

Facing Challenges Head On

I was not one of those children who dreamed of being a teacher when I was older. While I loved playing school with my younger brother and going to school, it was never a profession that I saw myself growing up to be. It was not until my freshman year of college when I took an elective class in child development that I finally found something I was truly passionate about. Not coming from a family of teachers, I really didn't know much about teaching, except for my own experiences as a student in a classroom. Being naïve, I thought that a good teacher was one that was passionate about what they do and who was patient and kind, as these were what my favorite teachers possessed. It was not until my internship year that I realized a teacher was so much more. It was that year that I realized how many different hats teachers wear on a daily basis. I found myself being a problem solver, nurse, parent helper, tutor, cheerleader, event coordinator, friend, comedian, detective, counselor, musician, and a student. Learning how to manage my various roles while planning and teaching lessons in addition to attending the graduate classes during my internship year was not an easy feat. This is when I discovered that teachers do what they do because they are passionate about their students and sharing their love of education. Each day is different and with the unexpected comes excitement.

After my intern year I was fortunate to be hired for the following school year. I was very excited and eager to have my own classroom; however, it was during that year that I quickly realized I still had so much I needed to learn. While there were many areas I felt confident in, I felt that there were many gaps in my teaching. I was confident that my undergraduate program and internship year at Michigan State did an amazing job preparing me to become a great teacher, but I strongly felt that teachers can never know enough. Being a newlywed and first time home owner, I knew that graduate school was not in my cards at that time. Thus, I turned to

professional development opportunities offered by my county and school district as well as buying every teacher resource book on Amazon. With each day came more confidence and skills; however I began to feel very scattered. Too many sources brought too many varying opinions. It was then I decided that I should begin looking into graduate school. I needed to bring focus back to my teaching that was grounded in research, not reviews on Amazon. Being a proud MSU alum, I knew that I wanted to continue my education where I had left off 3 years prior. Being pregnant at the time, I knew that I needed a program that was flexible. When I discovered the MAED program on Michigan State University's website, I knew it was the perfect fit for me.

“Perplexity is the beginning of knowledge.” ~Khalil Gibran

One of the first courses I took that counted towards my master's program was TE 802 Reflection and Inquiry in Teaching Practice I with Judy Thompson in the fall of 2006. I took this course at the beginning of my internship year and while preparing to look for a job. Of all the courses I have taken in my life, this course has had the most significant impact on my teaching career. I feel that it is because of this course that I was able to do well in my interviews, thus get a job in a great district, as well as giving me the knowledge to teach reading successfully.

While I had learned a little about reading instruction during my undergrad, it was mostly centered on the components the Balanced Literacy methodology. While the components were named and defined, there was very little instruction on implication in the classroom. It was not until TE 802 when we read the book Mosaic of Thought that I began to get a vision of how literacy instruction should look in the classroom. Through discussions, I learned that reading

instruction was made up of many components: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension and how these components fit into a Reader's Workshop approach to instruction. It was from this class that I currently base my classroom instruction around. Having this knowledge made me feel more confident when I interviewed. My current principals told me they were impressed with my approach to reading instruction and felt that it was one of the many skills that set me apart from my competition.

“The more you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.” ~Dr. Seuss

Having taught first grade for 5 years, I was very familiar with many reading assessments. I did running records and spelling inventories on my students multiple times each year. I believed that these assessments were very helpful in identifying my students' strengths and weaknesses. However, I still found myself having a hard time providing interventions for my struggling readers and extensions for my high readers. It was not until I took this class that I realized that even though I was assessing, I was not utilizing them to the best of my ability.

Assessment guides instruction. In TE 842 *Elementary Reading Assessment Instruction* this is exactly what the course focus was. I found this class to be an extension of what I had learned in TE 802 with Judy Thompson. Previously having learned the components of good reading instruction, this course broke down those components providing various assessments for each. I learned how to analyze the data collected to create goals for students and plan best practice lessons to help my students reach his/her goals. I began to think critically about the way I currently had been assessing and utilizing the data. I began to realize that I was never seeing the whole child. I relied too much on running records and quickly realized this might be why I had trouble working with my struggling readers. After taking this course, I am now able to use

all of the assessments collectively, allowing me to better pinpoint where my students' troubles lie.

