

When I began my journey into the world of graduate education, I had no idea what to expect. I did not realize that joining this world would change and enhance my views on so many things. I did not realize that I missed being a student, and how much I was longing for some meaningful learning in my life. Most importantly, I forgot how much I do not know.

Before starting the Master of Arts in Education (MAED) program at Michigan State University, I was a new teacher who was trying to find herself in the classroom. I was hired into Warren Consolidated Schools immediately after my student teaching, and began my first year as a Spanish teacher. My first year was a long one; I spent many extra hours trying to make sure my lesson plans were as close to perfection as I could get. I attended as many new teacher professional developments as possible, and I tried to always choose sessions that I thought I could actually benefit from. When it came time to start my second year, I thought I was ready to go. Unfortunately, I was laid off over the summer, and I was devastated. To make a long story short, I was ultimately hired back as a part time employee, which turned into a full-time position by the end of the first semester. I was then given the opportunity to teach two English classes, which I gladly accepted. The rest of that year ran as smoothly as one could expect while teaching two new preps, but I was able to successfully plan and implement lessons according to the curriculum. From there, I was moved twice more, until I ended up at the alternative high school that I have been at for two years. It was not until I began teaching at this particular high school that I realized how much knowledge I was lacking. My students needed more from me than previous students had needed, and I knew that I needed to be so much more for them than I was. It was a challenge that I readily accepted, and the classes I was taking at the time helped me in more ways than one.

During the summer semester of 2017, I took a class that changed my outlook on so many things in a very short time. One particular class (EAD 822: Engaging Diverse Students and Families) directly impacted me because my classroom had suddenly become populated with more diversity than I knew what to do with. I had no idea what I was getting myself into at the time, however it was one of the most idea laden, meaningful classes I have ever taken. I could not stop thinking about the ideas introduced by the course, even when I was not reading articles or writing papers. I found myself explaining different articles or ideas that we discussed in class with anyone who would listen. I told my parents, friends, co-workers, etc. about this class, and it initiated so many conversations that I never would have had without it.

EAD 822 changed me in more ways than one. Throughout this class, I was challenged to think about my own racial identity, and how that affected my teaching and interactions with people every day. When I first sat down to work on this racial autobiography assignment, I remember thinking to myself: “Ok, so you’re white. How can you write an essay as long as she wants about your whiteness?” As it turns out, I have a lot to say about the fact that I am a white female, and I learned a lot about what that means for me. In particular, I now know what it means for me when I am standing in front of a diverse group of students who do not share the same background as me. I found myself thinking about specific students often, and interactions I had had with them in the past. I reflected on some of the moments where I lost my temper and patience, and realized that there were probably communication issues stemming from the differences in our backgrounds. It helped me to be more aware of my actions and words, especially when dealing with students who are different from me. It made me want to be better for these students, because I want to be able to

help all of my students in the best, most meaningful way possible. This year, I was more aware of the words and phrases I was using with minority students. I am trying to change the way I interact with these students so they can have a more positive, beneficial educational experience, at least in my classroom. I have been able to reflect upon those interactions and attempt to change them to make them better.

The professor, Dr. Chambers, broke up the course into different modules that corresponded to different minority groups. During one week, a lot of the videos and readings discussed "whiteness", white privilege, and what this means. One of the assignments was a recent documentary from MTV that explored the idea of white privilege at length. The narrator interviewed not only whites, but various minority groups, and some of the things that were said shocked me. The majority of the people from the minority groups who were interviewed said that they knew all about white privilege, and that they had seen it first-hand many times throughout their lives. On the other side, the majority of the white people interviewed denied that white privilege exists, and at one point even said that there is reverse discrimination on white people when it comes to college scholarships. A younger, white female said that she was unable to get any scholarships to college because they all went to minorities who had the same qualifications that she had. When the narrator informed her that, as a white person, she was much more likely to receive a scholarship (he had statistics and evidence to back up his statement), she began to cry and say that she was not sure why he was attacking her in this way. This particular scene blew my mind! How could this girl think the narrator was attacking her? He was simply providing information! This was the first time that I realized that not enough people are talking about these types of issues, and something needs to change.

