

Peace Academy, 13K596

Principal (2012—13)	Lisa Reiter
Grades served	6—8
School Population/Demographics	The student population of 117 students includes 10% English language learners and 14% students with disabilities. 75% of students are Black, 21% are Hispanic, 0.9% are White, and 2% are Asian.

Case Study: A Veteran Teacher in a New Context at PEACE Academy

In August 2012, Marianne Bertini joined the staff of PEACE (Purposeful, Ethics, Advocacy, Community and Environment) Academy. Becoming a 7th and 8th grade math teacher at PEACE – a middle-school serving 114 students, located in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn – marked a huge shift in Marianne’s career. For the past twelve years, she had taught in upstate Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, working in alternative schools in rural and suburban areas.

The principal of Peace Academy, Lisa Reiter, planned for the upcoming school year knowing that teachers needed to feel supported and heard. With this in mind, she and her Assistant Principal, Amy Rodriguez, opted to join the Teacher Effectiveness Program (TEP) for the 2012-13 school year. They hoped that joining TEP would allow them to better support teachers in developing their practice.

The school year begins: Adjusting to a new environment and a more actively involved principal

As the first day of school approached, despite her years of teaching, Marianne felt unsure of what to expect. At her previous school, the principal, who observed her was responsible for administering several sites, so she wasn’t observed by her often. “She was rarely in our building,” Marianne recalls. The principal would occasionally circulate through classrooms for a five-minute visit, take notes, and later give teachers copies of her notes, with no conversation about instruction.

PEACE Academy’s opening PD, which the full staff attended, focused heavily on introducing the staff to the Danielson *Framework*, emphasizing how the observation and feedback cycle could support teachers in advancing their practice.

Through these frequent cycles of observation and feedback, teachers would reflect on the areas in which they felt they needed to develop their practice, as well as where the school as a whole needed to go. “[Principal Reiter] really emphasized that we all have to work and be the best we can be, and that she would support us in achieving that.” Marianne was familiar with the Danielson *Framework for Teaching*, which had been used in her upstate district for quite some time, but she was definitely unaccustomed to having Visitors in her class so frequently.

Early in the year, Principal Reiter dropped by Marianne’s class and noted stacks of paper – lesson plans, students’ homework, and classwork and extension worksheets – cast seemingly haphazardly over her desk. At the end of the period, she approached Marianne, gestured toward the desk, and asked gently, “How can I help you with what you have going on here? What can I do to help you get a little more organized?”

Marianne shrugged, not knowing just what to make of the question. “I know, I know, it’s looking a little out of control, right? I gotta stay after-school and get this stuff together.”

“That’d probably be easier if you had some better tools,” Principal Reiter offered. “Maybe some desk organizers?”

Marianne agreed and, within a day, she had received a desktop organizer with hanging file folders that helped her keep lesson plans and student work organized. While it was a small and straightforward gesture, Marianne appreciated the support her principal was willing to provide.

New challenges: Planning in a new way, and working with peers

At PEACE Academy, teachers were expected to have lesson plans for each day, a major shift for Marianne. After twelve years of teaching, she felt like a first-year teacher.

As Marianne began the practice of writing daily lesson plans, she recognized that they provided her with a record of her daily work with students, allowing her to more effectively reflect on her practice. As she got to know the learning gaps in her classes, she started planning with the prior knowledge of her students in mind: “I realized, ‘Oh for this lesson, the kids need to know what an integer is. Do they know that? If they don’t, how am I teaching that into my mini-lesson?’”

Although Marianne felt proud of the gains she was making over the course of the first few months of school, Principal Reiter also pushed her to think about her practice in new ways. Following a feedback conversation early in the year, Principal Reiter sat down with Marianne and they examined her notes of the observation together. “You lectured for around 25 minutes,” Principal Reiter observed. “I know you’re used to working with older students – but in this context, I saw students losing engagement quickly.” She described a couple different examples including when students put their heads down while others chatted in the back of the classroom.

Marianne considered. “How am I going to get through the content I need to get through if I don’t have as much time to lecture?” she asked. “There’s a lot to cover.” Principal Reiter nodded. “Let the kids help you. Tell them you’re lecturing for fifteen minutes, max, and so long as they’re focused and engaged, then they’ll get to move on to practice activities. That group and independent practice is where the learning will happen. I bet you’ll be re-teaching less if you’re making more time for them to practice applying the concepts you’re teaching.”

