

The Journey to the End By Katie McBride

It was July of 2012 when I made the decision to return to school, a decision motivated primarily by my desire to once again experience being a student and the joy I get from learning. Following graduation from Michigan State in 2007, and the completion of a yearlong internship, my first priority was to find a teaching job. Having little success with that, I left Michigan for Chicago and accepted a position as a teaching assistant until I finally had the opportunity to teach fourth grade in my own classroom. The first couple years of teaching were a challenge, and I knew the demand of being the best educator possible for my students, as well as making myself a valuable colleague and asset to my school, required my full attention. Following my second year of teaching, however, I began to crave the education that was now absent from my life.

I always knew I wanted to pursue a master's degree and I also hoped to have the opportunity to return to Michigan State for graduate school, but with a life and career in Chicago, that was simply not a possibility. I looked into Michigan State's online MAED program and realized I did not have to sacrifice a quality education due to my distance from the school I adored. Given the graduate courses I completed during my internship, the decision became an easy one; I could apply those credits and begin my program in the spring of 2013 and, if everything went according to plan, finish with my master's degree in August of 2014.

I carefully contemplated the selection of concentrations and decided to focus on math and science, as year after year, I noticed my students struggling with that content and growing increasingly frustrated and discouraged with the material. I also remembered my past experience with those subjects and recalled my teachers' difficulty in making them accessible and enjoyable to their young students. Teaching full time while taking graduate courses would be no easy task, but I was excited take the knowledge gained and apply it directly into my practice while also reflecting, adapting and improving my teaching strategies. Though this was an essential component of my undergraduate experience at MSU, having the flexibility to teach and learn from my own students would no doubt provide me with an invaluable experience. The courses I took while enrolled in the master's program all served as integral parts to making me a better teacher who thinks critically about how to pass on my own love for learning to my students, as well as reach the wide range of learning needs present in my classroom each and every year.

I was apprehensive about Teaching Science Understanding (TE 861A), which was the first course I took as an official master's student in the spring of 2013. I never enjoyed science courses as a student, and my own students' difficulty with the subject matter left me feeling dissatisfied with my ability to teach the information in an innovative and relatable way. This course completely changed my opinion and approach to teaching science and presented me with several methods to engage my students with the assistance of the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) as my guide. These standards broke science concentrations into logical and explicit subcategories and provided concrete examples for

how they related to the core idea, science and engineering practices and crosscutting concepts. Through the NGSS, I learned to strengthen my own understanding of *how* to teach science as well as tips for integrating scientific methods and discussion throughout the school day. These standards also build upon critical thinking skills essential to understanding science and the world around us.

TE 861A provided me with a better appreciation for how to effectively implement formative and summative assessment as a way to guide instruction. Rather than simply rush through new units due to time constraints without consideration for student knowledge about the concepts, this course taught me to slow down and utilize students' misconceptions and beliefs, in addition to hands-on approaches, to improve understanding. I employed this model throughout a unit on seasonal change and was completely amazed by my students' improvement in understanding from past years and the enjoyment that resulted from this learning. Reading and writing also served as essential cross-curricular components for my students to reflect on and reveal their thinking, in addition to a way for me to adapt my instruction to meet the needs of all my students. Though this course ended over a year ago, I am so appreciative for the way it has shaped my views on and ability to continue to teach science in a way that my students understand and love.

During the summer of 2013, I was enrolled in Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners (TE 846), as it was required to advance my teaching certificate for the state of Michigan. This course was pivotal in my program and provided an array of approaches for reaching the needs of diverse literacy students. Considering I work in a general education classroom in which about half of my students speak a different language at home, some who come to me speaking no English, and many who struggle with learning disabilities, this course quickly became an asset to my understanding of teaching literacy in this unique setting. As a teacher who has to balance a huge range of readers and writers without the support of a special education teacher, I am forced to be well organized and track the learning progress of all the students in my class while also evaluating my own instructional strategies and effectiveness. This course helped to make this daunting task less overwhelming for me and the results in my students were certainly measurable.

