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This past January, I was in a dark place. I was anxious. I was exhausted. I felt defeated. I had trouble coping with the challenges of this school year both professionally and personally. Luckily, I dragged myself into a path forward when given the opportunity to write and reflect as part of the Teacher Leader Fellowship Program. Dr. Betty Sternberg asked me to write a reflection of my experience teaching during the pandemic which turned into part of a published monograph. As I reflected, I didn't want to sit in the dark any longer. I wanted to use the darkness to identify lessons that can drive our path forward. The reflection process brought me into the light of positivity and I realized that I was letting myself focus on what isn't instead of what could be! I see the path forward as continuing to be a lifelong learner and continuing to seek opportunities to positively impact the future. I realized that my voice matters. Being a TEAM mentor and cooperating teacher would continue my path of continuous learning while allowing me to use my voice to impact future generations of teachers and students. This year I was lucky enough to be able to learn with CCSU interns. I worked hard to make their experience valuable. Unexpectedly, I learned just as much from them.

My strive to be a continuous learner is also why I believe I would be an effective TEAM mentor and cooperating teacher. My participation in the Teacher Leader Fellowship Program has kept me on the forefront of current educational practices. I have formed connections with colleagues around the state and continue to learn with them. In addition, this year I led a Professional Book Study with my colleagues at Greene Hills using the book, "Cultivating Genius," by Gholdy Muhammed. These two examples, from this year, highlight that continuous learning is not just a desire but a priority for me.

In addition to being a continuous learner, collaboration is another imperative priority for me. You cannot teach from an island. Future teachers need to see the power of collaboration. If you walked into any 5th grade classroom at Greene Hills, you would find all classes engaged in the same learning experience. That is evidence of our strong collaborative team and using the Continuous Improvement Cycle to identify best practices. We use data to reflect and inform. We keep students at the forefront of our decision making. We believe that ALL students can achieve at high levels. Most importantly, we trust and value each other.

Lastly, relationships have always been a priority of education, but the pandemic has shown they are paramount. My goal would be to instill in future teachers the importance of relationships while providing the experience to learn how to build them naturally and effectively. Building relationships can't be limited to ice breakers during the first week of school. We need to learn our student's histories and give them the chance to explore their own identities. Relationships enable a culturally responsive environment, allow students to feel valued, and create a safe space for risk taking. It's important to not just get to know your students but really see them. We need to show our students, through love and care, that they matter. Their culture

matters. Their race matters. Their identity matters. Their families matter. Their strengths matter. Their needs matter. They are seen and they are valued. Relationships are fostered through connection and understanding. It's not about isolated "get to know you" activities as much as giving our students a voice, allowing them to see themselves in their learning, and creating experiences in all content areas to highlight student identity. Building relationships can't be taught or googled. It's an experience.

My hope is that future teachers, under my tutelage, leave with the understanding that we have the profound responsibility as elementary teachers to not just build a strong academic foundation but to instill a love of school and learning. Students may not remember individual lessons, but will remember the way they felt in your classroom - the moments of success and the moments of laughter. It is our responsibility to give students a love of learning that creates a bright future of exploration, motivation, and creativity.

Thank you for your consideration,
Julia Darcy