

## Returning to My First Aspiration

By Sarah Weston

More years ago than I care to admit I graduated high school harboring a secret, I was pregnant. Living in a small community, once I began sharing my pregnancy, the news spread quickly. I had planned on going to [WMU](#), but with news of my pregnancy, family and friends thought I would never be able to achieve my dream. Fortunately, I found motherhood to be the **motivation** I needed to get my degree. Over the four and a half years I spent at WMU there were many late nights as I struggled to juggle the responsibilities of working, going to school full time, and raising a child. I worked hard and earned my degree in elementary education.

My entire life I have always enjoyed school, learning and reading. I also love working with children. As a teenager I spent so much time working with children I even bought my first car with money I earned babysitting. I often planned activities to do with the children I worked with and spent my own money on activities to keep them occupied. As I chose what to do with my life, it made sense to become a teacher. When I began at WMU I planned to earn a degree in special education. Prior to applying to the special education program I was required to obtain volunteer hours. I spent several hours helping out in a classroom at the [Van Buren Intermediate School District](#). All of the students in the preschool class I helped in still wore diapers. As I observed the teacher changing diapers, I decided I was already doing that at home, I didn't want to do it at school too. I loved working with young children, but realized I wanted to work with students who were able to communicate and express themselves more than the students I was observing. After careful consideration, I switched my major to elementary education with an emphasis in early childhood.

Once I finished at WMU I accepted a job teaching in a local cooperative preschool. I loved my job and my students, but I only worked there one year. When the school year ended in June 2003 I chose to stay home with my growing family. I had only anticipated staying home for a few years, but things didn't go as smoothly as I had planned. Along with my husband Mike and our five year old daughter Ally, we were excited to welcome Nick to our family the summer of 2003 and Carter the fall of 2004. My priorities and interests were transformed as the needs of my family changed. When Nick was 18 months old I began to suspect he had developmental delays and sensory issues, later receiving a diagnosis of [pdd-nos](#). Carter developed severe respiratory issues which resulted in appointments with multiple specialists before finally getting answers at [C.S. Mott's Children's Hospital](#). I spent my time teaching Nick how to play and communicate as well as researching autism, [SPD \(sensory processing disorder\)](#), croup and asthma. I disinfected everything and carted both boys back and forth to speech, OT (occupational therapy) and doctor's appointments. As frustrating as this time was, these experiences changed me for the better. As I advocated for my own children, I became **passionate for early childhood education** and desired that the **educational and emotional needs** of all students would be met.

The 2009-2010 school year was the first year both boys were in school full time. Nick was doing well with limited intervention and Carter's health issues were under control. I had subbed some while my boys were younger, but now my availability was wide open. I spent a considerable amount of time

subbing at [Paw Paw Early Elementary](#) and at [Cedar Street Community and Family Center](#), where I had the opportunity to teach Young 5's in a long term substitute position. I loved teaching Young 5's and learned a lot from the experience. I found the knowledge I had acquired while home with my boys to be very useful. I found many of the strategies I had learned with Nick to be helpful within the classroom setting as several of the students struggled with sensory issues. One of the students had severe allergies and asthma, so I found the "medical training" I endured came in handy as I eased the fears the family had about a different teacher being in the classroom and I had the background to easily meet the needs of their child. As the school year wound down I realized I was ready to enter the work force on a full time basis. I wanted to be back in my own classroom. In an effort to meet certification needs and prepare myself to help all students in my classroom, I knew it was time to concentrate on my graduate work. As I began looking for a master's program I chose the [MAED](#) program at MSU because I could complete it entirely online, which fit well with my busy family life, and because it had many options in terms of classes and areas of concentration. I chose special education as my core area, wanting to immerse myself in material that would allow me to meet the needs of students who had been diagnosed with special needs or who may be diagnosed in the future. As I chose it, I realized the irony of the situation. Years ago I had switched from special education to pursue regular education, only to return to special education as I worked on my master's. The experiences I had helping my own children as well as the students in my Young 5's position led me back to special education.

One of the first classes I took at MSU was **TE 846: Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners** with Nicole Martin. In this course I learned about the developmental process of reading and how to help struggling readers. I learned many techniques to help struggling readers and writers such as looking at word parts, explicit reading instruction and giving authentic writing assignments. I also learned how to help students who were struggling because their primary language wasn't English (English Language Learner (ELL)). Since it had been a few years since I had earned my teaching certificate and it had been several years since I had taught outside of substitute teaching experience, I found myself immersed in a whole new way of teaching reading. Prior to this course I had never heard of phonological awareness or phoneme segmentation. In addition to learning how important the early years are to reading development, I learned many skills I now use to help my students develop vocabulary, phonological awareness, fluency and comprehension.

