

Synthesis Essay

When I decided to apply to the Master of Arts in Education program at Michigan State University, I was at one of the most challenging points in my career. I had just earned my tenure after teaching for three years when I chose to leave my home in Hawai'i to move to Michigan. I accepted a job as a first-grade teacher and was ecstatic to begin this new journey of implementing my favorite lessons with my new students that I have done with my previous classes. Aside from the new location, curriculum, and colleagues, I had a difficult time connecting with this class because I was teaching in a new context and demographic that I was used to. I went from teaching in a school comprised of Filipino, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and Asian descent to a population of 99% Black students. Each day was dealt with new obstacles, and I constantly felt like I was being defeated. Due to this and other contributing factors that were out of my control, I decided to step away from this job and familiarize myself with other school districts within my county instead.

I became a substitute teacher for the remainder of the school year, learning about the different schools and their structures and demographics. Unable to find any long-term substitute positions, I was back at the job fairs crossing my fingers to find a position for the upcoming school year. Eventually, I was able to accept a job as a first-grade teacher again at a school that had a similar demographic to my previous school. I felt much more prepared and supported, but still left like I was not doing enough for these children.

That is when I decided to pursue my master's degree at Michigan State University. It was always a goal of mine to continue my education after gaining some experience as a

classroom teacher, so I was overjoyed to receive my acceptance letter to begin in the Summer of 2020. The Master of Arts in Education program has far exceeded my expectations of what I envisioned online graduate courses to be. The Teacher Education and Education courses expanded my knowledge on content area, specifically literacy. I have conceptualized the psychology aspect of education, along with deepening my understanding of multicultural education. While each course offered quality content and rigor, the courses highlighted in this essay had the most impact on my identity as an educator and has transformed my future pedagogical practices.

Ironically, I enrolled in TE831 Teaching School Subject Matter with Technology soon after the global pandemic was heightened, and schools transitioned to online learning. I looked forward to trying new platforms and tools that would enhance my lessons and quickly discovered how technology is essential in teaching in a 21st century classroom. My Vodcast Project and Voice Thread Project enabled me to step outside my comfort zone and use multimedia tools to create a lesson and share with others on the internet. Based on my new knowledge of the Tech Tools assignments, I also created a re-purposed lesson plan showcasing my ability to integrate websites such as bunce and Flipgrid into an existing unit. This learning process sparked creativity into my teaching as I struggled to make my online lessons engaging for students.

This course not only provided multiple opportunities to interact with digital resources, but also how to implement them effectively based on my learning outcomes. Universal Design for Learning was a new concept to me, but I became knowledgeable about the approach to curriculum that minimizes barriers when teaching digital natives. Universal Design for Learning

gave me a deeper understanding of how to make learning accessible and allow educators to be the architects of curriculum to coincide with the goals of their students. Using audio books or bringing in realia for an upcoming unit are just a few examples of how this structure promotes diverse talents and creativity which are both fundamental in today's society.

Another learning outcome from this course was my ability to analyze and criticize information and teach digital citizenship. In order for children to understand the purposes of technology, educators must first learn how to evaluate the quality of digital tools. There is a plethora of resources available, and I am now well informed about the effects of children's thinking patterns when deciding if a tool will be appropriate or not. My disposition regarding technology has changed overall because I am more compassionate toward digital natives and their ability to thrive on multi-tasking, random access, and interactivity. Letting the imagination of a child shape their educational views is a new perspective of technology, and allows them to learn organically, given the expectations and opportunities.

I was always drawn to learning and teaching literacy since taking undergraduate courses in the College of Education. My academic advisor at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa was also a literacy professor who equipped me with the strategies needed to help children acquire the skills and foundational skills for reading and writing. TE848 Writing Assessment and instruction further heightened my knowledge about specific genres of writing through curriculum analysis and reflections. I have broadened my proficiency in designing a writing atmosphere, implementing strategies for teaching, and addressing special populations.

