

I applied for this program before receiving my teaching certification, which put me along a different path than my peers that already have their teaching certifications. I am currently active-duty military and do not know what state I will be relocating to for my retirement and will apply for my teaching certification when it is known. I know I have the passion and desire to be a special education teacher. My career and educational background are in criminal justice, with both my associate's and bachelor's degrees being in the field, as well as my career in law enforcement. Therefore, applying to this program was a big change of direction for my life-long journey. I did not know what to expect when entering the Master of Arts in Education Program at Michigan State University.

The first two classes I enrolled in the fall of 2020 were very eye opening. I did not know what to expect regarding criteria as well as the intensity of the workload. I knew it would be difficult, but I did not know it would completely change the way I dedicated my efforts to my schoolwork. In my bachelor's program there was a lot of reading, but I could get by with skimming my required readings. In this program, there was no way to do that, although I tried in the first few weeks of my first semester. It did not take long (about three weeks into the course) for my instructor to email me about my completed work. He could tell from my writing I was not fully engaged in the readings Thankfully; I was given the opportunity to re-do the work that was not up to par with the syllabus. Once my instructor explained more in detail what he was looking for, I knew I had to change my mindset to get through the course as well as the entire program.

The other course I took my first semester was about being creative, which is not one of my strongest characteristics. I really struggled getting into a groove in my feedback notebook and finding my creative juices. This course was chaotic, and I was struggling to use creativity in different ways than I had done previously. I had a very supportive and engaged instructor who was always there if I needed her for anything. About halfway through the semester things started to click and it was easy sailing all the way to the end. But after that first semester, I knew I had to maintain the motivation and drive to complete the program.

This program had a lot of group projects as well as peer-reviewed feedback. I did not expect an online program to be so diverse and impactful in how I learned. I expected to be writing 20–25-page papers during and at the end of every semester, but that was not the case. I did have a paper in one or two classes, but overall, it was group projects and hands-on assignments. It really changed the way I do research as well as how I collaborate with my peers, including outreaching my peers with questions or when I needed help. I am no longer afraid to ask for help from a peer, as everyone is moving toward to same goal and willing to share their experiences.

My favorite course in the program was EAD 830 Urban Education: Racial Achievement Gap. Not only was the course insightful, but my instructor was phenomenal. He was extremely knowledgeable in this subject matter, and I was astonished with the amount of information I learned from him. He did not readily offer his opinion regarding the “right answer” for the achievement gap in America; instead, he wanted us to form our own conclusion of the subject and come up with our own solutions. The readings for each unit were intense and long. My interest and engagement made the readings and coursework appear easier. We were required to have a zoom meeting once a week and talk about our readings. The discussions were student led and they got heated at times. Our instructor would allow us to debate our opinions, but he would always bring us back to the topic in a unique way. He never said we

were wrong but offered insights to have us practice empathy or to consider an alternative viewpoint.

Our final project was a case study of the difference in a child's socioeconomic status and the achievement gap. We were originally supposed to work in groups however, because I am not a teacher, he allowed me to complete the project on my own. In hindsight, I could have used the help of a practicing teacher to assist with the small details I have no experience in, but my instructor was always there for me if I needed help or had questions. Completing this case study taught me a great deal about school funding and how where you live geographically can have a great impact on a child's education, as well as shed light into how schools are funded. What was most interesting to me through this case study was most educators, including principals and school superintendents, are aware of the achievement gap and are unable to enact changes due to lack of funding. It is shameful how diverse funding is supplied to school districts in our nation. The low-income schools are suffering, and the rich are receiving the best education because they have the means to provide more for students. It a cycle that keeps perpetuating but does not seem to be an issue for our national government to find a solution for the funding crisis.

