

## **Reaching All Students**

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When I pictured the teacher I “thought” I should be as I was going through the College of Education at Grand Valley State University for my undergraduate degree, I knew I wanted to help the students that were often overlooked because they’re the most challenging to work with or support. I thought I had to be Ron Clark – taking an inner city school by storm to find those students who fit into this category I had created. Surely it would be an urban school where I would find students coming to school without school supplies and the tools one would bring to school with them coming from a home that nurtures education and learning from a young age. My heart was passionate about serving those students who may not have what they already need to be successful when entering school, such as social and academic skills as well as the physical means such as resources, like books, at home to support the development of these skills. So I set my sites on finding this inner city school to teach at.

Little did I know that this place was right in the community in which I have lived in for my entire life. There lies a special *little* community in West Michigan just ten miles east of one of the biggest tourist towns in the state. When I was called to student teach at this school district, a district where its entirety lies within two buildings on the same campus (Elementary and Middle/High School), I was naïve to thinking that I would not develop into the teacher my heart had longed to always be. I had no idea I was walking into a tiny community that needed teachers to stand

strong with the community members to fight for the education these students deserve but might otherwise not receive because many students do not come to school prepared with the necessary tools to be immediately successful in the school structure – both socially and academically. I had no idea the amount of students receiving free and reduced lunch or where termed to be “At-Risk”. Surely this could not be because this tiny, rural school district did not fit into the picture being portrayed in the media or by Hollywood where these types of situations occur in the largest cities and urban districts.

I was honored to accept an Elementary teaching position within this school district only months later for the following school year. I have spent my entire teaching career within the same building where I now teach First Grade. It did not take long for me to realize that many of my students come to my classroom with special needs, once again both academically and socially. These needs come from disabilities or many as a result in the environment which they live – poverty, education is not a priority, etc. While some of these students had Individualized Education Plans (IEP’s) meaning they could receive special education services such as resource room time, speech therapy, and occupational therapy, the majority of the students did not have IEP’s due to the fact they would not qualify under the qualifications for a specific disability. In addition, the students I taught who did have an IEP spent little time receiving special education services and spent the vast majority of the school day in my inclusive, general education classroom with me as their only support due to Least Restrictive Environment regulations.

I knew I needed assistance. Here I was fulfilling my dream, but in an environment vastly different than I ever imagined and with very little resources due to the size of community and population it served.

By my second year of teaching, I began serving as a member of my school's Student Support Team. My drive to have access to resources to help the students at our school who were most in need increased. We still meet every other week to discuss students that are struggling in their classrooms or overall school environment. The team tries to provide teachers with resources to help these students be successful in the general education classroom and then ultimately decide if the student should be tested for further special education services. My toes were dipped into the world of special education prior to pursuing my Master's degree. I realized what a wealth of knowledge other members of this team have from their experience in the field of special education that could benefit my own students in my general education classroom! I began applying things I learned in the meetings and began researching information further on my own because the needs of my students were so great! I also wanted to be able to answer the questions of other staff members when they came to me due to their knowledge of my being part of this team and mostly be there to support the parents of students. I learned how important it is to meet the needs of students in my classroom who have special needs while still meeting the needs of the overall population – which is one of the hardest yet most prevalent challenges I have faced on a daily basis in my teaching career.

I began looking into Master's programs all across the nation that would provide me with the education to help students with special needs in my general education classroom. Michigan State University (MSU) had the program that has provided me with this exact education over the past two and a half years through their Master of Arts in Education (MAED) program, which I have studied with a Special Education concentration.

One of the most valuable pieces of information I have studied multiple times throughout my program is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). I have encountered this term and applied it in various capacities through several of my courses such as CEP 840 (Policies, Practices, and Perspectives in Special Education), CEP 842 (Content-Area Instruction for Students with Mild Disabilities) and TE 831 (Teaching School Subject Matter with Technology). Upon learning about UDL, it could be said I had that "aha" moment – it was the term I had been longing to hear without even knowing the official name of it all throughout my teaching career! Basically, UDL benefits *all* students – exactly what I need in my inclusive classroom. Slight adjustments are made to current designs or future designs are made that accommodate the needs of both the general education students and special education students. For example, a real life example of Universal Design (used outside of the classroom in everyday life) would be captions on televisions. Now, this most obviously benefits individuals with hearing impairments. But captions may also benefit the rest of the population such as using them in airports or at the

gym. This is one very simple example. But this very simple example helped me view my classroom environment and curriculum in a different light. What slight adjustments can I make to what I already have and what will I incorporate into new designs to make things accessible to everyone? These became the new questions I ran through my head and still do.

