

M.A. Program Reflection

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Introduction

After completing my Art Education undergraduate studies in December of 2013, I was eager to enter the M.A. in Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning program in order to expand my knowledge of early childhood education. During my undergraduate studies, I developed a deep passion for working with young children, curriculum development, and the visual arts. I tailored my M.A. program plan focusing on early childhood curriculum with an emphasis on art-integration. In the following sections, I discuss my professional growth each semester.

Spring 2014

My first semester of the M.A. program was a time of exploring the integration of art in early childhood education. My final paper for **EDUC 570** (The Reflective Educator) focused on researching the original Fröbelian kindergarten. In preparing my paper titled: *Retracing the Roots of Kindergarten as an Art & Design Academy*, I discovered how the original kindergarten “curiously resembled the nineteenth century artist’s studio” (Sienkiewicz, 1985). I was inspired by Fröbel’s philosophy that children should be engaged in constant activity and interaction with objects in their physical environment. Fröbel’s curricular system known as “gifts” connected with my passion for art-integration as children used the “gifts” to construct their own knowledge through a wide range of highly manipulable 2D and 3D materials. I feel that children should be allowed to engage in playful “handiwork,” freely expressing themselves and developing at their own pace, both academically and socio-emotionally. The Fröbelian kindergarten concept is the basis for what I intend to practice as this embodies interactive learning and symbolization.

Through my experience in **EDCT 586** (Teaching and Learning: Research and Application in the Classroom) I gained an expanded knowledge in educational research. During my field placement in a kindergarten classroom, I was exposed to the highly regimented schedule being imposed on young 5-year olds. I felt that young children should not be forced to sit for extended periods of times completing worksheets or listening to whole-group math and literacy lectures for the majority of the day. This kindergarten placement inspired me to answer the research question: "Is There Enough Play in Kindergarten?" I conducted a thorough literature review analyzing the amount of play evident in early childhood education throughout history and sought to understand how much play *should* be included in current kindergarten classrooms. I also analyzed how much of each type of play was present throughout the day in my mentor teacher's classroom. The results from my project motivated me to conduct further research into developmentally-appropriate curriculum and advocate for play-based learning in early childhood education.

EDEC 437 (Integrated Curriculum in Early Childhood Classrooms) was influential in my professional growth. The course taught me how to create develop developmentally appropriate, standards-based integrated lesson plans/curriculum for young children. I credit EDEC 437 with allowing me the flexibility to experiment with designing my first ever art-integrated, project-based lesson plans in the context of early childhood education. Many topics discussed in this course such as the Reggio Emilia approach, eventually led to future areas of research in my other MA courses. I was also afforded the opportunity to give a presentation to my fellow classmates on a topic I was knowledgeable and passionate about. Professor Pollack invited me to present on Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), a method for

engaging students in open-ended conversations about art. I was subsequently invited back to present again to a different class in Fall 2014. According to Professor Pollack, students “appreciated my enthusiasm and knowledge.” Presenting on VTS was a rewarding experience and further reinforced my passion for integrating art in early childhood education.

EDRL 522 (Assessment and Teaching in Reading and Language Arts) made me rethink my assumptions about teaching literacy. I learned that reading is about making sense of our world, through text, visual imagery, music, dance, etc. This course influenced how I view art as a form of meaning-making, serving as a visual text that expands the communication potential of every child. My book presentation on Peggy Alber’s *Finding the Artist Within: Creating and Reading Visual Texts* made me realize that art is a language which can be learned. I acquired knowledge of semiotics, the study of how people communicate meaning across sign systems (i.e. art, music, dance, etc). Overall, as a result of this course I have a much clearer understanding of literacy. I now enjoy reading subject matter books and articles in academic journals.

Toward the end of the spring semester, I joined three professional educational organizations: The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), The National Art Education Association (NAEA), and the Association for Curriculum Development and Supervision (ACSD).

Summer 2014

In **EDUC 571** (Research Paradigms in Education), I created a literature review titled “What is the Value of Art-Integration in Early Childhood Education” for my cognate proposal. Using research-based evidence, I validated my views on the benefits of art-integration in the context of early childhood education. I explored how art-integration supported social-emotional development and academic achievement in the early childhood curriculum. This literature review will also assist me in articulating the importance of art-integration in future discussions or presentations involving educators, families, administrators and the greater school community.

I was introduced to play-based education during a UCLA course **EDUC 125** (The Role of Play in Early Childhood Education). This course increased my awareness on the importance of play in young children’s development and academic learning. Most importantly, it made me realize how art-integration in ECE naturally facilitates play-learning. The final products I created for this course included a play-based curriculum project and a letter to parents explaining the importance of play in early childhood education. My professor, Dr. Helen Davis, comments on my parent letter: *“This is an outstanding letter. You are direct and to-the-point...I like that your introduction and conclusion are appealing to the parent body.”* My goal is to utilize play-based learning when developing curriculum and lesson plans during my career as an early childhood educator. Young children learn best when they are allowed to actively construct knowledge through direct hands-on experiences and play.

Fall 2014

During the Fall semester, I enrolled in my first graduate level early childhood education course **EDEC 532** (Social-Moral Development in Early Childhood Education). In this course, I developed an action research project which stemmed from the literature review I created in EDUC 571. For my action research project, I reviewed literature related to the connection between art and young children's social interaction and peer relationships and sought to answer the question: "How Can Collaborative Art activities Promote Friendships in 1st grade?" Working with my mentor teacher, I designed a series of collaborative art activities with my primary focus on helping a particular six year-old girl in the class who was introverted and uncommunicative. The action research project proved to be beneficial in my focus student's ability to develop meaningful social relationships and friendships with her peers. My project also inspired my mentor teacher to continue cooperative activities in her class to help assist other students in their social development. As a result of this project, I was able to validate that integrating art into the curriculum is a contributive factor in advancing young children's social development.

EDCT 585 (Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice) introduced me to a diverse group of curriculum theorists motivating me to place myself within Progressive Education on what Dr. Perry Marker calls the "theoretical landscape." After reading about the views of Progressive curriculum theorists such as Maria Montessori, John Dewey, William E. Doll, and Elliot Eisner, I was inspired to focus on educating the "spirit" of the child and integrating their strengths, interests, and needs into my curriculum development. Montessori (1912) expressed that "from the child itself he will learn how to perfect himself

as an educator” (p. 24). This quote resonated with me as I believe in placing the child at the center of curriculum, teaching, and learning.

My studies of Progressive Education ideals led to a detailed research and analysis of the Reggio emergent curriculum, which was the topic I chose for my final course paper. The first half of my paper analyzes the Reggio emergent curriculum’s historical, philosophical, and curricular origins, roles of the teacher and learner, project work, and the roles of art and the environment in Reggio Emilia schools. The second half of my paper was dedicated to a critical analysis of the Reggio emergent curriculum, defining its strengths, points of consideration for implementation in U.S. public schools, and how it could be assimilated into standards-based education. To complement my research, I enrolled in a 2-unit graduate course on the Reggio Emilia approach. The in-depth research into the Reggio emergent curriculum provided the foundation for my cognate project.

Conclusion

I feel that my breadth and depth of knowledge has increased significantly since entering the M.A. program. The flexibility of the Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning program has permitted me to design a program plan that best suits my particular needs and interests. In addition to the required courses (EDCT 585 and EDCT 586), I had the good fortune to enroll in courses in my area of emphasis, early childhood education, as well as reading and language, elementary education, and art education. My program plan has contributed to my growth as an early childhood educator and curriculum specialist who is passionate about providing my students with a meaningful and enriching education.