

Never Done Learning...An Interview with Me
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Why Teaching?

Over 20 years ago I became a teacher in my home state of California and I was so excited. It was February 1994 and I was hired on an **emergency teaching certificate** to take over a classroom in East Los Angeles. I was a substitute teacher at the time and a tenured teacher had been fired. The principal hired me and said it was up to me to “pick up the pieces” of that fifth grade classroom. It seems so long ago, yet I can still remember the mix of happiness and fear that I felt stepping into the school; not as a substitute, but as an actual teacher. I remember being handed my classroom key by the secretary and pointed in the direction of my classroom without any direct supervision at all. As I began setting up my first classroom, it really dawned on me: I was 25 years old and going to become **responsible for the education** of thirty 5th grade students. Ultimately, I got into teaching to make a difference in children’s lives and to help them gain knowledge so they could become independent, successful members of society. Of course, I had several awe inspiring teachers during my own childhood and I wanted to help children learn the same way they helped me so very long ago.

How has teaching changed in 20 years?

Certainly, the field of **education has changed dramatically** since those early years of my teaching career. Back then, we taught using the whole language approach and learning was a very natural experience for children. In those days, teachers did not have very much accountability to state standards regarding student progress the way educators are held to state standards today. This may seem to be an ineffective approach to many new teachers now, but the lack of continuous data collection and mandated testing allowed educators to teach naturally without overanalyzing student progress. As I see the way that teachers and students function in the classroom now, with **standards based curriculum** and frequent testing every step of the way, it seems counterintuitive to my earlier and more natural teaching style. Education philosophies have changed, yet my young students still come to school excited to learn and that is one thing that I believe will remain constant in the field of education.

Why Michigan State University?

Entering the program at Michigan State University with a focus on literacy has helped **rejuvenate my career and revamp my own educational practices**. I have personally

grown as a teacher because of my experiences in the MSU program. The California school system and its' progressive teaching pedagogy was my only prior knowledge and academic framework for how I taught children. I knew when we made the move to Michigan that it was finally time for me to earn my master's degree. At the time, I could see how the state of Michigan really tied the way children are educated to the content expectations and I was not used to that style of teaching. I am grateful for the learning experiences I have had during the course of my studies at MSU and believe my educational experiences have **increased my effectiveness** in the classroom.

Throughout the MSU program, I was given the freedom to develop and create my own program plan. The MSU program has helped me better meet the academic and emotional needs of the students I teach in my own classroom because I was often able to work with my students to develop case studies and academic activities coinciding with my MSU classes. These carefully selected courses offered me access to effective **research based strategies** that are necessary in today's classrooms. Oftentimes, teachers going through a master's degree program spend the majority of their time reading about educational pedagogy and are unable to immediately practice what they have learned during any real life teaching experiences. During my studies, I have been able to **directly apply** the majority of my coursework to the individual needs of specific students. The MSU courses I selected through the program helped me come up with a plan for several of the academic and social problems that needed solutions in my class.

What have I learned on my educational journey at MSU?

My experience at MSU has offered me an opportunity to explore two areas of education: **literacy and special education inclusion** in the general education classroom. The area of special education has dramatically changed since I began teaching. In California, all of the schools where I taught had self-contained classrooms where special education children were placed. They did not really interact with the general education classrooms and never really seemed to be a part of the school community. This did not allow these children to learn how to function with the rest of society and did a disservice to the majority of special needs students. In today's schools, teachers need to learn how to make **academic and social accommodations** for special needs students in the regular class setting.

Although my primary focus at MSU was literacy, I believe the time I spent in my inclusion courses really helped me increase my knowledge on my responsibilities to my students with special needs on a daily basis. I also became more effective as their teacher because I was able to study current best practices and behavior techniques that have been developed to help them flourish in my classroom. The following inclusion courses at MSU represent

what I consider to be an important journey through learning about special needs students in the classroom.

What MSU courses were most influential to me?

