

### **Reflection on Learning**

In the course of a year and a half, plus the time spent during my student teaching year at Michigan State University, I have regained my identity as a Spartan Learner. A “Spartan Learner” is a title of pride; it means that I have come “home” to the school that I love, albeit in an online environment, and I have continued to learn and grow both as a student and an elementary school teacher. Nothing could make me prouder or feel like my journey through the Masters in the Art of Education (MAED) program was worth it than looking back over what I have gained through the variety of courses I have taken and the influences they have had upon my vision.

Upon beginning the MAED program, I decided that I would focus on literacy so that I could better my skills as a teacher of reading and writing. In retrospect, I don’t think I could have made a better selection on the focus of my program. I know that I have grown as a literacy teacher, but I know there are still many questions I have and learning experiences I need to have before achieving the status of being a well-rounded reading and writing teacher. The courses I was able to enroll in for this focus helped me add more ideas of creatively teaching the concepts of reading and writing, and opened the doors to methods of differentiating my teaching for different learners. However, down the road, I know that I will embark on more journeys through learning so that I can feel like the consummate educator that I achieve to be.

### **Reflection on Growth as a Teacher and Learner**

The first course I took in my program when I restarted my journey down the path of higher education, in summer 2011, was CEP 883, the Psychology of Classroom Discipline. This course fulfilled an elective for me and I knew it would be worthwhile for me to take part in because as an elementary school teacher, I undoubtedly have and will continue to face disciplinary and management problems. Psychology of Classroom Discipline was also the first time I would experience working with a group of people all online, with no face-to-face encounters. As I navigated through this new learning environment, I found myself becoming engrossed in the methods and ideas for how to maintain a sense of control in my classroom while keeping things positive and uplifting. I was astounded to find that the content I was reading in this course (and others) was pertinent to things going on my school, such as using a Positive Behavior System for recognizing students acting in a positive or helpful way. This let me know, once again, that the MAED program courses were going to be current and useful in my own learning.

The big lessons and ideas I took away from CEP 883 are ideas that I have continued to live by in my teaching. One big idea was the idea that if a teacher lets their mind think about students in unproductive or negative ways, low expectations will be communicated with those students. I find that I catch myself when dealing with a student who has behavioral or academic problems and checking that I am thinking about the issue in a positive way so that the student I’m working with does not feel poorly about him or herself or feel that expectations do not apply to them. Living by this idea has helped me to keep my classroom a positive place for the most part. I know that as long as I am aware of the message I send to my students through my expectations, I can count on my students to meet those expectations. With poor behavior, I have to consistently point out the positives so that the student who slips into repeated behavior problems knows he or she can come out of their “slump” eventually. Another big idea gained from CEP 883 was the power of listening. When students feel that they are being listened to by an adult, in this case, me, discipline problems subside. When I can tell my students are not engaged in listening to a lesson I’m teaching, it upsets and frustrates me. So, it makes total sense that if a child does not feel they are being listened to, they are also going to be upset and frustrated. Teachers are BUSY people, but we need to make sure we make the time to listen to our number one priorities - our students.

Another course that I took, TE 836, Awards and Classics of Children’s Literature, was a memorable one for many reasons. First, it was the first time that a professor would assign enough reading to keep me busy almost each evening after I came home from teaching my fourth graders. It was the first time that I learned the hard lesson of not keeping up with a workload, especially while reading the incredibly long novel *Little Women* and having to write several synthesis papers and watch both corresponding films. In this way, I learned lessons about myself as a learner at the same time I was learning lessons about the content in the course. I learned that time management was

important, even though I of course already knew this. I learned that I needed to give myself enough time to get something done, but at the same time, give myself enough time to take a break here and there so that I didn't push myself to my "mental limits."

Academically speaking, the content of TE 836 sparked many new ideas for me. Before taking the course, I had no idea that there were children's literature awards other than the Newbery or Coretta Scott King awards. Dr. Apol presented the content in a scaffolded way where we were able to explore several children's literature awards before diving into the better-known awards. The memory that stands out to me was learning about the Pura Belpre Award and the Schneider Family Award.