Early on in my Master's program, I took the enlightening course CEP 832 (Educating Students with Challenging Behavior). This course stood out to me because of its applicable content to my own classroom needs. Many of my students' needs affect their behavior. I was able to directly apply this course to a student in my own classroom. Jere Brophy's book Teaching Problem Students provided me with a lot of insight in identifying behaviors that cause problems for students at school. Once I had a better understanding of problem behaviors, I learned to identify a specific need of a student through evaluation, collect data, create and implement a behavior plan, and then evaluate the effectiveness of the behavior plan. I was able to do this first hand with one of my own students during this course and reaped the benefits of it. Since taking this course, I have used many of the skills I have learned. The skill I used most often is pinpointing one specific behavior to work on and collecting data. Brophy's book along with other research in the course now helps me to identify many behavior problems and disabilities. Data collection is important to learn about a student's behavior and also while implementing a behavior plan to evaluate its effectiveness. Whenever I discuss a student with a parent, administrator or with the Student Support Team, I am able to discuss valid

data that I have collected. It is easier to create behavior plans with knowledge gained from this skill and then evaluate them effectively.

Managing behavior in the classroom is crucial in creating an effective inclusive classroom. CEP 841 (Classroom Behavior and Management in the Inclusive Classroom) helped me learn ways to create a classroom environment that sets up both general and special education students to be successful. Studying Richard Lavoie in this course helped reshape my thinking about classroom management to increase positive classroom behavior. I needed to set up a system that managed how I interact and motivate students instead of just focusing on the students' actions and then reacting to their behavior. Instead of being reactive to classroom behavior, I have learned skills to be proactive to students' behavior. Studying Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support, better known as PBIS in many schools, also gave me the opportunity to focus on understanding school-wide behavior management and setting up systems that create long-term results instead of momentary solutions. Lavoie explains the importance of students with special needs clearly understanding the social structure and expectations at school in order to be successful – this is not always an absolute understood to them, but it takes modeling, practice, and reinforcement. Focusing on the social and emotional needs of my students is as crucial as focusing on their academic needs.

Along with learning to help students socially, emotionally and behaviorally in my inclusive classroom, I needed a deeper knowledge of what I could do to support all students academically to ensure everyone's success. CEP 842 (Content-Area

Instruction for Students with Mild Disabilities) gave me the opportunity to study many ways to support students with various disabilities, for example, Learning Disabilities (LD), in strengthening the area of their disability. Many students struggle due to disabilities with either Reading or Math, which in turn affects performance and comprehension in other content areas such as Science and Social Studies. In addition to learning strategies that I can use when working with students in those specific areas according to their needs, I learned what I can do to set up a classroom and make plans to accommodate the needs of all of my students. I had the opportunity learn strategies for co-planning with colleagues and specially co-teaching with a special education teacher. Co-planning and co-teaching are important with inclusion because general education and special education students are together most of the day and are expected to meet the requirements of the same curriculum – unless modifications in an IEP are stated. I was able to study the BASE Model and consider The Planning Pyramid when curriculum and lesson planning in order to determine how and what students in my inclusive classroom need to and will learn. In order for academic success of all students, Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) should be enforced in order to teach students to take responsibility and ownership of their academic needs. One teacher cannot meet the academic needs of every student alone. It is a team effort between the adults involved in a student's education and the student itself.

As my MAED program at MSU comes to a close this semester, I can see how all of these pieces have played a part in helping me become the teacher I once longed to

be and will continue to motivate me to continue growing into that teacher. I do not need to go and seek out students who need me as I once thought. In the end, I have been blessed with students who have caused me to search and research and study and practice to become the teacher they need me to be – I have been inspired by the needs of my students throughout this entire journey. The school I work in, the population I teach, and the individual and unique needs of each and every one of my students has pushed me to pursue each course I have taken in this program. Each school year brings a new set of students with their own needs - some will qualify for special education services while others will just fall short. I now have more tools to fill their toolboxes that they need to be successful in school and know how to research and obtain additional information that I am sure I will need in the future. The needs of each individual student must be addressed in order to have one positive and impactful classroom.