

Mollie McAllister- UNCG Voices from the Field- October 2008

A UNCG Elementary Education Graduate Tells About Her Teaching Experience with the New York Public Schools

When I got to UNCG I had no clue what I wanted to major in. I hopped around from sociology, to art history, and then finally landed at education. After I got into the School of Ed I was placed on the A+ literacy team. Ellen and Jerry, who are here today, were my team leaders.

I moved to Brooklyn the week after I graduated. It wasn't until two weeks before the school year started when I was hired at El Hajj Makil El Shabazz , better known as PS 262, in Brooklyn, one of the tougher neighborhoods to teach in. On the teachers' first day back to school the principal introduced me to the staff. At first I wondered how the school would embrace me, I was the youngest teacher and the only Caucasian in the school. However, it wouldn't be long before my co-workers, students, and their parents would become my extended family.

On my very first day of school I was just as nervous and excited as the kids were. One of my students decided she wasn't in the right class. Her name was Bella, and when I had all of the kids go to the carpet to sit down for our first lesson, she went straight to the closet and got her rolling book bag and headed for the door. I went over to her and I asked her what she was doing. She used every four-letter word in the book to yell to me that she wasn't in my class, that she was supposed to be in the fourth grade, not the third grade. So, I quickly understood that it had just hit her that she had been held back.

Bella was on a first grade reading and writing level. It was impossible to get her to join the rest of the class during mini-lessons, and to not start fights with the other students. After researching what interested her and what her favorite things were, I began to integrate those into my lessons. Her aunt was a hairstylist and Bella aspired to be one too. When we did non-fiction writing she researched hair and wrote about the history of various hairstyles and techniques. At the end of the unit we celebrated her writing by letting her braid my hair. That was when I had long hair. She loved to dance so I paired her up with a friend and they used dance to retell the story they just read.

So I would like to encourage you, as corny as it sounds, to follow your dreams. Step outside of the comfort zone and try something new and different. Keep an open mind. There are so many opportunities for you in the world of education so take advantage of them. Remember to look at your students through different lenses and try to understand where they come from, and teach them where you come from. Remember to set your expectations high and know that every child can succeed.