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Rediscovering My Calling *Synthesis Essay*

It's hard to believe my time as a graduate student is coming to an end. Throughout this experience, I have grown more than I could've ever imagined. Thinking back, I knew I wanted to go to graduate school since before I graduated college. Graduate school had always been a goal of mine, and one I hoped I'd one day get to fulfill. I struggled with the decision of immediately applying to a graduate program after graduation, or going right into teaching. I ultimately decided to teach for a year to gain real-world experience and insight into what program I might want to consider. This year was exactly what I needed to discover my passion for struggling literacy learners. During this year, I met a student who struggled greatly in reading and writing, more than any student I'd ever met or learned about before. As a first-year teacher with little experience and absolutely no support from my school, I didn't know how to help him. I hated this feeling and never wanted to feel that way ever again. I decided to apply to graduate school and began this program the following summer.

Staying Anchored

The first few classes ignited an already bright passion in me for literacy and special education. Before I began graduate school, I recognized a passion for both but didn't realize I could combine them in the form of this program. For the first time, I felt like I could truly make a difference with my students who struggled in literacy. I learned strategies for teaching all different kinds of learners and discovered resources to use with my students, as well. When I came back to school the next fall, I realized how unhappy I was with my current situation. After a few semesters of this program under my belt, I became aware of how standard most of the assessments/interventions we learned about are in schools today. If my student mentioned above had been in any other school, he would have received services and got the help he needed. At my school, he was overlooked and ignored, despite my numerous cries of concern.

I realized that I didn't believe in a school like that, and for the first time EVER, questioned if I even wanted to be a teacher anymore. This was a terrifying thought, but throughout this whole situation, this program remained my anchor. It kept me going and reminded me of my love for teaching even on the hardest days. This program gave me insights as to what resources and supports most schools had available for struggling

readers, and gave me the knowledge of how to help them myself. One of the best resources I received was McKenna and Stahl's [*Assessments for Reading Instruction*](#). This book is filled with various assessments to use with struggling readers to determine a starting point for instruction. When I tutored a student who struggled in reading this past summer, I was able to use these assessments to collect initial data. At the end of our time together, I was able to re-administer the assessments to see his growth.

A Leap of Faith

In the Spring, I decided to take a risk, put my program work to the test, and change schools. I was offered a position as a Reading Interventionist that was the perfect job representation of this program. This job allowed me to see the work I was doing throughout this program in real life. I also had the opportunity to work side-by-side with our school's Literacy and Math coaches who quickly became the sweetest friends and colleagues. Working with them inspired me to consider a leadership role in my school one day. While this wasn't something I ever considered before, I began to see the future of my career as limitless and ever-growing. Although my Reading Interventionist position was only temporary (the district only hires interventionists for the spring semester), the school asked me to come back as a first-grade teacher in the fall. Now that I'm back in the classroom, and have the first-hand experience of a reading interventionist, my work as a graduate student is all the more relevant and applicable. My love for teaching and literacy education is at an all-time high, and I couldn't be happier. I used many of the literacy assessments I learned about at the beginning of the school year, and know how to help my students who need more than the given instruction.

Notable Courses

Thinking about the specific courses I've taken throughout this program that helped make this professional growth and increased passion possible, I have decided upon the following three: CEP 804- Literacy Instruction for Students with Mild Disabilities, TE 836- Awards and Classics of Children's Literature, and CEP 841- Classroom Management in the Inclusive Classroom. I chose those three because they are the three that I still think about the most and reflect upon today. Even though those courses ended months ago, I've yet to dismiss them from my mind. I wish I could take them all again so that I could soak in the knowledge even more. Below I will describe my unforgettable experience in each of these invaluable courses.

1. CEP 804- Literacy Instruction for Student with Mild Disabilities

This was one of my earlier classes and the one that truly confirmed my love for literacy education. In this course, we focused on inclusive classroom instruction, but from solely a literacy lens. We experimented with various types of literacy assessments, collected and analyzed actual student data based on these assessments, and created remediation plans for students who struggled. Throughout this course, I became extremely familiar with administering and analyzing literacy assessments. When I worked as a Reading Interventionist last Spring, this knowledge helped me truly understand my students' needs on a deeper level, and allowed me to create meaningful goals for them.

