

First Draft—Spring 2014 Learning and Behavior Specialist I Masters

Personal Statement

During the summers of my high school years I was fortunate to care for two children, one of whom with autism and attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD). I was challenged each day working with a child with autism. Each day was as unpredictable as the next, but I found autism spectrum disorders and behavioral issues to be fascinating. I was drawn to the many challenges the child faced, as well as the solutions used to conquer these challenges. While this experience is just one experience I have had with children with learning and behavioral disabilities, I believe it is the core reason that I am drawn to my goal of pursuing the Learning and Behavior Specialist I Master's Program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and implementing behavior focused interventions through curriculum.

My interest in working with children with learning and behavioral disabilities has been heightened by my undergraduate studies in Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS). My concentration in Child and Adolescent Development allowed me to focus on the theories behind child development and the ways in which society and families play a role in the development of children. My passion to work with children with learning and behavioral disabilities was strengthened by taking courses both inside and outside of my major that incorporate the needs of individuals with disabilities and their families. Through my applied courses, HDFS 206: Early Childhood Curriculum and Development and HDFS 294: The Autism Program Resource Center Internship, I gained hands-on experience not only teaching young children and producing developmental portfolios, but also creating supportive materials for children, families, and community members. I completed an honors project in HDFS 206 that consisted of an extra developmental portfolio of a preschool-aged child. This was my first exposure to annotating behavior and it is one of the many reasons I want to teach and with a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Through my internship with the Autism Program, I completed internet modules on autism, used BoardMaker to create visual support for individualized projects, and attended public events to share resources and events with the community. I believe that building strong ties with families, teachers, community resources and other professionals is vital for an individual's success.

My practicum experiences are complemented by additional coursework I have taken on how to best serve individuals with disabilities and special needs including SPED 117: The Culture of Disability and HDFS 208: Children and Families with Special Needs. I took SPED 117 for James Scholar credit and completed an honors project under the supervision and guidance of Dr. Cheryl Light-Shriner. For this project, I adapted two children's books that were designed to be used during group time when the teacher was reading a copy of the same book. The adaptations allowed the child to be interactive in order to help enhance attention and understanding. This project helped me realize that I love adapting materials for school-aged children in order to maintain an inclusive educational environment where all students have the opportunity to succeed. My coursework on individuals with disabilities and special needs built upon my understanding of children and families but highlighted families and individuals with special needs.

I have achieved several academic honors including the Dean's list, James Scholar, and being inducted as a member of the Phi Eta Sigma National Honor Society. I take pride in my success and determination in my education as I am completing a 4-year Bachelor program in a span of 3 years.

During my Bachelor's degree, I also gained valuable experience as a research assistant for Dr. Aaron Ebata. . Through this position and my participation in the James Scholar Program, I conducted an independent student research project titled: Nature's Role in Family Interactions: Promoting Positive Relationships and Cohesiveness between Mothers and Daughters. I played a pivotal role in all aspects of the research process of a larger Family Leisure Study in which I interviewed middle childhood youth, transcribed interviews, utilized SPSS to enter in quantitative data, helped develop observational coding schemes, and analyzed interaction data. I was awarded a

\$500 scholarship from the College of ACES for my independent research study on this project. From this research project I have developed a curiosity about impacts on family relationships, and want to build upon the results by conducting further research on children and families with special needs during my master's degree program. This master's program will support my interest in research as it teaches to incorporate research-based practices into curriculum.

As an undergraduate, I worked as an assistant teacher at the Champaign First United Methodist Child Care Center. Here, I was constantly challenged by the behaviors and attitudes of developing infant and early childhood-aged children. Once again, I found myself drawn to children with learning and behavioral disabilities. Shortly after starting, I was introduced to my first student with an Individualized Education Plan. I used my past experiences and skills to support a child who could not understand English and also had a developmental delay. I worked to reach his level of understanding in order to help him succeed inside and outside of the classroom. Through this experience I was also able to develop professional skills needed in an educational environment such as collaborating with co-teachers, developing strong relationships between parent-teacher and teacher-child, observing and recording a child's behaviors, reflecting on individual child strengths and areas of improvement, and supporting the individual child based on his or her specific needs. My experience with teaching a child with English as a second language drove my interest in working with culturally diverse populations. I know the Learning and Behavior Specialist Masters will support this interest by its goal of effectively teaching diverse populations. The unique student teaching opportunity in Chicago Public Schools within this program reaches out to a diverse population I have yet to work with.

I have not only dedicated a great deal of time to my academics and employment experience, but also to my extracurricular involvement. I value getting to know my peers and college, while enhancing my leadership skills and volunteering in the community. I stay involved with my college and major by serving as the Vice President for the Human Development and Family Studies Ambassadors, a student group whose focuses lie in departmental and community service, college recruitment, and professional development. Additionally, I serve as the Secretary for the Illinois Student Council on Family Relations at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and participate in community service events in the Champaign-Urbana area. I strive to encourage my peers to volunteer in the community by creating service opportunities for the housing student body by sharing the position of the Ikenberry Commons Executive Board Community Service Co-Chair and serving on the Hall Councils for the residence halls I have lived in throughout my undergraduate education. I value community resources and believe that community service is just one way to understand the community I live in and the resources it has available. The Service Learning aspect of the program at the University of Illinois will allow me to continue my passion of serving the community.

Ideally, I am working towards a Masters in Special Education or more specifically, a Learning and Behavior Specialist Masters, so that I may continue my education of understanding and providing support for children with learning and behavioral disabilities and their families. I believe the education path will answer my questions surrounding autism spectrum disorders and students with severe and multiple disabilities, allow me to deepen my passion for teaching, and open my eyes to other disabilities and how to appropriately address children's needs.

I intend to use my passion and degree to educate children with learning disabilities and behavior issues by teaching children of various ages of diverse populations. The core goals of the Learning and Behavior Specialist I Masters here at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign build off of my previous experience and will only enhance and broaden my skills to teach children with learning disabilities and behavior disorders.