



THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF
PHILADELPHIA

Teacher Residency Program Spotlight

Alma Sheppard-Matsuo - Feltonville Arts & Sciences

“As a teacher, I hope my students and colleagues will always be able to feel respected, heard and challenged. I hope students and colleagues will always be willing to offer the same back to me.” - Alma Sheppard-Matsuo



The Teacher Residency Program Spotlight is designed to showcase our residents doing what they love most - teaching. Every month we will highlight a different teacher resident to illustrate the ways in which Philadelphia’s new educators care for their students and communities.

Alma Sheppard-Matsuo is currently working at Feltonville School of Arts & Sciences teaching English. They have an animation degree from the School of Visual Arts in New York City and are an avid supporter of art, poetry, books and youth empowerment.

.....

Why did you apply to the Teacher Residency Program?

I applied because of the opportunity. For several years, I had thought that if I could afford to go back to school, I would get my certification and Masters to be a teacher. I've worked for years as an artist and community organizer [but] I wanted to work more directly with youth in education. It had always seemed like a pipe dream, until I found out about the program.

You graduated college with an animation degree and now teach middle school English. In what ways do you channel your love of art/animation to English lessons for your students?

My work with art has been, since college, working with youth, with community, uplifting voices, often in after-school and summer programs. I always taught visual art as a tool of communication and personal empowerment. My love of storytelling is what originally drew me to animation and I've always been a voracious book reader. The jump from animation and art to teaching ELA seemed simple. To me, ELA serves a purpose very similar to art; being able to lift your voice, expand your mind, have compelling conversations that explore the problems of your world.

You are a huge supporter of being true to oneself and recently began using they/them pronouns in your professional workspace. Tell us about that journey and experience.

I've identified as queer since I knew what the word meant. The exploration of my gender has been a more recent journey. I'd spent several years knowing my gender felt fluid, but not quite feeling brave enough to claim my gender identity until this past year. I do not identify as a woman; I feel more comfortable and honest in my body identifying as non-binary. Becoming a full-time teacher, I realized that I needed to be open about my gender, insist on the use of my prefix and pronouns, for my own sake and as an example to my students, queer and otherwise. It is never easy to come out; it is much more painful, in my experience, to lie about yourself and have that lie upheld, even unknowingly. From my own childhood, I knew how important it is for young people to see others be themselves and still be respected, even if they are different than the norm around them. I've been fortunate in that my colleagues have been supportive and respectful; it's been an experience I hoped for and am continuously thankful to receive...there has been steady growth in students using both [pronouns], with some confusion but otherwise acceptance. I don't know that many students understand the connection of queer gender with Mx. prefix, and not all are interested in questioning the purpose very deeply, which has been fine. We don't always need to understand someone to respect them. Any students who have asked, I've always tried to make

space to discuss. A few have opened up to me about their own gender and questions about gender, which has been great. I hope it sets an example to others in the district and among students that being honest and open about your gender and orientation are okay.

Think back to a teacher that inspired you. What would you say to that teacher now?

I was fortunate enough to have many great teachers throughout my education. In particular, I'm thinking about my second grade teacher. She was so friendly, boisterous and welcoming; I was very shy with other kids my age and had just moved to the school. Her presence made me feel much more comfortable. If I could speak with her now, I would let her know that her presence has stuck with me for over twenty years; that I have always kept her attitude with me and other students in mind while I work with youth of all ages.

There is a saying, “To teach is to touch a life forever”. How would you finish that sentence, “To teach is to”?

To teach is to dig a well, pour a foundation, to build for a community.

.....

- ❖ Meet the [Residents of Cohort 1](#).
- ❖ Interested in joining our 2018-19 cohort? We encourage you to apply [here](#). For full consideration, candidates must have a passing [Praxis](#) score in their content area and commit to teach in Philadelphia's public schools for 3 years.
- ❖ For more information about our Teacher Residency Program, please visit our [website](#).
- ❖ Teacher Residency Program [FAQs](#)
- ❖ For questions, feel contact us at teacherresidency@philasd.org.