

## Always a Learner

I come from a family that prioritizes education and as I grew up that mentality was planted into my core beliefs. Once I graduated high school, going to college was the only option for me and so I knew that graduate school would also be in my future. It was another thing I just felt like I "had" to do and always saw in my future. My passion for learning seeped into all areas of my life and even the career I had chosen for myself had something to do with education. If I wasn't a student dedicated to learning, I was the educator facilitating learning for others. After a few years of teaching kindergarten and first grade, I applied to [Michigan State University's Master of Arts in Education \(MAED\)](#) program just like I had planned for. I dove right back into a world of education that had become so comfortable to me, and this time I was the student once again.

There was a point when I was applying to the MAED program where I went to my building principal for advice. I knew I had to choose a focus for my program and I was hoping she could provide some insight as to which path might be the most useful for me as an elementary school teacher. She asked me why I was applying for the program in the first place and suggested that thinking about that might help me pick an area of focus. It was at this moment I realized that I had no idea why I was actually pursuing my master's degree other than it was something that I always thought I needed to do. Surely I had a better reason. I began to worry that I was making this monumental life decision merely based on a developed habit.

It wasn't until after I was accepted into the program and began to map out my courses that I started to understand my motivation behind earning this master's degree in the first place. I spent hours pouring over course descriptions trying to find the courses that I felt like I needed most as an educator. I chose courses that focused on effectively teaching literacy, dealing with challenging behavior, and classroom management because I wanted to graduate this program feeling like I was a better teacher and person than when I started. And that was it, I simply wanted to improve and become better at the job I fell in love with. I connected this straightforward idea to my life in education. As a student I wanted to get smarter and learn and as a teacher I felt that familiar itch to advance so I became the student once more. Sure this tendency might still be considered a habit, but a habit of striving to become better is one I am okay with driving my life decisions.

Now that I am nearly finished with this program, I can reflect on where I started and where it has taken me. The courses I took over the past few years have changed me for the better and continue to demonstrate the profound impact on me as an educator. I can happily say that because of my learning experiences as a graduate student in Michigan State University's MAED program I have more knowledge about effectively teaching literacy to young learners, understanding the foundational building blocks my students need to become successful readers, and I have more confidence in my ability to make management decisions that ensures my students are learning in a safe and healthy environment. My overall experience in the program is invaluable, but there are a few courses that stand out in particular to me because they have pushed me to apply my learning beyond the classroom and into my own.

## Change in Perspective

When I was in high school I took a class called LINK, where general education students would buddy up with a student with special needs and go to one of their classes with them for support in whichever way they needed it. One year I was paired with a student a few years younger than me that has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). My teacher told me about the struggles she encountered socially and I remember having to explain to her a lot of social norms that did not come naturally to her. I thought, "If I didn't know about this social norm how would I want it explained to me?", and this was a mantra that I consistently came back to while working with children, especially children with special needs. My trusty mantra failed me however in my first year of teaching when I had 4 students with extremely challenging behaviors and I found myself becoming frustrated because I could not figure out how to teach these students to control their emotions. Year after year I felt the same familiar exasperation trying to manage difficult behaviors and it was something I desperately wanted to learn more about in my masters program.

Perhaps the biggest and most valuable change in myself as a professional came after taking [CEP 841: Classroom and Behavior Management in the Inclusive Classroom](#). It was in this course where my professor first introduced me to the idea that every behavior has a function, and the job of a teacher is to identify the function of an unwanted behavior in order to address it at its source. This was significant for me because it was no longer sufficient to imagine myself as that student in order to confront challenging behavior. I was able to shift my point of view and realize that I am not those students, and I need to understand from a teacher's perspective the function a certain behavior is fulfilling in order to successfully manage it. Now my mantra is, "Behavior is communication" and I see my role as decoding that communication.

