

In-depth, Individualized Academics: “The Giver” Assignment and Follow-up

Read this (disguised) letter to parents, and ask yourself whether a teacher with 30 or 35 students in a class could provide this detailed feedback. Could she ever get to know a child well enough? Would she have time to be as supportive and encouraging as this teacher was? Would she ever even think about sharing this wonderful experience with you as the parents—and, if she did, would she find the time to actually write an email like this?

Sixteen students in a class, with a 1:8 or 1:10 ratio counting subject matter expert teachers, is what enables us to deliver this type of individualized attention, to every child, every day.

What would you pay for your child to have this experience?

Subject: Maria’s writing assignment in class

Hello Mr. and Mrs. Smith,

I wanted to let you know about Maria’s writing experiences in class over the last two days. Yesterday, I challenged each of them to think about a specific part of The Giver, our current novel, by pointing them to a certain sentence or idea. I gave them the page that this sentence/idea was on, and a list of possible questions they could answer. However, I explained that I wanted them to begin practicing responding to what they were reading on a deeper level. The guidelines were this: they could write anything that came to mind when they read this sentence/idea. I put up 5 questions on the board if they were having difficulty beginning this assignment. These questions asked things such as "how would this apply to your life?" or "Are you confused by this part of the book?" I reiterated that there was no wrong answer for this assignment, but rather, I wanted them to practice writing down and articulating their thoughts and opinions about a specific moment in the story.

As the class began working, I could tell that Maria was at a loss for where to start. I knelt down next to her desk, and asked her if she needed help. She said she wasn't sure where to begin, and said, "I don't know what to write." I thought perhaps she didn't understand the specific part of the story I had given her, so I asked her to explain in her own words what was happening on the page. It was obvious from her explanation that she understood the storyline, but was having trouble forming her opinions. I could also see that this troubled her greatly as her voice quivered a little - it seemed like she was fighting back tears. Maria is always thorough in her work, and never shies away from a difficult assignment. Therefore, I knew that this assignment was extremely challenging for her to feel at a total loss of where to begin. I started her with a much more basic question to respond to - Do you like this part of the book? This seemed to give her a starting point, and she managed to jot a few ideas down with the remaining time.

We can definitely discuss this in further depth during our parent/teacher conference on Friday, however I wanted to point out a few thoughts I had regarding Maria’s experience yesterday, and my high hopes for her in the future. She is excellent at following directions, but sometimes struggles with articulating her thoughts. Nothing that she would have written down would have been incorrect, yet I could tell that she felt very uncomfortable with the vast freedom of the assignment. I intend to help her develop this creativity, as I've seen glimpses of it in the past. Besides the ability to write an interesting story, the ability to form an opinion about something is a skill that will benefit her in future classrooms, jobs, and social situations. I believe it is a life skill that will allow Maria to become a strong individual, which is why this is so important.

Today, we did the same activity with another section of the book. I handed Maria a quote, and watched as she got right to work. Her pencil furiously scribbled across the page, while her hand flipped between the pages of the book. She was thinking and responding to the text. I was so impressed with her willingness to face and overcome something that just about brought her to tears yesterday. That

speaks to her strength as a student and an individual. Ten minutes later, she handed in a beautiful page filled with her own thoughts and opinions about her quote. I could tell she was proud of herself as well, because when I took her assignment, she said, "Ms. K., look at how much I wrote today." I gave her a "fist-pound" (a cooler way to give a "high five"), and told her that I was VERY proud of her.

Again, we can talk about this on Friday, but please know that I'm so proud of Maria. I know yesterday was difficult for her, but that didn't stop her from trying again today. It takes a lot of strength and bravery to try something you feel you may have failed at before. Even though she did not fail yesterday, I know those are the feelings she was struggling with.

I look forward to seeing you on Friday.

Sincerely,

Ms. K