

## ***My Journey toward Higher Education...***

Synthesis Essay

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***“The roots of education are bitter,***



***but the fruit is sweet” -Aristotle***

In the winter of 2010, I began a journey towards higher education. I was in my second year of teaching, and I knew that I had to start thinking about continuing my education. I wanted to earn a masters degree, but I wanted to actually learn tools and strategies that I could directly apply in my classroom. I also knew that as a second year teacher I didn't have a lot of extra time, but I did have an abundance of responsibilities and stress. I had recently finished my bachelors degree; I can't say that I was excited to start school again. I knew that not only did I need to meet the state requirements, but I needed to continue on so that I could continue to be a highly effective teacher.

After hours of research, I decided to apply to the MAED program. Reflecting on the original goal statement that I wrote when applying to the program, I realize that I applied with the goal of learning as much useful information that would directly impact my students in a positive way. I wanted to know how to motivate my students to want to do better. I wanted to be a great teacher and inspire my students to value education. This program has provided multiple opportunities for me to do all of these things.

The fact that the program was completely online was exciting and nerve-racking at the same time. At that time, I was driving 45 minutes one-way to work each day. I knew I did not want to have to travel far at night to get to various classes. This program honestly fit with my lifestyle. I truly did not know what to expect. I knew I wanted to earn my masters degree from a reputable college, and I can now say that Michigan State was the right choice for me. I am walking away a better educator for my students and as a role-model with a good source of information and ideas for my colleagues.

When entering in this program I knew that I wanted to focus my learning around special education, technology, and literacy. I took courses in all three areas, and because of that I honestly can say that I have an extremely well-rounded education. I started my journey by taking courses primarily with the special education focus...

***“The purpose of education is to produce not just good learners,  
but also good people” -Hardin***

With the goal of creating a positive classroom environment, I selected to take CEP 841 *Classroom Management in the Inclusive Classroom* as one of my first classes. This course gave me specific strategies for dealing with children that have behavior challenges. At that time I was teaching in a classroom for middle school age students with moderate cognitive impairments. I was presented with several unique behavioral challenges, and this course was extremely useful then, and still is now. One thing that had a significant impact on my teaching beliefs is the benefits of implementing a positive behavior support system in my classroom. If it is done correctly, setting up a positive behavior support system can be extremely beneficial.

I learned the benefits of extinguishing negative behavior by supporting, recognizing, and rewarding positive behavior. The district that I work in is participating district wide in a MiBLSi cohort, Michigan's Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative. PBS is widely used and supported in every building in the district. I am an active member on the committee and am very passionate about its cause. I have the foundation of knowledge from the work I completed in CEP 841 to make me a contributing member of the team. This course is one that has traveled with me through various teaching positions. I refer to the strategies that I learned in this course regularly. Since this was one of the first courses that I took, it definitely lit that spark of excitement in me. I was ready and motivated to continue on in this journey of continuing my education...

***“Learning is more effective when it is***



***an active rather than a passive process”***

Early on in the program, I also took CEP 842 *Instruction in Inclusive Classrooms*. This class also had a significant impact on my education; the easiest way to describe what I learned is by saying that I learned what good teaching looks like. I learned effective teaching strategies that I could immediately put to use. One tool that I particularly connected with was the concept of universal design when creating lesson plans. The idea behind universal design is that all students have the chance to learn. I learned to not just teach to one type of student, but rather teach to all of my students no matter their disabilities or challenges. Of course I knew of the concept of addressing multiple learning styles, but this actually taught me how to apply that concept on a regular basis.

When I think about what I walked away from this course with, things like embedding short video clips into my lessons to re-teach objectives, and having my students create visual representations of what they have learned to take the processing to another level both come to

mind. I learned the benefits of providing my students with broad learning objectives so that they know what is expected of them. They need to know the goal of the lesson so that both they and I know if that goal has been reached. Doing this is an easy way to set them up for success. I also learned how to create effective graphic organizers to better help my students organize the information that they are learning and processing. All of these tools are ones that I use on a regular basis. CEP 842 is the kind of class that I enjoyed taking because I can actually apply what is being taught; makes sense considering that is what I try to provide for my students. It modeled good teaching, and made me excited to continue this adventure toward higher education...

***"If you imagine it, you can achieve it.***



***If you can dream it, you can become it."***

I went on to take CEP 842, *Developing Positive Attitudes towards Learning*. This class was another course that allowed me to apply what I was learning immediately in my classroom. I still remember that the course started off by discussing the pros and cons of using rewards in the classroom. Prior to this course, I used rewards all of the time. I work with the high incidence population, and using rewards seemed appropriate, and came natural to me. I now know that although rewards can be effective, they need to be established in a consistent and appropriate manner.

