

Deciding to apply to TESC MiT program began years ago in a loud, chaotic high school hallway. It was a day of firsts': new school, new student, and my first official position as a paraeducator. Ready for the challenges and rewards of working with a non-verbal student, I had read her file, brushed up on my ASL, and had prepared some visual cue cards. She had her own tablet communication device as well, and I was hoping she was as excited as me for this day.

From the start nothing went as planned. First, she arrived without her device. Then her ASL was more made-up words and signs, none of which I knew or understood. My visual cue cards ended up thrown across the room. Finally, she was also a runner. Which is how we ended up sitting in the middle of the busy school hallway. When the halls finally grew empty and quiet, we sat side by side on the floor: exhausted, sweaty, both of us unhappy at how the day was turning out.

How was it possible with so many solid ways to communicate to not find success? What was I missing? I remembered reading that she loved listening to music. Pulling up a music play list on my phone, I chose a favorite to play out loud and watched her face light up and a smile emerge. She looked at my songs and chose the next one. She can read! In her files it didn't say she couldn't read, but I had wrongly assumed.

It was then that I realized that I was relying too much on *how* we were going to communicate. Success was not going to happen with just her device alone. Instead, I first needed to develop connections and not rely on just a couple ways for her to be able to communicate with me. Beginning with her love of music, she began to teach me how to communicate with her!

It took days and weeks to build those connections and find success. She often arrived without her device, or it wasn't charged. She hated my cue cards, and I stopped trying to use them. She taught me her sign language and I taught her some ASL. We began with a bond over music and found further connections through art, reading, basketball, and love of family and friends. Eventually we were also making academic progress. A non-verbal student wasn't the challenge. The challenge was me and I was challenged to change my views on how connections and learning should occur. Once I started thinking outside the box, the real teaching began.

After that life changing job, I went on to work with a diverse group of students, including my current position working with high schoolers who are at a facility to receive mental health care. They reflect the vast array of cultures, languages, religions, sexual orientation, and often special needs that can be found in all our public schools. I began to develop a passion for discovering ways to individualize how students learned. I was turning

connections and positive communication into a teaching tool and seeing that I was making a difference. Soon I was spending time outside of school hours researching how to make modifications to lessons and how to make academic subjects approachable for every student and to create a love of learning. I was also beginning to seriously consider going back to school and becoming a teacher.

Meanwhile, I taught students fractions and percentages while shooting hoops. We used everyday objects and Hot Wheel cars to learn Newton's Laws of Physics. They explored poetry to improve their reading and writing. I created art and music lessons that were also math lessons. More and more I thought about teaching as a career. If I became a teacher then I could still work creatively with lessons, but I'd also gain knowledge and know-how of more traditional methods of teaching. It would not matter if a student was non-verbal or spoke a different language at home. Whatever the challenges, if I better understood the basics of how to teach and combined that with my creativity and belief in individualizing learning, I knew I could create success for students. I began to imagine being part of a teaching team with folks who shared these same passions and the differences we could make together. It was time to pursue becoming a teacher.