

The Right Path Will Find Me...

In 2014, my college-level educational journey began at the greatest university in the world, Michigan State. I always knew I wanted to be a Spartan, given that both of my parents bled green along with my older brother. What I didn't know was what I wanted to learn about, study, and eventually become one day. I knew that college would be a time for me to experiment, socially and academically. I didn't know what direction I was going in terms of friends or a life-long career choice, and the thought of having to decide overwhelmed me. My first semester I took several university-required courses and felt lost. I had heard packaging was a booming field, and decided I would give those courses a try. Turns out packaging engineering was not for me...

After my first semester, I had decided I was going to give some education courses a try. I knew I always wanted to be a mom and loved children, so I thought it may be a good fit. After taking my first education course, I realized something. I realized that I no longer felt lost or sad in college. I was excited to walk to class and learn about education. I was thrilled to sit amongst a group of people who also wanted to make a difference in young-children's lives, just like me. It was in that moment, that I not only realized education was the right path for me, but I learned a valuable life lesson. **I don't always have to know what is ahead of me. All I have to do is ride the wave, try new things, and the right path will find me.**

Fast forward to the fall of 2019. By this point, I had graduated from Michigan State University with a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and completed my year-long internship through MSU's Teacher Preparation Program. I landed my very first teaching job in a first grade classroom, and couldn't be more excited to start my teaching career all on my own. While the first few months came with many challenges (difficult behaviors, students that needed extreme amounts of support in literacy and math, and meeting brand new colleagues), I had absolutely no idea the challenges that were ahead of me.

It was March of 2020, and I walked into school like it was a normal school day. Little did I know, it would be the last time I would be walking through the front doors of my school for months. The COVID-19 pandemic had rocked the world, and my first year teaching would not end like it started. I would not get to teach from my classroom or see my students in person the rest of the school year. Just like in 2014 when I started college, there was so much uncertainty surrounding my life, and I was feeling lost and overwhelmed yet again. I remembered back to that time and the lesson I had learned: **I don't always**

have to know what is ahead of me. All I have to do is ride the wave, try new things, and the right path will find me.

For the remainder of the school year, we taught our first graders virtually, which was something completely new to me. I had to learn how to navigate websites my students and I would use, figure out effective ways to communicate with parents, and determine the best ways to help my students learn and grow through a computer. While the last few months of the school year were overwhelming at times, I was thankful I had so much time to dedicate to my students and my career. There weren't any distractions or places to go, so I took this time to dive into supporting my students academically and emotionally during the trying times.

Throughout the virtual learning process, I started to realize that it may be a good time to begin applying for a master's program. I had more time to devote to my own education. However, I was nervous because I knew the courses would be difficult and I worried about balancing my own school work along with my teaching career. I thought about when the pandemic is over and when schools to return to in-person learning, would I be able to handle school and work at the same time? Again, I thought about the lesson I had learned in undergrad: **I don't always have to know what is ahead of me. All I have to do is ride the wave, try new things, and the right path will find me.**

After some extensive research on a variety of masters programs, I knew there was one program that felt like the right fit: Michigan State University's Master of Arts in Education Program. I applied in April of 2020, and a month later I received the letter that I was accepted into the program. I felt so many emotions: excited, proud, nervous, scared. I began the program in the 2020 summer semester and became a learner once again.

Once a Learner, Always a Learner

All of the classes I took throughout this program influenced me and helped me grow as an educator. However, there were several courses that stood out to me as favorites because I learned skills I can use in my classroom right now. One of my favorite courses I took was called TE 842- Elementary Reading Assessment and Instruction. The main assignment for this course was to analyze a variety of literacy assessments and data that was collected from two elementary aged students. I spent countless hours observing the data of each student, exploring the reason each assessment was selected for the student, and understanding the students' strengths and areas in need of support. After analyzing the data, I created goals for each student, and determined instructional strategies I would use to help the student improve their literacy skills.

