

# A Diploma Can't Show what a Mind has Gained!

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When applying for Michigan State I had the mindset to gain as much knowledge as possible to further myself in my career as a teacher and in the educational field as a whole. I entered the program to learn more about school leadership and special education. After my position in my previous school was eliminated I found myself changing my outlook of the future from special education to literacy instruction. I was a high school assistant principal and worked with a lot of the special education department. I wanted to gain more knowledge in this area so that I could be a bigger contributor for that department. My position was eliminated and I found myself back into the classroom as a third grade teacher. In this new position, I discovered that many of my students were below grade level in reading and struggling to do their work because they could not read fluently. With this new position I decided to change my content area to literacy instruction so that I could be better equipped to guide my students in their learning of literacy. Even though I no longer was an assistant principal I did want to keep learning more about school leadership and how I as a teacher could still lead those that are part of my every day life.

One of the first classes that I took in my master's program was EAD 825. This course was all about shared leadership in schools. I took this course when I still had my position as a high school assistant principal. This course was such an amazing course to take at that point in my career because at that time my cup was overflowing and I could not put another thing on my plate when it came to tasks that I had to do on my own in my position. I always had the mind set of; if you ask for help then it means that you are weak and can not do things on your own. I am not sure where I received this mind set from, but because of that I would stress out daily and work crazy hours so that at the end of the day I could say to myself, "good job, there's nothing you can't handle!" Well to a point that was true; I could handle anything that was thrown at me. If the school wanted a technology plan; I was there. If the school wanted new criteria for evaluating staff; I did that too. I wanted to prove to everyone that I could handle my job and that I was the right choice for the job. What I didn't know and what I found out in EAD 825 was that a leader that shares responsibilities is a leader that is more people willing to step up and show you that they have your back.

I took what I learned from the course and I started creating teams within my building. I had teams that would talk about curriculum, discipline, school atmosphere, report cards and many other topics. I would have these teams work together and brainstorm their ideas of how to improve these areas. At first it was very hard for me to sit back and put the trust that was needed for success into the hands of these new teams. As time went on it began to get easier to do so, because I was allowing them to show me that they were on my side and capable of doing these things in the right way. My staff's attitudes changed and the environment of the school also changed because the staff began to feel important. I never wrapped my mind around the concept that if you allow others to

do things that they would be happier with their job, I always thought that if I asked them to do something that they would think I was being “bossy” or pushy. It was the total opposite for my group of teachers. I saw individuals who would come to work with the meanest looks on their faces and just had the look that they would rather be anywhere in the world but here, turn into leaders who would stay late and come early to work so that they could have their voices heard. Not only did the staff involved in these teams become happier to be at work and felt the sense of want, I myself began to get happier because I was no longer alone on an island of tasks. I had others to rely on and to lean on when I needed help. I had others that I could bounce ideas off of and trust that their input would be beneficial for the school as a whole. I shared responsibility with others and when I shared with them, they shared back and we became a team that was all working for the same set of goals and with the same outcome in mind. This course for a better choice of words; saved my life. Stress could have killed me, I could have been totally burned out because I tried and would have continued to do things on my own.

Another great class that has had a huge impact on my leadership in school was EAD 824 Leading Teacher Learning. In my new position I teach third grade. When I was placed back in the classroom I was not sure how I as a teacher could really lead others. This class has given me many great tools that I have used and because of them I have been able to help other teachers gain knowledge and expertise in areas that they were lacking. In this course I was taught that you do not have to be in charge to be a leader. How true that saying has become in my life. When I started teaching third grade I decided that I was going to do things differently than what had been done in the past. I decided that I was going to teach my students in the areas of Math and Reading in small individualized instructional groups (I learned about this in another course I will share later) where I teach to the students needs so that I can ensure each child in my class has the best opportunity for success. When I started this technique in reading I was quickly approached by other teachers who wanted to pick my brain on what and how I was doing things. They wanted to know what I did so they could use it in their classrooms as well. On the flip side I was also approached by other teachers in the building who have been teaching for many years who shared their dislike for what I was doing because it was making them “look bad”. I was put in a place where I had to decide on what was better for my students and not what is better for other teachers. I of course decided that I was going to do what was best for my students. After my first year test scores were out and my scores in reading were leaps and bounds above other classes. It was then that the teacher’s in other grades that approached me in a negative way before came to me and wanted me to show them how to teach reading in this way. I decided the next year that I was going to take a similar approach with math and with lots of trial and error I succeeded in making a program that works. This time when the word got out there was not much negativity and more teachers wanted to hear about how I teach math. In EAD 824, we learned a lot about coaching and how to work with others in your building to help them by building up their weaknesses. I took what I learned from this course and set up a meeting with my principal and asked him that it was possible if at the next professional development day that I could share with the entire staff about Guided Math and see how big of an interest there was for it and if anyone wanted to be involved in Guided Math coaching. When I presented on Guided Math many teachers were interested

