

Teacher Interview: Jennifer Whitley

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 think what is unique to my classroom is building personal relationships with each and every student. I teach at a high priority high school and many of these kids come with a lot of baggage with them every day. Some of them come hungry; some of them come without changing clothes the day before, and I think we take the time in my classroom to invest in them, to acknowledge where they come from, to let them know that they have worth and self-value, and once we build that relationship with them in the classroom, they begin to have that positive attitude. They reflect that they can be successful, that whatever they come from does not mean that they cannot be successful in the classroom in instructional, that the world is theirs, and so we work on that.

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

At a high priority school, what we see is a lot of our kids of poverty don't have organizational skills. In Union county, we are very fortunate that we're a one-to-one county, and so all of my students have Chrome Books, and so what I've done is the perpetual book bag filled with papers in the bottom of it or looking for missing work or assignments, I've created online personal websites for my students, and so we are 90% digital in my classroom. We still do tactile learning, but one of the things I like to help them do is to empower themselves to learn how to be organized, and so everything that we do, they connect to their personal websites, so when it's time to review, when it's time to study, they have it all at their disposal, they don't have go digging, they don't have to look for things.

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

I think differentiation in the classroom takes many forms. We are, like I said, a one-to-one classroom; at the same time, there are those students that just cannot function with technology, and so, pen and paper is where they are successful. Just recently, we studied World War II and propaganda, and I had students create online propaganda posters, but I have those students that need to be differentiated that wanted to create posters, and they recognize it, and it was really neat to see them draw and color and create their own things, so I think what it takes to differentiate is to tap into those students' individuality to find what works for them, so that they can take ownership of their own learning. Once they get excited and they take ownership of their own learning, they're gonna be successful in your classroom

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

One of the things that you have to do is make sure that you are constantly assessing those students. It doesn't necessarily have to be formal assessment all the time, but what you do need to do is reflect with each individual student to see if those concepts are being mastered. If they're not, then you have to take the time to go back for each individual student and make sure that they mastered it. In your classroom, it's your responsibility as the teacher to make sure that each and every student masters those concepts. It's not okay for the majority of the students to be successful. It's our role to make sure that each and every one is successful, and so whether it is checking over them on a class project, whether it is a benchmark test, or whether it's just having a classroom discussion, or back channel through Today's Meet, you constantly have to reflect, you have to be engaged in the students' learning so that you yourself can assess if learning has taken place. If it hasn't, then our responsibility is to go to that child and to make sure that we catch them up, whatever the means necessary.

How do you "hook" a reluctant learner to your content?

Like I said, I teach a lot of students who don't want to be there. They're there because they have to be or Mom or Dad will face the repercussions of it. I recently had a student who missed 22 days of class, and we've been celebrating because for three straight weeks, he's been in class because he's finally bought into it, and what it took for him to buy into it was number one, he realized that I cared, and that he had value in my classroom. He had not experienced that in the former school where he came from and for him to realize that someone cared about him, someone was going to hold him accountable, and that he couldn't sit in my classroom and not do anything. That was the biggest thing because, you know, I got the proverbial, "Miss, why won't you just let me sleep?" and I said, "Because you're gonna be successful. If you step into my classroom, my job is to make sure that you're successful, and that's what we're gonna go." And now, after missing 22 days, he's been at school 3 straight weeks, and he actually has a C in the course right now for this grading period, and so I think, again, it's holding high standards, making sure that those kids are empowered and that they know that somebody cares about them.

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

I think what we have to let new teachers know is number one, the students come first. We're in it for the students to become successful. Whether we get frustrated with them, whether we are upset with statewide policy, or the standards or the curriculum, our goal is to make sure those students are academically successful in our classrooms, and so they have to work to make sure that each and every student is successful. Again, it's not okay if nine out of ten are successful. All ten...it is our job to make sure that all ten are successful. Number 2, I would tell them to find a mentor. I know that North Carolina has the BT program, the mentoring program. Sometimes that works really well; other times you may be set up with a mentor that does not maybe...is not in your PLC, for instance. You need to find someone that you feel like is a good teacher, a veteran teacher, and attach yourself to them, steal from them, you know, borrow from them, you know, rack their brains. Find someone that you can collaborate with that is willing to invest in you as a beginning teacher to encourage you to become a better teacher as well.