I learned that I need to pay attention to the quality of engagement when rewarding my students. My students need to be highly engaged in the expected task to earn a reward. Rewards need to be provided in a meaningful way. The student needs to understand what they are being rewarded for so that the likelihood of them repeating the positive behavior increases. We can't just throw rewards at our students without explaining why. They may come to feel entitled to the reward and their intrinsic motivation will decrease.

I walked away from this course with a couple of other tools that I use on a regular basis. I learned how to complete a motivational assessment on my students. The motivational assessment allows me get to know my students preferences so that I am better able to motivate them intrinsically. If I can tailor some of the instruction around specific likes and dislikes, the chances that my students will be interested and motivated increases. I also learned how to complete a TARGET analysis on my students. This measure allows me to look at the task that I am assigning, the authority in which I am assigning it, the recognition I am providing, the grouping I am facilitating, the evaluation I am completing, and finally, the time I am providing to complete the task. It requires the educator to look at each of these measures and really accommodate for various student interest and preferences. I can alter any of these measures

so that the chance of success for my students increases. It is a tool that I have shared with colleagues and I refer to often.

This course addressed one of my main goals I set when starting the MAED program. I wanted to know how to better motivate and inspire my students. This course showed me research and data to support practical strategies that I can use in my classroom. At this point in my journey I had a strong foundation and understanding of my special education focus, and I was excited to start learning more about effective literacy strategies...

***“Enthusiasm is contagious; start an epidemic.” -Don Ward***



One of the more recent classes I took was TE 843, *Secondary Reading Assessment and Instruction*. I was really excited about taking this course. Teaching literacy is something that I am very passionate about. It is also an area that I feel like I can never learn too much about. I am like a sponge, ready to soak up any information provided to better help my students. This course required me to use my students at the time for all of the assignments and projects. I was able to complete the requirements for this course, and create some beneficial resources for my students.

One very useful tool that I walked away with was how to analyze the literacy practices of my students both in and out of school. We were required to develop a tool to get a better understanding. I created a survey for my students to take. It asked various questions about their literacy preferences and practices. It is a tool that I still use, and have shared with others. Once my students completed the survey, I analyzed the results to get a better understanding of their preferences. I learned things like what kinds of genres of literature they are interested, what non-fiction texts they like, how much they read at home, and if they prefer electronic literacy tools. Once I gathered all of my data, I was able to directly apply it and create lesson plans to include their interests. I set literacy goals for my students and asked essential questions. It was a great learning experience for me, and my students reaped the benefits.

After I complete the unit, I can honestly say that I saw increased motivation and general participation from my students. They noticed that I took interest in what they liked and preferred and incorporated that into the lesson. I gave them some autonomy over what they were required to read, and the method in which they could read it, e-reader, on-line journal, and so on. It gave them a sense of importance and worth in the classroom. It really gave me a

renewed passion for teaching my students to appreciate literature. I walked away from this course with a toolbox of strategies that I still use.

***“Approaching the Journeys end.”***



I am finishing this journey with taking ED 870, the Capstone Seminar course. This course serves as the culmination of all of my hard work in the MAED program. I am compiling exemplars from all of the courses that I have taken, and reflecting on what I have learned and walked away with. It is not only a showcase of what I have learned, but serves as a refresher to me. I have been able to go through many of the assignments I completed and it has provided many ‘ah-ha’ moments. I had forgotten some tools and strategies along the way. I am now remembering them and able to apply them again. It is a great way to end this journey.

I am highlighting my work by creating an on-line electronic portfolio. This portfolio can be used for years to come. This has pushed the limits of my comfort zone, but made me a better educator. I have grown to learn and understand the benefits of on-line learning. I am now able to create a webpage. I think that this is something very important for an educator in this time of technological growth. I am walking away from this journey a better teacher and colleague.

Reflecting on my journey shows how far I have come. I have had to collaborate with my peers from all different walks of life and around the world. I have learned and grown with people with the same goal as me, to continue my education. My MAED coursework makes my job as a teacher consultant so much richer. I am able to share with my colleagues many of the tools and strategies that I have learned. I am better prepared to teach in this ever changing society. I know that my learning will not stop here. The MAED program has molded me into a lifelong learner. I am excited to see where this journey continues to.