For the past twenty-two years, I have been immersed in the role of student. Before August 2007 I had seen the teaching-learning process from just one perspective; the result was the creation of many ignorant assumptions. This is especially true concerning the role of a good math teacher. I thought a math teacher simply did some examples at the board, assigned homework problems from the textbook, and gave a test at the end of a chapter. This classroom environment, however, does not promote learning and the impact it has on students’ lives. What does the effective teacher do? What do students in this teacher’s classroom look like? These questions are the broad base from which to start when developing an educational philosophy. Through an exploration of my beliefs about teachers and teaching, learners and learning, knowledge, and my overall philosophical orientation to education, I hope to acquire the understanding necessary to answer those questions.

Deciding to become a teacher did not come quickly for me. I had just finished the fall semester of my senior year at Manchester College, and I thought I had a clear idea of where my life was headed. The graduate school applications were in the mail, and I was exploring some careers in the banking industry. However, I felt that something was lacking in both paths. I sought a stimulating career that would require the creation of a new me. My personality had never previously pushed me towards creativity or the roles associated with being a leader, but I wanted that to change. The answer came to me almost immediately; teaching was just the profession to provide an avenue for this redefinition of myself. Through the teaching of mathematics, I hope to lead future generations to a love for the subject through engaging connections to real life while simultaneously creating the new, more influential me.
As a teacher I will be expected to stimulate and support the cognitive growth of my students. This can be accomplished through the roles a teacher must embody. A teacher is a subject matter expert who is eager to inspire future generations to pursue the endeavors that subject offers. Therefore a teacher should continually seek new approaches to instruction that are both engaging and relevant to students. A teacher is also an adult advocate for students. In a world where many are forgotten, a teacher knows that all students can succeed with appropriate differentiation. The teacher is a supporter on whom students can rely not to belittle, use sarcasm, or emphasize only weaknesses in student performance. Teachers provide students with reasonable and useful assessments and focus on life-long learning in a project-oriented classroom. For example, a teacher could simply tell students the formula for a parabola and reinforce it through exercises in the textbook, but the information is likely to mean more if they construct a solar oven using the same ideas. Finally, the teacher is “less a sage on the stage and more a guide on the side” (Vatterott, 2007). A teacher with this mindset establishes an active environment in which student responsibility and independence is valued. Students are encouraged to analyze the impact of their choices in the quest for personal growth.

The effective teacher is also guided by beliefs about learners and learning. In my personal experiences as a student, learning was dominated by external forces such as good grades and parental approval. It is hard to escape this fact in modern society, but learning is most valuable when it occurs for the sake of learning. This is just now becoming apparent to me as I look for ways to help others discover the math that saturates everyday. I also believe that learning is most valuable when it is focusing on
improvement and not perfection. Mistakes are a key component of the learning process that allows students to see how their learning evolves overtime. As a result they will glean more relevance from the learning process. I believe that all students learn best when the learning objectives and assessment criteria are clear. If the teacher clearly outlines expectations and how he or she will determine if those expectations are being fulfilled, then students will take more responsibility in their learning and positive results are more likely. Finally, I believe that learning is more satisfactory for the learner if he or she establishes a balance between independent exploration and collaborative inquiry. In other words the student connects to learning through both reflective thinking and dialogue with classmates. The ideas of others present new perspectives from which students can build their knowledge base while personal reflection allows students to acquire a sense of how their learning occurs and progresses over time.

In addition to concerns about teaching and learning, teachers need to establish a sense of the meaning of knowledge. I believe that true knowledge is that which we can use to understand life and the world in which that life takes place. Does true knowledge include that which is eventually forgotten? For example, true knowledge may not necessarily include the exact formula for the volume of a sphere, but understanding the concept of volume can enable students to understand their environment. This is true knowledge. Due to its timeless nature, math curriculum does not undergo radical changes very often. Therefore I will encourage students to develop a knowledge based on authority and tested by reason and personal experience. When they hear a theorem or proposition, they need to wonder about its validity and how it furthers understanding of their own lives. Only then will true knowledge be constructed.
My teaching philosophy does not fit just one of the five major philosophical branches of education; rather it is a synthesis of perennialism and reconstructionism. At first these philosophies come across as incompatible; perennialism deals with that which is constant while reconstructionism delves into change. However, I believe the two can be used harmoniously. I want students to acquire knowledge of unchanging principles and apply them in an effort to reconstruct the existing social order. In other words, students are using the everlasting ideas of yesterday to discover solutions to problems of today. For the perennialist this style of teaching develops the rational person and critical thinking skills. For the reconstructionist this style of teaching uses the reason and critical thinking to understand the world as it currently is and reshape it. The marriage of perennialism and reconstructionism allow teachers to use classic ideas and creative works, but it is not confined to them.

Finally, I believe learning is an active process in which students “construct understanding of the material to be learned” (Parkay, 2007). This approach to learning is known as constructivism. I believe students are constantly using constructivist tactics when they study mathematics. They are always using prior knowledge to understand new material. For example, students will struggle in learning how to use formulas if they cannot recall their basic knowledge of addition and multiplication. This belief also implies a student-centered classroom where the students are dynamically involved with the content through engaging and varied instruction and hands-on activities. An environment of this kind increases both teacher and student satisfaction and achievement.

My decision to become a teacher was based on primitive ideas of what a teacher is really like. Those ideas have been radically altered in the past six months. The
refinement of that perspective and my passion for the career are directly related; my
desire to teach has increased as the true responsibilities of a teacher have become clearer
to me. My new perceptions of the effective teacher, shaped by my philosophy of
education, promote the success of learners both in and outside the classroom. This career
choice will challenge me to move beyond my comfort zones in an effort to inspire
students with a love for the exciting future of mathematics.