

## Confidence Found in Humility: A Synthesis of My Studies

The path I paved to become who I am today was not an easy or direct one. I always knew I had dreams, but to be completely honest, I didn't quite know what they were. Where I find myself today is as a strong, intelligent, and confident educator, but I must credit that transformation to the humbling moments along the way.

I am often ashamed that I didn't approach my undergraduate classes with more humility. I was working full time in a middle school classroom as a co-teacher, so I participated in course work with a level of undeserved arrogance. My classes simply became obligations, rather than opportunities to grow. I graduated with decent grades and was able to immediately secure a job at a low-income public school. For the next couple of years, I earned badges of honor, much like a Girl Scout. I made a life-long teaching best friend, I cried over the circumstances of my students, I was angered by the injustices of the special education system, I successfully completed a life-time's worth of fire drills. Then...the five-year itch, scratching at me to be more. I always knew I was missing something, but I didn't quite know what that was.

My next left turn placed me in the independent school system; a stark contradiction from where I began my career. With the school's yearly tuition being similar to that of a public university, my salary and classroom budget were life changing. However, I couldn't shake the saddening feeling of inadequacy. Would I be classy enough for such high-brow parents? Would love of my craft be enough? Would I be educated enough to keep up? For the first time since I graduated, I began to question my abilities. I was surrounded by amazing teachers who were experts in their field and I felt insufficient. The unearned arrogance was beginning to fade away and I needed guidance. I found counseling, ironically, in our school counselor. He helped me recognize that my decision to teach in an independent school provided me with exceptional benefits. Beyond the lack of standardized testing, I was in the trenches with people that were better than me, people who earned their arrogance. I was given blanket permission to veer off my curriculum if the moment warranted genuine learning opportunities, where previously, that would justify a write-up. He reinvigorated my search for the dream I always knew I had but didn't quite know what it was yet.

---

*First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Sarah with a baby carriage...*

Being a mom is the hardest thing I have ever done. One cannot understand what it means to be selfless until you hold your child in your arms for the first time. Nothing else

was more important than my family. This shift in my life forced me to reevaluate my priorities. Before my family, I never took a day off and often worked on weekends. That was not possible anymore, so I had to learn to work smarter. I had always envied my husband and fellow teachers that had master's degrees, but being a mom of two, I never thought it was feasible to juggle work, family, and graduate school. I had settled on the idea of continuing what I was doing, since family came first. It wasn't until my husband and I filled out some paperwork that asked for our parent's highest level of education that something became unsettled. I couldn't shake the image of my girls filling out the same form in their future and not checking "master's" for both Mom and Dad. How can I as a mom and teacher preach the importance of being a lifelong learner and not want more for myself? How can I raise two strong and independent young women, if I give up on my own dreams?

---

When I began my first round of graduate courses, I promised myself that I would approach them differently than I did with my undergraduate. These courses were not a means to an end, but rather an interest to be mastered. My hope for entering the Master of Arts in Education (MAED) program was to develop a justified confidence in my abilities. While I am good at teaching mathematics, I do not have a content-based foundation in it. I do, however, have a love and passion for learning. As I now reflect on my time in the MAED program, I feel as though I am competent enough to engage in deep and thought-provoking discussions about educational pedagogy and philosophy. I now want to make those around me better. I want to pass on all that I have learned to force those thought-provoking discussions about pedagogy and best practice onto anyone who will listen.

My undergraduate degree was a mix of cookie-cutter educational pedagogy classes with some scientific content courses dispersed throughout. What excited me the most about the prospect of the MAED program was its customizable nature. If I found value in a course, I could take it. I have taught for over a decade and I have never taken a literature class. I was excited that I could change that. While all my courses were truly life-altering, there were three, in particular, that paved the way for my educational reinvigoration. These courses shaped how I think about education and have forced me to not just learn new information but apply what I ingested.