This course influenced my teaching career because it taught me the importance of taking the time to assess my students in literacy concepts. There are so many literacy skills that a child must learn in order to have the foundation to read and write (phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, prosody, and comprehension are just to name a few). This course taught me how to choose the right assessments for my students, and implement them so I can track their progress and monitor their growth. The assessments and skills I learned from this course are ones that I often use in my classroom currently!

Another one of my favorite courses I completed during my time in this master's program was an elective called CEP 820- Teaching Students Online. When I enrolled in this course in the summer of 2020, I knew there was a very good chance my district would be teaching remotely to begin the 2020-2021 school year. I searched through a plethora of courses, and when I found this course, I knew it would be the perfect fit for the situation my district was in.

The main assignment for this course was to create an "Online Course Module" (OCM) for my students. I reflected on myself as an educator, and knew that my primary focus for my students has always been literacy. Because I was taking a course that was outside of my literacy concentration area, I decided to create a OCM that was centered around teaching math, a subject that tends to fall to the wayside with so much of my time concentrated on teaching literacy. My math module consisted of a variety of lessons that included assignments, learning resources, and assessments to assist my students in virtual learning.

This course influenced my teaching career because it pushed me to explore technology in ways I'd never had. It was the perfect opportunity to explore different online learning

platforms, online learning tools, and ways to communicate and teach my students in a virtual setting. I was able to use the online course module that I had created to teach my students in real-time during the pandemic. I was able to use trial and error to see what worked well and what didn't work well, and make adjustments so I can continue using my online course module in the future. From this course, I learned that stepping out of my comfort zone and trying something new, can end up being rewarding for my students!

One course I took many skills from during this master's program was called TE 846- Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners. The purpose of this course was to explore a variety of ways to accommodate differences amongst literacy learners. The main assignment for this course was called the "Literacy Learner Analysis Project." For this assignment, I had the opportunity to work one-on-one with a student of my choosing. First, I interviewed the student and her parents, so I was able to gather information on the child's literacy history, likes, dislikes, strengths, weaknesses, and the amount of time she devotes to literacy practice. Having this information, helped me determine literacy assessments I could give the student that would give me the most information about her as a literacy learner. After assessing the student, I took the data I had gathered and planned several lessons that included assignments and materials I would use to help the student improve in the areas she needed support in. Once the lessons were complete, I reflected on her growth since beginning our study sessions, and created a letter that included recommendations for her parents and future teacher.

This course influenced my teaching career because it helped me think about ways to accommodate my literacy learners, no matter their level. I learned a variety of ways to assist my students who need more support, and ways I can provide opportunities to challenge my students as well. This course also helped me think about the importance of tapping into my students' strengths, rather than focusing on their weaknesses. Instead of focusing on what the student does not know or cannot do, I took their strengths and built lessons around those skills! After taking this course, I think about this often with the students in my class. I try not to focus on the gaps, but instead focus on what they DO know!

Forever & Always, GO GREEN!

Throughout this master's program I feel that I have learned and grown so much as an educator and person. I have learned so many teaching strategies, skills, styles, and ideas that I had never known about or been exposed to before. Not only did this program teach me valuable skills that I can implement and use in my classroom on a daily basis, but it also helped me improve my time-management, balance, and computer skills. When times felt stressful or hard, I always remembered the lesson I had learned at the beginning of my college journey: **I don't always have to know what is ahead of me. All I have to do is ride the wave, try new things, and the right path will find me.**

My journey through this master's program has left me feeling extremely proud of myself and all that I accomplished. While my masters journey is coming to a close, that does not mean my learning journey will. I am committed to my career as an educator, and know that it is my responsibility to continue exploring, evolving, and learning just like how I hope my students do. I am so thankful for all the professors, fellow students, and mentors that have crossed my path during my 7-year education journey at MSU. Without these people guiding and supporting me, I would not be the educator I am today! Since the day I was born I have been a Spartan, and now that I have received my undergraduate and graduate degrees from MSU, I've never been more proud to bleed green!