

May 2016

Corps Member Spotlight: Brittany Clark (NY '15), English Teacher at John Dewey High School in Brooklyn, NY



Why did you join Teach for America? I am the daughter of an immigrant who came to the United States in the 1970s. My mother was an English Language Learner and she did not receive the support that she needed to be successful and achieve the American Dream. Growing up, she always told me that I needed to go to college because education is the key to the American Dream and to the world. I am first generation college graduate, which still overwhelms me with pride because the journey to get to college was not easy. This motivates me to get in front of my seniors every day and encourage them that whatever they are going through, it will get better if they persevere. I also went to a Jesuit university, where they promote a social justice

mission in which you are to give back the privileges you attain in college. For me, higher education was such a privilege and teaching is a way for me to try to give back. My mother's story and my story fuel me in all of my classes. I teach mostly seniors – and in the beginning, it was hard, because the urgency for them to learn is so intense! I thought *how can I be the person you need in the next school year to prepare you for the real world and for college?* It led me to feel so passionate about teaching them about not only reading and writing, but also about society and how to advocate for themselves and for others.

What have your students been learning this year?

When I was at institute, we did a lot about what our classroom vision should be. My classroom has a mission statement: students will take an active role in their own education – claim their education, not passively receive it – by fostering a community of respect, perseverance, and hard work. It comes from Adrienne Rich's idea of claiming one's education, not passively receiving it. This means we are not reading Shakespeare just to read Shakespeare, we are analyzing our own identities and the world that we live in, using literature as a vehicle to do so. In my English class, we are reading *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario, the story of an immigrant who travels on the tops of trains to enter the United States without documentation. So we are diving into immigration, and my students are writing essays that propose how we should handle and talk about this issue. What do we need to consider in this social justice issue? We're breaking down the black and white binary that freshmen always come in with, and helping them examine a more nuanced approach.

What has been your biggest break-through moment?

With my seniors, we did *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini and explored gender roles. We uncovered institutionalized oppression by playing trashketball. I put my students in four rows, and each student balled up a piece of paper and threw it in the trashcan. My students were automatically saying, "This isn't fair! We're seated all the way in the back row!" I began questioning them. Who's sitting in the front row – in our society? And how would you feel if you were sitting in the front row, but couldn't get it in the basket? This is how my students started to develop empathy for people in all rows.

It's women's history month, so we're curious what you do to celebrate and empower your female students – not just this month, but year round.

There are very subtle things that I do. I use gender-neutral language – instead of “he” and “she”, I use “their.” With my freshman, I make them go boy, girl, boy, girl every time they share out. With my seniors, I cold-call alternating between boys and girls. I engage my students in conversations about gender roles. When we have conversations about gender, all of it is intersectional – we think about where gender is influenced by race, ethnicity, social class, etc.

What's your favorite classroom resource?

I love the professional development that is put on by the DOE. I love the book *Notice and Note* by Kylene Beers, which teaches you how to teach reading strategies. It's well-formatted so you can identify a reading strategy, use the handouts, and go. I've found it to be very helpful with my high school students. A few of my colleagues in the science department are also using it for nonfiction.

What has been unexpected in your first year?

Everyone says that your first year of teaching is “the worst.” Through this experience, what's been the most unexpected is that every time I leave the classroom I can't imagine walking away from it. I feel so much genuine love for my students and feel that it is reciprocated by them too. This whole experience is completely happy and positive.