

My Journey to Be a Spartan

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Teaching had always been the career path I predicted my life would take me. I had wanted to be a teacher since as long as I can remember, probably around first grade. This love continued throughout my early and late elementary years where I found myself with great teacher after great teacher, inspiring me to follow in their footsteps. I have loved the act of teaching for a long time as well. I was the big sister to my brother, the oldest child at my mother's daycare, and later, the neighborhood babysitter; all roles in which I showed my love of teaching little ones new things.

I imagined myself teaching first, second, or third grade but never Kindergarten... especially since my student teaching in kindergarten for eight weeks was oh so challenging – the children were non-stop active, always in need of help and attention, and oh the boogers and germs in that classroom! Yet ironically, my first job was teaching Kindergarten in an inner city school district and I was thankful to have a job right out of college! To walk through those school doors each day and be the best teacher I could be, even when I felt conquered by a group of five-year-olds, was the most challenging feat I had ever overcome.

After that year, I got married and I was on the hunt for a job again, for sure that life would lead me to teach older students in a small district near my husband's new job. Never would I have guessed that today, I find myself teaching kindergarten again, an age I never thought I would love. I have been teaching pre-k and kindergarten for all five years of my teaching career so far and would have it no other way. I have found I love and appreciate their daily energy and excitement for learning and their sheer joy when they have accomplished something difficult. It has its challenges for sure, but it is refreshing and a joyous environment to come to work to.

During my third year of teaching, I began thinking about the next phase in my journey as a beginning teacher, which was beginning a master's program. I asked colleagues what programs they completed and administrators what Master's experience they would most look for in a teaching candidate (as I would find myself job hunting again that summer). Michigan State University kept being mentioned. I completed my undergraduate degree at Central Michigan

University so I knew I wanted to find a Master's program at another highly-rated university to diversify my educational resume. I began looking into the MSU master's programs to see if one of them would fit my needs and was pleased that I found the all online format of the Master's of Arts in Education (MAED). This was exciting as both of my parents are MSU graduates so I would soon be embarking on a journey to join the MSU alumni in my family.

The MAED program was appealing for a few key reasons. I appreciated that it was an entirely online degree program as that allowed flexibility to work around my family and work schedules and the convenience of taking courses from my own living room. It was also nice because, living in the Detroit area and teaching full time, I would not have been able to manage traveling to take courses on MSU's campus. Therefore, the online format provided me with a unique opportunity to become a Spartan. Secondly, I was also attracted to the MAED program because it allowed me to choose two areas of specialty rather than a master's with a single focus which seemed much more common at other universities. I liked this as I could take courses to strengthen two areas of educational need, which I chose as special education and literacy. Special education was an area of interest for me, not necessarily a desired future career path. I wanted to learn more about the different disorders that students qualify under for special education, how the special education referral and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process works, and how to help be an advocate for students with diverse and sometimes more challenging needs in my general education classroom. On the other hand, literacy is an area of instruction that I wanted to strengthen as it is one of the most important subject areas of learning for lower elementary age students and without good literacy skills, students generally struggle in all curriculum areas.

When I began the Master of Arts in Education program at MSU, in the summer of 2012, I wanted a convenient program that would get me on my way to earning my degree and completing the requirements of the state of Michigan in order to apply for my Professional Teaching certificate. I found that as I began taking courses my goals morphed from simply wanting to get it done and out of the way in a convenient and relatively quick way to realizing all that I could gain from this experience with online learning. I was gaining technology skills I could use in my classroom, meeting other professionals with similar learning goals, and gaining expertise in the fields of special education and literacy to help me meet the needs of my own classroom of students. Many of the Master's courses helped me gain new skills and/or impacted

my teaching in some way, but a few were most influential in changing my ideas, gaining significant knowledge, and/or being most relevant to my learning goals.

One of the courses that most influenced me during the MAED program was actually my very first course, CEP 841 – Classroom and Behavior Management in the Inclusive Classroom. I had just finished my third year of teaching and had come to the realization that no matter what school district (I had already taught in two), what type of program (full or half day), and what socio-economic area, there would always be students with challenging behaviors in my class. This class helped me to look at the challenging behaviors in a very different way. Instead of focusing on the behaviors themselves, it trained me to observe the behavior but focus on what need the child was trying to meet by displaying that behavior. Once the need was determined, it was much easier to determine strategies to use and what the child could do to meet that need in an acceptable way. I also learned that prevention is key to good classroom management, as most behaviors can be prevented. This is much more successful than reacting to behaviors after they happen as prevention and reaction are often the difference between positive and negative classroom management. In addition, I learned the key difference between discipline and punishment as well, which was important as I developed my own ideas that I would incorporate into my classroom management plan.