I could easily go on and on about this class, because it has definitely made the biggest impact on how I think about things, in and outside of the classroom, but I will try to summarize the best I can. This class taught me so much about how we (American educators) are failing the minority students in our country, and have been for many years. There is research to back this up, and it has been happening for a significant period of time. This class made me want to explore and use Culturally Responsive Teaching methods in my own classroom. No, this class showed me that if I truly want my minority students to excel and succeed in my classroom, I need to be more culturally responsive in my teaching. My diverse classroom cannot benefit from just my white experiences; they need more. This class made me see that, and I will never be the same.

As a result of this class, I have changed certain things in my classroom, and I plan to continue to change and adapt my classroom as necessary. For example, now I have posters hanging with my Spanish posters that translate certain things into Arabic, like the days of the week, the months of the year, and the colors. Now, instead of just seeing these words in English and Spanish, my English Language students can also see these words in a language they are familiar with. I have also expanded my silent reading library to include titles that are more diverse than they were before, and this is an ongoing process. Before the MAED program, my silent reading library was full of typical young adult books, but most of the books revolved around white main characters living in the United States. Since then, I have added in several books that do not have a white main character and could be more relatable to my minority students. My silent reading library will continue to evolve as I find and add in more books.

I have spent more of my five years as a teacher teaching Spanish, although it is my minor. Now that I am teaching English consistently, it has become obvious to me that there is so much I do not know. Fortunately, I was able to take a class that helped me figure out what I do not know and provided a multitude of useful information. TE 846: Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners taught me how to approach my struggling readers, and what to do once they have been identified. During this class, we were asked to select a student and perform a case study. It was this assignment that changed the way I view my students, and showed me that I should not be so quick to make assumptions.

I chose my student, Billy Bob (the name he insisted I use to refer to him in the case study), based off what I saw in class and what was reflected in his grades. He seemed to be a struggling student who also needed help to find the motivation to complete his work. As I worked with him, I realized that Billy Bob was not struggling in all of the ways I originally predicted. He did not have a hard time with reading the way I thought he did, rather, his issues were rooted in finding the motivation to do the work. This realization opened my eyes to other students in my class, and helped me identify some of the individual challenges they faced. I realized that I had a lot of students who appeared to have difficulties in certain areas, but were fully capable of doing the work when they chose to apply themselves.

As I worked my way through the case study, I learned many different, useful things. Not only did I learn about a variety of strategies to help struggling readers, but I also gained useful knowledge about what to do with readers who do not have this issue, and how to challenge them further. I have always been an avid reader, and I have always tried to share my love for reading with my students, however, I am not always successful. As I began to apply different strategies to my lessons, I noticed an increase in engagement, particularly when it came to vocabulary.

Vocabulary instruction has always been a challenge for me. I know that expanding one's vocabulary is important, but I have always had a hard time finding ways to make it meaningful for students. The texts from TE 846 covered vocabulary instruction extensively (among other things), and my vocabulary instruction has become increasingly more meaningful as I apply more strategies. Last year, my students were responsible for looking up words, finding their definitions, and creating semantic maps. This year, my students are performing the same tasks, however, their vocabulary words are interlaced with the rest of the curriculum. My students also take ownership of the words by choosing some of the words that we are going to investigate further as a class. They are encouraged to use them as much as possible, even to the point that they can receive extra credit for using their words with other teachers. I have heard and seen so much new vocabulary usage in the last few months! The biggest change has been with my EL (English Language) population. I was able to experiment with different ideas that I got from my classmates and the texts, and trouble shoot with my classmates at the same time.

All in all, the MAED program has changed my teaching and my thinking in many ways. If I had not gone through this program, I would be the same teacher I was before. Rather, because of the MAED program, I am a more culturally responsive teacher (well, I'm trying to be), and I have much more information about how to engage students with literacy. I will be walking away from this program in December a new teacher and a new learner. I will be leaving this program with much more knowledge than I started with. I learned so much about what it means to be a minority in

today's world, and how being a minority student is different from being a part of the majority. I have learned how to engage my students in reading, even when they are not necessarily motivated to do so. I was able to become a student again, which reminded me how much I love learning. It has brought a renewed passion to my classroom and to my teaching.