

A Culmination of My Experience

When I began Michigan State University's Masters of Arts in Education program (MAED), I was not sure what to expect. I had been teaching for a few years and knew that continuing my education was one of the most important ways for me to grow as an educator. I had always known that a Master's degree was something that I wanted to earn but I was not aware of how beneficial the experience of earning one would be for me personally. I am in my fifth year as a teacher for the visually impaired (TVI) and have worked with students in preschool through high school. After graduating with my bachelor's degree and earning my teaching certificate, I moved to Phoenix, Arizona and worked at the Foundation for Blind Children. After my first year, I moved back to Michigan and began working for Livonia Public Schools as a TVI. Since becoming a teacher, I have been in several different school buildings working with various administrators and staff. That is the nature of my content area though. TVIs service a small percentage of the population so we go where there is the highest need. I am often moving from building to building. As a result, I have been fortunate enough to work with some amazing students, families, teachers, and administrators. However, as I work with such a small percentage of the population, move around a lot, and utilize a curriculum that most other teachers and administrators are unfamiliar with, I have often felt like I was on my own island. There were many times when I was the only faculty member in the building with a special education background. If I had questions or wanted input from another special education teacher I did not have many outlets to do this. Now I am in a building with other special education teachers but I still feel that developing my knowledge in special education is a critical component of being an effective teacher. I knew that I needed to build up my own resources and knowledge in order to be the best teacher for my students and their families. I applied for the MAED program at Michigan State University with this goal in mind. However, I did not know that the journey to be a better teacher would also lead me to learn about myself. Through my experience in the MAED program, I have gained a network of peers and resources, further developed my abilities as a special education teacher, and gained a sense of pride in myself.

Being in an online program provides a unique classroom experience. I had taken some courses

online during my time as an undergraduate at Eastern Michigan University but was unsure what to expect from an entire program online. I can now say that this was the best decision I could have made. I have had classes with peers in other parts of Michigan as well as all over the world. My first collaborative project was with a classmate who lived in Japan! With a program concentration in special education, most of my classes were with other special education teachers. I thought it was such a cool thing that I was sharing ideas with a peer who lived across the world from me. Throughout the program, there were many collaborative project opportunities. One course in particular was CEP 840: Policy, Practices, and Perspectives in Special Education. In this course, we went over every detail of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and created one with a partner. I found this to be extremely beneficial because IEPs are such a critical element of special education. We were able to share our knowledge and learn from each other. I utilize the information that I learned from this assignment every single day in my career and remain in contact with my partner. I know that I could go to her with any questions I have. Another course where collaboration and networking were present was in CEP 866: Psychoeducational Interventions for Children & Youth. We worked with partners to create a presentation that could potentially be given to school board members. In groups of three, we worked on this 15-minute presentation and shared it with our peers. One of the most valuable aspects of this project was the collaboration within my group. We all agreed to a time when we would work on the project. Then we created a Google doc and utilized the chat feature so that it could be interactive. Throughout this process, we could consistently make comments to each other; providing feedback and checking over each other's work. I really enjoyed having this group dynamic because I knew we could bounce ideas off of each other and I would have feedback from peers with an understanding of special education. A third class where collaboration and networking played a significant role for me was in CEP 841: Classroom Management in Inclusive Classrooms. In this class, we compiled a list of electronic resources that we could utilize in the future. We shared our resources with one another so I have resources from all of my classmates as well. These resources relate to aspects of inclusion and include topics of behavior, classroom management, and family involvement. Having peers to collaborate with and share ideas and resources with has had a direct

impact on my current and future career. I feel that I have a network of colleagues that have a similar background who I can go to for education-related questions and ideas. This is significant for me because sharing resources and ideas with colleagues is a way for me to continuously expand my knowledge and understanding of teaching strategies as well as specific aspects of education and special education.

