

How have your *life experiences* prepared you to teach my area of concentration? What have been your strengths in preparation, areas needing growth, plans for next steps?

Literature has always been an obsessive passion for me. Growing up, my father was always reading something new to him or writing something of his own. My mother was always painting or drawing, and she encouraged me to engage in my own artistic practices. I took immediately to novels and poems like it was air to breathe. Not only did it strengthen my feelings of empathy and my desire to understand the perspectives of others, it provided me with opportunities to explore literature as an expression of identity, existence, and resistance.

When I was in middle school, my mother was undergoing treatment for cancer, my sister was in and out of the hospital, and my father had just begun his career as a teacher after working for many years in a leather tannery. Studying literature and going to school had always been things I greatly enjoyed, but now they had become my whole solace from the turbulence of my home life and a family who didn't have the time or energy for me. I was dedicated to my studies, voracious with hunger for any knowledge to enrich my inner world. And since the cafeteria lunch was the biggest meal I had on some days, that voracity was imbued with even more urgency.

It was during this time that I first become aware of the ways our bureaucratic approach to education disserves students at best and actively harms them at worst. Both of my parents left for work early, and my sister had dropped out of high school, so I was alone in the mornings. It was difficult to wake up and catch the bus at 6:50 AM; I missed it often. Each time, I walked the four and a half miles to school so that I could be there. It took over an hour to walk there, and each time I arrived late, I received a detention. I eventually was suspended (in-school suspension, I was relieved to hear) because of all my tardies. Yet there was never a question of why I was late so often, why I arrived in the winter with my hands stiff and red from walking through the New England cold. And how badly I wanted someone, anyone, to ask!

My experiences have instilled in me an indelible love for the written word and the craft of writing and analysis. That can never be shaken from me, and it's something I want to share with others as much as I can. I believe my experiences, in middle school, high school, and college, coming up against the shortfalls of our education systems, gave me a keen understanding of how these systems fail our students, especially those already marginalized. I need help finding the ways to work toward equitable education concretely, and I hope that Evergreen's Masters in Teaching program can help me get there.

How have your *academic experiences* prepared me to teach in your area of concentration? What have been your strengths in preparation, areas needing growth, plans for next steps?

In my undergraduate coursework at Emmanuel College and Evergreen, I extensively studied literature and writing. I've focused intensively on poetics, fiction, nonfiction, philosophy, creative writing, and formal academic writing. Some of my favorite courses were comprehensive explorations in the literature of American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (where we expanded the Modernist canon to include black writers), contemporary poetry and Islam (where we considered words as well as the space between them), and second-order cybernetics (where we studied art and the world around us through a systems-thinking lens). And of course, I learned a lot from my professors and my peers in every class I ever took.

I'm fascinated by language, its musicality, and the ways in which the dance of expression and interpretation manifest in everything from interpersonal relationships to philosophical texts as dense as a dying star. When I think about teaching English literature, I hark back to my days as a student. I think about my peers who delighted in language so challenging it felt aggressively esoteric. There were always other students, though, who were incredibly intelligent—but felt understandably excluded by highly abstract writing and the jargon of critical theory.

One thing I loved in the class about poetry and Islam was the emphasis on simplicity of language. We studied Rumi and Ibn Arabi, two poets who use sparse diction to exalt love and Allah, and my own poetry changed drastically as a result. I'm no longer interested in playing heady games with the reader: isn't it better to sing to them in a way they understand? The words we use are evocative of our perspective, and how we use them can truly define our perception of the world. When we use language in a way that excludes others by sheer fact of its opacity, without any consideration of who our audience is, it only serves to demonstrate that certain people deserve to understand what we're communicating, and others do not. I believe this awareness of interplay between text and interpretation is essential for any educator.

In addition to this understanding, my academic career gave me opportunities to hone my organizational skills and practice dedication to bettering myself each day. There is an incredible amount to be learned from educators, both those seasoned and those green as a spring sprig, and I hope to become an even more compassionate, open-minded, and intelligent person by studying pedagogy and working alongside our community's talented teachers. I also hope to improve my public speaking skills—essential for an educator. I've always struggled with getting up in front of a group of people and expressing my ideas to them. If I were to choose a particular area needing growth, it would be this. My confidence in my own leadership skills leaves something to be desired. I anticipate, though, that with practice will come ease.

Education is both a social good and structurally unjust. How do you understand this contradiction and how can it be addressed?

Education is an essential service. It is embodied not only in our school systems but how we parent our children, how we interact with our peers, and how we carry generational knowledge forward with us. Education can foster empathy and curiosity about the world around us, and it gives the opportunity to practice critical thinking skills that are crucial to our survival, our joy, and our compassion. It provides children with structure and community, allowing them the social skills necessary to connect with others and open themselves to friendship and emotional intimacy.

Unfortunately, any system within a culture is informed by that culture. This means that, since we live in a colonialist culture which privileges upper class, white, male, cis-gendered, heterosexual, able-bodied people, the praxis of our education reflects that. However intentional or unintentional, our educational system punishes students for being anything outside that privileged group (already a punishment in itself). This manifests in so many ways: curriculum strangled by its stiff adherence to a white, male canon which alienates marginalized students, schools that are inaccessible to immunocompromised students and students with disabilities, and an inability (or refusal) to supply teachers a livable wage are only a few.

While our schools do function to perpetuate the structural injustices that so many students and parents experience, they are undeniably an invaluable social good. When considering how to address this frustrating contradiction, it is imperative we examine every aspect of our educational system. As much as we need to diversify our curriculum, we need to examine how our grading is influenced by structural biases.

Grading strategies often go overlooked because of our deep entrenchment in the typical grading scale. Grading on a scale of 0 to 100 percent, as most teachers do, is a disservice to students and complicates what is meant to be as objective as possible an evaluation of their academic progress. Over half the possible score a student can receive is a failing grade—this leaves very little motivation for a student to improve their grade once they have even a single 0 dragging down their grade. Using a different grading scale can help take away the power of a low grade and give students the opportunity to redeem themselves.

The common practice of including behavior in a student's grade creates even more disparity in our education system. Many teachers include participation in students' grades. As someone who was shy in school, I understand how this can detrimentally impact students who may have no problem grasping material and showing their understanding in other ways than class discussion. Other soft skills, like time management, are also often graded. Docking points for a late assignment only means that the assignment's grade does not accurately reflect the academic aptitude of a student. Further, punishing misbehavior by lowering grades reinforces disparity that contributes to the reinforcement of our carceral state: students more likely to "act out" are those already most marginalized and most at risk of being funneled through the school-to-prison pipeline.