I have been a teacher for 15 years at Madison Middle School. I love being a teacher and making a difference in the lives of children. I teach at the middle school level and always have. When people I meet for the first time ask me what I do and I respond that I teach middle school, I almost inevitably get the following response: “Oooo, that's a tough age!” I couldn't disagree more with those people. I think at ages 11 – 14 (middle school ages) students are really hungry for education and interpersonal relationships. I love it because most middle school students are still “little kids” at heart and mind, but physically and emotionally they are starting to become “adults.” I really feel like this is a crucial time to mold and shape kids into what they will become as adults.

This class is one of two classes that I am taking this summer as I start my journey to obtain my Masters of Education Administration from South Dakota State University. My goal in taking these courses is to one day become a principal and have the opportunity to lead a staff in educating and preparing a school full of students for their journey in life. Being a principal is something that has always been at the back of my mind ever since I first got into education. Many of my peers and family members have encouraged me to go back to school to get my master’s degree but I hesitated to do so because I wanted it to be the right time. I didn’t simply want to get my master’s degree “just because.” I wanted to get my degree at a time when I thought I would use it. Well, that time is now for me!

During this class I have not only been reminded of some of the “time tested” methods of teaching that have been around for years – things that I learned when I was taking classes to be a teacher some 20 years ago – but I have also been exposed to new and innovative ways of instruction that have been studied and researched in the years since I graduated. When we did our effective teaching metaphors for class, I compared an effective teacher to a good mechanic. If you have ever been in an auto shop, one of the things you notice are how many tools an auto mechanic has at his disposal to get the job done right. A good mechanic is always adding to his toolbox to make sure he has the right tool for any job. A teacher also has a “tool box” full of tools that they use to maximize student achievement in their classroom. A good teacher will constantly update their “tool box” with new and proven ways of helping students learn. Over the course of this class, I was able to fill up my teacher “tool box” with new methods and models of teaching that I can not only use in my classroom right now, but can also use to help guide other teachers that I will hopefully one day have under my supervision as their principal. In the next few paragraphs, I am going to highlight a few of the methods and models that stood out to me that I plan to use in the coming school year.
One of the first methods discussed in the book was “planning for presentation and explanation.” Since I teach math, I find it necessary to “explain” things to students quite often in my lectures. This method expanded on that idea by giving me ideas that would “help students expand their conceptual structures and develop habits of listening and thinking.” I never really did much planning for the lecture part of my lessons before. I simply put down the information I needed to cover and a few examples that I thought would help. The textbook really opened my eyes to the fact that I need to spend more time planning my “lectures.” Of most importance is making sure and access the prior knowledge of the students to help tie in the new material with the old material that they have already learned. The toughest part of teaching for me is working with the kids at all different levels that come into your classroom. I learned that I need to be careful about how much content and information I present at one time. That doesn’t mean I have to “slow down” my instruction, it just means I might need to break it into smaller chunks – something I have the ability to do since we teach on a block schedule. Another area of presentation and explanation that I need to improve on is gaining the attention of the students and explaining the goals of the lesson. When I first started teaching, I almost always had a challenge question or question of the day ready for the students when they came into my classroom – I’ve really gotten away from that. I also need to do a better job of letting the students know what the goal of the class is for each particular day – give them a “means to the end” so to speak.

Another method of teaching that I thought related well to my teaching came from Chapter 13: Cooperative Learning. Now I thought was already doing a good job of using cooperative teaching in my classroom. However, the book did an excellent job of clarifying for me how to connect cooperative learning into the science of learning. The book talked about developing democratic classrooms in which the teacher gives students a little bit of “say” in group work. It doesn’t mean that the teacher is turning over the classroom to the students; it just means that the teacher allows students to be active participants in setting the standards and expectations of the group work – in other words we are preparing them for life outside of school. I have found in teaching that when I allow students to have a say in the expectations and outcomes of a project, they often “set the bar” higher than I would if I were setting the expectations myself. I also learning that when placing students into cooperative learning groups it is not only important to group them according to ability, but I also need to keep in my ethnic and racial understandings – something I never really took into consideration when grouping students.

The final model of instruction that peaked my interest was the problem-based learning model. I was especially intrigued with opening of the chapter where they described Mr. Singh’s class and how there was a waiting list of students who wanted to take his class. I think that every teacher, including myself, want kids to want to come to their class. What can I do to make kids want to be there and want to learn? Problem-based learning is and engaging model of teaching that draws kids in and helps them to see the
relevance of what they are learning in a “real life” scenario. If I had a nickel for every time a student said “Why do I need to learn this – when am I ever going to use it?” I would be a rich man. I’ll be honest, I don’t always have an answer for those students. Problem-based learning would be a way that I could really tie in what we are learning in class to situations where kids would need to use what they were learning in a real life scenario. I have very simple ideas of how to use measurement, sine, cosine and tangent, Pythagorean Theorem and solving equations on a construction site. Our school is currently undergoing a $16 million dollar renovation. There will be construction crews on site for the next 2 years completing the task. What a great opportunity for me to use problem-based learning in a real world scenario in math. I am excited to start planning!

As I stated earlier, this is one of two classes I am taking as a start down the path of obtaining my master's degree in Education Administration. I feel like I have already gained a wealth of knowledge that will help me right now in my classroom and will also be extremely valuable to me to help guide other teachers in the future as their principal. I have really learned a lot about the different ways students learn and different strategies that I can use to help all students connect to the information being taught and become life-long learners. My “toolbox” now has the "latest and greatest" tools to help me accomplish that!