and I had three teachers from multiple grades that were interested in working one on one with me to help implement Guided Math in their classrooms. I work with these teachers on a weekly basis and go into their classrooms and observe them on their delivery and interaction with their students and then discuss with them ways that they can improve. I feel that through my coaching I have made a bigger impact on a staff then when I was an assistant principal. EAD 824 has shown me first hand that you do not have to be in charge, or have a title in order to lead others. This course has shown me so much and because of it I feel that my leadership has changed into something even greater than I ever imagined.

When I started my master's program I wanted to learn more and more about Special Education but as I got back in the classroom Literacy really started to become my main priority. As I explained in the previous sections my literacy classes have really helped me to improve not only myself as a teacher but also as an instructor in literacy. I took TE 846: Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners the summer before my first year teaching in an elementary classroom. I had taught previously at the Middle School level and then as an assistant principal so going back in the classroom and especially in a third grade classroom really worried me because I had never taught children who are still developing as readers. When I taught in the Middle School students were expected to know how to read and you really didn't have to teach them how to. Going to third grade was a total 180 degree turn for me and I am so thankful that I took TE 846 the summer before I started my new position because the tools that I gained in this classroom and the ideas that I learned from it really opened my eyes to literacy instruction and has now set me on path of success in my district.

I had the idea prior to this course that when teaching children to read there was a one dimensional way of doing so. I thought that each child learned the same exact way and that if we went through a book as a whole group that they would just catch on and start reading. This course was mind blowing to me because I was taught that teaching reading was just using a class set of books and just reading. This course showed me that in reality that each student that comes into a classroom has different sets of reading attributes that they bring with them. Not all students have the same gaps in their understanding and if I teach to the whole class in a one dimensional way then there will be some students that do not get their gaps filled and in return will never become successful readers. This course also gave me the idea of how to look for achievement gaps and what to do to fill them. I used this a lot in my first year of teaching. I formally assessed each of my students and found out exactly where they were in regards to their reading level and how well they did in the areas of fluency, comprehension and accuracy. Based upon this new found understanding of each of my students I began to group them based upon similar abilities and gaps. I then created individual plans for each of these groups to help fill these gaps and improve their reading abilities. This class has shown me that if you teach one specific way then only one specific student will learn. Your classroom is full of students who have many different abilities and if you just teach to the "average" level then only "average" students will grow. The "advanced" students will be bored because they are just getting review and not being pushed to go further and the "lower" students will remain low because they can not do the work or the readings that

are assigned because it's above their ability. This course has really changed my outlook on literacy instruction and because of the new ideas and techniques that I learned, such as guided independent instruction; I have become a better teacher and my students are becoming greater readers than they ever imagined that they could. Also, because of this class, other teachers have found these new ideas and techniques and now my building is more focused on individualizing instruction and our building has seen a huge growth across the board in reading. I can't imagine teaching reading or math in any other way at this point and without this course there is no telling how many students I may have hindered from reaching the potential that they were capable of.

To say that my master's program at Michigan State was not life changing would be a crime, because without the knowledge and know how that I have gained in my entire course work I would not be where I am today. My time at Michigan State has been one that has truly been a great experience. I have gained so much from my literacy instruction classes. From how to assess students reading ability, to finding which books are the best examples to use with your students to engage them more, or to how to build a classroom where reading is at the core; each class has given me a tool that I can use to become a better teacher of literacy. I have also gained so much knowledge in the area of leadership as well from my course work. From how to build a team with a vision in the forefront to establishing trust in a group; these courses have shown me just how to become a leader and how to bring others around you to levels of success that they may not have thought was obtainable. My journey through my course work has really changed me for the better. I started this program to gain as much knowledge as possible and I have done just that but in reality I have gained more than knowledge, I have gained a new perspective on life and how my life can influence and change others. From literacy instruction to school leadership, I can make a difference in others. That is what I truly gained. In May when I get my diploma that says that I have completed the requirements that were given to me, I can smile and know that not only did I complete the requirements but I also have changed my life and the others around me.