

## Synthesis Essay: *The Book of Graduate School*

There is something special about a brand new book: the pages are perfect, the characters undiscovered, the storyline has yet to unfold. An unopened book contains endless possibilities. It was that love and excitement for the journey of a new book that I had when I began my **Master of Arts in Education at Michigan State University**. As an undergrad at Michigan State University, I completed the five-year program that included a yearlong internship. I became a language arts teacher because I believe literature has the ability to transport readers anywhere. I want to instill a love of reading into my students by showcasing the wonderful aspects literature has to offer. Everyday in the classroom, I am teaching my students the skills they need to analyze literature and write about what they are discovering. Getting a Master of Arts in Education degree in Literacy Education was an easy decision because I wanted to continue to learn the best way to teach literature to my students. My initial goal was to focus on instructional practices, but as time passed my focus changed towards utilizing the technological skills I was learning into my classroom. I tackled challenges and overcame obstacles that I had originally not believed I was capable of overcoming. My courses asked me to critically think about what does it mean to be a "successful" teacher and push myself to become the best teacher I can be. Through this program, I did learn more ways to teach literature to my students, but I also discovered many things about myself as a learner.

### **What Makes A Good Book?**

The first thing that you see when you pick up a book is the cover, which gives you a hint about what the book was about. An attractive cover can get a reader to first pick up the book to determine if they should read it. Colorful covers line book shelves, but award-winning literature always rises about the rest. As a teacher, when I had selected books for my students, I always believed that award-winning books were the best of what books could offer. I guided my students towards those books, and I used examples from those books to exemplify what great authors do. When selecting courses for my masters, **TE 836 Awards and Classics of Children's Literature** immediately stood out. I thought this would give me the opportunity to find even more wonderful books to share with my students. Throughout the course we examined a variety of awards, looked at their qualifications, and read books that had won awards. Critically analyzing these texts showed me that just because a text has won an award

doesn't mean it is right for every reader. For example, *Looking for Alaska* [by John Greene won the Printz Award](#), which recognizes young adult literature, but it contained mature content that is not appropriate for every teenage reader. Additionally, many "classic" and beloved texts including *Little Women*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *Peter Pan* have not won any of these awards. In TE 836, I had experiences with award-winning literature that truly exemplifies what it means to be the best, including *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson, a story about a young girl who sees the consequences of mistreating others. In my **final essay** I analyzed Louise Bernikow's quote, "What is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices.", which highlights that awards are really just a small group of individuals selecting what they thought was the best -- it does not need to define what lines our shelves. Now, I do not judge a book based on its award, but on the content found within. Recently during a memoir unit I was teaching, I read an excerpt from the **Coretta Scott King Award Winning book, *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson** who wrote about her life through the use of poetry. In the class, my students talked about why this is an exemplary text and what made it award-winning.

### **An Undiscovered Character**

One of my favorite things about a book are the unexpected characters. In one of my favorite series, *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling, at the end of the series in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the character of Severus Snape showcases bravery, true love, and sacrifice that I had not originally expected of him. Every decision he made throughout the series was not for himself, but actually for the greater good. Throughout my life, I have always taken on leadership opportunities, but once I got a teaching job I found myself unready to take on a leadership role. As a new teacher, I was still trying to figure out how to lesson plan, grade papers, and communicate with parents -- all while still continuing to learn how to be a teacher! I found myself being more of a follower, rather than being the leader that I truly hoped I could be. I took the course **EAD 801 Leadership and Organizational Development** with the hope of learning how to discover those leadership characteristics in myself. I chose this class because I thought the course would help me become a leader in my school. Throughout this course I had to examine an area where I could see myself contributing to my school community. I had noticed that our school had moved away from the culture of sharing of best practices and resources, and I thought about how I could help to encourage a more collaborative environment. In my school teachers are doing wonderful lessons in their classroom, but are reluctant to share their ideas with others. I wanted to figure out a way to promote the sharing of ideas back into our school. In this essay, I outlined what I thought needed to be done and

how I could contribute to that process. Our school had monthly curriculum meetings, but we rarely shared what great things were happening in our classroom. I believed we needed a curriculum leader who would coordinate a meeting where we collaborated and worked together to plan engaging meaningful lessons for our students. After this course my supervisor offered to individuals the opportunity to volunteer to teach others something that they had learned and love to use in our classrooms. This year I had utilized **Google Forms** as a way to record information during writing conferences, and I said I would love to show my colleagues how to set this up. Before this class, I would not have volunteered because I felt I wasn't experienced enough or knew enough about teaching. Like Severus Snape, I took a risk hoping to help the greater good of the student population. In my story, my colleagues and I discovered something about myself that I had previously thought I was incapable of.

