

Nothing is Impossible!

by Christina Wilson

My first four years of teaching special education at Hillman Elementary were great, but I knew I wanted to further myself. I was often looking at the education I have received thus far and evaluating what I knew already and what I still wanted to learn. I also spent a lot of time perusing all of the different colleges and programs that were available and debating on if I wanted to go back to get a master's degree and what I may want to get that degree in. Each year, I thought to myself, "Do I want to/have time to be able to receive a master's degree?" After taking a course in reading assessments in the summer of 2010, I decided I was ready to further my education. I finally decided on a special education program offered through Michigan State and was so excited to begin the program.

As I look back at my experiences while earning my master's degree through Michigan State University, I am so proud of myself and am excited to say that all of my hard work has paid off! I've learned so much about myself as a learner and a teacher, as well as gained some important ideas and insights that have influenced the way I have learned and also the way I have taught my students in my classroom.

My family and I have been talking about my education throughout the last two years, when I began pursuing my master's degree. Not only has no one on either side of my family completed their master's degree, but no immediate family has received their bachelor's

degree! My family has been so supportive throughout my educational endeavors and helped encourage me as classes and work became tough to juggle.

Educational Knowledge

Looking back at my education, I had a couple of classes that really increased my knowledge of basics in the educational area. A class that allowed me to look back at the history of education was ED 800 - Concepts of Educational Inquiry taught by Dr. Weiland. This class taught me about some great leaders who paved the way to how the educational system is today. An eye-opening book that I read during this class was called "Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed" by Howard Gardner. This book opened my eyes on how important it is to balance the educational curriculum by teaching students how to be truthful, how to be a good citizen, and also how it is important for students to have their own opinions on what is beautiful. This class also allowed me time to research various websites that I could use while creating lesson plans.

During my first semester, I had a class that helped me learn more about working with students with autism. CEP 843 - Autism Spectrum Disorders: Characteristics and Educational Implications, taught by Dr. Summer Ferreri, allowed me to learn in-depth exactly what autism was and how to work with students that have been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. From that class, I was introduced to a book that I have used with some of the parents I work with. "A Practical Guide to Autism: What Every Parent, Family Member, and Teacher Needs to Know" by Volkmar and Wiesner was a book that was easy to read and understand. I

share important points in this book with parents and have even had a parent borrow the book and enjoyed reading it as well!

CEP 866 - Psychoeducational Interventions and Children and Youth taught by Dr. Matthew Diemer was another class that made me become more aware of how to work with those students who are at-risk. The school I teach with has many students who are below the poverty line, so this class allowed me to learn more about how I could work with those students and some interventions to use for those students. I enjoyed this class because it looked less at what I need to do in my classroom, and more at what I needed to do with students outside of my classroom. It was so interesting to learn about the different personal and familial factors that could be present and how to work with those factors in order for a student to build a more positive outlook of life around them.

Implementation

Michigan State University has offered many great classes that helped me become a better educator for my students and become a more positive role model in the community I work in. I have shared with other teachers, parents, and community members some of the information I have learned about various disabilities and strategies to use with children as well. One of the classes that I learned the most from was CEP 804A - Reflection and Inquiry in Special Education - Literacy Instruction taught by Dr. Carol Sue Englert. In this class, we studied various reading strategies to use for students with learning disabilities. Since my teaching career is focused on language arts in a special education resource room, this class was built around my teaching job. I would learn of a new strategy or resource to use and I could then instantly take

that knowledge and implement it in my classroom. Since I have taken that class, I have also shared the things I learned with my colleagues and some of them use the strategies in their classroom as well. One of the most beneficial strategies that I learned in this class was PLAN-It, READ-It, and Respond-to-it strategies to use before, during, and after reading. I learned just how important it is for students to look at the story before and during reading, not just after reading a passage.

Another class that was a great experience was TE 848 - Writing Instruction and Assessment taught by Kati Macaluso. In this class, we first focused our attention on ourselves as a writer and then how to teach students how to write themselves. We studied many different genres of writing and practiced writing in those genres ourselves. It was an interesting way of going about teaching writing to college students/teachers. During the class, I wasn't quite sure how I felt about the way the class was presented - I wanted to dive right into how to teach writing to my students. In hindsight, I can now see how important it is for yourself to know how you write before you teach writing to others. One genre that I have not focused on much myself or with my students is poetry. In this class, we spent time reading some poetry and I even read a poetry novel, which I had never heard of before. I worked on some poetry with my students after this class, and it was interesting how my younger students really enjoyed writing the poetry.

One of my hardest, but yet most rewarding, classes was TE 849 - Methods and Materials for Teaching Children's and Adolescent Literature taught by Dr. Laura Apol. The texts we used throughout the class were actual children's books. I spent a lot of time that semester in our

local library's children literature section and I enjoyed it! I was able to explore so many different books and look at different literary elements presented in the literature. When I was presented with books or authors that I really enjoyed, it was fun to share them with my classroom and to see what my students thought of them! There was a lot of literature packed into one semester, but it allowed me to look at many more authors and the books they wrote more in depth. My favorite assignment in this class was viewing and comparing books written from before 1970, from 1970-1990, and after 1990. This was something I never would have thought of doing on my own and I realized how there were many similarities and differences in various literature.

These classes allowed me to implement what I was learning immediately and effectively. Students seemed to enjoy when I would bring in new strategies to the classroom. The students would be engaged because it was always something new and students never knew what to expect next!

Becoming a Better Student & Teacher

While looking back at my classes and all of the things that I learned, I have learned so much about my students and how to teach them in the academic areas that they struggle with. I have learned many new strategies to use in the classroom and to those students with disabilities, in order to help my students to an even greater extent. I am glad I took the classes while I was teaching, because then I could take what I had learned and implement it immediately, which helped me retain all of the different strategies I learned in each class.

Throughout my classes, I have also learned so much about myself and the way that I learn. Online courses include a lot of independent reading work and having discussions with your peers on the Internet. The format was completely different than the classroom experiences of my bachelor's degree. These classes included a lot of group work with others, so it was important to trust your classmates and get things completed in a timely fashion.

Now that I have completed these classes, I have learned to become more organized. I admit that I was a very unorganized person and my family would agree with that statement. They would often say, "I can't believe you are a teacher! You are so unorganized and messy!" I would laugh it off but I quickly learned during my first semester that you have to be organized during online classes. The professors often wouldn't remind you when things were due, so I made sure to fill out all the assignments and their due dates in a planner because it was very easy to lose track of what assignments I had to do and when they were due. In general, I feel that I have become a much more organized person.

The online classes also forced me to pace myself in my classes. Teaching full-time and taking master's classes was very tough. Most nights, I would come home with papers to correct for my students and also need to work on homework. Some nights, I would just want to have a "night off" and relax. I had to learn when I could take that "night off" and also make sure I wasn't waiting until the last minute to complete my homework. I tried to make my experience as stress-free and relaxing as I could.

A Blessed Future

Creating this portfolio as I finish my master's degree has been an enjoyable experience. I have been so excited to look back through the assignments and projects I completed in my classes and to think about all of the things that I have learned throughout the past two years. Not only have I learned so much more about education, but I have learned so much more about myself as well. This has been an amazing accomplishment for me.

Creating this portfolio also helped me create new goals for myself since receiving a master's degree was the goal I made for myself a few years back. In my future, I look forward to taking more educational courses in order to better myself and to learn even more. I also look forward to pursuing new job opportunities as they become available. I am thankful for the education I have received and excited about the educational and career opportunities that are yet to come!