One course that really influenced me personally was **Teaching Exceptional Children and Youth in the General Education Classroom**. This was the first course that I took at MSU related to accommodating the needs of my special needs students. I was able to research ways to help these students acclimate to the general education environment. The most memorable activity from this course was writing about how a person in my life who was affected, either positively or negatively, by a **special education experience**. I wrote about a family member who was placed in a self-contained classroom merely because he was “hyper”. Back in the 1970s, children who did not demonstrate perfect behavior at school were often placed into special education classrooms. They were basically brushed under the carpet. My reflection essay really made me stop and think about what my role is in ensuring the least restrictive environment for my own students with disabilities. This course also helped me develop a deeper knowledge of the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**. Because of this class, I better understand the federal implications regarding the rights of special needs students. Finally, the class taught me how the ADA has really changed the process that teachers, administrators and parents use to determine the educational rights of a special needs child as they go through school.

Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners was another important course that helped me improve my educational practices. The push for differentiated instruction has been at the forefront of education for the past several years and this MSU course taught me various methods of teaching reading by providing **differentiated lessons**. Learning about differentiation and best practices in literacy instruction has dramatically helped me reach the various ability groups that I have in my kindergarten classroom. I was able to apply the course literacy activities directly to my reading and writing instruction. The majority of my students had not attended any type of school and did not have any knowledge of letters, phonics or phonemic awareness skills. This class has helped me **accommodate the most intensive students** I was teaching and also offered ideas on how to implement an independent reading program for my higher students so that they could become better readers. The most relevant part of this course was that it showed me ways to incorporate technology as a way to provide differentiated literacy instruction on a daily basis.

The course, **Educating Students with Challenging Behavior**, really had a huge impact on me and I took it during a school year when I needed it the most. This course actually helped me develop a plan for a very difficult student whom I had during that school year.

This student came to me with a **possible autism spectrum disorder**. This student went undiagnosed by his pediatrician until the end of the school year. Our school district does not provide any special services for students with autism spectrum disorders, so this course came to me at the right time in my career. To say he had challenging behaviors in our classroom would be an understatement and many of my other students were affected by his outbursts. This class allowed me to use him as my case study and work on **specific behavior strategies** that allowed him to communicate his frustrations at school without outbursts or tantrums. Even after I ended the course in the fall, I was able to continue to use the research based strategies which allowed me to continue with the positive behavior plan so that this student could complete kindergarten in a general education classroom.

Another **relevant** course that guided me in the classroom was **Developing Positive Attitudes Towards Learning**. I really was able to take the theories we learned and directly apply them to all of my students who lacked motivation to learn. More importantly, this course really helped one student in particular. My case study for this course had a very traumatic childhood and really **lacked the self efficacy** to become an independent learner. In this course, I learned how to eliminate many of the task avoidance techniques he used and was able to help him develop confidence in himself as a capable student. This course taught me how to step back and allow my students to take more control of their own learning. One of the main philosophies that I found important was the idea of creating task value and personal relevance for my students in the classroom so that they can be **internally motivated** to learn. As I come to the end of this school year with my class, I have seen a major change in their self confidence and motivation to learn.

When will I be done learning?

Although I am very excited to be graduating this semester, I do not necessarily view my upcoming graduation as the end to my educational journey. I have always been the type of person who enjoys learning about new things, both personally and professionally. With this, I expect that my own **education will never really come to an end**. The new educational strategies and hands on experiences through my master's degree program have provided a springboard for me to continue my own investigations. I look forward to researching several educational topics that will help my students become confident learners. One of the main topics I plan to research is ways to effectively incorporate the use of **technology across all content areas**. I also want to learn about computer based programs that can be set up for an individual child to track progress and adjust to meet their own academic needs.

In the near future, my MSU training involving the use of technology will come into play because our school may be getting one to one laptops for all students. Through my continued studies beyond my master's degree, I hope to research how to create and develop individualized learning experiences for my kindergarten students on their laptops. The online coursework at MSU has **prepared me to meet the challenges** of educating students through the continued use of best practices. In conclusion, **I want to say thank you to my professors and fellow students** whom I have worked with during my master's degree. I have enjoyed being a part of the professional learning community at Michigan State University and will use my newfound knowledge to help my students become successful learners in the classroom. I am never really done learning and I know that wonderful experiences await me, both in my personal and professional life, and for that I am truly grateful.