Another aspect of this course was a book club. My group read and discussed the book Comprehension and Collaboration: Inquiry Circles in Action. While reading this text, I did not realize how much of an impact this book would have on my teaching. I took this course over the past summer and could not wait to begin the new school year utilizing all of the great lessons and approach the book offered. I am currently teaching all of my social studies and science through inquiry circles. It also reinforces the comprehension skills/strategies I teach during my reading block. In the short time I have been utilizing inquiry circles, I have already seen a large difference in my students. They are excited for social studies and science and are retaining more information. They are collaborating and discussing their thoughts and learning. It is amazing to see six and seven year olds converse like they are. It is something I would have never thought possible before this course. I have also shared this book with colleagues and am excited to see that 3 other teachers are seeing the great results I am as well.

“All battles are won before they start.” ~ Sun Tzu

One of a teacher's most important jobs is managing his/her classroom effectively. This is because classroom management has a large effect on student achievement. However, this is the one area I felt the weakest in my first year of teaching. I had a very challenging bunch of kindergarteners. I had two students who at the time were not diagnosed with Asperger's and emotional impairment as well as students who had short attention spans and loved to talk. I felt that I had no control over my students. This made it very difficult for me to teach. I spent so much energy on solving problems that I quickly got burnt out. I began feeling like more of a babysitter than a teacher. Lucky for me the following year I moved up to first grade. While I

had the student with Asperger's again, the rest of my class was the perfect class. The honeymoon phase lasted all year! That year, my students made so much academic growth because I was actually able to spend all of my time teaching. It was then I realized I needed to strengthen my classroom management skills before the following year since I knew I would never get a class as perfect as them again. I spent the summer reading books about different approaches. Over the next few years, behavior management continued to be a huge struggle for me, no matter how many books I read. Thus, I was so excited to see that a lot of classes in classroom management were offered in the MAED program.

One of the last classes I took while in the MAED program was CEP 841 *Classroom Management in the Inclusive Classroom*. When I originally signed up for this course, I was hoping to learn strategies for helping the students I have each year with special needs that are mainstreamed into my classroom. What I did not expect was the significant impact this course would have on my managing **all** of my students' behavior. It has given me a new confidence I lacked before. I am beginning to feel more in control and am able to spend more time teaching and less time correcting behavior.

The focus of CEP 841 is implementing a positive behavior support system in the classroom. I learned that all students' behavior is functional and in order to truly solve the problem I must identify the purpose of the behavior and implement an effective intervention plan to solve the underlying problem(s). I remember reading the texts for this course and previous students of mine popping into my head. The information I was reading made so much sense and made me wish I could go back in time and use the strategies from the course to help solve the problems from previous years. Instead of getting frustrated and constantly giving out consequences, I am now able to identify functions of many of my students' behavior and treat

the problem in a positive manner. I am also much more proactive. This school year I moved into a new classroom. I spent a lot of time thinking about placement of my furniture, creating classroom rules, and building positive connection with student and among each other. This course has allowed me to reach all my students and give them what they need so we can all be successful.

“Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.” Gandhi

I entered in the MAED program with blind eyes. I had no idea what to expect. I knew that being a first grade teacher who lacked confidence in reading and writing instruction that I wanted to concentrate in literacy. What I didn't expect was the opportunity to take classes in classroom management and special education as well. Due to all of the amazing classes available, as well as the use of technology throughout the program, I am walking away with an extremely well-rounded education, more so than I could have ever imagined!

I have gained confidence in all areas of instruction as a result of my time in the MAED program. I have added a lot strategies, resources, and knowledge to my educational tool belt that have made me a better teacher. One thing I wasn't expecting was how much I would learn about myself as both a learner and person. I was nervous to take online classes because I was worried I wouldn't get as much out of it as I would in a traditional classroom setting. I was worried I would struggle with time-management, technical skills, and motivation. I had been teaching for 3 years when I applied to the program. I was also 30 weeks pregnant with my first child. While I knew I could not imagine having to be in a classroom at a given time for many hours each week, I wondered if I could handle working full time as well as raising a baby and school. Things got even more complicated when my child was born with many problems that required us

to live in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit for three months and had us coming home with a baby that was trached and vented. With my world crumbling around me, I took a year off to adjust to my new life, but I did not give up. I realized how dedicated and strong I really was. I learned that I face challenges head on. This made me a strong candidate for online learning. Taking classes online was hard, but this challenge made me rise to the occasion. When I realized how much I was learning and how much of an impact it was having on my teaching, I found myself becoming more motivated. I saw how independent I am and how capable I am of learning new things on my own. While I thought I was good at technology, I quickly realized how many amazing new programs and websites that are out there that I hadn't been even aware of. While I have come so far in the past few years, I know my journey is far from over. As Jiddu Krishnamurti stated, "There is no end to education. It is not that you read a book, pass an examination, and finish with education. The whole of life, from the moment you are born to the moment you die, is a process of learning."