Learning Resource Spotlight: Maria Cecilia de Feitas Cardoso Buckley

Students in 3-4-5 must cherish Maria Cecilia for the fun times: Falling down on the floors of the Aspen and Blue Spruce classrooms for a session of laughing yoga as a break during a long spelling test; for lessons peppered with movement, chants, songs, whispers and shouts in her Wilson clubs; and for her ready use of hula hoops, jumping jacks and push-ups to break up and actually improve students’ readiness to learn.

But she’s also known for instruction and partnership. Maria Cecilia works with all students in the two 3-4-5 classrooms for nine hours each week facilitating reading conferences, supporting teachers and students, and giving assessments. She also participates in parent-teacher conferences and meets individually with parents. Her role is to work with the classroom teachers, students and parents collaborating on the review of assessments, interpretation of comprehensive evaluations, elaboration of support plans, and determination of accommodations or strategies to help each student progress.

Maria Cecilia is a proponent of mindfulness and balance activities to increase focus during a lesson. “I respond to the needs of the students in my two classes regarding attention, focus, executive functioning, planning and organizational issues,” says Maria Cecilia, “as well as with specific goals related to academics through writing support plans, and taking care of all the school paperwork that goes into DPS evaluations. One of my concerns is to ensure that the students who would benefit from services actually receive them.”

After school, Maria Cecilia teaches two Wilson Clubs, which follow the Wilson Reading System program as closely as possible in two days/week. During that time, says Maria Cecilia, she hopes to bring some fun into the hard work, “to demystify challenges too often labeled as negative problems, to increase self-awareness, self-worth and self-confidence, and of course to teach reading and writing.”

When asked for a personal quote, Maria Cecilia responds with simply: “Every person is unique,” and adds, “This might not sound particularly remarkable... yet EACH person is remarkable! When we take it seriously, we are able to have deep respect for each other. I believe it is essential to acknowledge each person as one-of-a-kind, non-repeatable, singular, special, noteworthy, sacred, with own specific beauty, gifts, ways of learning, strengths and challenges, abilities and disabilities, and with his or her own vulnerability.”

After a pause, Maria Cecilia comes up with another quote she loves, attributed to Michelangelo when he was 87, “‘I am still learning.’ When I completed 40 years of teaching, my loving husband gave me a plaque with this quote, to celebrate my ‘teaching anniversary’”!

Maria Cecilia joined Stanley BPS after relocating from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The children’s and teacher’s smiles were the first thing to catch her attention, says Maria Cecilia. “Although at the time I was really looking for an academic place to teach at a University, I decided to stay here for a while. This was in December 1998... and I am still here!”

Maria Cecilia started her career as a teacher at Rio de Janeiro Public Schools, in a very poor neighborhood. The only materials the school had were white chalk and a blackboard. Her students would go to school bare-footed, putting on their “school shoes,” which were given by the school, at the school gate; they had their breakfast when they arrived, and at noon, had their only hot meal of the day.

“One of my first classes had students who were repeating 1st grade for the third or fourth time, or more. One student was 14 years old! Some knew all the ‘reader books’ by heart, but still could not really read a word. So I had to develop a different method to teach reading. Since it was rural area, the school had a big yard, and I asked the students to bring gardening instruments, and we built a vegetable garden. They all learned to read in one year, starting by writing names of vegetables to put on little signs in the garden, and breaking down those words into sounds. I developed a strong love for working with students who learn best when teachers use different strategies. Because of that, I decided to go beyond the bachelor degrees in General Education K-12. So I went back to college to get a degree in Special Education.”
After having experienced teaching at several public schools, Maria Cecilia received scholarships that took her to the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where she received a MS in Behavioral Disabilities and a Ph.D. in Special Education and Educational Psychology. A return to Brazil found her teaching many years as a professor of undergraduate and graduate programs in the School of Education at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, where she participated in teacher formation programs in many different areas of the country, as well as working in partnership with the public school system and helping innovate services for children with developmental disabilities. Maria Cecilia was also instrumental in starting some programs for students with multiple disabilities.

After coming to Stanley, Maria Cecilia was trained to use the F.A.S.T. program, became a Wilson Certified instructor and was trained in the Orton-Gillingham Approach. She is also trained in Handwriting Without Tears. Currently, besides working at Stanley part time in 3-4-5, she also teaches at the Stanley Teacher Preparation Program, and keeps a private practice as a Board Certified Educational Therapist. Maria Cecilia is fluent in four languages: Portuguese, English, French and Spanish and has travelled extensively giving workshops, training professionals volunteers and visiting friends in many countries in South, Central and North America, in Western and Eastern Europe, and in Syria.

The nature of Colorado and its four seasons brought Maria Cecilia and her family to Colorado, where she enjoys nature, hiking, cross-country skiing, snow shoeing, swimming, biking, reading, traveling, cooking and being with people. “I am very involved in my church,” adds Maria Cecilia, “and my husband and I are member of the Board of Directors of the Faith and Light International Association, which fosters ecumenical faith-based communities of friendship between families with children with developmental disabilities and friends from the community. The goal is to develop everybody’s gifts and include all in the life of the churches and in society. I have volunteered in this association since 1977.”

To Maria Cecilia, Stanley represents pure Joy of learning. If you can’t tell from the description of her very active lessons, Maria Cecilia loves to see so many happy learners. “I see students and adults at school smiling and laughing while experimenting, digging into questions, searching for answers, making discoveries,” says Maria Cecilia. “Being joyful when learning opens up the brain and the spirit, making it possible to have a healthy approach to life and others.”

Maria Cecilia is passionate about being a facilitator of growth, discovery and learning; to her, life is an opportunity to grow in our physical, social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual dimensions. And what professional accomplishment is Maria Cecilia most proud of? “Perhaps a very simple, but very significant ‘accomplishment’ that brings me deep joy is when I say it is time to clean up after one hour of after school intense instruction and a student asks ‘Already?’” Who can imagine another answer?!