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R2D3- Intercultural Engagement Application- Project GEM

In the spring 2023 semester, I took an opportunity through Project GEM to become an art teacher for students with severe emotional behavioral disorders (EBD). Project GEM is a nonprofit that works to place volunteers in a low-income/high-risk special education setting for arts education. Given the unique needs of the students at this special education-only school, it is difficult to change schedules daily and incorporate noncore academic activities such as art, music, and physical education. The school depends on programs like project GEM and volunteers like me to give students those opportunities.

I became aware of the program and that they were looking for volunteers through the honors newsletter. I filled out an online application and then an interview over zoom. I also had training over zoom as well as a brief meeting in person. Going into the role, I had previous experience working with students who have disabilities and felt excited to continue to gain experience in my future professional field of special education. My role was as an art teacher in one sixth and one seventh-grade classroom; both with students with severe EBD. The classrooms I went into had about 5-8 students, one special education teacher, and usually a paraprofessional. When in the role I spent time creating weekly lesson plans, instructing the lesson, and preparing a show for student work. I planned and gave the lessons independently, with little input or support from the special education teacher in the classroom. The challenges I faced were mostly in classroom management and connecting with students.

Emotional behavioral disorder is a disability category within special education. Students' EBD may cause them to struggle with following norms/rules, making connections with others, controlling intense emotions, or more depending on the unique needs of the student. In this case, the students I worked with had such severe emotional and behavioral problems that they were not able to be successful in a traditional school setting. The students I worked with were placed in a self-contained special education classroom and school.

Emotional behavioral disorder is a large part of these students' identity; it has shaped the school they are in, the classmates they are with, and will affect their future. To understand these students and their identity I first need to understand my own. In my own background and educational journey, I was fortunate to experience success without much friction. My parents and siblings are all college-educated to some degree and I was brought up to value education. I have aligned with the public education system successfully, being able to conform to the traditional path of completing high school in the typical four years, earning college credit while in high school, and moving on to higher education. Students with EBD have an identity that does not align with the traditional systems, but it is not to say that they cannot be successful. Success just looks different than what I and others are used to.

I have experience working as a paraprofessional to support special education students. I have worked with students who have learning disabilities, autism, and EBD. I knew EBD caused students to struggle socially at times and that behaviors can often impact academic success. My background, however, was in the typical public school with students who have mild-to-moderate disabilities. I did not have experience working with students with this severity of EBD.

In this experience, I had to overcome ethnocentrism and adjust my understanding of the student as someone with EBD. In this academic setting, the students I am working with have a

severe disability that impacts every part of their everyday life. They *may* approach directions differently, communicate how they feel in unique ways, have different tolerance for challenges, have low self-esteem, and more depending on the student and scenario; but I needed to remember all students are different and not all stereotypes are true.

Before gaining experience, I tended to try to predict how students would respond and their abilities. I needed to let go of my preconceived thoughts and expectations and allow the students to create their own identities. For example, I would assume that if our lesson had complex directions students would get overwhelmed and therefore not complete the task. I shied away from challenging the students because I assumed that they would not tolerate the challenge. I learned how resilient these students are and how they are very capable.

I also needed to change how I communicated and connected with them. To have an effective relationship with these students I had to consider both of our identities, not just my own. I can not only consider my half of communication style, comfort level, or language level. At first, I gave complicated directions in large chunks and did not break it up well. This did not work for all students. One of the students processed verbal language slower than I am used to due to their disorder. In this case, it was more effective to use simple language spoken at a slower rate.

It is important to build rapport with students of all types, but especially students with EBD. Power dynamics are a large consideration when working with students who have EBD as a part of their identity. Connecting with students will usually take more time and build trust as an authority figure. I had to be more patient and explicit in the relationships I built with these students versus students I have worked with in the past. In the past, I have been able to feel a connection with a student in just a few short interactions. With these students I felt unsuccessful

after the first couple of meetings because I expected a faster connection. In the dynamic between teacher and student, I have the power. When I step out of my role and identity as their teacher and try to step into their role as student, I can understand how they would be slower to connect. Beyond the typical role of teacher and student, these students also have another layer in their identity as a student with EBD. Teachers don't always serve students with EBD in a way that is best for them. Instead, teachers seem to set and carry out a system that doesn't always allow success for EBD students. Considering this history of an imbalance of power, I can understand even more why the students may be slow to connect.

This experience is directly applicable to my future as a special education teacher because of its work with students whose identity is impacted by their disability. Through this experience I had to reflect on my personal identity as someone who is not disabled and has had success in the traditional school system. I will have to note that my future students have a different identity and because of that, they may interact with me in ways different than I expect. The mindfulness of a student's identity humanizes them as an individual and validates their needs- even if they are different needs. I can continue the practice of meeting the student halfway, and not only basing communication and connection opportunities on my previous experience and personal identity. Without this experience, I may have been less mindful of students' unique, individual needs and placed too much value on my assumptions of students