As my coursework and career moved along, another highly influential class I took was **CEP 883: Psychology of Classroom Behavior** with Vicky Mousouli. Prior to this class I had taken other classes that focused on classroom management, but this was my favorite class. I suspect one reason I liked the class was its focus on the theories behind student behavior and the fact that I took it after several years in the classroom. As we discussed classroom management and went through [CHAMPS](#), I thought about my classroom expectations and created a framework which I implemented into my classroom when the new school year began. While I had always known relationships within the classroom were important, this course helped me realize how important my relationships with each student were and how important the relationships between all of the students in my class were. I realized that while I had nurtured individual relationships, I hadn't spent as much time building a classroom community. I gained many

ideas to take back to my classroom which I now use to build a sense of community and help my students build caring and trusting relationships between each other.

Throughout **CEP 883: Psychology of Classroom Behavior** we came back to the topic of motivation several times. As we discussed motivation I realized how large of a role it had played in my own education. My motivation to succeed when I was a young mother helped me pursue my teaching degree, and my motivation to help my boys ignited my passion to help all children, which led me to the class I was currently enrolled in. I realized I didn't consider the importance of motivation in terms of lesson planning and classroom management as much as I needed too. This realization helped me understand that as I developed relationships with my students I would learn more about their interests which I could in turn use as an advantage as I developed lessons and provided reading material based on interests that would motivate them.

As I continued on the path to complete my Master's, I realized that literacy education had changed since my undergraduate studies and I wanted to educate myself so I would have the knowledge I needed to teach my students. While special education was one of my core areas, I also added Literacy as my second core area. **CEP 850: Technology and Literacy for Students with Mild Disabilities** with Cindy Okolo, Rachel Kopke, and Mei Shen met both of my interest areas, and sparked my interest in the use of technology. I had always found technology inspiring and useful, but I had limited experience using it in the classroom. I learned how to evaluate a student's needs and abilities to determine if AT (assistive technology) would be useful. I learned how to select technology that would be useful for different situations. I also realized that despite the vast array of technology that is available, there is limited research to back it up. While it is important to look at the research, it is also important for me to consider the best ways to help the student overcome their reading struggles. I need to consider the pros and cons of specific technologies before determining if they are appropriate. I expanded my technology knowledge as I tried many programs that were new to me and I also learned about the many different technologies which could be utilized to help students with reading disabilities. This gave me the knowledge and motivation I needed to increase technology usage within my classroom.

Another class I really enjoyed was **TE 849: Methods and Materials for Teaching Children's and Adolescent Literature** with Kristin McIlhagga; I feel it changed the way I evaluated literature. Despite the fact that I was always an avid reader, and I have a huge collection of children's books, I hadn't spent much time thinking about children's books in terms of their creativity and artistic design. As we analyzed books, considered the implied meaning as well as any hidden messages, I realized there were considerations I needed to make beyond whether or not I liked the book or if it was created by one of my favorite authors. I learned I needed to select books not because I enjoyed them, but because my students would enjoy them. I also learned that throughout the year I needed to explore a wider range of genres with my students and make sure multicultural books were accurately presented as part of the regular curriculum. I realized my students need to see themselves in the books they are reading. If I limit their literature exposure, it would be the same as limiting their possibilities.

As I reflect on my course work over the last four years, I realize that each course I took gave me new

skills and new ways to think about education. I chose to complete all of my classes during the summer semester because I felt that was the only way I could give my job and my family the time they deserved during the school year. As a result, I was able to primarily focus on my coursework during the summer, gaining new ideas and new ways of thinking to the classroom each school year. It took me five summers to complete the program because I spread my classes out. However, I am glad I made this choice. By doing so I was really able to focus on integrating new ideas from each class into my teaching, while occasionally also trying out new ideas on my own children.

When I began my teacher preparation courses I was a young student, juggling a baby, work and school, determined to make it all work. Finishing my master's has required balancing three children, my online courses, and a full time job. Reflection has helped me realize that I truly enjoyed this journey. Despite the hard work it required, my love for learning is one reason I chose to become a teacher and why I was motivated to work hard and achieve my goals. As I finish my master's, I hope I am able to share my love for learning with my students and I am grateful that the program has better prepared me as a teacher.