

My Educational Journey

By: Sarah Bowen

Upon graduating from Michigan State University I knew I would be returning shortly to obtain my master's degree. Since I took several graduate level courses during my internship year I wanted to continue to further my education; however, at the time I was unsure what I wanted to study. Therefore, I decided to take a break between undergrad and graduate school to put all of my energy into my first year of teaching special education at the elementary level. After a successful yet demanding first year of teaching, I found myself yearning to go back to school. I was eager to learn ways to improve my teaching and promote my students' academic success.

I was eager to go back to school and participate in a graduate program through Michigan State University. Unfortunately, I was living in North Carolina at the time so online courses were the only option if I wanted to continue my educational path as a Spartan. An online learning opportunity was also more conducive to my schedule since I was working full time teaching special education. After reflecting upon my first year, I wanted to expand my knowledge on literacy techniques and strategies to meet the needs of my struggling literacy learners. In addition to the students on my case load, I was in charge of remediating all low achieving students in the grade levels with which I co-taught. I ran several reading remediation groups throughout the week and monitored their progress. Consequently, I wanted to learn more research based strategies to implement within my reading groups to further ensure their success. In addition, I wanted to continue to stay up to date on special education policies and continue to learn strategies to support my

students with special needs both academically and behaviorally. This led me to applying to the Master of Arts in Education program at Michigan State University with a concentration in Literacy Education and Special Education.

The first course in my program which really helped me develop my writing instruction was TE 848: Writing Assessment and Instruction taught by Lisa Hawkins. This class focused on writing research, assessments, and the overall process of writing instruction within the classroom. I had to write several narrative and poetry pieces through this course which really challenged me as a writer. In addition, we critiqued peers' writing samples following a Writer's Workshop model. Since my students follow a writer's workshop model in the classroom, it helped me grow as a teacher by experiencing this model first hand and understanding the importance of my students revising and editing their written work. I learned several techniques to incorporate into my own writing instruction which improved my students overall motivation and ability to follow the steps of the writing process independently. During this course I created a research based PowerPoint on Self-Regulated Strategy Development in writing. I learned strategies for students to independently set goals for themselves during the writing process and monitor their writing development throughout the stages of the writing process.

In TE 842: Elementary Reading Assessment and Instruction, taught by Chad Waldron I gained additional knowledge on reading assessments and instruction through research based practices. Through this class, I analyzed students' reading data through a variety of informal reading inventories. I was able to utilize these inventories (i.e. Qualitative Reading Inventory by Lauren Leslie and JoAnne Caldwell and Basic Reading

Inventory by Jerry L. Johns) within my own classroom. By administering these informal reading inventories, I was able to have a better understanding of where my students' are currently performing at in reading and which particular areas (comprehension, fluency, phonics, or vocabulary) they struggled with. I also had the opportunity to meet with the literacy instructors at my school, share my knowledge from TE 842, and teach them how to conduct these assessments on their own students. This way they were able to monitor and track their students' growth in reading informally throughout the year. Furthermore, I conducted a case study on two students' data and created classroom accommodations and goals for instruction based off of their individual needs. This course was a turning point in my literacy instruction. With the knowledge and skill set gained through this course, I felt more confident in addressing my students' literacy needs and implementing interventions for them to be successful within the school setting.

TE 846: Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners taught by Dongbo Zhang further expanded my newly gained literacy knowledge by applying what I learned in TE 842 to the classroom setting. I had the opportunity to create individual lessons tailored to my struggling literacy learners through research based instruction. For this case study, I had the opportunity to work with one of my students on my caseload, and tailor the lessons to align with his IEP reading goals. I specifically enjoyed reading one of the required texts for this course, *Teaching Strategic Processes in Reading* by Janice F. Almasi and Susan King Fullerton. Through this text I learned comprehension, word recognition, and fix-up strategies which strong, strategic readers' use as well as reasons why struggling readers are not naturally strategic readers. I also learned the important aspects to keep in mind when teaching strategic processing along with strategic practices to include within my

literacy block. This allowed me provide more meaningful and explicit literacy instruction when working with my struggling readers on my caseload and within my literacy remediation groups.

Another course which made an enormous impact on my career as a special education teacher was CEP 842 Content Area Instruction for Students with Mild Disabilities taught by Cynthia Okolo. At the time I was in my second year of teaching following an inclusion based co-teaching model. This class focused on inclusion based support for students with special needs and the multiple co-teaching models for school personnel to implement. I learned about various accommodations for my students in content areas (math, science, and social studies) to ensure my students were successful while participating in the general education setting. With inclusion on the rise in the public school systems, I knew it was imperative I was knowledgeable in this area. One of our assignments for this course was to plan, co-teach, and co-assess a lesson with one of our colleagues. This assignment further improved my ability to collaborate and co-teach with my co-workers in an inclusive setting. I learned about the importance of utilizing several co-teaching models within a lesson and ways to best support my students under an inclusion based teaching model. In the end of this course I put together a professional development presentation and website on differentiating math instruction. Within this presentation I researched math disabilities, ways to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of struggling math learners, and accommodations to implement within the classroom. I also further learned ways to differentiate math instruction through co-teaching models and had the opportunity to share these strategies with colleagues at my school.

CEP 841: Classroom and Behavior Management taught by Troy V. Mariage focused on the behavioral, social, and academic needs of students in an inclusive setting. After taking a course with Dr. Mariage during my internship year, I was eager to enroll for his class this summer. I learned about Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and how to meet the needs of diverse students through data-based interventions. This course provided me with an in depth analysis of behavior management techniques and ways to implement these techniques within my classroom foster a positive and safe learning environment. For my final project in this class I conducted research on Behavior Intervention Plans and how to write successful plans within the school setting. Through my research I learned about the process behind Intervention Plans along with coping strategies and self-management skills to instill within students with behavior concerns. I also learned about the importance of looking at the entire child by taking their strengths, weaknesses, and interests into account when developing Behavior Intervention Plans. After taking this course, I am more confident in my abilities to support students with behavior concerns and address these concerns through Positive Behavior Interventions.

Lastly, my Capstone Seminar ED 870 course allowed me to reflect upon my journey through the MAED Program. In this course I created an online portfolio which displayed a showcase of my graduate work. We had the opportunity to collaborate with our peers and provide feedback to further improve our portfolios. Within our portfolio we were required to include an electronic resume, work samples from courses, essays reflecting on the MAED Program, and our graduate coursework transcript. I wrote a Goal Reflection essay during this course and reflected upon my goals I created when originally applied to the Master's Program. This was a very enlightening essay because I was able to see how my goals

evolved throughout the program. The other essay I wrote, Future as a Learner, required me to create goals for myself as an educator and determine what I hoped to accomplish next as I continue my journey as a lifelong learner. I loved how this course forced me to reflect on all of my hard work throughout the past year and put together my all of accomplishments into an electronic portfolio to have for years to come.

Reflecting on the past year and half, I am beyond thrilled with my decision to enroll in the MAED Program and extremely grateful for this opportunity. It has been challenging at times to balance a full time job and graduate school work in the evenings, but the knowledge I have gained as an educator through the MAED program is irreplaceable. I have learned ways to improve my teaching practices and gained a stronger insight into research based strategies that drive instruction. The insight gained throughout all of my courses has positively impacted my students within the classroom and improved my abilities as a teacher. While my rewarding educational journey through the MAED program comes to an end, I feel well prepared and excited to continue to apply the knowledge I have gained in the classroom to further improve my teaching.