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ED 870
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Leveling the Field with Literacy: A Synthesis of Learning

As an undergraduate at Michigan State University (MSU) studying Child Development and Elementary Education I had strong formative classroom experiences working with a wide range of student ages and development. I found my passion teaching early elementary students who are constantly curious, largely because I love that I am able to contribute to a lifetime of learning by helping to build a strong foundation in one of their earliest classroom experiences.

One of the most profound learning opportunities children have at this age is with literacy. So, since I have always been a voracious reader, writer, and learner, I knew that I could translate that love into a love for teaching reading and writing. Additionally, there has been a shift in education that recognizes early literacy intervention and culturally-competent teaching as two of the most important practices to ensure students become lifelong readers and writers. This shift solidified my direction for graduate study: strengthen my skills in literacy education in order to see all students unleash their potential.

Reflecting on my learning of Literacy Education throughout the MSU's Master of Arts in Education program (MAED), it is clear that I have been bolstered by professors and colleagues who have tremendous experience. I have had the opportunity to both focus on my chosen concentration, Literacy Instruction, and the opportunity to take courses which revisit educational theory, classroom management, and ethics. Furthermore, it is through their encouragement that I am now successful in meeting the two goals I entered the program with: to become more proficient in diagnostic skills and strategies to assist me in reading instruction and intervention and to dig deeper into writing and language in order to drive strong, meaningful instruction of the writing process as a whole.

TE 802 was a methods course that I took in the fall of 2016, during my internship, which focused on developing a writing unit. For this class, I was working in a setting of a blended third and fourth grade class. One aspect the planning and development for the unit that I found particularly helpful for my practice was to plan backwards. This means that you plan with the end goal in mind and then place all of the components leading up to that goal in a meaningful order. I chose to lead the How-To unit with the end goal being that students showcase a skill at which they consider themselves to be masters. Throughout the planning and implementation of the unit and developed many valuable skills, such as:

- backwards planning
- interest-based writing

- writing process
- publishing
- writer's showcase

It was during this course that I discovered the importance of modeling for writer's workshop. The lesson in which I did this most effectively (and theatrically) was during a lesson on revision. I sat with my students in a large group and had them tell me how to make a sandwich with the ingredients of bread, turkey, lettuce, and mustard. I also had the appropriate materials of a plate, plastic knife, and napkins. I took each instruction my students gave literally, such as "squeeze mustard onto the bread", which meant that the sandwich was overflowing with ingredients! I recorded each step they gave on the whiteboard and then the next day we revised the steps in order to make a sandwich that was palatable. Though this lesson was focused to the specific genre of How-To, it could easily be altered for any other genre.

The greatest strategy I learned from this class stems from the importance of interest-based writing. In order to remain engaged with their tasks, students were encouraged to bring the material in that they were writing about (if it used a material), and to experiment with the steps of their activity in order for them to be written logically. In continued use of this strategy, I found that encouraging students to bring in a material that related to their work allowed them to write more deeply and descriptively because their connection to the idea was right in front of them.

TE 842 & TE 845 were taken in the summer and fall of 2018, respectively. A large part of language instruction in the main stream classroom focuses on closing the gap between native English speakers and English Language Learners (ELLs) However, all students in my classroom are considered to be ELLs due to their age and experience with language. Both of these courses focused on a student's usage and development of language, as well as the strategies teachers can use to help positively impact this learning, such as:

- open-ended questioning
- extending and recasting language
- explicit instruction
- visual learning
- environmental print

The format of TE 842 was a book club, which is perfect for the practice of reading professional development texts with colleagues. I had the opportunity to read and review *All about words: Increasing vocabulary in the Common Core classroom, PreK-2* by Neuman & Wright. This text was quite insightful as it focused on multiple modes for delivering language instruction: small group, large group, and environmental print. Additionally, the book discussed explicit

instruction of content-based vocabulary from the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). For me, as an educator who prefers small group instruction, this book proved to be a strong resource! In my practice for the 2018-2019 school year, I changed my science and social studies teaching so that vocabulary was not taught in the large group setting at all; instead I exposed my students to the ideas present in the unit through group discussion and taught vocabulary in small group through text, discussion, or exploration. I found this method to be quite effective for instruction and I intend to continue this in the next school year.

