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### Philosophy of Teaching

My maternal ancestors immigrated from Hungary and Ireland just before the onset of the Great Depression, and survived by working as steel mill workers and seamstresses, and my paternal ancestors fled from religious persecution and raised their children on farms out here in the West. Both my parents grew up alongside chickens--my mother on a dairy farm in Gilbert and my father in urban Phoenix--and they both self-funded their college educations over the course of more than seven years. I owe each of them an immeasurable debt of gratitude for the freedoms, home, and education that I now enjoy. I went to a Title-I school, and so I saw firsthand the difference that a high school diploma and a college degree can make. From my family's experience and my own, I have seen the opportunities that education unlocks and the quality of life it produces. It is my goal to use education to empower and inspire my students, particularly those in low-income communities. This, as I see it, is the two-fold purpose of education: to give students the tools they need to achieve their ambitions, and to expand what those ambitions can be.

When considering students' diverse needs, backgrounds, goals, and dreams, it is important to consider that success looks very different for each student. In my case, due to the experiences of my ancestors, my parents, and myself, I believe in the power of grit, the ability of a person to shape their personal circumstances and build a happy and prosperous life through hard work, self-control, and wise decision-making. For the same reasons, my conception of

"happy and prosperous" does not necessarily reflect the upper middle class ideal of a large house and multiple yearly vacations. I understand that unbridled wealth is not possible for everyone, nor do I necessarily set it up as the ideal. In the case of my students, many come from homes struggling with addictions, absent parents, emotionally absent parents, gangs, hunger, poverty, violence, and other devastating obstacles. For them, success can vary from simply staying out of prison all the way to attending an out-of-state university. Success can look like learning how to budget food stamps, or learning how to research and purchase a new car. I saw both extremes at my own high school, and I continue to see both among my students. As a general rule, I think that success entails either having or actively building toward a stable living situation, a functional family (whatever that might look like), and a job that meets your economic and personal needs. However, I do not want to restrict my students to this narrow definition of success, and I would much rather equip them with the skills necessary to build whatever kind of lives they aspire towards achieving.

So then, how will I help students achieve their diverse ambitions? I believe that education can address the vast cultural and socioeconomic discrepancies within classrooms by teaching skills, as opposed to rote memorization alone. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, skills that are critical to navigating the political, economic, and interpersonal landscape of our day include critical thinking, interpersonal skills, healthy mental-emotional behaviors, constructive habits, technological competence, social literacy, historical awareness, and literary proficiency. Of those skills, AZCCRS requires half, and measures two through standardized testing. Therefore, what it means to teach is somewhat misaligned--though not incongruent--with what legislators require of teachers, and even further from the tests that measure teacher and student aptitude. I will easily meet state standards in the process of pursuing these goals, and so I do not allow the

standards to act as a cap, as a close-ended set of requirements, but rather view them as a strong platform on which to build the other important aspects of my students' education. In essence, I want to teach my students the skills that I deem important, that the current job market deems important, and that the government deems important.

The ways in which I will teach these skills are guided by a few core principles that define my pedagogical philosophy, but my most fundamental educational belief is in free speech. In the United States, education has become a social control force to which all youth are subject, whether in a public, private, charter, or home school setting. Students are required by law to listen to and obey these authority figures we call teachers, and so teachers find themselves in a unique position of influence that can easily go unchecked, or be used to further their own agendas. Too often, these personal agendas are incompatible with the needs and wants of the students/ communities that teachers are supposed to serve, which results in the perpetuation of social inequities that teachers could otherwise be instrumental in combatting. This reality has lead some current politicians and prominent media figures to frame education as the current civil rights issue of our time. As I perceive it, the single greatest obstacle to an alignment between teachers' actions and their students' needs is the restriction of the free expression of ideas. When students cannot communicate their truths, when students cannot think new thoughts or read new books, they cannot change their circumstances. Knowledge, and the ideologically free pursuit of it, is fundamental to a successful educational system. If students are forced to accept their teachers' interpretations of reality as fact, and then forced to regurgitate those views in their own words, our educational system amounts to nothing more than a sad attempt at brainwashing our youth into complacency and mediocrity. As a side note, if teachers are forced to accept and promote as fact an interpretation of reality established by one set of legislators, then the same

result holds true. Therefore, first and foremost, I believe that I should help my students develop their own thoughts and beliefs, not fill them up with mine.

