

A Life-affirming, Exhilarating Journey

By taking a variety of courses through the Master of Arts in Education (MAED) program at Michigan State University I have recognized that I have gained new practices, skills, and strategies to implement in the classroom. Some of the skills and practices that I have gained and are now a part of my repertoire after taking MAED courses include: Individual Education Plan writing, implementing and researching accommodations and modifications, implementing technology in my classroom and learning, practicing progress monitoring to guide instruction, and assessing students with learning disabilities. Through course work, practice, and reflection I am now a more qualified and confident teacher.

Courses:

My first master's courses were a part of my student teaching year; courses entitled 'Teacher Education'. These courses were the stepping stones into my understanding of lesson planning, differentiating, and getting to know my students as learners. My student teaching year helped mold me into the teacher that I am today. While studying and working with students on a daily basis, I learned how to create a professional yet friendly rapport with my students, as well as how to interact with staff members, community members, and students who have disabilities or exhibit challenging behaviors. During my student teaching I was able to learning acronyms based on teaching practices and learned how to interact in a school setting, including: applying practices, assessing, and progress monitoring. This student teaching year bettered me in many ways, especially in my teaching practice and learning how to accept and grow from feedback from my peers and mentors.

One specific course made a lasting impression on me and my teaching practice, CEP 841 (Classroom Management in an Inclusive Classroom). This course was the foundation to my current teaching practices regarding special education and self-discipline. After taking this course I began to understand the idea of providing students the tools to learn self-discipline as a way to control their actions rather than teacher reprimanding a student for challenging behavior. One book that really stood out in my gaining knowledge and understanding in self-discipline was Tom V. Savage's (1998) [Teaching Self-Control through Management and Discipline](#). This book explained that teachers need to provide students with the tools and supports to be responsible and aware of their actions, and showed the positive benefits of doing so in an inclusive classroom. I was introduced to [PBIS](#), Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports, as a way to support students, those with or without disabilities alike, in regard to their social, emotional, and academic growth. According to PBIS 2016, "Emphasis is given to the impact of implementing PBIS on the social, emotional and academic outcomes for students with disabilities", and research proves the effectiveness of this school wide program. I learned how to use an alternative route toward classroom management, providing the students the support, while creating an encouraging and inviting classroom. After taking this course and learning about [PBIS](#), I have joined a committee at my school to try and form a school-wide behavior program which will support students emotionally and socially in an academic setting. Without this course and the knowledge gained, I feel I would still lack the basic understanding of how to truly support students and how to ensure that a school as a whole can have common language and interventions.

CEP 841 also introduced me to the idea that accommodations for a student with disabilities can also benefit students without disabilities. After reading this course content, and researching accommodations for multiple learning disorders, I have gained new insight on the physical space in a

room, the furniture in the room, and the level of comfort in the room. The knowledge gained from this course was applied directly toward my teaching and affected my students as I worked hard to ensure a classroom where students were supported emotionally and socially, while providing each student with the opportunity for something that would originally be considered an accommodation and necessary due to an IEP or 504. One article stood out to me regarding the seating arrangement of a classroom and the types of chairs in the room. The article, [No chairs: Students 'get the wiggles out' on exercise balls](#), brings up the idea that students need movement and need to be both physically and emotionally comfortable, and that by using a yoga ball as a chair, it may support students as they wiggle and learn. I learned that supporting students' kinesthetic need for movement, while supporting them academically, will strengthen their engagement.

Two elective courses which benefitted in my understanding of special education include Educational Administration (EAD) 850 and Teacher Education (TE) 846. These courses addressed different topics; however, they were completely relevant to my work and students. EAD 850 consisted of working and reading about multicultural education and the impact a teacher has when they are aware and willing to aid and learn about students from all cultural backgrounds. TE 846 was the first case study I did where I frequently progress monitored to show student growth. I was glad to do this work as it allowed me to help support a student and helped me understand him even more, specifically gaining insight into what his literacy challenges were. This was incredibly important, as the English Language Resource Teacher and I worked hard toward helping get an individualized education plan (IEP) for the case study student I chose to work with. As the resource teacher and I worked, it allowed me to get to know the student and the strategies he used even more, which guided my differentiated small group instruction.

