

**No Pain...No Gain!**

**Gina Ventimiglia's Synthesis of the MAED Program**

After my first year of teaching I realized that I still had quite a bit to learn. Even though I was confident that Michigan State University's bachelors program and internship student teaching year had prepared me to be a solid teacher within an elementary classroom, that first year of teaching brought up gaps in my teaching that I felt needed to be filled in through further knowledge and experience. It was halfway through the school year when I realized that I had more learning that I was eager to do and I knew just where to turn to for the support and knowledge that I wanted. However, when I thought about heading back to Michigan State for my master's degree, I didn't know if I would be cut out for a fully online program. In my past educational experiences, I had always thrived on a physical classroom setting where I could build relationships with my peers and my teachers. I worried that this online forum would not give me the same opportunities to thrive, but took a leap of faith with a friend and applied to the program. As I began my first course in the summer of 2011, I quickly saw that Michigan State would guide me in my growth as an educator yet again, presenting opportunities online that I didn't realize existed.

There were some specific goals that I set out with when entering into this master's program. One of those goals was to strengthen my teaching of literacy in the elementary classroom. After teaching for a year, I realized just how important and overwhelming literacy instruction in the elementary classroom can be. I found myself seeking out opportunities to learn about the specifics of reading and writing and how to assess student progress. It was in my third course of the program where I began to have some of my needs as a literacy educator met through TE 846: Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners.

TE 846 was designed to learn more about teaching the basics of reading. It taught me how to assess and create interventions for struggling literacy learners based on best practices in literacy and

evidence based interventions. This course outlined specific skills that young students need in order to learn how to read. For example, skilled readers use efficient word reading, using multiple cuing systems to identify unknown words. They also have good metacognitive knowledge, using previewing, summarizing, questioning, and visualizing to help make sense of texts. These skilled readers have an extensive genre and world knowledge and have a strong motivation to be successful readers. After reading and discussing about these strengths of skilled readers, I realized that these were the skills that my struggling readers needed in place in order to be successful. These struggling readers were the ones that I felt I most challenged in helping within my first year of teaching. I didn't understand all of the technicalities that went into phonological processing, accuracy and fluency, vocabulary knowledge, and self-monitoring. Once I had more understanding about these reading areas, I felt I was better able to identify and tackle these issues of some of my poor readers in my classroom.

Each week I read a wide range of articles and discussed information about reading instruction with my peers. I was reminded of what phonological awareness was, "...referring to one's ability to recognize, discriminate, and manipulate the sounds in one's language, regardless of the size of the word unit that is the focus" (Anthony and Francis, 2005, p.256). The course readings specifically showed me examples and provided me with strategies of how to teach decoding, a huge skill that I needed in order to teach my young second grade readers. "Awareness and use of such organizational patterns, not memorization of rules, facilitates learning" (Moats, 1998, p.6). Similarly to providing skills and strategies on how to explicitly teach decoding to readers, I learned through the coursework I did here about procedures for word learning and teaching meaning vocabulary. For example, one article I read explained how to productively teach vocabulary instruction through the teaching of within word parts, including prefixes, suffixes, and roots (Stahl and Shiel, 1992, p.231).

Two major challenges I faced in teaching my second graders to become more skilled readers was improving their comprehension skills, particularly gaining deeper meanings from texts and their fluency. What I noticed after teaching second graders for a year was that they began getting the decoding and phonological awareness down but then struggled to remember that reading has to make sense and sound the way we talk. This course gave me opportunities to learn about strategies in which I could help my students gain more comprehension and fluency while reading. I learned about the three key elements of fluent reading: “accurate reading of connected text at a conversational rate with appropriate prosody or expression” (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005, p.702). This knowledge helped me understand that fluency was not just one overall reading skill, but rather three specific areas that could be impacting a student’s reading. I devoted my final case study project to developing the fluency of one of my second grade students, tackling issues of pace, accuracy, and expression. I was able to use self-monitoring charts, voice recording, peer and teacher modeling, repeated reading, and the use of reader’s theatre to increase the fluency of this child.

Reading comprehension is a huge aspect of reading and although I do not think that I learned everything about reading comprehension in this course, I do believe that I gained further knowledge that allowed me to make some better decision in my classroom about how to teach reading comprehension to students. This course gave me opportunities to read about the “...techniques that are most helpful in constructing meaning at a given point in time, before, during, and after reading” (Ehren, 2005, p.315). I began understand goal-specific strategies, monitoring and repair strategies, and packaging strategies, that readers need in order to process specific material while reading. This allowed me to better identify which comprehension strategies readers were having difficulty with and specifically focus on those through small group instruction.

With some of this reading knowledge, I was better able to teach my students how to read and how to become skilled readers. I put into action so many of these skills and strategies into my classroom.

