

The Closing of a Chapter

My Master's

The odd thing is, I swear I just applied for the Master of Arts in Education program at Michigan State University. Since the time of my application and even at the commencement of this program, I have evolved into many different versions of myself, both as an educator and as an individual. The world is an entirely new state; education has been examined under a microscope and made considerable changes within itself. However, I feel it is important to note that I began the program at the very start of my teaching career (I had three weeks of virtual teaching under my belt at the start of the program). In many ways, I had no idea what I was doing.

I had completed my student teaching and undergrad, and my "bag of tricks" to help students succeed needed more tools. Since then, so many things have changed. The program gave me ample knowledge, redefining my abilities. Since the start of the program, I have taken on new pedagogies to better equip my students with the necessary knowledge in engaging and tactful ways. In addition, I found a new purpose behind my career and reignited my passion for writing and reading.

My progression and overall evolution were not always linear, but I am proud of where I am now. Although I must admit, I did not climb this mountain alone; instead, I was in the great company of my academic advisor, professors, and classmates during this progression. Furthermore, When I look back at the program, several courses ignited these changes within my practice and or realigned my vision of a classroom teacher.

Pedagogical Gains

When I reflect on my pedagogical skills in 2020 as a first-year virtual teacher, I wince at the thought of some of the practices and procedures I implemented. More specifically, I had a narrow view of teaching early literacy at the beginning of the 2021-22 school year. My perception was you taught letter-sound correspondence, give the student a book based on their level designated from some standardized test, and work up to more challenging books, and boom, they become readers (ha! boy, was I mistaken).

Within the short time in the program, I gained new perspectives and knowledge on teaching and instructional practices, especially those related to early literacy and assessing reading levels. Looking back on the program courses, one course stands out as one that provided me with a new understanding of literacy: TE 842- Elementary Reading Assessment and Instruction. TE 842 switched my entire mindset in teaching early literacy. After thoroughly researching all five domains of reading and building the knowledge that each domain builds on the next, I instantly started implementing more explicit phonics instruction throughout my day and emphasized word structure. The course developed my understanding surrounding the buzz around the Science of Reading, which at the time, my district was encouraging the same shift. I was able to directly take what I was learning and implement the practice the next day. It was empowering to see this shift working as most of my students were making significant improvements- and I was enjoying it, too. From sound walls to orthographic mapping, the course gave me the knowledge to ignite further research, thus strengthening my pedagogical skills and making me feel more confident in my teaching.

Additionally, TE 842 provided me with an ability to closely examine assessments to ensure they aligned to the developmental stages of reading. During the course, I explored various reading assessments and considered their validity. I also learned to respectfully speak up and

advocate for early literacy during professional development meetings and provide my colleagues with similar perspectives. Since the course, I have ventured down many avenues that explore teaching with a focus on phonics (similar to the Science of Reading). I also have implemented several of the strategies outlined in this course.

Newfound Purpose

In a career that can often feel like you are trying to keep your head above water most days, it is essential to realign your vision and purpose, especially in the first couple of years. Teaching is the most rewarding career but is equally challenging. Similar to the evolution of my pedagogy, I have seen significant progress in identifying my overarching purpose, which keeps me driven to do my best. I have said this many times, and maybe I am just a new "gen-z" "everybody gets a trophy" teacher. Still, I love relationships and fostering a welcoming environment built on equity and emotional intelligence. In a world where every day the news features a new tragic story (school related or not), I feel it is not only just one part of my job but is at the forefront of my job to teach and nurture a classroom family where every child feels valued.

Throughout my program, I explored the many sad truths children face, and within their realities, I have found my purpose. In Summer 2021, I took CEP 841- Classroom and Behavior Management in Inclusive Classrooms. During my time in the course, I explored many behavior management approaches and examined the effect of trauma on children in the classroom, fostering a better understanding of behaviors.

During this course, I compiled research that supported the ideology behind trauma-informed teaching and realized along the way, instead of just speaking on behalf of making a change; I needed to make the changes happen right there in my mid-Michigan classroom.

