MS. ADDY RIGDON’S TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

My teaching philosophy is built on one, seemingly simple, foundational sentence: kids do well if they can. This six-word phrase, drawn from the work of Dr. Ross Greene and colleagues, radically rejects conventional thinking about student motivation and success. As a teacher, it is my job to create a safe environment with tools and supports so that each child is able and empowered to do well. If a child is not doing well in my classroom, it is my duty to understand and disrupt the obstacles that stand in his/her way. In creating a supportive environment for each student, it is my belief that a classroom must be both structured and nurturing. My classroom must also be equitable to be a space of growth, and I must use my power as a teacher to disrupt patterns of oppression in education.

Safety and security are rooted in structure and consistency. As such, I believe that having a structured classroom is vital to student success. By my definition, structure equates to clear expectations, consistency, and routine in the classroom. I believe that setting boundaries and expectations helps develop a child’s character, intrinsic moral compass and understanding of the world. In my classroom, expectations are decided upon by the entire group, and are always up for discussion. For example, my students work together in community circles to develop our classroom manifesto, or set of norms and agreements for our shared space. This gives students agency, and helps them think deeply about the learning community they want to strive for. Once decided upon, expectations outlined on the document are posted and upheld consistently. With clearly set expectations in place, students have a steady framework in which to grow, learn, and develop their own unique identity. When expectations are not met and class guidelines are broken, I work with my students to determine and implement a logical consequence. If a student makes a huge mess at lunchtime, for example, they will be the one to clean it up. Consequences in my classroom are respectful, responsive to choices and actions (rather than student character), and provide students with opportunities to restore their membership in the class community. My classroom community of curiosity, growth, trust, and kindness can only exist when students feel safe to learn and take risks.

        My philosophy of teaching is rooted both in consistent structures as well as another critical component: nurture. While consistency, rules, and boundaries are hugely important, I believe they must be matched with care, love, and support. This is why I choose to use restorative practices and positive discipline. Nurturing a student means taking a rigorous interest in him/her as a learner and a person. It means showing students that their ideas and feelings are important and worth sharing. One important way I nurture and respect my students is by really listening to them- their thoughts, questions, stories, and solutions. Our whole-group lessons provide ample opportunities for student voice, our small group and partner work is largely student-directed, and our independent work time is rich in student-teacher conferences. Listening builds our classroom community of trust, growth and kindness.

Within this classroom environment underpinned by safety and nurture, I aim to create an equitable space where each child is held to a high standard and given the tools they need to succeed. True equity in the classroom means that each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential. This kind of equity cannot exist if students are not building their foundational academic skills. Each student must be challenged and held to a high standard, determined by their own individual needs and developmental rate. This is shown in our daily classwork as well as in our overarching project work. Student literacy growth, for example, will look different for each student (i.e. intervention groups, focus areas, reading strategies), but literacy growth will still be expected from each student. If my students are not building their skills and making academic strides, I am not doing my job as a teacher. Empowering my students to challenge themselves and take charge of their learning will prepare them for future classrooms and careers, no matter where their futures take them.

I am a white, female educator who recognizes that schools have historically been used as vehicles of oppression (by people who look like me) to maintain the status quo and hold marginalized groups down. Knowing this, I am aware that every action and inaction I make as a teacher can either uphold or disrupt patterns of oppression and power dynamics of the classroom. Sending a student of color out of the room for a minor infraction, for example, sends a message that I have power over them and am exerting my power to cast them out of our community. I must be aware of the culture of power that exists in our country and the unjust privileges it affords me. I know that, as a white educator, I must defy systems of oppression that impact my students. My version of defiance is driven by encouraging student agency and family involvement in the classroom. As a teacher, it is my job to make sure that every family member is welcomed, supported, and heard. This might look like inviting families in to share their favorite book, or including family members in shaping our project design. It takes a village to raise a child, and I know that including a child’s family in their learning and growth is one of the best ways to guarantee student success in the classroom and beyond. My defiance looks like talking about and celebrating our differences, creating a community where no student feels attacked or excluded because of the beautiful traits that make us different. It looks like inviting experts of color into our class, so that my students see parts of themselves represented in their role models. My defiance looks like inviting student experience and expertise into my pedagogy, recognizing that my students carry with them a wealth of social capital. It means acknowledging that I do not have all the answers, and knowing that I have much to learn from each student and family member I speak with. It includes framing the classroom as our shared space of learning, not a domain over which I reign. My defiance is truly believing that kids do well if they can, and unequivocally welcoming any and all forms of learning.

In sum, the classroom is where children spend the majority of their day, for the majority of the year, for the majority of their childhoods. It is a critical environment not only for academic learning, but also for social emotional growth and character development. The interactions and experiences a child has in the classroom shape his or her identity and perceived ability to succeed. With this in mind, it is my role as a teacher to advocate for each of my students ferociously. Students leave my classroom with the confidence to be their own strongest advocate, knowing that they are resilient, brilliant, and ready to take on the world. My choice to teach is rooted in my love for working with children and families, and motivated most strongly by my belief in each child’s ability to succeed. It is my firm belief that kids do well if they can, and I work tirelessly to create a classroom community where *every* student carries the mantra, “Sí se puede” or “Yes, we can.”