TE 846 was divided into modules, which included cultural and linguistic differences, individual motivation differences, neuropsychological differences, instructional arrangements to accommodate learning differences, and required components of effective literacy instruction, and allowed me to customize my learning based on my own teaching experience. I was able to create and implement lesson plans according to the needs of my students and, with the help of the course readings, my colleagues and my instructor, reflect on how I grew as an educator through this process. This course taught me to consider the ways in which students approach learning literacy, the obstacles that interfere with enjoyment of learning to read and write, and how to create lesson plans that accommodate all learners and ensure continued achievement in all of my students.

Likely one of the most influential courses throughout my program was Educating Students with Challenging Behavior (CEP 832). This course presented numerous approaches for handling an assortment of behaviors without disrupting classroom instruction or

degenerating an issue. The format and material in this class allowed me to learn from my classmates and apply the methods to any teaching situation regardless of location, grade level or familial situation of my students. Additionally, with the help of the book *Teaching Problem Students* by Jere Brophy, I learned to shift my professional stance when encountering behavior issues in my students from avoidance and combativeness to exercising empathy and working towards a resolution. Though I'd had some success with traditional behavior plans in the past, I realized all I had accomplished was placing a band-aid on the problem rather than providing effective and useful solutions.

While working attentively with the students who had behavior issues was the main focus of this course, reaching out to the parent(s) of these students also played a major role. After closely observing and analyzing the problem behaviors and creating and implementing a plan of action, I was encouraged to make the path to improvement a partnership with my focus students' parents. Given that I work in a setting where many parents are often unavailable due to demanding work schedules and rarely speak English, I had not taken adequate time to seek parental input and involvement. I appreciated that this course provided me with methods for reaching out to the parents of disruptive students in a tactful way that avoided judgment and instead, promoted listening and understanding. I left this course having a better familiarity with how certain behaviors manifest themselves in unpredictable ways and gained the confidence I needed to help my students work through their behavior issues, enjoy learning, and successfully interact with their peers and teacher.

I decided to enroll in Teaching School Subject Matter with Technology (TE 831) in the spring of 2014 after receiving a Promethean Board in my classroom and realizing I lacked the necessary skills to teach to the twenty-first century learner. Though I was seeking some basic assistance for how to better acquaint my students and myself with technology and devices, I learned even more than I had anticipated. I gained a foundational knowledge that allowed me to integrate technology into my lessons in order to enhance and differentiate my instruction. Additionally, I became aware of a plethora of technology I didn't know existed, and through numerous articles and videos, learned how to use it to help my students understand complex material.

TE 831 allowed me to learn about useful technology and websites from my colleagues through regular tech tool posts, which required us to discover new technologies and report how they could be utilized effectively in the classroom. It was through this exploration that I was able to plan and execute interactive lessons that appealed to my students while also meeting the curricular goals. The repurposed lesson plan assignment, for which I selected an old lesson to incorporate technology, truly helped me to see the value and increased engagement when students interact with technology in a meaningful way. I now find myself evaluating how I could use this process with several other lessons and observe drastic improvement in my students' understanding and enjoyment. I have also taken on a leadership role at my school and appreciate having the knowledge to help my coworkers revamp their own teaching skills through the use of technology. Like many courses before this, I completed TE 831 with a newfound confidence that will help me in becoming a better teacher and mentor.

Though it has been a challenging two years since I applied to the MAED program, I am truly grateful for all that I have learned throughout this journey. I learned that, despite all my doubts, I can successfully take on the responsibilities of both a dedicated and enthusiastic teacher in addition to a hardworking student. I also discovered that my love for learning is easily passed on to my students and has an impact on their own feelings towards school and learning. Finally, I learned that my desire to continue my education and grow in my profession will not cease just because I have earned my master's degree. This is simply another check on my list of accomplishments, and I look forward to uncovering what awaits in my future of teaching and learning.