Inspired, I researched ways to introduce the concept of equity to young learners and focused on how to foster relationships among students, their families, and myself. As a result, I made immediate and swift changes before the start of my second year of teaching to model these newfound values. I started asking what was causing my students' behaviors, not; why are they acting like this? This simple shift made major waves in my teaching and ability to support students. Furthermore, I grew more reflective in my communication and, in turn, became a better listener and more effective teammate for both my colleagues and students' parents, thus making me a better teacher.

From the knowledge and experiences gained, I have implemented this ideology of equity, advocated for the importance of social-emotional learning, and worked diligently to build a classroom centered around social-emotional learning (SEL). As a result, my SEL lessons are often the highlight of my day. In addition, as I tactfully explore character strengths with my early learners, I have found children to be much more emotionally connected and aware than most adults. This change was noted not only by myself but my administration; my principal coined student relationships and parent communications to be my most prominent asset to the school and, on a larger scale, the district.

Creativity Sparks Teaching

I'm a words person, they cling onto me, or maybe I cling to them. Quotes, speeches, sayings, and books empower me, and I often find ways to resonate with words. My passion for words is an area that intertwines back to the purpose I previously identified, where I highlighted the value I place on social-emotional learning. Part of social-emotional learning is building character strengths such as resilience and love of learning. Before my program, I often was insecure about my own writing journey. I was trying to instill writing confidence in my students;

meanwhile, I was struggling with the same feelings on a grander scale. I vividly remember constantly focusing on the word count and the other laundry list of requirements, forgoing any personal emotions I might have toward the piece.

However, over the past year and a half, I grew more confident in my writing, found my writer's voice, and now my writing is the best it has ever been: expressive, well-planned, and something I genuinely enjoy. Although I completed writing assignments in all my courses, TE 848 – Writing Assessment and Instruction provided me with a new lens on writing. I was able to experience a role reversal and write creatively, redefining my writing voice, thus making me a better writing teacher. As you can imagine, it is hard to teach something you personally do not enjoy. Therefore, I learned new techniques to uncover one's writing voice. I was able to implement several of the highlighted strategies into my classroom and empower my students, just as I had experienced myself. Writing is difficult for early learners; it is challenging to identify ideas, establish characters, and develop a storyline. In many ways, writing was the subject I struggled the most to teach effectively to my second-graders, but we explored many realms of writing. With the knowledge gained from this course, I was able to implement various strategies to support the individual needs of my students and empower them to produce writing that made them feel proud. The instrumental shift in who you are trying to please makes all the difference with the proper support. Although I now see purpose in setting parameters for writing pieces, I equally find it essential to set goals and allow the student to implement some individuality within their writing.

Furthermore, along the same lines, the course reignited my passion for literacy. As a young child, reading was always my favorite subject, as it came naturally to me. Now I am an avid reader who enjoys critical thinking and conversation; through the program and the course, I

also was able to revel in my passions and reconsider new outlooks on books through implementing new opportunities for literacy and engagement within reading and writing.

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As mentioned, I have grown tremendously over the year and a half in the Master of Arts in Education (MAED) program at Michigan State University. I am beyond proud of the growth I have made and am left feeling honored and blessed to have this newfound knowledge, for, without it, I would not be nearly as effective as I am today within my teaching career. As an educator, I place a considerable emphasis on continued learning; I believe it is vital to continue learning and implementing new techniques to convey knowledge to students more effectively. From the noted progression in my pedagogical skills to identifying my purpose and passion for my career and content, I have made waves of growth visible to both myself and my administration and colleagues.

However, I must mention that above all, the program nurtured many of my passions, such as my love of learning. Inspiring me to explore my passion projects and ignited the possibilities of new avenues within the confines of education and outside the confines as well. As a result, I am eager for my next educational endeavor and feel equipped to continue my education and reach new heights. So, although finishing my Master of Arts in Education signifies the ending of a chapter in many ways, it is the start of something new.