

Katie Pierce, NYC—Sixth Grade ESL and Social Studies

At the beginning of Katie Pierce's first year, her diagnoses of her students revealed varied, and often dismal, levels of student readiness for her sixth grade Bilingual language arts class. Her students' Spanish reading and writing levels ranged from mid-first-grade levels through eighth grade levels and their English literacy skills ranged from pre-primer through sixth grade levels. Her students' backgrounds included those who were born in the United States and were fluent English speakers, those who spoke only Spanish at home but only read and wrote in English and some who had just immigrated to New York City from Spanish-speaking countries, having a wide range of Spanish-literacy skills. Another group of her students did not possess basic literacy in either language. After a year in Katie's class, her students averaged 82% mastery of sixth grade Spanish-language standards and 81% mastery of English-language arts standards. Four recent immigrants who entered Katie's class with high-level Spanish literacy grew their English reading two years by November. By late February, eight other students had already reached their two-year reading growth goals.

Katie refused to see the large range of literacy levels as a problem in her classroom; in fact, she often used that diversity to the students' advantage. Her students, in their heterogeneous learning groups, often took risks to read and write in beginning English, and they often received help from more fluent peers along the way. She also utilized small group instruction so that she instructed to different levels of fluency during every lesson. Due to her thoughtful planning, her students of all levels often wrote essays that demonstrate 80% mastery of writing objectives on their first try. She also often varied and customized the forms of her assessments—using journal writing, poster-making, poetry-writing, dramatic presentations, etc.—so that students could demonstrate their mastery in a manner that best accommodated their individual learning styles.

Central to her success is the culture of investment, recognition and celebration of her students' hard work toward improved literacy that Katie purposefully built in her classroom. For example, to motivate each of her students to obtain 80% mastery of writing standards on each of their 10 Writing Portfolio pieces, she presented those students who achieved 80% or 95% mastery on each essay with a certificate, while the rest of the class applauded and cheered in genuine communal ownership of the students' success. Katie also differentiated motivational strategies targeted for individuals and groups of students, doing whatever it took to instill an intense drive in each student. When Katie saw that a group of students was not turning in their homework assignments in the fall, she required them to stay after school to complete missed homework. Not accustomed to this type of time-commitment from a teacher, her students called her "la maestra mas rara del mundo" or "the weirdest teacher in the world." However, her "weird" tactics worked; Katie only had to hold two after-school homework sessions before these students began to turn in homework daily. Her former homework-dodgers transformed into the most vocal classroom advocates for the importance of homework in achieving academic success.

Katie's investment strategies also extended beyond the classroom and a single academic year. She established extremely strong relationships with her students' families, documenting 347 parental phone calls during her first year. As she says "I feel that building strong relationships with them at the beginning of both school years, communicating frequently with them (especially about

positive things their children are doing), and remaining available for them by providing my cell phone number, has helped immensely in . . . convincing the students why they must work relentlessly to reach their academic goals.” Additionally, she constantly reminds her students that they need to work hard enough not only to pass sixth grade, but to one day go to college. She encouraged her students to write to colleges, and receive brochures, in order to make college seem more like a reality to them.

One vignette in particular represents the investment and drive that she instilled in her students. Last year, on June 26, Katie had the burden of announcing to the class that the class average on their rigorous standards was 79.4%. The goal had been 80%. Her students demanded to keep learning to meet their goals. She allowed one more period of collaborative group work to help struggling classmates learn and improve. In Katie’s words, “The students worked feverishly to finish their pieces, with every community member involved either in writing or helping another student to write. I graded the essays in front of them on my clipboard, and stepped back to enjoy the joyous mayhem that took place when I announced that our Big Goal had officially been met.”

These kinds of results have led to invitations for additional responsibility and leadership for Katie. As part of her dedication to her students’ achievement, Katie remodeled her school’s bilingual department. Before she (and her colleagues) changed the system, the data on students’ needs was not available to inform students’ individual learning plans. Today, students’ learning is driven by their individual needs. Katie worked closely with each student’s family to assess fluency and researched NY State bilingual policies to construct individual learning plans.