

Lifelong Learning...

As I became more involved with the International School of Luxembourg (ISL), I began to look into masters programs. I play professional basketball and spend the majority of my time in Europe so physically attending classes for any program was quite a challenge for me. While I was only working as a substitute teacher at this time, I still could sense that it was time to update and refresh my education so that when I retired from my professional basketball career I was ready for my next career in education. I was very excited and motivated at the thought of going back to school and actually being able to apply what I was learning in the International classrooms I was working in. I had a lot of prior knowledge from my undergraduate experience and degree in psychology and early childhood development that I could finally start using in a real classroom. While I had the ideas and concepts in mind, I needed to push my knowledge and find new ways to apply these concepts as an educator.

I began searching for an online program and when I found Michigan State University's online master's program I knew that it was for me. The first aspect of this program that drew me in was the fact that it was completely done online. I could continue to play professional basketball, work at the International School, and at the same time further my own education. The second aspect of this program that sold me was the concentration areas and wide variety of courses that I could choose to complete this program. I chose concentrations in Sport Leadership and Coaching, as well as Literacy Education as I have a lot of passion for both of these areas.

The first concentration that caught my eye was the sport leadership and coaching concentration. My career has consisted of being a professional athlete and I love basketball and sports. I have spent a great deal of time working in the physical education department at the ISL, and also coaching there. As a coach and a physical education teacher I wanted to further my knowledge and learn new strategies and information that I could use with my students and athletes. As I am going through a transition from a professional basketball player, to an educator and coach I also wanted to refresh my ways of thinking about student athletes, and see them through the eyes of an educator and coach, not as a player. When I looked over the courses for this concentration I knew it would be a perfect fit for me.

The second concentration that convinced me this was the correct program for me was the concentration in Literacy Education. I work with young children that have just learned their native language, and are also beginning to learn the English language. Literacy education is something I am very passionate about and as I have been working in preschool and K1 classrooms at the ISL have had a desire to find ways to help the children really become active and engaged English language learners. I was looking for resources, methods, theories and the best practices that could help me as a literacy educator and when I saw the courses offered for this concentration I knew that Michigan State's online master's program was for me.

Purpose of Education...

Along my journey through my master's program there were many courses that touched me on a personal level and questioned, challenged, and refined my beliefs in education and how it relates to the real world. One of the first classes that touched me was a class (ED 800) that focused on educational inquiry. It was during this course that I took a deeper look at the purpose of education and asked myself questions about what this purpose meant to me as an educator. This course allowed me to ponder the questions of how do we learn, how does knowledge and experience effect our learning, and also how to expand my own educational inquiries. We studied the concepts introduced by John Dewey, Howard Gardner, E.D. Hirsch and also were able to study different inquiry methods through novels by Vivian Paley and movies such as Whale Rider. As I became exposed to more educational philosophies throughout this course I was forced to examine and reshape my own ideas as they were challenged. There was quite a difference of ideas between E.D Hirsch, Howard Gardner, and John Dewey that made me question my own ideas and where I fell in this spectrum of teaching philosophies. Hirsch proposes the idea that students must learn core knowledge and teaching should focus on learning facts that can be later used, while Gardner and Dewey promote education where students are immersed in experience and learn facts along the way. While I first tried to solely relate to an educational theory we learned in class, by the end of the course I realized that finding my own balance was most important.

As I questioned and examined my beliefs based on these theories I found myself realizing how much I believe in the ideas of Dewey and Gardner, and the importance of children being active and engaged learners who are able to immerse themselves in the educational experience. Gardner reminded me of the three virtues of "truth, beauty and goodness" and that although these three virtues are ever changing through the ages, they have been and will continue to be, the foundations of education, and also society and the world. Dewey explained that "Nature wants children to be children before they are men . . . Childhood has ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling, peculiar to itself, nothing can be more foolish than to substitute our ways for them." Connecting these virtues throughout the curriculum and educational experiences, along with Dewey's ideas of progressive education have helped me find a balance as an educator where the children can develop as real, active learners, and build a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

For the Love of the Game...

As I moved into my Sport Leadership and Coaching concentration there were many courses that I related too. The first course was Positive Youth Development through Sports (KIN 857). I fell in love with basketball the first time I picked one up in the third grade. My love of this sport has taught me so much, provided so many experiences for me, and taught me so many valuable life lessons. As I entered the world of coaching this course helped remind me that youth sports should be fun, help children in a positive way, and provide many teachable moments for life lessons. I learned that positive youth development "encompasses all our hopes

and inspirations for a nation of healthy, happy, and competent adolescents on their way to productive and satisfying adulthoods” (Roth 2004, p 3). By the end of this course I was able to create a program for the varsity girls basketball team I coach (see coursework page SOAR), which aimed to enhance the girls athletic development, personal development, and also engage them as positive, active role models in the school community. This course helped teach me the theories and research to help teach my athletes not only the athletic skills they needed for the game of basketball, but also the life skills that are needed to succeed in life outside of basketball.

