

Walking in the Footsteps of a Teacher

A parent shadows a second grade teacher and gains new appreciation for the profession



I shadowed a 2nd grade teacher last month and it was an eye-opening experience. I witnessed the degree to which teachers struggle to meet the ever-growing needs of their students, are not treated as professionals, and are being exploited.

To protect myself and the people involved (including students and parents), I will use pseudonyms for everyone involved. I am a parent and have security clearance; I simply wanted to know more about what teaching is like in North Carolina today.

The school is a magnet school within an affluent part of a major metropolitan area in North Carolina. Many faculty members said they felt lucky to be at a school with a great principal within a supportive community. Several confided they were afraid to think what teaching must be like in less affluent rural areas.

7:15 a.m. - Ms. Ray was in her classroom, after making some copies in a workroom that morning. She was eating oatmeal while she readied her classroom.

7:45 a.m. – Ms. Ray and nine other female educators met in a professional learning team. Four were 2nd grade teachers, one was a special educator, one a literacy specialist, one an assistant principal, and the rest were student teachers. They went over a few announcements, including that:

- Report cards were to go out tomorrow and paper just came in.
- According to their Positive Behavior Intervention and Support system, it was their turn to plan an event to help relieve faculty stress. All expenses would come from the teachers' own pockets.
- Teachers are no longer referring kids to administration for bad behavior, as the new system for doing so (ironically named "EASI") is hard to navigate. A tutorial has been posted on the Internet.
- For future "M class" reading assessments, teachers will not be allowed to test their own students.
- They then began discussing specific kids who are performing below grade level. They call this part "Kid Talk". The stated goal was to share knowledge about the kids to see if they could gain greater insight on how to meet their needs. They **talked about 18 kids total**, always referencing recent test scores (mainly M class reading scores) as a part of the discussion. A few kids stood out:

Tabitha: She rarely talks. They have referred her for testing but can't get the necessary forms back from mom. The family only speaks Spanish. It was recommended that a staff member do a home visit.

Greg: He is autistic, and all involved agreed he probably needs a one-on-one aid. He cannot stay on task and has a very hard time knowing what to do when left alone. A county representative came and observed and said the teachers need to write out every instruction for every part of the day so he could refer to those directions when lost. The teachers realize this will take at least an hour of writing a day, as there can be as

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many as sixteen transitions in a typical day. They don't know how they will do this, but if they don't, Greg will not get the one-on-one aid he needs.

Anthony: He is a new student. This is his third school this year. He came to school with scabies, and he has places on his body that are irritated and bleed. He reports he doesn't sleep at night. He tries to sleep all day, and the teacher does not know what else to do but let him. It's agreed someone should do a home visit.

I later find out that teachers must provide and document that they provided interventions for all 18 kids for at least ten minutes three times a week.

8:54 a.m. – Back to Ms. Ray's room where kids are doing morning work, which is to “solve two math problems using any strategy and then write a word problem to match the equation”. A teacher assistant is there named Ms. Grace. She starts pulling kids out who are below reading grade level to read to her for five minutes. She does this every day.

8:57-9:07 a.m. – Maddy's mom is here to talk about Maddy's seating assignment. Kids are lining up to have their morning work checked and get a sticker. Ms. Ray says that this mother comes in, unannounced, to meet with her about something most every morning. This is the sixth time she has requested a seating change.

9:07 – 9:14 a.m. – Ms. Ray circulates, checking morning work and praising the kids.

9:14 a.m. – The bell rings. Ms. Ray leads the pledge of allegiance and the singing of this month's song about America. She then leads them in reading a “fluency poem”, out loud, three times.

9:20- 9:31 a.m. - Ms. Ray facilitates a Letterland lesson, a new requirement this year. She's teaching words that have “ea” in them and make the “eh” sound. Cards are distributed, kids get up and spell a word she calls out, and the other students give a “thumbs up” or down to evaluate correctness.

9:31 – 9:35 a.m. – She helps them glue their spelling words into their notebooks.

9:35 a.m. – Daniel is crying. Ms. Ray asks Ms. Grace to handle a transition while she meets with him. She ends their brief discussion with “Let's talk more about this at recess, ok?”

9:37 a.m. – Carpet time. They learn about the three purposes authors have when they write: to inform, entertain and persuade. They discuss examples. Ms. Ray gives instructions for the next activity.

9:45 a.m. - Ms. Ray has prepared four stations for kids to work in to improve their reading and writing skills. Lots of materials have been prepared ahead of time: directions placed in a tray, labels printed, an evidence worksheet copied, clipboards, a computer station is prepped, and she has pulled and prepared to meet with a reading group.

9:45 – 10:05 a.m. - Ms. Ray simultaneously runs a reading group and supervises the other stations. She praises and redirects kids throughout the room. Ms. Grace assists.

