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Felicia Casto:

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Vicki Davis:

*The Ten-minute Teacher podcast with Vicki Davis. Every week day you'll learn powerful practical ways to be a more remarkable teacher today.*

VICKI: Today we're talking to Felicia Casto, [@jfcasto28](#) math teacher from Colorado and a recent Milken Award winner.  
<http://www.milkeneducatorawards.org/connections/articles/view/felicia-casto-rim-rock-fruita-colorado-spotlight> So Felicia, let's talk about your elementary math classroom. If I came into your classroom today what would I see?

FELICIA: Well, you would see kids interacting with each other, lots of tools and manipulatives, usually technology of some kind involved. I guess lot of interactions with the kids doing a lot of real-world tasks 3-Act tasks [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1jXSt\\_CoDzyDFeJimZxnhgwOVsWkTQ\\_EsfqouLWNNC6Z4/edit#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1jXSt_CoDzyDFeJimZxnhgwOVsWkTQ_EsfqouLWNNC6Z4/edit#gid=0) or things that they've created, problem that they've brought from home that their parents might be working on in their business or different things like that. So I try to make it very intentional but yet, they get to create a lot of things as well.

VICKI: Okay. What kinds of things are they creating, explain.

FELICIA: I was just going to tell you a little bit about my job right now, it's a little different. We kind of created a different position for me after a grant ended that I was working for. I was just a math coach. So I get to teach interventions that are math interventions and I also teach and enrichment class which is part of the specials block, but it's all math focused, and that's kind of the foundation – it's math that we do.

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So just to finish answering your question, my 4<sup>th</sup> graders right now are working on – we've been doing a lot of 3-act math task from Graham Fletcher [@gfletchy](#) (Math Lessons: <https://gfletchy.com/3-act-lessons/> ) or Dan Meyer [@ddmeyer](#) (Dan's Math Lessons: [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1jXSt\\_CoDzyDFeJimZxnhgwOVsWkTQ\\_EsfqouLWNNC6Z4/edit#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1jXSt_CoDzyDFeJimZxnhgwOVsWkTQ_EsfqouLWNNC6Z4/edit#gid=0) ) and right now they are actually getting to create

their own, it's kind of their final year project. So they are coming up with an idea and gathering the tools and getting the facts that they need to share. And then they always just start with a short snippet of a video that doesn't give them any questions or just as usually, information. And then they have to start by figuring out what they know and what they notice and what kind of question they're trying to figure out within that.

And after they've completed the first part they then have to kind of figure out what information they need to know, and then in the second act some of that information is presented to them. And then in the third act it's kind of answer after they go and do their thinking in small groups or individuals, however they decide to do that thinking.

VICKI: Okay. So when you say act, pretend like you're talking to someone who's not a math teacher, which I'm not. What would I see? Is this on paper? Is this through video? Are they creating a technology? What are they creating? What would I see?

FELICIA: So each kid has a notebook that kind of keeps track of their thinking and then, yes, act one usually starts out with just like a 30 second to a minute video of, say, somebody juggling a soccer ball. And then would stop that at the end of that act and they would discuss what they know about that or what are they trying to figure out mathematically? That act part is just that there's three different sections or if you think of a movie, there's three different scenes to the task that they're creating.

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VICKI: Cool. So what might they calculate with the juggler of soccer balls?

FELICIA: Probably tried to calculate how many juggles they can do in a certain amount of time based on the little bit of information that they got in that first act or maybe different places that the person could juggle it, how many times each one and then add all those together. Depending on grade level and the standard that they're working on.

VICKI: Okay. So are all the students working on something different or the same? And how do you keep up with it all?

FELICIA: That's a challenge. I see the kids in 30 minutes chunks, so it usually takes two to three days for them to complete a task depending on the depth of it. And so that's what we've been doing all year, they've been working on the same task and they're what we call, actually, low floor high ceiling. So no matter the level of the kid in your classroom, because we all know that in one classroom you could have kids that are at kindergarten level or that are 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. So everybody can access some sort of the task and find some kind of entry point for their own thinking.

VICKI: Okay. You also said you have technology in your classroom. What kind of technology are you using?

FELICIA: I have an iPad and a laptop that are mine and then the kids just share using those. And I have a couple of desktops as well. And obviously, my phone – they always have that in their hand as well. And then they're creating something through Google Drive or something through PowerPoint. We're just using Google Drive last year and this year because they can share easily their videos with each other and edit them and do things like that. So that's been a challenge to teach them and teach myself. But once I get them started, they're typically teaching me very quickly.

VICKI: Yeah. So Felicia, that's so curious because so many math teachers are used to just, okay, have a piece of paper, work problems, copy the problem out of the book, work the worksheet and you're spending all your time creating. I mean, are you doing traditional things? Have you always taught this way?

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FELICIA: Not, not always. This has kind of been a change in probably the last five years of my teaching and my philosophy really changed. I got my masters in reading and writing and after about 8 years I was like, "Okay, I kind of feel like I had a handle on how to teach that and what to look for. But I knew I had to revisit the math because I knew I wasn't very good at teaching it.

So I just started in with math and that's when I learned how much of a creative subject it was and how I was not teaching it that way, I was teaching it very much how I learned it. It's just very traditionally and so that's been a big change in the last five years of my teaching math.

VICKI: So I'm curious, what made you decide you needed to change?

FELICIA: I didn't want kids to hate math like I did growing up because that's how I felt about it. And then as I started learning about it and taking classes and getting into the real research behind mathematics it was like, "Oh, this is fun." And so I believe I just fell in love with teaching math because I was so bad at it. And so that was where my focus was and then in the meantime feel in love with it and enjoyed watching kids kind of have that realization as well.

VICKI: I am so fascinated that you went from someone who hated math to someone who loves math all because you learned how to teach it in an exciting way.

FELICIA: Right. And very conceptually. So every time kids are solving something it's draw a picture, build it, how can you connect this to your own life? Those are the questions that I'm always asking them and they're trying to figure out because that's the purpose of math.

VICKI: So Felicia, as we finish up, if you could go back and talk to the Felicia of seven or eight years ago, the one before you were transformed, what would you say to her to get her to more quickly adopt this new way of teaching?

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FELICIA: Just kind of a video, I probably would present a video of me being bored, teaching math to kids being bored learning math versus now. It's just a complete night and day shift, I think.

VICKI: What's different? What looks different?

FELICIA: I think the big difference is just my own feelings about it. I have a very close mindset about what math could be so that has been a huge shift in my thinking and going from that very fixed mindset of math not being any fun and it's not really connection and you're not ever going to use it later on in your life to what math is now for me. It's very open and it is used every day. And just that excitement and passion that I have not that I didn't have then. I had that with reading and writing but now it's for all of the subjects.

VICKI: Wow. So would you tell a math teacher if you're not having fun you're not doing it right?

FELICIA: Exactly. And I'd also kind of go with motto of if I leave exhausted at the end of the day, the kids had better leave more tired than I am or I did not do my job.

VICKI: I love that. So remarkable teachers, if you're not having it fun you're not doing it right. I think it's a challenge for all of us and some of my days are more fun than others. But I know when I've got it together we are having fun, we are enjoying learning. And I'm enjoying it too. So we've got some great advice from Felicia. I hope you'll check the show notes, follow her information and learn from her in the classroom.

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