

Personal Statement- Evergreen State College

Natashia Milburn (she, her, hers)

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Pursuing a Master's degree has always been a goal of mine, but after earning my Bachelors, I found myself unsure of the right path to follow. Rather than rush into a program that might not align with my future aspirations, I took a few years to explore my options and gain valuable hands-on experience working with youth. Late last year, I began applying for a Clinical Psychology Masters at the University of Central Florida. However, I soon discovered the university's deep ties to Israel, which conflicts with my personal values as an activist for Palestinian Liberation. As a result, I decided to seek out other universities and programs that reflected my values and principles. Regrettably, though not at all surprising, just about every institution in the United States has similar connections with Israel. After further research, I was thrilled to discover that Evergreen State College is the first college to divest from Israel and that it offers a duo pathway Master's in Teaching graduate program. As an advocate for a Free Palestine, I am inspired by Evergreen's stance and feel deeply motivated to apply to a college that matches my values, ethics, and passion for teaching youth through a Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive (DEI) lens.

During my undergraduate studies, I had two experiences which ultimately laid the foundation to my academic journey and even for my future career(s). A class I took the first semester of my education program, *English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Principles for K-12* ignited my interest in finding ways to integrate cross-cultural learning and cultural inclusivity into my overarching pedagogical approach. The following semester we were required to observe a classroom teacher for a total of 120 hours. I shadowed Ms. Nicole's 5th-grade science class at Lealman Innovation Academy in St. Petersburg, Florida and was instantly immersed into a culture of education that was unlike anything I had experienced before. Lealman Academy

serves students who face challenges in continuing their education at their originally assigned schools. The academy emphasizes project- and problem-based learning while promoting a culture of trust, respect, and responsibility.

However, it quickly became evident that the school was not effectively fostering a culture of trust and respect or seemingly any culture at all. I observed a lack of cultural validation or mother-tongue educational practices and saw few opportunities to enhance students' cross-cultural understanding. To create a culture of trust and respect, learning environments must support students' first languages to not only enhance their academic achievements but to acknowledge and celebrate their identities and backgrounds. Fascinated and inspired, I aimed to bridge the gap where the school was failing to provide culturally inclusive opportunities by connecting student's prior knowledge and/or things in their community or at home (Llosa et al., "Impact of a Large-Scale Intervention"). My strategies included visual aids such as multilingual printed handouts, index cards in their mother tongue, and bilingual glossaries with pictures. It's incredible how quick English Language Learner (ELL) students can learn when they are provided with culturally appropriate materials and accommodations to match their individual language proficiency and multilingual needs! While this experience was incredibly demanding, it was equally rewarding as it provided direct engagement with ELL students and youth from diverse cultural backgrounds. It served as a valuable preview for my pursuit of becoming a Multilingual Educator in Elementary Education.

After graduating, I began applying for jobs and quickly recognized the tremendous impact I could make in the realm of recreation, particularly in centers serving low-income communities. Recreation centers do not have curricula to follow or material to assess and there are less rules and regulations. This all allowed there to be unlimited opportunities to bring awareness to DEI practices and principles. When I was hired as a recreational counselor at the Broderick Recreation Center in the City of Pinellas Park, Florida, I felt that everything in my life

had led up to this position, at this specific recreational center. Within my first week at the center, I gave Broderick a much needed DEI makeover by adding multilingual signs, purchasing culturally diverse books, and advocating for left-handed scissors and larger markers to accommodate students' individual needs. However, my greatest achievement—and favorite task—was transforming culturally *exclusive* themes into themes that promoted cultural awareness and inclusivity.*

With an unwavering passion to enhance intellectual growth and emotional development through mindful, creative practices that champion a vibrant culture of inclusivity and diversity, I believe that the MiT program at Evergreen State College will elevate my knowledge to extraordinary heights. Through the integration of DEI into educational practices, we can cultivate a society where individuals are empowered to thrive as their authentic selves, thus building a more inclusive society.

Llosa, L., Lee, O., Jiang, F., Haas, A., O'Connor, C., Van Booven, C. D., & Kieffer, M. J. (2016). Impact of a Large-Scale Science Intervention Focused on English Language Learners. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(2), 395-424.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216637348>

*Attached to my application is my portfolio page of my week-long summer camp theme, “Ms. Shia’s Holidays Around the World” where we discussed other culture’s winter holiday traditions and made a culturally inclusive ornament to add to their jumbo holiday trees.