

Christina Johnson, Master's Degree holder. This title is not something to be taken lightly.

When I started my undergraduate program in 2007, I was the first member of the Johnson lineage to attend college. It was a tremendous accomplishment and I felt unstoppable. Flash forward to 2011, walking across the stage at the Breslin Center as they call out my name. And then again in 2012, as I walk through Erickson Hall having completed my student teaching. These are the moments that have defined my educational career.

I have tremendous pride in my ability to work through and persevere through challenging times. My family was not able to help fund my college expenses, so I had to figure out a way to do it on my own. I earned scholarships and utilized financial aid to achieve this goal. After graduation, my family, friends, and employer inquired about whether or not I was going to obtain my master's degree. I made a plan to start after my fourth year of teaching. However, that same year, my father passed away, and time slipped away from me. He was the one who made me feel proudest of my accomplishments. I knew he would want me to continue my education. So, after some time and careful consideration, I decided to embark on this master's degree journey.

My journey through this graduate program has been challenging, exciting, and transformative. Each semester I have taken two courses while working full time with many professional responsibilities. I have dedicated myself to my coursework and pride myself on my learning. During my second semester of graduate work, my entire world stopped--my fiancée passed away suddenly. I had to make an important decision, stay and persevere through the program even though my personal world was crumbling, or quit and continue at a later date. I again, persevered. I knew that both my father and fiancée would urge me to continue with my education and to not give up.

My father and my fiancée, John, are my inspiration and pushing force that helped me achieve my dream. They were my motivation when I thought I couldn't go on. *I would like to dedicate this essay to them.*

I decided to obtain my Master of Arts in Education with a focus in P-12 Postsecondary School and Leadership. I have always had an interest in developing my leadership skills, as well as a passion for teaching adults, specifically teachers. I was eager to learn strategies to develop my leadership skills, as well as learn specific skills and resources to help me teach adult learners best. My coursework has taught me the power of transformative learning. By providing disorienting dilemmas and counter narratives, my thinking has been challenged and my practices have been altered. Not only did I develop analytical thinking skills, I also had courses that worked to strengthen my basic skills in my current classroom. I gained knowledge, insight, and strategies in literacy strategies and classroom management. I have developed an analytical eye for working with diverse families and understanding the many facets that encompass diverse learners. The knowledge and skill set I have obtained through this degree program are invaluable. I have started to, and will continue to, utilize in my current and future practice. My thinking and practice have evolved and grown exponentially in the last year and half. One course that was incredibly transformative to my current practice was EAD 824, Leading Teacher Learning. I used to believe that professional development was intended for educators to learn new practices and put them into place in their classrooms. Often times, based on experience, I thought that professional development meant sitting in a conference room listening to a presenter and taking notes. Many times, I did not find relevance to my professional developments and did not think that they were necessary for my practice. Now, I know that valuable professional LEARNING is to be had and that there are educators and educational. I know that professional

learning involves the principal modeling as the lead learner and helps enable the educators in their buildings to create and attend powerful learning sessions that have true purpose and value in their classrooms.

I used to believe that professional learning communities (PLC's) were not meaningful and a waste of time where no true collaboration occurs. Based on my own experiences, there is a lot of off-task talking and a lack of direction, focus, and purpose. I now know that PLC's are an amazing opportunity to truly collaborate with peers. PLC's need an agenda and need purposeful planning in order to make the time meaningful for each member. Each member also needs to come in to their PLC with the same goal of making themselves stronger as a teacher so that their students can learn more efficiently.

I used to believe that collaboration was a process where educators share what they are doing in their classrooms and give tips on how to help others. I now know that true collaboration is where each individual member of a team is fully engaged and participating in helping to make each other better. True collaboration can be aided through the use of protocols and learning designs. The result of true collaboration is improved teaching and as a result improvement in student learning.

This course has directly impacted my leadership abilities. I am in charge of a professional special education for the first time this year in my district. Having the tools from this course has allowed me to provide my teacher learners with meaningful and purposeful learning! I have downloaded and utilized many materials from this course and have even passed some of them along to my other co-workers who are in leadership positions as well.