Writing can be outright messy and counterintuitive. The readings in this course gave me reassurance that when offering students mentoring, a love of words, and teaching the writing elements authentically, their thoughts can be conveyed accurately through their writing pieces. I have learned that strategies such as modeling curiosity with words and allowing children to discover their own ideas will allow them to apply cognitive and metacognitive strategies and will shape their views as a writer. I used to be intimidated to teach writing due to the complex elements and prerequisite writing skills needed to tackle any genre. However, this course has inspired me to let the writing process be an authentic journey since it is a nonlinear pathway that must be paved along the way based on my student's needs.

This course also addressed how to assess writing, which is sometimes arbitrary and subjective. Through our assigned chat group discussions and group papers, we were able to reflect on the challenges and implications of assessing writing. It was from this process that I was able to gain new insight from classmates who were teaching in different districts, counties, and states. We also identified effective ways to assess writing such as having a clarifying criterion, examples of student performance, providing students with feedback, using peer supporters, and helping students take ownership of their learning. These, along with my ability to think critically about writing has shaped my understanding of how to assess writing from the early-age milestones to text-based assignments for college readiness.

In terms of understanding education from a global perspective, EAD850 Issues and Strategies in Multicultural Education challenged my beliefs and understanding of diversity, multiculturalism, and personal identities. Initially, I truly believed I was valuing multiculturalism

by reading special books during Black History Month or creating art projects around The First Thanksgiving without teaching the accurate information to my students. However, I shortly realized the disservice I was doing to my students by teaching them information founded by white supremacy. Each reflexive paper and critical analysis paper gave me an opportunity to be more reflective on the associated privileges, differences, and power within social identities. After identifying where my stereotypes and misconceptions come from, I could move forward in recognizing the issues of privilege, power, and oppression in a professional and personal context.

I practiced these skills of unpacking and challenging popular media representations of diversity in my Thematic Analysis of a Movie assignment. Multicultural education is grounded in the ideals of social justice, equity, and critical pedagogy all of which were addressed in the films I viewed, *Hidden Figures* and *Dear White People*. Viewing popular culture films with a multicultural lens enabled me to address underlying issues such as engaging in uncomfortable conversations, decolonizing intercultural education, and investing in culturally responsive leadership. I also learned how films can be used as a catalyst to spark questions and discussions about difficult topics. Understanding the true meaning of representation is crucial in becoming an effective leader and active global citizen in today's context.

I am now informed of the narrative our educational system has forced children to believe without allowing them to analyze information and create their own opinion, typically in history. This course encouraged me to think critically about knowledge production and unlearn what I have been taught and what I have assumed. The danger of knowing a single story about someone or a group of people is that it becomes one thing in your mind. This is a cyclical

behavior that has been perpetuated overtime and I would like to break these barriers within my classroom. I understand this is an ongoing process and that will take time and multiple initiatives, but this course has given me strategies and resources on how to address multicultural education and be an agent for social change.

Now that I am nearing the end of my Master's in Education graduate program, I can thoughtfully reflect on how my self-awareness and ability to make sense of the world has been amplified. Someone who was experiencing the setbacks of an educator now has the knowledge and skills to address many of my initial concerns as a teacher. This global pandemic strengthened my ability to adapt and try new technology that will engage and teach children all subject matter. My experiences from my writing course presented new opportunities for me to practice being an author again. In a time where people are rightfully fighting for justice and equity within minority groups, my multicultural course will be a reliable resource when referring to diversity, power, and oppression. Each course is vastly different from the other, but all are interconnected in one way or another. What I have ultimately gained from this program is my intention to acknowledge new perspectives and apply new information within the appropriate context.

In the midst of this program, I also became a first-time mother to my son, Noah. When I think ahead to his future, I can only hope that he is raised in an environment where his individuality and creativity are valued. The content I have studied in this program goes much further than the walls of a classroom- it extends to children's homes, families, and communities, all of which make an impact on our views of the world. Since my husband is an

Army Chaplain, his job requires us to adapt to new environments often. I plan to adjust to these new settings by genuinely learning about other groups of people, valuing their cultures, and validating their knowledge. My son, along with all other children in our current and future generations deserve a quality education where they are able to shape their understanding of society and challenge inequities. By instilling these practices and beliefs that I have learned from these courses into education, I hope to prepare students in becoming critical thinkers and lifelong learners.