

Teacher Interview: Melissa Faetz

Imagine someone visited your class several times, what would they say the principal teaching strategies you use are? Could you talk about teaching strategies you use that are universal, and as well as strategies are somewhat unique to you and your personality?

I would think probably the more universal teaching strategy that probably you would witness if you entered into my classroom is the building of community between students and between the teachers. When I'm in there, my students and I, we're a team; even though they're young students, they're six and seven years old, we work together as a team. We're communicating, we're constantly discussing. It's not just a "me and them" situation. We're together, so that building of community is really, really important to me. I have found that spending that time reading literature and discussing it and making sure our classroom is a very inclusive place where everyone is respected. I push everyone to reach their potential, and to exceed their potential, really, truly, and I ask that all students are respectful in the classroom. I show them great respect and in return, I expect respect from them, and that has created a community in our classroom that's really, really useful. And when they have issues, I think one of the things we really work on in my classroom is debating and discussing that even if you disagree with each other, that taking that time to have a discussion about it and to respect differences of opinion, it has been a really valuable part of my classroom.

Something that's probably more personal to me is that I just really strive to push my students to have them...to have them really discuss everything to show understanding through speaking and through listening to others. By going back and forth there's a lot of new learning and new understanding that can come, so I think that would probably be something that's more particular to my classroom is I really emphasize the importance of classroom discussion and classroom talks. Whether it be in math or you know, discussing a story or even simply just having a discussion about a disagreement students would have, I really emphasize that in my classroom.

How do you organize your class to maximize learning opportunities for your students? How do you help them become better learners?

As far as organizing my classroom, one of the things I do is I use a variety of small group, whole group and individual instruction. Of course, this is definitely improved...this process is definitely improved when I have a teacher's assistant available, so that's really important with the young students, but I'm able to do whole group instruction, but then I'm able to have my students work independently at stations and centers and be independent learners while I pull small groups or individual learners and that helps me meet all of their needs because when you're able to work with students in such small groups, you can see where they need to be pushed and what areas they need to improve upon, and so you get that kind of one-on-one time, and just designing my classroom in such a way that I'm able to meet their needs through doing those small group and individual instruction, I think it is extremely valuable, and so that's something that I definitely do. I really emphasize with them independence in their learning. I want them to become active learners, an active participant in their own learning, using

inquiry and using writing workshop models helps students become more independent and active in their own learning.

How do you differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with special needs (EC, ESL, AIG, etc.)?

And that kind of goes back to what I was just speaking about, with having the students do small group, and whole group and individualized. If I have small groups, I am able to individualize my instruction to meet the needs of students that need to be challenged or students that need repeated instruction, more direct instruction, so I'm able to meet their needs of students with disabilities, students with more of attention issues by working with them one-on-one or by working with them small group, so having other students be independent workers during other times and being able to meet those needs. It's also a vital part of my job to work closely with our resource teachers, our therapist, anyone who is involved...parents...parents are an exceptionally important part of learning for my students with any type of special needs, so having a team of us to work together to try and best meet the needs. A lot of open communication is vital for me, and that's been an important part to meet any students with special needs, whether they need to be challenged or whether they're behind and need to be caught up, so having a lot...our resource department has a lot of knowledge, and I try to tap into them when I can.

How do you know when learning is occurring and what do you do when you question whether learning is taking place in the classroom?

I think there's a couple different ways that I'm able to witness and observe learning happening in my classroom. One is referring back to all of the discussion and debates that occur in the classroom, having meeting circles, science meeting circles, having students do activities, you know, just the good old-fashioned Think-Pair-Share. When you're able to tune in to their discussions, able to tune in to what they're saying, you can very quickly pick up on whether or not they understand a concept or they don't. Teaching in small groups, again, helps me to work one-on-one with students and be able to see whether or not they're understanding the concept. It's not simply a time where, you know, it's a free-for-all of students talking. I'm able to truly listen to what they're saying. Another thing I always have with my students is I simply ask them anytime they give me an answer, my favorite tag line is "Prove it! Give me your evidence." And my first graders, even at six and seven years old know they're going to have to explain to me, "I think this because of this." And starting to develop those skills at a young age will really help them in their learning in the future because as they get older, they're always going to have to give their evidence as to why they understand or believe something, and so I start developing those skills with them. Another thing is doing written responses. You can get very quick formative assessments of students by asking them to respond in writing. Writing is an essential piece of our learning, an essential piece for their future careers, and so having them give me written responses of things, whether it's a reflection on something we've learned or whether it's questions they may ask about a text we're reading, I ask them to put it in writing and I can get a very quick understanding of where they're at. I don't necessarily need every single assessment given. It's not a constant flow of testing; it's more a constant flow of listening and reading of the responses, and that really helps me understand where my students are at.

How do you “hook” a reluctant learner to your content?

I think using a variety of teaching methods helps to hook those learners. Having inquiry-based science where in science I also focus a lot on teaching literacy skills, reading of informational texts and things like that. We're able to practice those skills during our science instruction time using writing workshop where students have choice. I don't think we can ever under-value the option of choice when they're learning. They, you know...students have a choice to choose. They may be young, but they don't need to be told what to do all day long. They're individuals; they're humans. They have a right to enjoy some things and to not like other things just like all of us do. I think one of the things that I try to do is when I'm able to, I offer them choice; I offer them freedom, but I do ask them at all times, I say, "You may not...you may not think that you like this one thing, but the one thing I ask is that you have to try it at least once. You have to prove to me that you can do it," and then, say in writing workshop you don't want to write this genre after you proven to me that you know how to do it or this strategy, then you don't have to do it as much. You can choose and go back to another format of writing, so I think offering them choice, giving them the ability to say, "Oh, I prefer this over this." I think it makes them more active learners and gives them a feeling of more power and control in their learning experience.

If you were to give advice to a new teacher in North Carolina, what 2-3 learnings would you share?

I think the most important advice I could give to a teacher in North Carolina is to find a group of teachers that you can turn to, that you can discuss things with, that you can share things with, but that group of teachers needs to be a group of teachers that's positive that wants to improve their own teaching that's constantly seeking to make a positive impact on student lives. We all know how easy it is to become very negative and feel very down and isolated in teaching so having a group of teachers that you can turn to it makes all the difference in the world. So have...but you know...I really always...a focus on the impact of that being a positive group of teachers that really wants to improve themselves. The second thing I would say is be willing to accept when things don't work and be willing to take risks in teaching. When we...when we take a risk, sometimes it'll work and sometimes it doesn't, but having that opportunity to take a risk, to take a chance and try something new that you've never done before and having it succeed. It will really change your way of thinking. The...being excited about learning, being excited about learning new things with your students conveys so much to them, so if they see that we're willing to take a chance and we're willing to try something new, then that conveys to them that it's ok for them to take chances as well. And if they aren't able...if it fails sometimes, we simply pick up our pieces, we learn what we can from that experience and we move and we try something else new, and I think doing that as a teacher, they're able to say that, "Hey, it's ok to make mistakes; I don't have to be perfect. I'm simply a person and that's part of my learning. I can learn just as much from a failure as I can from a success. So that...you know just being willing to give it a try, and I think those are the two most important things I'm always willing to share with anybody who's starting the teaching profession.