

Rachel Boccio

Teacher Emphasizes Reading as a Life Skill

By Abbie Redmon

Rachel Boccio began her teaching career as a student teacher at an inner-city school in Hartford, Conn. Now, she teaches students in Connecticut's correctional school district how to read.

For 10 years, Boccio has taught in a self-contained classroom at Manson Youth Institution that is filled with an ever-changing roster of students. Her average student is between the ages of 16 and 18 and reads below a third-grade level, if at all. During admission, inmates are assessed at a grade-level equivalency, and those who place at a fourth-grade reading level or higher are put onto teams that rotate between classes in math, English, social studies and so on throughout the academic day. But Boccio's students — she normally has 10 to 12 — stay with her all day, for two and a half hours in both the morning and the afternoon.

All of the work that Boccio's students do is centered on reading. She incorporates material from other disciplines like math, science and social studies, but even these are fundamentally literacy lessons. The students in Boccio's class are at varying academic levels; some cannot read at all, and some are close and just need some support. Boccio's goal is to ensure that all her students are able to read, minimally, at a functional literacy level. Until they reach that level, they probably will not be able to read a menu or even understand a bus schedule. "When they go out into the world," Boccio said, "they're bombarded with text they can't read." This can be frustrating, so part of Boccio's job is to keep her students engaged and interested in learning.

Something that helps motivate them, Boccio said, is the Student of the Month program that she started informally in her own classroom.

Every few months she held an awards ceremony in her room, giving out certificates for the hardest worker, the most cooperative or the best in math, for example. The students really enjoyed it, so about two years ago, Boccio helped transform her idea into a schoolwide program. Every month she collects names from the other teachers and, with some help from the computer teacher, photographs the students and prints certificates for them, which the students love. The photos are displayed in a glass case in the hallway of the educational wing.

Many of Boccio's students are excited to be back in a learning environment once they are placed at an appropriate level. Still, since her students come and go throughout the academic year and are at varied levels academically, retaining organized lesson plans can be difficult. Boccio tries to cover topics in shorter time spans; no unit of study ever lasts longer than a month, and she plans for big changes in programming to occur at the beginning of a new (loosely-termed) semester. One of the challenges of Boccio's job is continually accommodating new additions to her classroom without making those students feel as if they have missed out or are unable to participate right away. It is a stressful environment, and many of the students have mental health issues; both of those elements affect classroom behavior and how Boccio enforces rules. As different students join and leave her class, Boccio must alter the rules to match the students' temperaments and personalities.

However, Boccio feels there are benefits in the way her class is structured. "I never have to do that thing that teachers have to do every year where you start with a brand new class," she said. "Once a good climate has been established, it just sustains

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itself." It is much easier to maintain order this way, she said. Even though many of her students have behavior problems, when new students come into Boccio's classroom, it is clear to them that she is in charge. At this point, Boccio said, she does "a lot more teaching than disciplining."

Reading at a functional literacy level is "a huge line of participation in society," Boccio said. Getting her students to that level is not easy, but to encourage them to work hard, Boccio emphasizes how important the information is and how relevant it is to their lives. She gives her students grades on everything and lets them know that she's really evaluating them. "People like to be successful," Boccio said, "so as [the students] start to get some good grades back, and feel that I'm really watching them carefully ... most of them meet that challenge; most of them actually are quite successful."

Abbie Redmon is associate editor of publications at ACA.