For example, in order to better teach word recognition I began to implement a word study program, “Words Their Way,” that allowed for students to be aware and use organizational patterns instead of memorizing rules. Along with this program, students began learning prefixes, suffixes and roots of words in order to build a meaningful vocabulary. Through my final case study project I was able to implement some fluency strategies learned about throughout the course. These specific fluency strategies were ones that I continue to use with students who are struggling with the three various aspects of fluency, accuracy, rate, and expression. The understanding and exposure to various comprehension skills allowed me to explicitly teach multiple comprehension strategies at one time to small groups of students, filling in their gaps in meaning while reading. Because of the transfer I made through gained knowledge of reading instruction through this course into my classroom, this class was extremely meaningful and important to me as I continue my journey as an elementary school teacher.

In addition to TE 846, another reading course was essential in my development as a literacy instructor. This course was called TE 842: Elementary Reading Assessment Instruction. This course focused on the assessment and teaching of reading at the elementary school level. Throughout this course I continued to learn about the breakdown of teaching reading in the elementary level including comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, phonological awareness, letter-sound knowledge, word identification, and a reader’s motivation. This course primarily used the following two texts *Comprehension and collaboration: Inquiry circles in action* by Harvey and Daniels and *Assessment for reading instruction* by Stahl and McKenna to help teach about both formal and informal reading assessment. It was the assessment piece of this course that I found to be most beneficial to my learning and teaching. As I began exploring the readings and presentations in this course about assessment, I realized that there were some changes that I wanted to make within my classroom that I think would help make the assessment of my students more organized and valuable. When it came to

conferring with my students, I felt unfocused, making what I have learned to now call “not observable” notes about what my student’s strengths and needs are. “Individual conferences provide an ideal opportunity to talk one-on-one with students and help them sort out their thinking as well as come to a deeper understanding” (Harvey and Daniels, p.273). I believe that in second grade the individual conferring is so important in order to push students to the next level of reading, digging deeper into texts, and planning for future whole group lessons in reading. Therefore, I adopted many of the organizational strategies that were presented to me in an article by Paul Boyd-Batstone. I began taking anecdotal notes on only four – five students each day with premade labels to save time allowing me to make purposeful observations that would drive future instruction. I learned about particular verbs that helped me stay focused in my observable notes. I remember reading in this particular article, “To be effective and practical, the recommendations should be task oriented. New teachers have the most difficulty with this part of the process” (Batstone, 2004, p.235). I was relieved with this statement because as a new teacher I felt this was the most challenging part for me, that is the *where do I go now? How do I plan a task that will improve this struggle and meet that student’s needs as a reader?* Writing recommendations with the children’s parents in mind was an excellent suggestion that I continue to keep in mind when I write anecdotal record assessment forms for my students.

This course gave me an opportunity to reflect on the variety of assessments I give in the classroom. It has allowed me to gain information, strategies, organizational tools, etc. to guide me in pushing my assessments in reading. I believe that as I try new types of assessments and change my assessment practices I will continue to have questions that arise. This course was important for me to take early on as an educator so that I can develop reading assessments that are meaningful and practices that lead to observable information on each of my readers. This information can be critical in moving my student’s reading further along and being able to communicate this information to my parents.

Along with my goal of becoming a more knowledgeable literacy teacher, I also wanted to continue to strengthen my classroom management skills throughout this master's program. I completed my student teaching in the urban setting of Detroit Public Schools. While teaching here, I realized that classroom management was essential in order for successful student learning to occur. As I transitioned into my first years as an educator, I realized that urban setting or not, these classroom management skills are critical in creating a classroom environment where all students will succeed. It was because of this experience that I knew that taking some courses that furthered my knowledge base of managing challenging students and guiding me in my classroom discipline would be helpful in my teaching career.

The first course I took in the MAED program was called CEP 883: Psychology of Classroom Discipline. This course explored the many different aspects of classroom management. One of the big ideas that struck me most during this course was the importance of personal connections between students and teachers and how that impacts student learning and behavior in drastic ways. I felt this was a theme that continued to come up in each reading, discussion, and reflection of my own throughout the course. One comment in Chapter 1 of Jones and Jones was from a principle, explaining that students need to feel, "...cared for, competent, and valued" (Jones and Jones, 2010, p. 12). I think every person, whether you are a student or a professional in a workplace, wants to feel like others genuinely care for them, feel that they are capable of succeeding, and feel that what they say and do is valued by others. Even though I think I always knew this to be true, it was the first time that I really thought about how I could and should do that for each of my students in my classroom daily.

Another big idea I learned throughout this course was the link between high expectations set for students and the intrinsic motivation of students. Without high expectations set and feeling valued in the classroom, student's intrinsic motivation seems to be severely lacking. I found this to be true

when reading Champs chapter 1, task 5. They stated that positive expectations need to be held for all students and that “high expectations = set the stage for high achievement” (Champs, 1998, p.40). If students are held to high standards, it will pave the way for them to feel valued, have a connection to material and teacher, and in turn succeed academically. In addition, this course brought to light the extreme importance and necessity of classroom organization. To me, this is the heart of a well-functioning classroom and as a newer teacher, I think it is one of the most important things for me to grow and learn in. CHAMPS Module 2 really laid out the essential framework for me for this concept of organization. They broke it down into seven tasks, each heavily contributing to effective class organization. These allowed me to reflect on some parts of my day that worked well and other times that were more challenging and needed improvement. They provided ideas about how to change and adjust your routine in order to maximize learning time. These suggestions and ideas were ones that I continue to integrate in my current classroom as different groups of students come with a variety of needs.