To that end, I intend to challenge students' existing paradigms, encourage students to research and defend their own thoughts and beliefs, and facilitate open dialogues between people with different perspectives. First, I will introduce students to ideas, stories, and authors that represent different ways of thinking about important issues or different ways of living, and simultaneously provide my students with the literal and metaphorical space in which to pursue ideas that intrigue them. As one potential example of such a thing, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee and *If I Ever Get Out of Here* by Eric Gansworth are both harrowingly realistic fictionalized accounts of prejudice. The second book, which is less well-known, is the semi-autobiographical retelling of what it was like to grow up on the Tuscarora Indian Reservation in 1975, and deals with the day-to-day discrimination that so many people endured. Ideally, I would like my students to have the option to read both books, then pursue other salient discussions of prejudice in America, and finally tell their own experiences in relationship to the same issues. Second, as students grapple with complex topics and consider multiple perspectives on those topics, they will come to understand and articulate their own beliefs more clearly. Plus, they will be better able to understand the perspectives of others. Those two books certainly had that effect on me during my student years. Third, I will not censor ideas that I disagree with, and I will certainly not make students feel unable to voice their views, even and especially the dissident perspectives. Whenever my teachers enforced their own interpretations—even interpretations that I agreed with—or even simply gave a more powerful voice to one side of an argument over another, I always saw the intellectual diversity of that classroom suffer. Every time, class discussions devolved toward intellectual homogeneity, and thus away from

usefulness. As a teacher, I will give equal voice to opposing viewpoints without disparaging one or the other. To preserve and maximize the intellectual potential of my classroom, I will do my best to afford students the space to expand their understanding, openly engage in meaningful conversations, and stand by their views.

In the same spirit of facilitating open discussion and free expression of ideas, I will not tolerate bullying, nor will I tolerate discrimination against race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, age, nationality, veteran status, religion, or beliefs. These things are not conducive to the free expression of thought, and are often applied in academic settings to the emotional, academic, and social detriment of students based on their various intersecting cultures. While it has become increasingly easy in today's volatile political climate to censor others' ideas through the mechanism of overly policed speech, there is a distinction between the open expression of ideas and the use of words or ideas to deliberately marginalize others in an otherwise intellectual discussion. When it comes to children in a mandatory school environment, I am more willing to restrict the use of unkind words than I am in the adult sphere. For instance, adult comedians often use racial slurs to reclaim the terms and strip them of their derogatory power, but grade school students typically do not apply that nuance when yelling racial slurs at their schoolmates. In the adult scenario, censoring taboo words censors ideas, but in the adolescent scenario, censoring taboo words protects other students' abilities to communicate in an environment of openness and respect. My goals in supporting the free expression of ideas is to protect and achieve the maximum degree of intellectual freedom and development for all of my students.

Of course, everything I have just presented all functions in support of my original two-fold goal in becoming a teacher, which is to empower and inspire students. When I understand my own definitions of success, philosophical values, and pedagogical approaches, I will be that

much closer to enabling students to express and live by their own. When I expose students to new perspectives, create a space in which new ideas can be openly debated, and encourage students to develop and defend their own viewpoints, I empower my students with the ability to pursue their education in the way that they deem will be most beneficial to them, as opposed to restricting them through established power structures that are often adverse to their needs. I open up space for discussion about their diverse academic needs, and provide room for the development of the aforementioned 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, which is the crux of what I hope to truly teach my students. These benefits are further protected when verbal bullying is prohibited, specifically within a setting that necessarily involves adolescents who are required by law to participate in the classroom. When combined, these tenants of my educational philosophy empower students to achieve their diverse ambitions, and allow them to expand what those ambitions can be.