The MAED program has also given me more confidence in my abilities as a special education. As a TVI, a significant percentage of my students have additional disabilities. However, my background is predominantly in special education for the visually impaired. Not having extensive knowledge on other impairments, I wanted to learn as much as I could about all aspects of special education so that I could be a valuable resource for my students, their families, and my colleagues. One course that stands out is CEP 843: Autism Spectrum Disorder: Characteristics and Educational Implications. In this course, we learned about teaching strategies, interventions, and behavior strategies for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). We read scholarly journals on social skill instruction, video modeling, and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). We also read a book written by an individual with ASD, *There's a Boy in the Girl's Body* by Judy and Sean Baron. This book was so eye-opening for me as it gives a first-hand account of an individual and his family struggling with autism. I work with several students with autism and felt that this course gave me a different perspective. I now feel that I have some tools to work most effectively with this population. Another course that I feel was especially enriching in this area was CEP 842: Content Area Instruction for Students with Mild Disabilities. I learned about students with mild disabilities and how to accommodate them in math, science, and social studies classes. We explored a variety of teaching strategies and intervention techniques. At the end of the course, we created a presentation that could be used as professional development for teachers about this population and how to make accommodations in academic classes. I chose to focus my presentation on students in upper elementary math classes. Finally, in addition to being a valuable course in regards to networking, CEP 840: Policy, Practices, and Perspectives in Special Education impacted me in this area as well. In this course, I learned a great deal about Attention- Deficit /Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This was

beneficial for me because I have also had several students with this diagnosis. In one course, we research evidence-based practices for students with ADHD. I learned how to implement behavior contracts, token systems, and classroom meetings. I also learned the significance of structure and how that can impact a child with ADHD. Finally, we I learned about evaluations and self-monitoring strategies to track progress with behaviors. Having opportunities to research other areas of special education, apply our knowledge to create presentations, and collaborate with peers has given me greater confidence in my abilities as a teacher. While there will always be more to learn, I feel that I am better equipped to work with students with additional disabilities and their families in the future. The majority of my students have additional needs so learning as much as I can about other disabilities directly benefits my teaching today.

Lastly, my experience in the MAED program has given me a sense of pride within myself that I have not felt before. Being in my first several years of teaching, I have always needed to work a second or third job. I was a waitress during my first two years of teaching and now I am a tutor and a nanny. With always having at least two jobs on my plate, I was not sure how I would be able to fit in a Masters program. Being a full time teacher is exhausting enough, let alone having additional jobs and being in school. However, I knew that I had to place my education as a top priority and had to figure out the logistics of how it would look for me. I had to choose whether I would spread out my coursework over a long period time, taking one class at a time, or take on several classes at a time to finish it more quickly. Ultimately, I decided I would go with the latter. I began the MAED program last summer; June 2015, and will be finished with it next month, December 2016. Juggling several jobs with a considerable course load at MSU has not been easy. There were many days that I did nothing but read, study, type, email, and blog. There were also many nights that I stayed up late doing school work, and woke up at 5am for work. I am fortunate to be surrounded by supportive family and friends who have helped out when they could so that I could achieve my goal of earning a master's degree. I have also been fortunate to have experiences with dedicated peers and professors who were professional and made the learning activities valuable. I have given one hundred percent to this program in addition to my jobs. When reflecting about my experience in the program and what I have learned, I realized that this has given me a greater sense of pride and

accomplishment that I had not had before. I feel that I can consider myself a stronger person as a result. I am not a quitter and when I want to achieve something, I follow through and work for it. This Master's degree will always be a reminder for me of that.

I have gained more from my experience in the MAED program than I had ever thought possible. I value the academic learning opportunities I have had to expand my resources of teaching strategies and am grateful for the collaborative opportunities I have had to work with dedicated, motivated, and intelligent peers. I utilize the knowledge from these opportunities in my classroom today and know that they will benefit me in the future. Having a network of colleagues to share resources and ideas with is an invaluable aspect of this experience. In addition, I feel that as a direct result of my education within the MAED program, I am a more confident special education teacher. When I began, my experience was only with students with visual impairments. Upon completion of this program, I have learned about autism, mild disabilities, and ADHD, among others. Because I was able to expand my knowledge of special education, disabilities, and strategies, I feel that I am a better teacher for my students and families. Finally, my experience in the MAED program has left me with a sense of pride in myself and my accomplishments that I had not had before. I have put forth all of my effort to complete this Masters program while working a full time job as well as a couple of part time jobs. I know that there will always be more to learn about education and I look forward to new opportunities for learning. Overall, this has been one of the most beneficial and valuable experiences in my life. I know that it will be present in my every day teaching as well as in my future teaching experiences.