In TE 845, the focus of the course was in ELLs and the teacher's ability to support them in the classroom. I created a lesson using background knowledge and text to teach content-specific vocabulary centered around *The Very First Thanksgiving Day* by Rhonda Gowler Greene, a book used for a lesson on retelling. This vocabulary included "Pilgrims", "Mayflower", "Native American", "Feast", "Harvest", and "New World". This lesson was perfectly suited for this student because he had very little background knowledge of Thanksgiving, but he had a general understanding of farming, which related to the vocabulary of "Harvest" and "New World". I was also really pleased that he was able to make a text-to-self connection when we talked about the Pilgrims traveling, because his grandma had come to visit them from China last summer – he was very adamant that she had flown, not traveled by boat. Overall, I found that using the strategies from this course were helpful for the teaching of vocabulary and I will continue to use them.

In spring of 2019 I took TE 846 Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners. This course required me to conduct a case study, ideally on a student of mine who I identified to be a struggling reader. Due to the age and experience of my students, many are building letter and sound fluency for the majority of the year. Therefore, I decided to focus on one of my most advanced students, knowing I would get more bang for my buck, so to speak. The student I chose had already learned all of her letters and their accompanying sounds and also showed a high interest in writing.

In working through assessments and activities with this student, I learned a lot about the strategies that would work well for the niche of students I serve. Most importantly this case study allowed also for a study of problem solving for me with a focus on phonological awareness. Since my students are all early learners, they have a variety of experiences and for many my classroom is their first formal literacy learning experience. One of the most successful and flexible strategies I used was the use of Elkonin boxes. Elkonin boxes are a concrete way for students to demonstrate the sounds they hear in a word. Seen in the image, the student in my case study could easily identify the onset sound and the ending sound of the image provided. Using this strategy, she was able to identify the medial sound! Elkonin boxes can be used on many levels: students who are just beginning to manipulate sounds to students who are learning to spell. By using the tools presented in this course, I am able to confidently troubleshoot reading difficulties in a more successful way.

Overall, TE846 gave me a different perspective on success in reading development. Ultimately, the goal of reading instruction is for students to read independently and fluently, however the

process includes what seems like a million infinitesimal steps. I was so relieved that this class broke down all of the steps of reading instruction to all of the skills and how they impact future growth. For me, I felt so relieved to know that all of the different activities I do with my students truly make a positive impact.

In addition to seeking instruction specific to literacy development, the courses outside of my concentration expanded my knowledge of cultural competency, responsiveness to student needs, educational theory, and classroom management. I found that these courses have been very beneficial to the methods of my instruction most simply because they have given me a lot to think about!

First, each of these classes in some way touched on the effect of a student's background on their education. A lot of the students in my current district come from much different backgrounds than the one in which I grew up, and sometimes that can be easy to forget. This background could be in any given variable: race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, the family's value of education, etcetera. Given instruction on importance of background and how it affects each individual, I will be able to give my students more grace and differentiation centered around their needs.

My favorite course outside my concentration was CEP883, Psychology of Classroom Discipline. In this course, I had the opportunity to learn about classroom management and how to make it effective, as well as strategies to increase the practices present in my classroom currently. In addition to the classroom management plan, which can be viewed in my showcase, I was provided resources to assess student behavior in order to better meet their needs.

The sum of each course has molded me into a more well-rounded teacher through the opportunity to delve deeper into these topics while in pursuit of my degree.

As I complete my graduate work, I enter the classroom in fall 2019 with a heavier toolbox. A toolbox filled with evidence-based strategies, understanding of educational theories, and a renewed zest for the teaching of literacy. I have had the benefit throughout my courses to work with a range of students, needs, and developmental stages. I completed an internship and began my professional career, finding resources and working with other professions whose tutelage bolstered my growth. Each of these experiences pushed my thinking of what students can do as speakers, readers, and writers, and my beliefs about how their learning can be accomplished. Upon completion of my degree I find myself better equipped to collaborate with colleagues and serve my students, while simultaneously knowing that there is always more work needing to be done. I am truly a better teacher for having completed this study.