In addition to CEP 883, I took CEP 832: Educating Students with Challenging Behaviors. This course focused on the characteristics of different students with challenging behaviors and interventions for teaching these students. I learned about how many different types of challenging behaviors there are and how each needs a separate set of skills and strategies in order to best manage that behavior. This course used three texts that were so valuable to have in my professional repertoire (*Teaching Problem Students*, *BEST Practices: Behavioral and education strategies for teachers*, and *The Tough Kid Tool Box*). These texts provided specific and concrete strategies of maintaining an effective teaching stance with students with challenging behaviors.

The course broke down working effectively with aggressive and angry behaviors, impulsive and active behaviors, shy and withdrawn behaviors, and low achieving and failure oriented behaviors. I learned about the specific components to look for in each of these challenging behaviors. For

example, I learned that passive-aggressive students are subtly oppositional and stubborn, try to control, show borderline compliance with rules, mar property rather than damage, disrupt surreptitiously, and drag their feet (Brophy, 1996, p.201). Similarly, I learned about the characteristics typically displayed by hostile-aggressive students: they intimidate, hit and push, damage property, antagonize, and are easily angered (Brophy, 1996, p.171). As these lists reoccurred for many of the challenging behaviors, I realized that there were important distinctions that could significantly impact how a student's behavior might improve or not based on the teacher's knowledge of the specified behavior.

This course pushed me to think about which behaviors created a shift in my teaching stance and when was it least effective. I realized that my teaching stance is least effective when presented with the challenging behavior of hyperactivity. I therefore focused on how to maintain a more professional stance with this challenging behavior through a variety of techniques such as providing opportunities for movement during lessons and having concrete items that help hyperactive students stay in their seat or not blurt out as often. I feel that I have so many tools in my "challenging behavior toolbox" that I can use that are manageable, effective, and practical within my classroom. I have been able to have more flexible limits with particular students after taking this course, an attribute of an effective socializer according to Brophy (Brophy, 1996, p.23). This is incredibly valuable information to know about myself as an educator and will help me when presented with a challenging behavior in my classroom. What I found most helpful throughout this course was the teaching of these challenging behaviors through the vignettes of real teachers presented in Brophy and case studies provided through the course instructor. These scenarios allowed for in depth group work where suggestions were made based on each challenging behavior. The scenarios created opportunities for reflection on my own teaching, reflection that helped me to grow and nurture all students more effectively.



It is clear that throughout my master's program I have gained confidence in my literacy teaching as well as my behavior and classroom management skills. I am proud to say that I have also learned a great deal about online learning throughout this journey. As I mentioned, I was a bit skeptical about having no physical interactions with peers and teachers during my master's program, however, I learned very quickly that I could still thrive in my online classroom. I was provided a multitude of opportunities to exchange ideas and knowledge with peers and professors through discussion boards, group work activities, chat options, etc. The wonderful part of these online interactions was that I had the opportunity to be more thoughtful and clear when I engaged in discussions because I had time for reflection throughout the week(s). I was able to digest some of the information taken in for a particular course on any given week and think about why it was significant for me as a learner and educator.

In addition, embarking on this master's degree program online allowed me to understand parts of myself as a learner more clearly. For example, I realized that I have a desire to know all of the information for the course upfront, which in consequence becomes overwhelming. I did better with courses where I could only see that week's assignments. When I had the ability to see what was to come I felt too much anxiety about how I would get it all done. I also learned that at times I am not as technologically savvy as I may have thought! Although I consider myself "good" with technology, there were times throughout the program where my patience and skills were tested. It was a good learning experience and challenged me in ways that surpassed just the content of the courses. These struggles also allowed me to appreciate what I do know about technology and give me a thirst for wanting to know more.

Throughout this program I have learned that I seek out opportunities to reflect and adjust my current teaching practices. As I learn and take in new bits of knowledge from course work, peers, and teachers, I realize that I am a teacher willing and wanting to make improvements daily to my

teaching. I am a teacher who wants her students to know she is also a true lifelong learner. I know that I will continue to reflect through professional development, potentially more formal schooling, and collaboration with my colleagues, a network that has rapidly grown throughout this program. I proudly acknowledge that I am a self-motivated and determined learner who works hard to achieve my successes. The title of this essay is “no pain...no gain.” It was not without stress, hard work, time, money, and deep thought that my master’s degree was completed. However, it has been the most valuable gain in knowledge and professional development that was worth every penny, moment, and gray hair!

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