---

I was turned off of reading in late elementary school. I always enjoyed being read to by my mother, but never developed a love of reading for pleasure. I wholeheartedly believe that my disdain for reading came from a lack of teacher connection. I spent years as a very obvious reluctant reader and not one teacher intervened. One of the first classes I

took at Michigan State was **TE 836: Awards and Classics of Children's Literature**. This course was a deliberate choice for me, as I wanted to force myself to read. I truly believe in my mission to be a lifelong learner and what better way than to face what I believed I hated. This class completely changed my perception. This course posed the question: "What is the relationship between personal evaluation and cultural constructs of what is 'good,' 'better,' and 'best'?" I was blissfully unaware of the biases in the designation of classics and the awarding system in children's literature. Throughout the semester, I was not only forced to read more than I had ever read in my life, but each week posed a new question that required an extensive amount of reflection. This course provided me with opportunities to peel off the layers of cultural biases when I approach literature. I was exposed to new authors and genres to fill my own personal classroom library. As a result, I am much more conscious of what I read to my own children.

While I was not a special education major, I always felt as though I had a strong grasp of what it meant to educate students with learning differences. After all, my mom was a special education teacher for decades and I idolized her. I knew a multitude of acronyms, the difference between accommodations and modifications and had sat in on many IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) meetings. So, when I enrolled in **CEP 840: Policies, Practices, and Perspectives in Special Education**, I felt excitedly confident. What I soon learned is that I do not have a fraction of the knowledge of a true special educator. Luckily, the class was small and consisted of a plethora of different people. Some were special education teachers, some were administrators, some were parents, and some were general educators, like me. Week by week, this course provided an opportunity to digest the many different categories covered under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), like Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Emotional Disturbances (ED) and Intellectual Disabilities (ID). By the end of the course, I wrote an entire IEP for a fictional student. I have a new appreciation for caseworkers who have to write multiple IEPs year in and year out. They require an extreme amount of time, information and energy. It was through this course, that I realized how much disconnect there truly was between the worlds of a general and special educator. This course enhanced my belief that all educators should be special educators.

Finally, **CEP 802: Developing Positive Attitudes Toward Learning** was a great course that helped me understand the ins and outs of student motivation. This course provided me with a microscope to analyze my own classroom practices. Motivation has been a buzzword in education, and I believe like most educators, I don't think I fully comprehended what motivation entailed. CEP 802 provided the science and skills of how motivation can be enhanced through student engagement. By employing the

TARGET model, I learned how to critically analyze decisions in the classroom, such as how I presented my material, how I organized my small-groups, and how I interacted with my students to encourage student participation. Most importantly, I learned a wonderful teaching phrase: what you see is the fruit, but you must look for the root. This outlines the belief of the course, in that a child's behavior may seem as though they are apathetic or unmotivated (the fruit), but these external behaviors are most likely not related to motivation at all. Apathy and laziness may actually be fronts for gaps in a lack of content understanding, cultural miscommunication or unclear expectations (the root). By the end of the course, I was able to take all of these insights and create a motivational design project for an actual student. The student I chose lacked motivation and had a general apathetic view of learning. By observing her over the course of the semester and engaging in multiple rounds of discussions, I was able to analyze my own teaching style as well as my content. I greatly appreciate the new insight I developed from this course. I now approach reluctant learners with curiosity rather than frustration and annoyance. I am hyper aware of the environment I am creating and if what I'm doing will meet the needs of my students, in terms of engagement. I have certainly become a more patient, productive and active educator.

---

Just last weekend, on a road trip with my husband on our first ever trip without our girls, I reflected on my time at MSU. What I found most profound is that I finally had an idea of what I want to do next. Because of the knowledge achieved and the experiences gained, I have determined that my goal would be to use my degree to become a support specialist for teachers and students alike. The MAED program has provided me with the drive, knowledge, and skill base to push for what is best for my students. Drawing on my time, I am excited to find creative and intentional ways to support students with interventions and educational strategies while providing necessary resources and tools to teachers and parents. I am proud of my journey and excited to see what happens next.