As an elementary student, Samuel Kapler, now a senior math education major, was big into math and could often times be found teaching his younger cousins how to do math problems. However, as he grew up and his world expanded, a career in math education wasn’t something that was on his mind.

In fall 2012, Kapler started here at UNI as a deciding major, not sure what major was the right fit for him. The one thing he was sure of, though, was his love for mathematics. As he took classes his first year, he discovered that becoming a math educator was something he was passionate about and it was because of a problem that he realized existed in K-12 classrooms.

“Students tend to have a negative attitude toward [math] which makes me all the more want to overturn that ideal,” Kapler explained. “They don’t have to necessarily love it, but I want to help them not hate it; to be more comfortable with it.” As Kapler took more math and education classes his sophomore and junior years, he fell more and more in love with the field. This love prompted one of his instructors to present him with the opportunity to travel abroad during summer 2015 to teach mathematics to students at the KNU Global Summer School in South Korea.

“The program to travel to South Korea sounded so unreal,” Kapler said. “I was given the opportunity to teach mathematics and American culture to South Koreans and it was the most teaching I’ve done to date.” Kapler has completed his level 1 and level 2 field experiences through the UNI Teacher Education program but teaching in South Korea was his first experience leading a classroom as the head teacher.

“Having the entire classroom be mine, from planning to teaching, really made me be a leader right off the bat,” Kapler explained. “It was my first lesson planning experience for an actual classroom.”

Kapler created all of his lesson plans and then reviewed them with a Korean buddy assigned to help him with cultural context of his plan. The Korean buddy worked to fix any language barriers in the lesson and provided feedback on how the students would react to specific content.

Kapler saw the biggest difference between teaching math overseas in South Korea versus here in the United States in the eagerness of the students.

“Americans are a lot less eager and a lot less curious about education. The students I taught were friendly, respectful and wanted to listen,” Kapler explained. “They had a different attitude toward their education than some of the students I have worked with in America and they wanted to learn.”
What surprised Kapler the most, though, was how the students learned. As soon as he wrote material on the board, the students were quick to memorize the content, but didn’t necessarily utilize critical thinking as much as he expected. His classes at UNI taught him the importance of incorporating both memorization and problem solving into his lesson planning and the importance of both in learning.

“UNI taught me to view learning as something that goes beyond just memorization but that critical thinking is necessary too for learning to occur,” Kapler stated. “There’s a reason UNI is known for high excellence in its teacher education program. They hire fantastic staff who know what they are doing; and the professors here care about their students and that’s why I was even presented with the opportunity to teach abroad in the first place. That’s what we are taught as future teachers, to care about our students, and that’s what my teacher did for me.”

Coming into UNI as a deciding major gave Kapler the opportunity to explore what he was passionate about and in finding that passion in math education, he gained opportunities and new perspectives on the world that he may not have had if it wasn’t for the math education program at UNI.

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Kapler (middle row, far right) with other KNU Global Summer School teachers and students.