



From Theory to Practice: How the MAT Program Shaped Us as Educators

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The MAT program at Lake Forest College has helped our cohort grow into reflective, student-centered educators who are prepared to enter classrooms with purpose, care, and confidence. Through coursework, fieldwork, and student teaching, we strengthened our ability to plan instruction aligned to standards, use assessment and data to guide instructional decisions, and design learning experiences that are engaging, rigorous, and accessible to diverse learners. The program gave us more than theory; it gave us the opportunity to put theory into practice in meaningful and consistent ways. As a result, we leave this program with a stronger understanding of what effective teaching looks like and a deeper sense of responsibility for the work we are about to undertake as educators.

One of the most valuable aspects of the MAT program was that it pushed us to see teaching as both an intellectual and deeply human profession. We were not only asked to learn strategies, methods, and frameworks, but also to think carefully about our values, our beliefs about students, and the kind of classrooms we hope to create. This reflective process helped us move beyond viewing teaching as a checklist of responsibilities and instead understand it as purposeful, relational, and transformative work. We learned that strong teaching involves careful planning and content knowledge, but also humility, flexibility, empathy, and a willingness to keep growing. The program reminded us that becoming an educator is not just about mastering technique, but about developing a professional identity rooted in service, reflection, and continuous learning.

Throughout the program, we came to better understand the importance of relationships, classroom culture, and consistent expectations in shaping the conditions for learning. We learned that students thrive when they feel safe, known, respected, and challenged. Meaningful learning cannot happen without trust, and trust is built through genuine relationships, thoughtful classroom structures, and a belief in students' potential. The MAT program encouraged us to think intentionally about how the environment we create as teachers can either affirm students or unintentionally hold them back. This has shaped the way we now think about instruction—not

¹ With contributions from Aidan Horn (MAT '26), Lake Forest College.

simply as the delivery of lessons, but as part of a broader effort to create spaces where students feel a true sense of belonging and are supported in taking healthy academic and personal risks.

A major strength of the MAT program was the way it deepened our understanding of culturally responsive teaching, and the responsibility educators have to honor students' identities, languages, and lived experiences. We were reminded that students do not enter classrooms as empty vessels waiting to be filled. They bring with them histories, cultures, funds of knowledge, strengths, and perspectives that must be seen as assets. This understanding challenged us to reflect critically on whose voices are centered in the curriculum, how classroom materials represent students and communities, and what it means to create instruction that is both rigorous and affirming. The program taught us that equity is not a separate initiative, but a mindset and commitment that should shape all aspects of our work, from planning and assessment to communication and advocacy.

For many of us, this learning was especially meaningful in relation to multilingual and bilingual education. The MAT program equipped us to teach in both dual language and monolingual settings and helped us develop a stronger understanding of how language functions in the classroom. We learned to support bilingual learners through translanguaging, intentional language development, scaffolds, and equitable differentiation that increases access for all students. This preparation helped us see students' full linguistic repertoires as strengths rather than deficits. It also pushed us to think more deeply about how schools can either affirm or suppress students' identities through language practices and instructional choices. As educators, we now feel more prepared to create learning environments where multilingualism is valued and where students can draw on all of their resources to make meaning and participate fully.

In addition to strengthening our understanding of language and culture, for many of us, the MAT program also expanded our capacity to support students with diverse learning needs. Through our coursework and field experiences, we developed a greater understanding of IEP processes, collaboration with special education teams, and the use of accommodations, modifications, and multi-tiered supports. We were pushed to think beyond broad ideas of differentiation and to consider what inclusion truly requires in daily practice. This included learning how to identify barriers to learning, collaborate with others to better support students, and adapt instruction in ways that preserve rigor while increasing access. The program also gave us practical experience with ESL strategies, scaffolds, and language-rich instruction that supports both content understanding and language development. These experiences taught us that effective teaching requires patience, adaptability, and a commitment to meeting students where they are while continuing to believe in what they are capable of becoming.

Another deeply meaningful aspect of the MAT program was the Teacher Action Research project, which allowed us to experience both the art and the science of teaching in a powerful way. Through this work, we learned how to collect, analyze, and interpret data in order to better understand student learning, classroom dynamics, and the impact of instructional choices. This

process showed us that teaching is not only relational and intuitive, but also analytical and evidence-based. It requires us to observe carefully, ask important questions, study patterns, and make informed decisions based on what students show us. The action research project helped us see that teachers are not simply implementers of externally-generated ideas, but thoughtful professionals capable of generating knowledge from their own classrooms and practice.

Rather than only consuming research created by others, we were challenged to become active contributors to pedagogical understanding. The action research process invited us to identify meaningful problems of practice, frame researchable questions, collect relevant data, and reflect on what our findings revealed about teaching and learning. Questions on how translanguaging-based classroom communication routines that align with students' real-world language repertoires support their engagement and meaning-making during content learning in a third-grade dual language classroom reflects the kind of purposeful inquiry this work made possible. Through projects like these, we learned how to move from curiosity to systematic study, from anecdotal impressions to evidence, and from reflection to instructional action. We came to see research not as something distant from teaching, but as one of the ways excellent teaching is developed and sustained.

This process was especially empowering because it taught us to trust our professional observations while also grounding our decisions in evidence. It gave structure to our reflections and pushed us to articulate why certain practices matter, for whom they matter, and how they can be improved. We learned that data is not only about numbers or compliance; it is a tool for understanding students more deeply and making more equitable, student-centered decisions. At the same time, the program reminded us that data must always be interpreted with humanity. Behind every observation, assessment, and artifact is a student with a story, a context, and a set of strengths and needs. This balance between evidence and empathy is one of the most important lessons we take with us from the MAT program. It reflects the program's larger message that teaching must be both rigorous and compassionate.

The MAT program also taught us the importance of collaboration and the power of learning in community. We did not move through this experience alone. As a cohort, we learned alongside one another, shared ideas, reflected on challenges, celebrated successes, and supported each other through moments of uncertainty and growth. Our professors, mentors, and cooperating teachers also played a significant role in shaping our development, pushing us to think more deeply and helping us connect theory to practice. This collaborative experience reminded us that teaching should not be isolated work. Some of our most important learning came through dialogue—with peers, with mentors, and with the students and communities we served. The sense of community within the MAT program made our growth possible and reinforced the importance of remaining open to feedback, learning from others, and contributing to professional communities in our future schools.

As we reflect on the MAT program as a whole, we recognize that it has shaped us in ways that go beyond lesson planning, assessment, and pedagogy. It has helped us develop a clearer sense of who we are as educators and who we hope to become in service to our communities and the world. It has challenged us to teach more inclusively, think more critically, and lead with greater integrity. It has shown us that teaching is demanding work that requires both heart and skill, both reflection and action. Most importantly, it has affirmed that education can be a space for transformation—not only for students, but also for teachers and the communities they serve.

We leave the MAT program deeply thankful for what Lake Forest College has provided us. We leave with stronger knowledge, a deeper understanding of students and teaching, and greater confidence in our ability to lead classrooms with intention. At the same time, we leave with humility and a continued desire to keep learning. We know that entering the profession is only the beginning, and we understand that becoming the teachers we hope to be will require continued reflection, collaboration, and growth. Even so, this program has prepared us well. It has equipped us to enter schools with professionalism, competence, and heart. It has empowered us to see ourselves not only as future teachers, but as thoughtful, reflective professionals who are ready to make a meaningful difference in the lives of students and in the future of education.

On behalf of the MAT '26 cohort