CEP 841 is also where I first took an in-depth look at [Positive Behavior Interventions and Support \(PBIS\)](#), which was simply a term I was aware of before this course. PBIS would begin to be a passion of mine as I switched school districts that summer and soon joined the PBIS committee at my new school. I am now a big advocate for PBIS with parents and colleagues. I am part of the school committee, encourage colleagues to play a role in our school-wide PBIS initiative, and model for other teachers the data collection and usage needed to track student behavior and the effectiveness of interventions.

In spring of 2013, I took CEP 832 – Educating Students with Challenging Behaviors, which was a great follow up to CEP 841. This course was my favorite in the program because it was the most useful to me and filled a need for me during that teaching year. It focused on reading about how to work effectively with many different and challenging behaviors that students may exhibit, such as aggressive and angry behaviors, impulsive and active behaviors, shy and withdrawn behaviors, and low-achieving behaviors. What was great was that I not only read about this topic, but I was able to apply my learning to a real student, and one of my own! I

had many challenging student behaviors being exhibited in my classroom that year but there was one student in particular whose attention-seeking behaviors threatened to push me over the edge and needless to say his behaviors were the ones that I chose to focus on for my project. I learned how to record data on a specific problematic behavior, try a strategy or intervention, and then check the data to see if my strategy was improving the behavior. It was also refreshing to be able to discuss challenging behaviors with similar grade level colleagues and to get not only empathy but ideas and suggestions for working with specific behaviors. Overall, this course really got me thinking proactively and productively about challenging student behavior rather than simply being frustrated about it. I also feel it solidified my belief in the need for data collection and reflection when working to change a student's behavior. This type of data collection became a large focus at my school, so it proved a great asset to have this course as I could bring some expertise back to my own district colleagues.

In the summer of 2013, I took CEP 840 – Policies, Practices, and Perspectives in Special Education. This course focused on special education practices in the United States. One of the highlights of this course was writing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for an imaginary student. I had no idea what went into that process and I was stunned at the amount of work and time that goes into completing the IEP paperwork, analyzing the student data and his/her learning needs, and determining positive and achievable academic goals for the student. The second highlight of this course was the assignment to make my own classroom website. This was a daunting and challenging task at first as I had no idea where to start or how to create a webpage. This made me step out of my comfort zone and try something new, which was using the website platform a colleague had suggested to me, Shutterfly. I learned how to make my own classroom website that is user-friendly as well as very informative. The course encouraged me to put pages on my website to tell parents about PBIS, differentiated instruction, and other resources. I can honestly say that without the push from this class I probably would not have taken the time to make a classroom website on my own; it has been a real asset to my classroom and has greatly increased communication between myself and my students' families.

As a literacy teacher, I was impacted by TE 842 – Elementary Reading Assessment and Instruction. This course not only opened my mind to multitudes of different ways to assess a students' literacy skills but also the many instructional strategies that can be utilized to meet the needs of those students in their skill deficiencies, whether that be comprehension, alphabetic

principle, fluency, phonological awareness skills, etc. With the partnership of colleagues in the course and then on my own, I was able to look at student assessment data and determine areas of strength and weakness, assign goals for improvement, and research instructional strategies to meet those goals. This gave me more confidence in looking at my own student assessment data and determining the one or two most pressing goals for achievement based on students' progress toward the literacy [Common Core State Standards](#).

The last course that I am going to discuss is the reason I am right now reflecting on my master's program, which is ED 870 – Capstone Portfolio course. I have to admit that at first I was upset to be paying two thousand dollars to recap my learning in the last nine courses in the MAED program as the program itself has been such a financial commitment for my family. I can now say that without this course, I would not have reflected on my learning as a whole and how I have changed as a teacher and learner due to earning this degree. It was also well worth it to have had the opportunity to create an online portfolio which will showcase my abilities as a teacher and the assets that the master's program has brought to my instruction.

I am proud of my accomplishments but most of all I feel a drive to teach others things I have learned during my time participating in the MAED courses. This online portfolio will help me prove to employers and colleagues that I have skills that can prove useful in leadership positions at my school. I am proud to now be able to call myself a Spartan alumna, which I believe is an elite name in the academic community. I know that by being a part of the Spartan family, it will push me to pursue greater things in the future, wherever my journey may lead.