Along with the giant shift in my thinking, I am also proud of the work I completed in that course. I became familiar with and had practice completing a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and have used this assessment to assist me in my own classroom a number of times. I am also proud of the work I have done researching and learning more about Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) Therapy and how teachers can apply the basic principles in their classrooms to help assist students with ASD find more success in the classroom. You can find the presentation I created [here](#). Overall I have become a better teacher because of my experience in this class because I know more about preventing and controlling challenging student behavior for students with and without special needs.

## First a Learner, Second a Teacher

As a teacher, I am conditioned (or even wired) to put the needs of others ahead of my own. It is something that I am comfortable with and have become accustomed to in my career, my life even. Every decision I make is done with my students in mind, and it is easy for me to forget that I too am a learner and that affects the way I teach tremendously. This idea was at the forefront of my learning experiences while taking [TE 849: Methods and Materials for Teaching Children's and Adolescent Literature](#) and something I have come to appreciate. This

was another course that made a significant impact on me because I was encouraged to first read children's literature through the eyes of a reader, then understand how my own exposure to literature can play an important part in teaching it to others.

An aspect from this course I know I will always stay with me is the awe and inspiration I felt when I explored the book, [A Velocity of Being: Letters to a Young Reader](#). Inside what looks like a typical college textbook is a collection of letters from people of all walks of life about the power of reading and what it personally means to them. I was in awe that there were so many affluent people who were impacted by reading in so many different ways, and I was inspired to provide a bridge, as a teacher, to the magical opportunities that literature has to offer.

One of my favorite excerpts in this book was written by Rebecca Solnit. At one point she reveals, "The books of my childhood were bricks, not for throwing but for building. I piled the books around me for protection and withdrew inside their battlements, building a tower in which I escaped my unhappy circumstances". I feel so passionately about not only teaching students how to read, but teaching them to love it, because I know that the benefits far surpass academics. I am grateful that I was pushed in this course to confront my own experiences with literature and who I am as a reader because in the end I was able to see why it is we read in the first place, and why it is essential that students receive effective literacy instruction.

## Reflect to Grow

Another course that helped refine my skills and build my confidence as an educator was [CEP 883: Psychology of Classroom Discipline](#). I can remember being embarrassed at first to be interested in taking classes that were just dedicated to classroom management because it comes with this assumption that only new teachers (or bad ones) need to learn about classroom management. However, I have come to learn through my own personal experience that classroom management is one of the most difficult and essential things about being a teacher because if you do not have a handle on management, you will be spending more time putting out fires instead of teaching curriculum. And now I am no longer embarrassed to admit that I will probably be interested in learning more about and improving my management skills for as long as I am teaching in the classroom.

This class was so valuable to me because I not only learned about effective research based strategies for classroom management, I also practiced how self-reflection leads to personal growth. It was uncomfortable at times, but when I genuinely reflected on my own management practices and discussed how they could be improved I felt like I was sharpening a skill that I could use for the rest of my career. I can confidently say that my teaching practices have improved because of my inclination to self-reflect and make improvements everyday.

Although this is something that has now become a habit for me, I completed a project of self-reflection while taking this course that gave me a great jumping off point. You can find the project [here](#). In it I look closely at different aspects of my classroom management, and I use practices that I learned about in the course to implement a plan to improve my overall management. It was the ultimate form of self-reflection and I believe it will benefit me for years

to come. I am incredibly proud of the hard work I put into this project that I completed that summer, and it has helped me a lot starting the 2020-2021 school year.

### Linking it All Together

I have always seen myself as a learner in all stages of my life. I am a student even when I am not taking classes and pursuing a degree because I am constantly striving to become better. My experience participating in Michigan State University's MAED program contributed greatly to the confidence in my abilities to teach literacy effectively, and to implement classroom management practices that ensures my students are learning in a safe and supportive environment. I have gone through many changes in myself as an educator as a direct result from my involvement in the MAED program and I am extremely grateful as I see these changes as improvements. Perhaps the most valuable change I have encountered is that I am able to carry these skills I've learned over to my career as a teacher. I am also able to continue using these skills long after I have graduated, wherever my career path takes me.