Strategy

Demonstrate that you are available and willing to offer support for needs big and small.

Strategy

Have your notes available during feedback conversations.

Strategy

Share succinct verbal feedback rather than write a long narrative.

Marianne began timing out her lesson plans more carefully, striving to keep the mini-lesson to fifteen minutes or less and incorporating pacing reminders into her plan. She told her students, “Look, I’m not talking more than fifteen minutes total. Help hold me to it.”

She realized she was spending much less time in front of the classroom than she had been at the beginning of the year, and much more time conferring with students one-on-one as they did individual work, enabling her to promote more student engagement and to plan based on a greater knowledge of her students.

Implementing next steps: Having students work together

As part of the observation and feedback cycle, Marianne and Principal Reiter reviewed a range of student data, including student assessments and classwork. They noted how lesson planning and less front of the room instruction had a positive impact on student learning.

To build on this success, Principal Reiter asked Marianne specific questions about her thoughts on group and pair work. “Given this data, what are some ways you might organize your students in groups to promote student discussion and critical thinking?” Marianne thought about this. “I have not usually done group work in my class because I have worried about management.” Principal Reiter responded, “How about pairing students by ability, so that some who are stronger in certain skills can help other students, perhaps once or twice a week? Once you have tried it, we can talk through the results and see if it makes sense to continue that strategy or try a different one.” By this time, Marianne trusted the input of her principal and used various data from her students to create pairings so that students would be able to support or challenge each other.

Marianne was pleased to discover that this approach changed the dynamic of her classroom almost immediately, as students seemed more engaged when they walked through her classroom doors. Marianne found herself serving a broader range of student learning needs, rather than focusing solely on students who were struggling to gain command of the material.

New classroom strategies mean new plans

Now that Marianne was incorporating group work into her lessons on a daily basis, she found her current lesson planning template a bit lacking; it provided space for differentiation, but not group work. Principal Reiter shared some lesson plan templates with Marianne, saying, “Mark them up. What do you like? What don’t you like? How would you change it? Make it better? What doesn’t work about this?”

When Marianne saw some of the lesson plan templates, she was taken aback by the level of detail and wasn’t sure that everything on the template was necessary, particularly, space for relevant learning standards, the objective of the lesson, and the prior knowledge students would need to understand the lesson. “It doesn’t have timeframes like the one I use – it’s more like, why am I doing this? A rationale? Do we really need that in there? Isn’t it a given?”

Principal Reiter listened to Marianne and helped her adapt one of the templates so it made more sense for her. Marianne decided to start using the plan for two of her classes as a starting point.

Strategy

Offer a series of resources for teachers to choose from and adapt to meet their needs.

Marianne began to see that the more specific questions captured in the template – the rationale for the lesson, the prior knowledge and skills students need to succeed, the mini-lesson, classwork, differentiation, student partners/groupings, share-outs, and extensions – really pushed her to be even more prepared for each day of school. As she planned, she realized that the rationale and the prior knowledge were not a given, as she had initially suggested to her principal – and by considering those elements in her planning, she was able to craft more targeted lessons.

These changes in her planning resulted in students doing more of the thinking and learning, which was evident in the work they produced. Marianne found that students working in pairs were not only willing to take on additional work, but eager to.

Reflecting on a year of significant change

As Marianne began to focus on preparing her students for the next school year, she amplified her efforts to write detailed plans and incorporate group and pair work into her lessons.

During a morning meeting in May, Marianne was flattered when Principal Reiter gave her a “shout out” for her efforts to incorporate more student groupings into her class. At the same time, she enjoyed watching her students become more confident as they worked with their partners. “They don’t realize, but it raises their confidence,” she observes.

One pair, comprised of a very bright young woman who often wanted to spend class time chatting with friends, and a young man who had showed little motivation before, had shown particularly notable growth. With the two paired together, the young woman was able to better focus on her work, while the young man, eager to demonstrate that he could keep up, worked hard to reach her level of understanding. By the end of May, Marianne was using the new lesson template for all of her classes.

Reflecting on the difference between her previous and current teaching jobs, Marianne gratefully observed, “[Now] I have a principal who’s in the building all the time, who communicates, who tells me how to improve and gives me the tools to do it, who congratulates me when she sees me doing something when she knows I’ve been working on it.”

Strategy

Engage teachers by publically acknowledging growth and hard work.