The Pura Belpre Award is an award given to children's literature that is written or illustrated by a Latino writer who portrays the Latino cultural experience. I have always been fascinated with different cultures, which I was able to explore through being a Geography minor in my undergraduate studies. This award interested me because I knew that in the future, my students may be more multicultural and I should be able to find literature to fit the ever-changing cultural make-up of my classroom. I was able to read a book called *Becoming Naomi Leon*, by Pam Munoz Ryan, which told the story of a young Latino girl facing family problems. The story was so beautifully written and had lessons about learning from one's past, learning about one's self, and coping with problems that are out of your own control. I was also introduced to the Schneider Family Award, which is an award given to children's books that portray special needs situations. I had no idea that there were books that told the stories of special needs instances and was even more thrilled to learn this was an award that could be given out. As teachers, children who have special needs impact us all. Knowing there were books that are written for the purpose of telling special needs experiences opened my eyes to a whole new genre of reading, one that I can share with my students each and every year.

The last course that has impacted my journey through my Masters program the most was another children's literature course, again taught by Dr. Apol, TE 838. This course's focus was on Children's Literature in Film. Initially, when I saw this course as one that was available for the summer semester, I wanted to take it because it just sounded *fun*. The description stated that we would be reading well-known children's books and viewing the films that were created in their wake. I was able to take away several experiences with analyzing a book with its film and also gain experience with what goes into making a film, from the music choices, camera angles, and voice-overs.

A memorable module from TE 838 was when we had to study one of my favorite books of all time, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J.K. Rowling. I am an avid Harry Potter fan and this was my third time reading this book. After reading the book, we of course were assigned to watch the film and make note of the differences from the written story, and also to think about why the filmmakers chose to include or take out certain scenes from the story. After watching the film, we were then assigned to read literature created around the Harry Potter phenomenon. This literature broke apart Rowling's magical world and analyzed everything from gender roles to religious meanings in the story. The reason this module was so memorable to me was not only because there was so much literature to go through, but also I was astounded at the amount of "stuff" one piece of literature could inspire others to create. The whole point of the module was the idea that literature has the power to create hype that affects people of all ages and creates things that everyone can enjoy, from films, to theme parks, to real-life Quidditch teams. The lesson I took away from this is that the power of one book can affect several people, a lesson that I want to convey to my students.

### **What's Ahead?**

It should be obvious that over the course of a year and a half of intensive Masters studies, along with taking Masters courses during my student teaching year through Michigan State, that I have grown as a learner and gained several experiences and life lessons. However, I do not in any way feel that I am done with my journey as a learner. There are several more things that I can think of in this moment that I would like to explore so that I can feel as well-rounded a teacher as possible. I am grateful that I was able to have the experiences of being a MAED student, but know that there is more out there for me to learn.

In the realm of reading, a huge emphasis has been placed on differentiating reading instruction for students with different difficulties. In the past, I have done my guided reading instruction by level, but I am extremely interested in learning how to differentiate reading through strategy grouping, or grouping based on what students are struggling in, independent of their reading “level.” My district has also moved to using a different reading assessment for upper elementary than it has in the past, the Developmental Reading Assessment 2 (DRA2), which diagnoses those areas of struggle for readers. I see myself looking into some training in the future so that I can feel well-educated and know exactly the best way for me to help my students, no matter what their struggle in the area of reading is. The idea of grouping students based on difficulty coincides with the Daily Five and CAFÉ program started by the “two sisters.” Several of the teachers in my district have migrated to this new way of structuring Reader’s Workshop, and although I have also done this, I would love to feel more knowledgeable about this type of reading instruction.

Technology changes things for teachers, as well. I have gained the opportunity to use iPads in the classroom for instructional purposes. In the past three years, I have learned how to use document cameras, laptops in my fourth graders’ learning, and websites to track data and learning. As more aspects of the education field begin to be affected by the technological world around us, I know that I will no doubt want to learn more about how to use the technologies available to my students. Students in 2012 have their whole lives ahead of them with much of their time being spent with technology, whether it is a laptop, a cell phone, or an iPad. I want to be a teacher who can guide the usage of these technologies in a smart, positive way.

Undoubtedly, there will be several other opportunities for me to learn. Although I do not plan on earning my PhD or work toward being anything other than a teacher, I know that with the way education changes almost month-to-month, that I will find more things that I want to become more fluent with in my teaching. I know that reading and writing will always be at the forefront for me; without literacy skills, our students may not become well-functioning members of society. As times change, student populations change. I know that as an educator in 2012 with much of my career ahead of me, the journey will continue and I will continue to grow as both a learner and a teacher. The Michigan State University MAED program was an excellent start for me to continue the path of becoming a “Master Teacher,” and a wonderful reentry into the “Spartan Learner” world, but I know I will continue to have more to learn.