One of the last courses that I took which strengthened my teaching practice was CEP 804A. This course allowed me to learn to take chances and try new strategies or skills with my students, especially those that are best practices and evidence based. This course also strengthened my skills regarding lesson planning and implementing accommodations and modifications for students. Through this course's projects and assignments I worked diligently toward planning lessons incorporating age appropriate standards (Common Core State Standards) while focusing directly with what my students need. Not only did I learn about my students, but I was able to create a stronger emotional connection and create a stronger understanding of their needs as a student and where they struggle. This course, and the projects that I completed during that time, gave me the time and tools to create thoughtful, differentiated lessons and progress monitoring for students who struggle with literacy skills and strategies. This course also allowed me to learn about website creating, and researching topics so that I could refer back to the [sites I made](#) as I continue my teaching career. This course opened my eyes to how I can support all students, not just those who struggle. This was especially helpful as the majority of my students during the 2016-2017 year were strong readers. Through this course I was able to research, read about, and implement teaching practices such as: [reciprocal teaching](#), [PALS](#), [annotating reading](#), all of which can be used for those who struggle and those who excel in reading.

Change:

Since the beginning of the program and my studies I have changed as an educator and student. Not only have the courses I have taken aided in my change, but the interactions with students have allowed me to change for the better. Many of the courses gave me the opportunity to work with students

in a one-on-one setting, in small groups, or as a whole group. These interactions strengthened my understanding of how to create lessons which are based on the Common Core State Standards and align with the Social and Emotional Standards that also support learners of all kinds. The courses I took provided time and practice for me to begin to implement tier 1, 2, and 3 interventions as a way to support my students. These interactions with my students gave me insight as to how I can differentiate my instruction, and how I can create lesson plans or units to best support students academically and emotionally. These courses reminded me that teaching is much more than academics, that reaching students at a personal, emotional and social level is truly what is vital to make any growth.

After taking the Teacher Education courses during my student teaching year, I had recognized that I needed more information and background on Special Education as a whole before I should begin my studies focused on a single disorder. As I began to plan the courses to complete my master's, I changed my path and worked toward understanding and implementing accommodations and modifications in an inclusive classroom, and learned about the rules and guidelines teachers follow as a part of Special Education protocol. This change in path guided me toward taking courses which involve educational inquiry, practices involving differentiating for students with mild disabilities, practices in regard to special education, and reflection of my growth. As I continued to work toward my Master of Arts in Education I was able to focus on gaining best practices in regard to working with students in an inclusive classroom.

Originally, as I began my master's, I had planned to study the Autism Spectrum Disorder specifically, however, I recognized that I needed more in depth study and practice toward all of Special Education in general so that I could best support my students and students to come. I was trying to figure out, "What is special education?" and "How can I better myself as an educator as I learn about Special Education?" Now, as I finish my studies, I have set new goals and aspirations for myself. My goals and aspirations still have to do with learning about Special Education, but also have to do with communication and languages that I can learn, and also implementing technology into my classroom seamlessly. The goals that I have set for myself involve continuing my education and gaining knowledge about special education. Professional development provided by my district and taking courses on my own, will allow me to continuously grow alongside my students. I have to strengthen communication, whether it is by learning another language, or working to share information with parents. I would love to take courses on Sign Language as a way to broaden my communication horizons, but also to make myself more aware of another community we have in the world. I also plan to continue to speak Spanish, a language in which I am fluent. Lastly, I want to keep communication strong by implementing technology, allowing me to share work and information with parents. I plan to incorporate technology in my classroom more frequently, and seamlessly (and will accomplish this by continuing professional development) while also sharing student work with parents in a fast and efficient way. I can accomplish the link between communication and technology by using an app called [Seesaw](#). I have started to use this app in my classroom and it has allowed me to monitor student work and also share with parents the wonderful products their children produce.

During my master's program I was able to interact and receive feedback from fellow educators, especially in my later courses. This interaction with educators and school staff members was incredibly beneficial regarding my understanding of concepts, learning through working in collaborative groups, and allowed me time to reflect from peer feedback and guidance. Not only have I gained new perspective on

topics and practices, but I have also learned about supplemental materials that I can use, and was able to visualize how others worked with students with specific needs in an inclusive classroom. Having the opportunity to work with other students and teachers, and to learn from their work, practices, and feedback, has proven invaluable. This newly gained information is authentic and genuine, and has opened my eyes as to how I can approach a new situation with a student.

As I reflect on who I am as an educator and person after my master's program, I am overjoyed with the growth I have made and the knowledge I have gained. I recognize the importance of my job and the importance of being a continuous learner along with my students. It is clear to me that the work that I have done will impact my students, especially regarding the newly gained skills, strategies, and practices that are now a part of my teaching repertoire. This journey, working toward a Master of Arts in Education, has truly been life-affirming and exhilarating.