Another course that significantly impacted my current and future practice is EAD 866, Teaching in Post-Secondary Education. This course taught me the fundamental differences (as

well as similarities) between andragogy and pedagogy. I gained insightful knowledge on different styles of learners and differing styles of teaching that work best when working with adult learners. This course helped me develop a clear teaching philosophy that can be simply stated in one sentence: *I want my students to learn*. My ultimate goal is to enable them to develop learning skills so that they can be successful in future academic and non-academic settings alike. I learned that I am a progressive educator who works to give students practical knowledge and problem-solving skills. I now realize that I am not simply a “giver” of information, but a “facilitator” of lessons and teacher of skills. I learned that a facilitator provides information and then allows the students to “wrestle” with the material to learn it and make it their own.

Not only did I learn more about myself and my personal philosophy on teaching, I gained valuable skills in working with adult learners. I used to think that college professors and adult leaders could simply present information and adult learners, being self-motivated, would retain the information. Through this course, I learned that adults come to the classroom, like children, with multiple layers of motivation and skill. One cannot assume that adults have more motivation than younger students. I also learned that adult educators need to take on the “facilitation” role and create a learner-centered classroom where the goal is to develop students as autonomous, self-directed, self-regulated learners. Providing opportunities for short mini-lesson and collaboration within the classroom is crucial.

Finally, I was able to develop skills necessary to teach adults/college courses. I did not realize what detailed planning and preparation is necessary for creating a syllabus. This was probably my favorite assignment of my entire graduate career. I am truly interested in teaching course at the undergraduate level, specifically undergraduate education courses. This syllabus

allowed me to live out my dream while applying practical knowledge I gained from the course. I now see that through this course, and being an actual student in graduate classes with differing professors/syllabi, how critical a strongly developed syllabus is. There needs to be clear course goals, learning outcomes, detailed readings that connect to the content, a course outline, due dates, expectations, and various other university required elements. I think the most challenging aspect was creating clear learning outcomes and matching them to the learning plan. Finishing this syllabus was quite an accomplishment and a skill that I am grateful to have for my future career plans!

The last course that transformed my learning was EAD 824, Engaging with Diverse Families. This course was not actually on my first choice of courses to take (a course I was scheduled for was dropped), but I truly believe that fate led me to this course. This course shook my world and completely changed the way that I view family and community engagement in the educational system. The district I am currently employed in is INCREDIBLY diverse. We have a wide range of black, white, Hmong (Asian descent), eastern-European, and middle eastern students. Even in my small special education classrooms, a wide variety of racial sub-groups are present. Not only is our district racially diverse, we are diverse as far as the socioeconomic status of our families. Our city is fueled by the auto-industry and when it collapsed, the dynamics of our school shifted. This course taught me a critical term that I was unaware of before, intersectionality. Intersectionality is essentially understanding that students and their families all have a complex web of racial, cultural, economic, linguistic, and academic backgrounds and that all of these intersectionalities impact the way they engage and interact in society and in education. For example, not only am I Lebanese-American, I am also a single, hetero-sexual woman from a lower-middle class family. When engaging with families, one must remember to

keep intersectionality in mind.

Not only did this course help me understand my families and community, it enabled me to think about and develop a culturally responsive teaching approach. Understanding the power struggle and understanding the dynamics of power in an educational institution is critical in understanding how families engage with their children's education, especially for families from marginalized groups. I now know that developing a critical self-awareness and cultural consciousness (recognizing one's own culture and how it differs from others/may or may not be privileged over others) allows educators and educational leaders to better engage families in their community. I learned that teachers need to stay away from the deficit view (i.e. students from low socioeconomic status/a differing race/special education student will do poorly because of that certain characteristic). I also learned that we should not "erase" race, but rather cherish and honor those differences.

This masters program has been transformative to my professional career in more ways than one. I have gained valuable knowledge and insight on how to best teach adult learners, on how to improve and hone in on my current teaching, and learned incredible leadership skills and abilities. This year, I was asked to take on the role of special education district paperwork core trainer. I have utilized teaching strategies and practices such as accessing background knowledge and making prior knowledge transparent when working with adults in this position. I have created clear agendas and provided structured learning objectives to make the best use of time. I have utilized protocols for creating conversations around difficult topics. My own classroom practices have changed significantly as well. I can now determine functions of behavior and develop plans to best meet the needs of my students in these classes. I also gained valuable literacy skills to use with my students. Finally, my leadership skills have improved significantly.

I have gained ability and confidence in leading my peers and have taken on more roles to continue to improve. I am grateful to have completed this program through Michigan State and look forward to continuing my lifelong journey as a learner!