My next course I enjoyed was CEP 820 Teaching Students Online. When the pandemic hit and the nation shut down, teachers were scrambling to determine how to continue education in an online environment on a full-time basis. I was personally invested, as watched my children's teachers daily try and keep everyone engaged and learning. When I saw this course was an option for my degree, I took it so I could be better prepared as an educator if anything happened like that again. This course walked me through the steps of how to create and teach a course fully online.

The first few weeks were a struggle, not just for me, but everyone in the class. Our instructor was wonderful and sent out emails constantly with helpful information. She was always extremely quick at responding to emails and getting on zoom if needed. I was stuck the second week of the course and after ten minutes of talking things through with her, I had a solid plan to move forward.

I created a fully online course through the Canvas platform. The first few weeks of the course were organizing the material, creating a lesson plan, along with developing course objectives. This was the most difficult part of the course. I had to explain everything in detail to ensure I was covering topics for all types of learners. My feedback notebook was covered in red with comments weekly. Once I figured out the flow of my course, things became easier. In the end, I created a resiliency course through Canvas with activities, a test, as well as my voice recording teaching all the lessons. I am knowledgeable of the small details that may be forgotten about when designing an online course. This will help me in the future if I need to teach online.

The other course I enjoyed was CEP 850 Technology for Students with Disabilities. Prior to the course, I was limited in knowledge about assistive technologies and how they apply to a student's individualized educational plan (IEP). In previous courses I did learn about the IEP process, but nothing in depth nor the tools utilized to assist. We were required to complete a group project on assistive technologies. Most of my peers are already special education teachers, so they seemed to grasp the concepts faster than I. I was challenged with new concepts to learn initially, and I really had to pay attention to the details and readings within the course to understand assistive technology for students. My group created a Google

document about why assistive technologies are used, examples of assistive technologies in different subjects, as well as information on where to find the best assistive technology for a specific student. A single assistive technology will not work for every student; each student is unique and needs their own assistive technology to ensure they can operate and learn just like any other general education student. I intend to keep this project as a reference for to assist in my own classroom when I am teaching special education students.

Another project I enjoyed in this course allowed me to gain actual classroom experience. We were assigned to observe a student with an established IEP and come up with an assistive technology that the student was not currently using or was not documented in their student file. As part of the project, a trial needed to be conducted with the assistive technology I chose to see if they were effective for the student. I arranged with my daughter's junior high school to gain access to the special education classroom to observe a student. The special education teacher was extremely helpful and knowledgeable.

I observed a female student for a few days who was twelve years old and was almost non-verbal. After contemplating assistive technology options, I decided to try out a program on the iPad called N2Y. N2Y covers a vast array of educational subjects and can be used in many ways, even with benchmark testing. For the specific student I was working with, the N2Y program read the assignment, read the story to her, and had comprehension questions for her at the end. She was allowed to choose to provide her answers orally or by physical touch. Even in the short time I had with her, the N2Y program showed her growth, especially on comprehension. I believe this is due to a program that read the curriculum to her and provided different support options. She also used the N2Y program for other subjects and showed a positive outcome in her comprehension. This was one of the most rewarding projects I had done in my program. To be able to make a change and see positive results was extremely motivating and just confirmed even more that I want to be a special education teacher.

Overall, this master's program has better prepared me for teaching in the future. This program has impacted the way I think and complete tasks. I had to completely shift the way I previously learned to better understand the information provided to me at this level. Every course had an instructor that was patient, understanding and overall helpful in my educational journey. They want us to succeed and take the knowledge we gained and use it in a real classroom. It was refreshing to collaborate with peers that helped me throughout the courses and guide me since I have not had the same experience they have. One of my peers even took the extra step and sent me her resume to give me an example of what a teaching resume looks like. Terminology like individualized educational plan (IEP), autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and student, environment, tasks & tools (SETT) framework are all terms I never knew before this program. I have learned the unique teaching terminology for the tasks and tools for a special education teacher. I will not be walking into my first classroom in the dark, this program has prepared me for my future students as well as administrative work that must be done to ensure my students will be successful.