

Graduate Synthesis: Bringing it all together

“Instruction that seeks to maximize each student’s growth by meeting each student where she is and helping the student to progress. In practice, it involves offering several different learning experiences in response to students’ varied needs.”

-Maria Montessori

As a fourth and fifth grade teacher with a strong passion for individual needs, I strive to meet each child where he or she is academically and emotionally to help provide the needed foundation to support a passion of learning and academic growth. I have been fortunate to teach in a Montessori classroom where this philosophy is embedded into the program. Maria Montessori found the Montessori philosophy and program centered in the ideology of following the individual child and his or her needs. I strive to better accommodate and support each student with his or her personal challenges.

I have found my **graduate experience** at **Michigan State University** extremely beneficial and meaningful. These learning opportunities have developed my instructional practices. I have strengthened my abilities to assist all learners especially students struggling in literacy areas. I believe this is even more essential now when considering the implementation of **CCSS** (Common Core State Standards) and cross-curriculum learning. A strong literacy foundation is becoming a prerequisite to learning in the classroom.

When looking back at my graduate coursework, I can wholeheartedly say that this was an invaluable experience for my elementary students and me. It was beneficial for me to learn and develop my understanding of special education learning goals, assessments, and accommodations in order to better understand and support my students. It was also important for me to develop a stronger understanding of best literacy practices. This will help to keep my instruction clear, concise, and meaningful and will provide my students with clarity in regard to literacy and cultural areas when considering CCSS. Although I am truly grateful for each and every learning opportunity I encountered, there are four classes that strongly impacted my growth as a teacher of students with varying abilities.

The four classes that immediately stand out in my mind for strengthening my differentiated and individualized teaching abilities are:

1. Literacy Instruction for Students with Mild Disabilities with Carol Sue Englert (**CEP 804a**)
2. Writing Instruction and Assessment with Kati Macaluso (**TE 848**)
3. Developing Positive Attitudes toward Learning with Evelyn Oka (**CEP 802**)
4. Elementary Reading Assessment and Instruction with Meghan Block (**TE 842**)

Although there was definite overlap between these classes and my most meaningful learning opportunities, each class brought new experiences. When synthesizing the information from all of these courses, I find my new-found knowledge inspiring.

Literacy Instruction for Students with Mild Disabilities

This class was unlike any experience I have had before. It provided me with the opportunity to dig in to mild **LD**(Learning Disabilities), diagnostic assessments, goal settings, and accommodations and implementation. I participated in these various subject areas with a focal student who was struggling with mild LD. Together we completed multiple assessments to help pinpoint the students' needs. Then I had the opportunity to make and set learning goals for this student with help from suggested resources and the instructor. This helped to insure that I was correct, clear, and fair with the goals for the learner. With instructor guidance, professional educational resources, and consulting scholarly texts, I began creating accommodations and special lessons to help push my learner in the direction of the learning goals. I created lessons based on the assessment data and for multiple weeks the learner and I worked together to help him academically. By the end of this process, I had completed the assessment and evaluation components of **IEP** (Individualized Educational Program) goal setting and tailored instruction to help the learner reach these goals. Through this process, I gained insight into everything that occurs in the Child Study process (evaluating Special Education options and available services in regard to the child's qualifications) out of the traditional classroom. It was very helpful for me to experience and learn more about the Special Educational classroom and the responsibilities of Special Education teachers. This knowledge has provided me with the foundation to better support the learners in my classroom with a diagnosed disability and those without.

One specific take-away from this class was learning more about assessments. At the time, I was only completing informal observations and **Fountas and Pinnell** Assessments(to help determine reading and comprehension levels) in my classroom. Special Education teachers and educational assistants completed every other formal literacy assessment. I very rarely received the data from these evaluations. Now, I complete multiple assessments within **DIBELS** (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) with all of my students and I use additional phonemic awareness assessments when I have further questions. I also know to ask for assessment data from the Special Education department and I am able to comprehend much of the data shared with me.