Physical Bases of Coaching (KIN 856) was another course that I found very beneficial. By the end of this course I had a coaches “toolbox” that I created throughout the semester. The first project in my tool box was a coaches handbook that I created with lists of physios, trainers, doctors, nutritionists, dentists, conditioning coaches, and chiropractors to name a few. This handbook was a list for players, parents, and myself that provides expert advice in a given genre. I personally know all the people on this list and have worked with them as an athlete, so feel very confident in their advice when it comes to the athletes that I coach.

While I have a lot of knowledge about the techniques of basketball, this course really forced me to analyze the biomechanics of these techniques in a much more scientific way. I became much more knowledgeable and comfortable with muscle terminology and explaining how to shoot a free throw or jump shot based on these biomechanics. I was also very happy to learn new ideas about nutrition, warming up and stretching. When I grew up static stretching was all that existed and I learned new ideas and fact based research that supported the importance of dynamic stretching for athletes. I was able to create a dynamic warm up for the girls that I coach and the team captains lead this warm up series at the start of every practice. This course helped me learn the proper technique to teach my players and the confidence to apply what I was learning to my athletes immediately.

I also was able to create a strength and conditioning program that consisted of ten exercises for my athletes to perform. I was able to focus on what was most important for female athletes, and research exercises that will best help them stay injury free on the basketball court. As I have never been a fan of the weight room, and many girls I coach are not either, I was able to create a program using body weight and resistance bands. As an athlete I believe in all of these projects that I created throughout this course and I partake in many of them as a professional athlete. My players see my passion in the programs I created throughout this course as their coach, and they also see that as a successful athlete I actually practice what I am preaching to them.

Loving Literacy...

As I moved into my concentration in Literacy Education there are two courses that really opened my eyes to the kind of teacher I strive to be. Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners (TE 846) really focused on differentiation in order to meet each student’s needs. This course was very beneficial for me because I work mainly with ELL (English Language Learners)

and ESL (English as Second Language) students. As I learned different strategies in all areas of literacy I was able to develop and execute my own literacy programs to students in my classroom. The students I teach are just learning English and many don't understand or speak the language. This course helped me learn about phonics, phonetic awareness, phonemes and the importance of building a language foundation using these. Using pictures, alphabet charts, and flashcards I was able to increase the letter, sound, and word recognition of many of the students in my class over the course of the semester.

Elementary Reading Assessment and Instruction (TE842) made me realize the importance of creating a literacy rich environment for my students. I work with four year olds and everything in my classroom can help or hinder their literacy development. Since the start of the school year my classroom has been transformed into a safe and secure environment where the children can feel confident to learn the English language. There are many books available in many different genres along with cozy and comfortable places for the children to explore these books. There are signs and pictures all over the classroom so the children can have more opportunities for word recognition. Thematic units are created to help increase the child's overall comprehension of the theme, and done so in a way that reinforces literacy ideas and practices. I also use inquiry based learning in which the children are able to explore and research lessons based on their questions. With the use of inquiry, read alouds and think alouds my classroom has been transformed to a place where the children can collaborate and express their learning and understanding that makes sense to them. This course really enabled me to apply the philosophy of education that I adopted at the beginning of my master's program, and find great ways to assess everyone's learning and thinking.

Never Ending Journey...

As I have been reflecting on what I have learned in this program over the past two years it seems near impossible to put it all in writing. While the courses mentioned above had a profound impact on me, this entire program has affected me as a learner and educator. I enjoy learning and even as my formal education is coming to a temporary halt, my informal education will continue on a daily basis. I am always interested in new facts, new topics, and learning more about the facts and topics I am familiar with. As this program has put me in the role of an excited and motivated learner, as an educator I want to create and share this same role with my students. The world of education is constantly changing, and this program has taught me that ideas, strategies, and educational practices are constantly changing. On top of this every student that I teach or coach will be different. I must continue my role as a learner as I learn from my students and how I can best help them achieve their educational and athletic needs. I have learned so much information, and also how to reflect on this information and apply it in an educational setting. I know that my journey as an educator is just beginning, and that it will be a lifelong journey in which I am constantly challenging myself as an educator, and adapting to the ever changing needs of my students and athletes.