

Piecing it All Together  
By Andrea Hunt

From the moment I decided to become a teacher, I knew I would one day graduate with a master's degree. As a teacher, I know the importance of continuing education whenever given the chance. I knew that there would be more to learn, once my undergraduate degree was complete. Michigan State provided me with the skills I needed to start my career as an educator, therefore, I was confident in that their master's program could offer the additional guidance and skills I would need to become a more successful teacher.

Applying and furthering my education was never a question. The decisions came when choosing a specific focus and direct for my master's degree. I brainstormed a few different aspects of teaching. I first concerned where I saw myself down the road as an educator. I asked myself questions such as; Would I want to lead a school and take on the role of principle? Do I want to focus on a specific subject matter; reading, writing, mathematics? Is there an area of my teaching practice that I feel needs extra work and focus? What aspects of education do I want to become an expert at? Through these questions I came up with my decision of two concentrations; special education and education technology.

As a student teacher I was able to experience the life of a general education teacher and a special education teacher. I feel in love with both, which made the interview process more open. I knew I wanted to teach at the elementary level, but I was not as decisive when it came to special or general education. I was honored to have been hired the school year directly following my student teaching in a second grade general

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education classroom. As I reflected on my own teaching practice I quickly realized how beneficial my special education degree was. I found myself using more of my special education classroom in my general education classroom. This same reflective feeling came to me when picking concentrations for my master's degree. Furthering my knowledge of special education was important to me for my current position and for any future career changing I could make into a special education setting.

My second concentration for education technology has always been a passion of mine. Throughout my undergraduate degree at MSU I worked in the technology department. I was able to use multiple devices, tools and gadgets within the education setting. When I entered my classroom I quickly realized how limited the technology would be. This concentration of education technology was driven from my own passion and my eagerness to increase my students technology exposure and usage.

In the summer of 2013, I enrolled in the course, CEP 841: Classroom & Behavior Management in the Inclusive Classroom. This course taught by, Dr. Troy Mariage, provided me with a foundational knowledge in classroom management, behavioral intervention and knowledge of behavioral technologies to support a diverse group of students, focusing mostly on those with special needs. Throughout the course I learned about many different prevention techniques and behavioral strategies for students with challenging behaviors. I was able to take material directly from the course into my classroom. As part of the course we studied a series of behavioral assessments. We studied various behaviors, which allowed us to identify crucial factors that motivate,

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prompt, and maintain the behavior of students. Again, I was able to directly apply assessments and techniques discussed with classroom peers in my own second grade general education classroom. At the time I was finishing my second year as a classroom teacher. I was able to relate and discuss course material, while making connections to previous experiences and future experiences. Throughout this course we also applied our understanding of behaviors to develop and implement behavioral, social, and academic interventions. These aspect of the course brought me closer to my school special education team. After taking this course I realized the difference I could make by becoming more involved in my students with special needs IEP's and current accommodations and/or interventions.

The following summer I enrolled in a course to focus on my education technology concentration; CEP 818: Creativity in Teaching and Learning, taught by Dr. Punya Mishra. The focus of this course was to understand creativity and its relation to technology and education. Throughout this course we were constantly reflecting on a few questions; What does it mean to be creative? Is creativity born or can it be developed? Does creativity reside in the individual or in the social context within which we live? What does the creative process look like? With these questions in mind we brainstormed ways to become more creative in our personal lives and within out teaching practice. I realized that although I thought I was creative and had a good hold on expressing that in my teaching, there was still plenty of room to learn more. Walking away from this course I became more aware of specific details and creativity that was held within curriculums, lesson plans and the students in my classroom. The part of the

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course I took most away from was when we explored ways technology can be integrated into various subject matters. Coming from a school district with little technological resources I found this part of the course most beneficial. I was able to discuss my classroom wants and ideas with peers along with ways to integrate in our classrooms. The diversity of subject matters and age groups discussed throughout the course was eye-opening and made for enriched dialogue.

My favorite and most beneficial course I took through my master's journey was the course, CEP 832: Educating Students with Challenging Behaviors taught by Dr. Cynthia Okolo. I enrolled in this course in the spring of 2014. At the time I was teaching second grade and was experiencing teaching a child with many challenging behaviors. The timing of this course could not have been more perfect. This course allowed me to dig deeper into positive classroom management strategies, especially those that are useful with "tough to teach" students, like the one I had been experiencing all school year. We examined various types of behavioral problems that are especially challenging in the classroom: aggressiveness, oppositional behavior, hyperactivity, and social withdrawal, among others. With this work I was able to identify and gain greater understanding of the students I was spending everyday with. I began understanding the behaviors in my classroom and probable causes for which those behaviors occurred. For each type of problem we explore research-based practices that have proven successful in the classroom. Alongside the research we studied the work of real teachers, and applied them to case study situations. I was amazed how relatable each situation was to the student experiences I had in my current classroom or previous. The most beneficial

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aspect of the course was the group work. We worked as groups to develop behavior plans and interventions for each case-study situation. As a group we had great discussions about intervention plans, parent-teacher-student relationships, co-worker situations and much more. In addition to the weekly case-study work we also completed a semester long case study project of our own. I was able to spend time focusing on my “tough to teach” student and use the strategies I learned throughout the course with this student. My relationship with this students and his mother strengthened along with his behavior in class.

The last course that I feel has made a signifiant impact in my education and teaching practice is the course, CEP 870: Capstone Seminar taught by Dr. Matthew Koehler. This course allowed me to create this web-based portfolio, which presents my learning in the Masters of Arts Education program at Michigan State University. The information displayed represents the work and thinking I have done throughout my entire program at MSU. In addition to the web-based portfolio, I spend an eloquent amount of time reflecting on my work as a master’s student and teacher over the past few years. As a teacher, I know the power of self-reflection. Our first essay assignment, made me pause and reflect on how my goals have stayed the same and changed through the course of my master’s. I was able to celebrate all the work I had accomplished and make note of where my life as a learner was headed. With that said, our second essay assignment focused on continuing our education as a life-long learner. As I stated within that essay, I feel I have made great progress towards my goals, but most importantly I have learned the true power of education, which will only push me to learn more.

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As my formal education comes to a close, I am able to reflect on my past experiences and plan for future ones. I have the time to still reflect on my program and piece together the learning and discoveries that have taken place. I am able to connect big ideas of education, technology and special education. I will never stop exploring new ideas, teaching styles or technology. Although this chapter of my life is coming to an end, I am eager to see what will come next.