Years later, Jennifer learned that a neighbor who opposed the regime mysteriously went missing. The country
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