### **Climax Of A Story:**

To me, the best part of the story is the climax. It is the part of the book that I cannot put down because it is the most exciting. There is always conflict and difficult decisions that have to be made, but the characters pull through and learn something about themselves. In life, technology was my "frenemy", meaning that I respect it, I knew how to use it, but I was not about to test our relationship by trying something very complex and difficult in the classroom! Technology is an integral part of our world, and it is essential I provide my students with opportunities to utilize technology. Students are always using technology themselves, and I incorporated it into their education through **Edmodo** (to create a classroom website), [Google Apps for Education](#) by using Google Docs to comment on my students writing, and a variety of presentation tools, including [Prezi](#) to teach my students literary concepts. I was able to use basic features, but I did not go out looking for new and inventive technology to use in the classroom. **CEP 804 Policies, Practices, and Perspectives in Special Education** was a class in which I was interested because I had been teaching an inclusion special education class for the past two years. I hoped this course would give me more strategies and skills that I could apply to my inclusion classroom. I quickly discovered this class was going to push my boundaries with technology. I initially selected this course because I teach an inclusion. Throughout the class we had to create two Google Sites: **one with a group** and **one by ourselves**. When I read the requirements I began to get nervous. It took me a very long time to set up my first page, and I encountered many obstacles with the formatting. As the course progressed the expectations increased, and I had no idea if I would make it over these technological hurdles. We were required to not only gather information, but upload videos, link images to websites, and use a

resource that I was very unfamiliar with. But by the end of the course, I had learned so much about creating a website through Google Sites. I really like the features that it offers that **Google Classroom** did not. I love Google Classroom as an in class website to give my students documents and give assignments in class, but I was really looking for a way to share with parents what we are doing in the classroom. This year I am going to utilize [Google Sites](#) to update parents with a blog-style post containing details about the instruction their students had for the week.

### **And They All Lived Happily Ever After**

At the end of the program, **ED 870 Capstone** course asked me to make a professional portfolio that highlighted my studies throughout the MAED program. I had already created a professional portfolio after my internship, which I had continued to casually update throughout my career, so I used this course as an opportunity to add vibrant new information and content. This course asked me to use types of technology that I was previously not familiar with. For example, I created an **introductory video** about myself, whereas I had never before created videos! My **transcript of courses** in my Master's program showcases the different chapters of my studies where I grew as both a teacher and a learner. Looking back at all my artifacts from my graduate school, I saw my journey as that of a story with many bumps, twists, and memorable moments. My portfolio is an excellent example of my story of graduate school. Recently, I was looking for a new teaching position, and my new employer said that my newly renovated online portfolio was something that made me stand out as a candidate.

Overall, my graduate experience did not just teach me about how to teach literature to my students. I did learn new techniques, resources, and skills that focused on how to teach literature in the most effective way. For me, the theme in my book of graduate school was to never stop believing in myself. There were moments where I tried many times to complete a task, and I began to feel frustrated and discouraged, but I used my resources, including my teachers and fellow students, to help me reach my goals. In my classroom, it is important that my students learn language arts content, but what they learn about themselves is even more important. Now what does my future hold? Going back to graduate school for a leadership or special education focus? Looking ahead I am continuing to think about areas in my teaching practice where I can seek out new and innovative practices. My chapter on Michigan State Graduate School is coming to an end, but I believe I will be going back to school again soon. I believe life long learning is an essential part of being a teacher. For now, I am beginning a new job and utilizing all the

practices and skills I learned through this program into my new classroom.