I realized during my first year teaching that literacy learners were my passion, but it wasn't until I took this class that my interest began to explode. Thinking back to my struggling student, once again, this class answered so many of the questions I had, as well as questions I didn't even know to ask. Specifically, learning about how to select, administer and analyze various literacy assessments, filled in a huge gap of knowledge that I was greatly lacking from my undergraduate program. I realized that these assessments could give me a clear idea about a starting point from which to start an intervention. Some of the assessments I learned about include letter-sound inventories, phonological awareness skills tests, concepts about print assessments, spelling inventories, and running records.

When I was student teaching, one of my favorite mentors shared the following idea with me: Our heads were not built with windows, so we must use assessments to understand exactly what is going on inside our students' brains. I still think about that idea to this day and realize it could not be truer. If we don't know where exactly our students struggle, it is almost impossible to help them. This is exactly the predicament I was in with my student my first-year teaching. Because of this class, I now know how different assessments can be used as "windows" to help me better understand my students' needs.

2. TE 836 Awards and Classics of Children's Literature

As a lover of literacy, I was extremely excited to take this course. I've always been passionate about children's books, and believe they are a powerful tool we can use to teach young learners (*all* learners, actually) important lessons about life. In this course, we looked at various picture books, chapter books, and graphic novels as our course texts. Each book featured characters from underrepresented populations in literature such as African Americans, Asians, Latina/o, and LGBTQ individuals. We used the texts to create lessons we could share with our students to increase awareness about these underrepresented groups of people.

Until this course, I never considered what it would be like if I never saw myself through a character in a book. I can't imagine what it would be like as a child to never be able to relate to any of the characters I read about. Half the magic of reading is putting yourself in the characters' shoes and connecting to them. Additionally, the opportunity for inspiration often comes from identifying with book characters. For example, an animal-loving child might decide she wants to be an animal doctor after reading about a little girl who grew up to be a veterinarian. However, if that child only read about male veterinarians, she might not think that could be in her future.

This class helped remind me of my duty, as a facilitator of children's literature, to provide children with opportunities to see themselves in the texts they read. Because of this course, I'm now more aware of the types of books I use to teach with and include in my classroom library. My goal is to make sure every one of my students has the opportunity to find themselves in a book. Since I work at a high-diversity school, it is important that I find books to represent the cultures of all my students. This class also gave me the resources to find high-quality diverse books for my students.

3. CEP 841 Classroom Management in the Inclusive Classroom

This course actually surprised me with how big of an impact it had on me. I signed up with the hope that it would help me enhance my classroom management practices, but it did so much more. This course reminded me of how difficult and scary childhood can be, especially for those who have learning differences. It's easy to get caught up in the stress of teaching and forget we are in the business of tiny humans. We don't work with numbers, products, or other intangible objects... we work with children. Every single move we make and word we say has the potential to make or break a child. This course helped put into perspective the value of positive classroom culture, and showed how to lead our students in a respectful way. I've worked with teachers who believed scaring students into obedience was the only way to ensure successful classroom management. As a new teacher, this was heartbreaking to witness. This class assured me that it's possible to have successful classroom management and treat your students with kindness.

Since I took this course over the summer, I was able to begin this new school year with a fresh mindset about my classroom management goals. I determined I was going to fully buy into the idea of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports ([PBIS](#)). While I've practiced fragments of PBIS before, this course taught me the importance and benefits of a full-fidelity PBIS program. Throughout this course, I became familiar with the behavior expectations matrix, logical and natural consequences, and a proactive approach to preventing misbehavior. As I established

my classroom expectations earlier this year, I was easily able to incorporate these recently learned PBIS components into my classroom management plan. Nearing the end of our first semester, my classroom behavior is smoother than it's ever been. While I still have a lot to learn in this area, this course has transformed my classroom management style dramatically.

All Worth It

Now that I'm at the end of my journey as a graduate student, I couldn't feel more thankful about how much I've grown since the beginning of this program. Thinking back to my first year teaching, and to the student I didn't know how to help, I now can think of endless ways I could help him if he were in my class today. The courses I've taken have prepared me in more ways than I can describe to help any struggling reader who walks through my door. Not only that, but his program helped me rediscover my love for teaching and served as my anchor through difficult times. This newfound passion and educational toolkit I now have would simply not have been possible without this program.