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Teaching Philosophy

For me, there are two guiding principles that lead to effective teaching. First, teachers need to examine all systems in place to ensure an equitable education for all students. Second, learning should have applications beyond the classroom. These two beliefs create the foundation from which all other goals and strategies flow.

Effective teachers are responsible for meeting the needs of all students. However, educators at all levels are focused on closing the “achievement gap,” which shows that as a whole, we aren’t succeeding at reaching all students (“Students Affected”). It is easy to say that the system as a whole needs an overhaul as an excuse for why we as teachers are failing some students. However, we still have the responsibility to examine systems within our classrooms and eliminate barriers to education everywhere we can.

The simplest way to begin this process is to differentiate instruction, focus on student growth, and give students voice and choice. Technology has provided teachers with a simple way to begin differentiating. Websites like No Red Ink, Newsela, and Vocabulary.com automatically adapt to learners needs, providing them the support they need with very little effort on the teacher’s part. Personally, I’ve found writing conferences to be especially effective at providing individual support to student writing. This year, instead of assigning

and grading essays, the students write for a set time every day and work on individualized writing goals. Advanced students now have the opportunity to be challenged and learn skills beyond grade level. Struggling students don't feel overwhelmed and are motivated to keep going because the success criteria are achievable. In this way, not only am I differentiating instruction but I know each student is growing as a writer. Their grades reflect how much they have learned, regardless of their skill level when they entered my class. During conferences, I work with students to help them learn to evaluate their own writing, articulate their strengths and weaknesses, and make choices about writing topics and goals to focus on. I'm happy because they are growing as writers and they are happy because for thirty minutes a class, they have control of their own learning.

Changing the way I implemented writing instruction was scary because it bucked the system that has been in place since before I was a high school student myself. However, it came from an honest look at the way the system of grading writing in my classroom privileged some students and created barriers for others. I started examining the systems I had control over after attending a conference where I listened to a brain scientist speak. He explained how the brain works and learns new information. Then he explained how trauma impacts the brain, learning, and behavior. It completely changed my teaching practice. Having the scientific knowledge to contextualize student behavior allowed me to step away from it and address it appropriately. I learned techniques to deescalate situations when students were upset, and when I couldn't solve the problem myself, I began referring students to counseling instead of writing a behavior referral. I also instituted flexible deadlines to benefit students with PTSD, anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses. However, this

practice also prioritizes learning, and as a result, I have fewer students going through the motions of classwork and more engagement and student growth.

My second core belief about teaching is that learning should have applications beyond the classroom. The high school program I attended asked students to complete a year-long research project. Students chose the topic and how they would show their learning in an end product, whether that be a video, report, piece of art, or something else. I learned how to manage a long project and investigate topics that interested me outside of the traditional school curriculum. More than that, it made me a part of the learning process and gave me some say in how I would be evaluated and what my education would look like. This project transformed me from a student waiting for the teacher to tell me what to do into a competent young woman who understood how to learn. It created in me a passion for learning that lives on to this day.

Personally, I believe this project's focus on independent learning and student autonomy created an incredibly easy transition to college for me. Many of my fellow college freshmen struggled with the workload and rigor of higher education, but I had already learned how to manage long-term deadlines and how to learn on my own when I found I lacked a necessary skill or piece of knowledge. A similar transition took place when I entered the workforce: my peers struggled to learn project management when they didn't have a teacher setting deadlines, but I had already learned this skill and had an easier transition.

This learning experience highlights for me what good teaching looks like. Good teaching creates passionate, independent learners who take responsibility for their own learning and can transfer skills to new situations. I have experienced good teaching, and I

understand its benefit. I want to pass those benefits on to my students. For writing, this means students should be able to write in a variety of forms and for a variety of contexts, adapting their language, tone, and rhetoric to what is appropriate. It also means, I need to reflect with my students in the places in their life that writing may be required and share publishing opportunities that may benefit them.

Ultimately, teachers want to prepare students for the future. Clearly connecting instruction to the real world can provide students the skills they need to navigate the complex world we live in. While society is full of systems that privilege some and provide barriers to others, removing this reality from the classroom begins to build a generation that sees the value of dismantling unfair society systems. It also gives students who may face resistance outside of school the tools and education to combat the unfair practices they may encounter.

Works Cited

“Students Affected by Achievement Gaps.” NEA, www.nea.org/home/20380.htm.