

Portrait of a Student: Brianne

By Jill Ferris

“No one did the reading,” Brianne snapped at me before class with an attitude sharp enough to cut glass. Her intonation was crisp, laden with that certain buck-school, yet confrontational attitude that I have never quite understood.

“Oh, so you didn’t get to do last night’s reading?” I said, trying to put an understanding spin on her uncompleted homework. I was never one of those students; I always pretended my homework was done even if it wasn’t and sat through class with the world’s largest knot in my stomach.

“No. No one read.”

Awesome. I knew Brianne’s statement was not true – I had watched at least four students read in during the previous period and knew I could count on at least six more to complete such a homework assignment. Still, I couldn’t figure out where her hostile attitude was coming from, or why it was directed at me. Was she trying to challenge my homework assignments, or my authority in the classroom? Why was she using such an extreme statement which I know is absolutely not true?

I might have written Brianne off at that point had I not had this assignment looming in the back of my head. Less than a month into student teaching, I still hadn’t encountered a student that really frustrated me, but as Brianne’s attitude began to surface, I realized she was the child about whom I needed to learn most.

Slim with straight dark brown hair, she would often come to school in jeans and a fleece sweatshirt. If teachers are supposed to inadvertently favor students that look most like themselves, Brianne would be my student; and yet, she was probably the student that got to me the quickest, with an attitude that can only be described as bitchy. I must admit, I was relieved when, a few days after our encounter over the homework, I overheard students in my other class describing her, as a friend, treating them very similarly to how she treated me.

So with the realization that it would take a conscious effort for me to love Brianne, I tried to pay attention to her in class. While I quietly watched her, I discovered that she is a fiercely loyal friend. Whenever I assigned partner work, Brianne would immediately turn to Katie, and Katie would turn to Brianne. Both girls struggle academically, but they have learned to support each other as students and friends. If Katie ever felt put on the spot or confused during class, Brianne would immediately jump to her aid.

In speaking with my cooperating teacher and the Resource room teacher (Brianne has been labeled and has an I.E.P.), I learned that she has only recently returned to a classroom after being homeschooled for a few years. When I brought my concern about Brianne’s attitude to Mrs. Hasley, who has an amazing report with her Resource room students, she shared that she had only just started working with Brianne, but she found her to be incredibly sweet. The attitude, she suggested, might be a coping mechanism for when she feels overwhelmed or outpaced.

Taking this knowledge back into the classroom, I had a breakthrough in my appreciation for Brianne during a Jeopardy review game a few weeks later. As we started to play, I turned to her and Katie and asked if they wanted to choose the first category. Immediately I got a huff and “No” response. Even with some gentle prodding (“It’s ok,

choose any category”), both girls refused. I moved on to the next group, and when I came back around to them, I expected some more gruffness in asking for a choice. By that point, though, both girls felt comfortable with the game and class set up. From then on they eagerly participated.

As the game progressed, I would leave answers on the screen and discuss each question for a minute before moving on. During the first few slides, Brianne would huff that she wasn’t done right after I changed the slide. So I would go back and wait, watching to see when she was done writing. After the second time, I realized that I should just watch her. She was conscientiously writing down the answers on her answer sheet for each question; I needed to make sure that she was able to self-direct her own learning and support that. With that realization and her increased comfort, I think Jeopardy went well for Brianne and actually made me appreciate her more.

This activity changed how I thought about Brianne. I realized that her attitude was less about a challenge and more about not having the support necessary for her to be successful. My new goal was to offer her that support immediately, so that we could bypass the need for her to revert into a more hostile attitude.

My most successful moment at this came a few lessons later. I broke the class up into small groups, and purposely assigned each group a particular document to analyze from the turn of the century. After I gave the class directions and asked them to move into groups, I went immediately to Brianne’s group. I had given them a stereoscope of the sinking of the U.S.S. Maine in Havana harbor. By sharing that this was my favorite of all of the images and that I had specifically chosen them for the image, as well as explaining what a stereoscope actually was, Brianne actually became a leader in her group. I learned from that to turn to her and Katie first, after I assigned class work. By placing myself on her side immediately and answering any questions she had, I was able to make the classroom experience a lot more pleasant for both of us.