Writing Instruction and Assessment

This course challenged me as a writer and instructor. This class was filled with writing instruction and was much different from any language arts class I experienced. The entire semester, I engaged in writing opportunities in various genres including poetry, narrative, and informational. This included opportunities to revise and edit independently and with peer groups. Near the beginning of the course, I decided to research overconfidence in writing, which was inspired by a kind and hard working student in my elementary class. The evaluation and research turned into my final project and was my first experience with creating an evidenced based theory and proposal about one puzzling student. It was an invaluable experience because this challenged my thinking and encouraged me to think about the big picture while focusing

on the details. At one point in this graduate course, I evaluated **spelling strategies** for struggling students or students with learning disabilities. I had the opportunity to share these findings with my classroom. I know that I have implemented some of this newfound knowledge in my classroom and that I had peers that did the same. I am grateful for the challenging and enlightening writing-related opportunities.

The biggest eye opening opportunity that will continue to affect my writing instruction was the opportunity to participate in the writing process, as the student, in multiple genres. I have always been a proficient writer but I have always been critical and self-conscious of sharing my writing. While partaking in multiple writing processes as an individual and conferencing, revising, and editing with various partners, I reencountered the emotions I felt when I was a younger writer. The feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and stress to complete my writing on time returned. When revisiting these emotions, I was reminded of the importance of specific and guided instruction, clear guidelines and expectations, and opportunities to creatively independently write.

Developing Positive Attitudes toward Learning

I was inspired to take this course after attending a brief professional development course about positive attitudes and motivation toward school: I made the right decision. Throughout the semester we learned and evaluated key components to fostering a motivation classroom environment. This included evaluating different aspects to consider when students appeared to be disengaged and uninterested. I appreciated the amount of case study evaluations we completed in small groups, which helped me when transferring my motivational knowledge and critiques into the classroom. In addition to evaluating student behaviors, we also evaluated teacher instruction, behavior, and management styles when considering promoting strong motivation and inspiration in the classroom. I found that the Montessori environment naturally inspires motivation through the classroom philosophy and arrangement. This course also challenged me as a teammate. This class supported a lot of group work with an assigned group. My group and I supported one another and all wanted to improve our individual instruction, but we all worked full time and we were separated among 4 different time zones. This required flexibility with late night meetings, early morning meetings, and trusted diligence with promptly checking and responding to emails. I incorporate many group projects into my classroom but I was able to share with my students about how my peers and I worked through our time conflicts to help expose them to specific problem solving situations with group work. This turned into a great learning opportunity for my students, my peers, and me.

Throughout this class, I considered one student struggling to appear motivated with writing. With the help of research, my professor, and my graduate class group, I was able to evaluate and pinpoint his motivational struggles. This led to the careful and structured implementation of the strategies we studied in class. I was able to help my student gain independent motivation and confidence in his writing and abilities. I have since implemented some of the strategies I used with this student to my entire class because I found them valuable and inspiring and one of my goals as a teacher is to

promote a passion of writing.

Elementary Reading Assessment and Instruction

In my undergraduate experience at Michigan State University, I learned the foundation in reading instruction. I appreciated my learning opportunities but I did not have the background experiences to help make this learning more meaningful and applicable. This course reviewed the principal and key components of reading instruction and assessment. I explored the concepts in my summer school classroom as I reviewed them in my graduate course. This dual reading instruction experience encouraged me to internalize the reading components I had studied years ago. Through implementation while receiving a guided review, I was able to ensure that I was successfully and correctly applying and using reading strategies and assessments with my students. This turned into a strong reading instructional opportunity for my current students, future students, and me.

One of my accomplishments, in this course, stands out in my mind. At the time of this course, I had just completed my first year of teaching and it was my first summer in my graduate program. I was exhausted and overwhelmed! During the school year, I realized there were some changes I intended to make in my classroom for the following year. One of these goals was to create a scope and sequence of reading and writing instruction to help ensure I was covering many genres in a meaningful and interconnected manner. I also wanted to find thorough and meaningful mentor texts to enhance my instruction. In the course, I was able to accomplish my school goal based in research and course content. The following year when I implemented my scope and sequence, I knew my students were being exposed and learning about text in meaningful and applicable ways.

I believe that my entire graduate experience while pursuing my Master's degree at Michigan State University was incredibly beneficial and applicable to my daily classroom encounters. Even though it is hard to decide which learning was the most noteworthy, there were four classes that pushed me and molded me into an informed teacher of students with a variety of learning styles and abilities.

-Sarah Kobes

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