**Alia Trannon’s Teaching Philosophy:**

Growing up as a student who regularly experienced academic success throughout my time in the public school system, I still remember receiving my first low grade on an English essay in high school. My teacher, one of my favorites then and since, didn’t slash up my paper with angry red marks, but instead circled key parts and asked probing questions, inviting me to deepen my, admittedly surface level, assessment of the text. I worked hard revising that essay, which this teacher then accepted for full credit once I demonstrated deep engagement with the reading. Getting that A meant more than any of my other high marks throughout years of schooling, because I worked and I learned, and I felt like I had earned that score. I didn’t feel discouraged by my sub-par score, instead I felt challenged, like that teacher believed I could achieve deeper thinking than I was demonstrating. Since then, I have worked to channel the feeling of transformative learning experience in my own practice and have tried to model the learning environments that have stuck with me for years to come, in order to foster the ability to find joy in the process of discovery in my students, current and future. As parents leave their students in my care every day, they should expect to leave them in an environment where risk taking is celebrated as an integral part of their student’s learning process, and where deep learning and understanding of important knowledge is expected from, and achievable for, all students.

These hopes are centered in the reality of teaching middle school and knowing that it is a delicate time for many students who are enduring major changes physically, socially, and emotionally, in addition to engaging in schoolwork. I have found it important to be deeply empathetic and understanding of the tumultuous nature of their emotions and, at times, behaviors. At the same time, I find it vital to give middle school students clear and consistent expectations for engagement in order to optimize class time and student-teacher relationships. Students at this age are in an exploratory period of their life, where they are trying out new aspects of their identities and trying to affirm social status constantly. I hope to continue to grow in meeting these assertions with patience, and to leverage these complex experiences to stimulate learning and growth.

Specifically, being a teacher of the Humanities, I aim to guide students through English and Social Studies content while building associated skills in empathy, community building, self regulation and tracking, and critical thinking. Through engagement with literary and informational texts, students explore and intake stories and background on a wide variety of cultures and experiences to build empathy for the perspectives of those different from themselves. Students also explore and discuss historical and current events that shape the world around them to give them a more textured understanding of what they experience.

I believe that students learn best when they feel in control of, and responsible for, their learning. So, in my classroom, I give students as much choice with their engagement with the information as is feasible for the lesson. For example, for many reading lessons, I have students engage in independent reading and journaling to practice reading skills in their independent reading book. Also, giving more freedom in writing topics allows students to apply new skills to a piece of work that they are excited about!

I work to establish a culture of curiosity and growth mindset in the classroom to provide psychological safety and opportunity to explore and genuinely learn without feeling judged. This is seen through a policy of not grading assignments that are meant to advance learning of a topic or practice a new skill. I believe that grading the learning process emphasizes external approval, instead of stimulating a student’s natural curiosity. Over-grading assignments can also be discouraging to students who are struggling with the material, further limiting their engagement and learning. I want my students to find joy in learning, and I believe that alleviating some intense academic pressures that may already be swirling around will provide the best opportunity for learning with excitement.

Growing up in a rather traditional school system, I had a rigid perception of classroom management: points for good behavior and public exposure for poor behavior. Instead, I think class-wide practices such as building a list of expectations for teachers and students, with for steps if the expectations are broken are effective ways to build a common language around expectations that can be consistently referred back to as challenges arise throughout the year. These expectations also highlight the concept of class harmony, knowing that we brainstormed them as a community and so we are all expected to follow them.

Additionally, I believe that a teacher’s primary responsibility is a promoter of engagement, facilitator of information, and a mentor for growth. A crucial practice for this ideology is consistently pre-assessing students, or gathering their previous knowledge and interest in topics to maximize both their intake and their engagement with the information. This is something I am continually working toward in my teaching practice, and is easy for me to overlook in my plans in favor of over-explaining. Conferring during independent reading and writing helps me to achieve this in my classroom. Conferring about where students are feeling strong and what they are working towards on an individual level has provided boundless opportunities for differentiation in instruction, and has also helped inform small group or whole class lessons based on trends in conferences. These facets of teaching, when combined with strong class culture, are conducive to a space where deep and joyful learning takes place.

As a Black educator, my commitment to equity and a liberatory education for all students is close to the heart. I see culturally responsive teaching as one of my strengths, as I intimately know the sorts of hostile environments that have been created historically for students of color in schools. My goal is to create a classroom where students can show up as their whole selves, and can fit new knowledge and information into the way they understand the world, and to develop a space where there is continuity between the way a student learns and processes information in and outside of school. One of my main objectives as a teacher is to interrupt harmful patterns of distrust, and to create equitable environments for students of color. I aim to achieve this through grading practices such as a 0-4 rubric scale or developing a culture of continual revisions on assignments. I also emphasize restorative redirection and consequences, instead of being punitive or exclusionary, to disrupt historical inequities in classroom punishment, and statuses between students in the class. In restorative redirection, I provide consistent and clear expectations, followed by one warning, before a problem solving meeting, where the student and I work together to come up with solutions. This approach to discipline helps avoid assumptions made by teachers in tense moments of classroom discipline, which can harm the student-teacher relationship and the student’s academic identity.

Overall, the classroom is a place where students explore their interests and push themselves to expand their knowledge, even if they struggle at first. Classrooms are also the ultimate arena for collaborative learning and meaning making, and grappling with new information with peers propels even deeper learning than that is accomplished in isolation. I serve as their mentor who expects greatness from my students, and does everything in my power to make it achievable.