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10:06 – 10:30 a.m. – They rotate roles and repeat the stations. Ms. Grace has to leave to go to another room. Things get a little dicey; Greg, the autistic student, needs redirection. A student tells on another student for sneezing on a desk and not covering their mouth. Ms. Ray wipes down the desk. Many students suddenly need Ms. Ray attention – lost library books, they want a sip of water, they are unsure where to put their finished work.

10:30 a.m. – Snack time! Ms. Ray provides goldfish crackers to kids who don't have snack. The extras are provided by parents. Kids take turn sharing stories in front of the class. Others raise their hands and ask questions.

I take a peek at the calendar on Ms. Ray's desk. On Tuesday she had an after school meeting. Today she had a meeting before school and has a meeting during planning. Thursday she has two parent conferences, one during planning and one after school. Friday she has an after school meeting.

10:35-10:40 a.m. - Ms. Ray does hall duty while students go to electives.

10:40-11:20 a.m. – Ms. Ray teaches a reading elective in her classroom. She has read and selected award-winning books that she will read aloud.

11:25 a.m. – Kids change classes again. Ms. Ray gets a love note from a student. "You are my favorite teacher and only teacher and I appreciate how you teach me everything. Thank you."

11:30 – 12: 00 - Ms. Ray teaches a social studies elective in another room. She has prepared a lesson on relative and absolute location and reading a map grid.

12:00 p.m. – Recess! Ms. Ray circulates on the playground, supervising and chatting with colleagues. My interactions with staff are interesting. One teacher tells me this is her 17th year teaching, her 11th in NC, and she still doesn't make the pay she received her first year teaching in New York and California. Another tells me she has 27 students, and anything over 20 means she "is not able to meet anyone's needs". Another teacher tells me there are three kids suspected of having diabetes in her class, and they must draw blood 5 times a day, but there isn't a nurse so she has to do it.

Greg skins his knee and Ms. Ray applies a band-aid. Another student reports his arm is hurt and he "heard something pop", but he claims to be sick or hurt in some way most days. Teachers gather to assess the situation. They decide they better call home. He comes back the next day with his arm in a cast.

12:30 p.m. – Recess is over. Ms. Ray takes the class to bathroom. A parent volunteer speaks to her while they go. The parent reports that two students need to be disciplined for misbehavior during a pull-out reading program. While Ms. Ray handles it, the kids go to lunch.

12:40 p.m. - Ms. Ray appears at the faculty table in the cafeteria with her lunch. She has 14 minutes to eat. I ask Ms. Ray if she works on the weekends. She says Sunday is a "workday" when she does about 3-4 hours of work.

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I ask if there is a teacher's lounge. They report it was converted into a teaching space, so now they eat with the kids. Teacher assistants supervise the kids while they eat. They tell me there is not a vending machine for their use in the school.

12:54 p.m. - Ms. Ray went to the bathroom for the first time. All the bathrooms in her building are dedicated to special needs students or general student use. There is only one staff bathroom at the front of the building.

12:55-1:00 p.m. - Ms. Ray takes the students to the bathroom as they return to class.

1:05-1:20 p.m. - Ms. Ray reads from a novel as the kids listen attentively on the carpet. Ms. Ray is very expressive and draws them in with predictions and questions.

1:20 p.m. – Time for a Common Core math lesson. Ms. Ray reveals that her laptop has been broken for two weeks, and she has no idea when she will get it back. She has a loaner laptop that has no battery power. Until she gets her laptop back, she cannot use her SMART board or document camera.

Kids are given two-digit addition and subtraction word problems and told to solve them using at least two strategies. Ms. Ray circulates; Greg is lost. Students begin presenting their solutions on the board. They demonstrate number lines that relate math to space, “math mountains,” and math ladders.

A special educator comes in to assist Greg in math. Ms. Grace comes and takes two students out for math remediation.

The kids are getting squirmy. They keep analyzing the problems with lots of firm redirection from Ms. Ray.

1:45 p.m. - Ms. Ray assigns two new problems. She circulates. She has prepared a math challenge activity for students that finish early.

1:56 p.m. - Ms. Ray gathers the students on the carpet to process the math they just learned.

2:03 p.m. - Ms. Ray takes them for another bathroom break.

2:10 p.m. - Ms. Ray projects a “brain break” video where they watch a video and do rhythmic movement.

2:15 p.m. – Ms. Ray calls them to the carpet, reads two sample book reviews to them, and they analyze the elements of each.

2:25 p.m. – Ms. Ray circulates while students begin working on writing their own reviews. She works one-on-one with students. Derek claims he can't think of a single book, and says he has no books in his home. Ms. Ray reminds him of ten titles they have read together. Pulling teeth comes to mind.

2:40 p.m. – Students leave for electives. It's Ms. Ray's planning time. She and Ms. Grace brainstorm why forms and homework are no longer coming back in folders sent home. Ms. Ray decides to send home an Internet-based reminder.

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2:45 p.m. – Meeting. Ms. Ray is the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports chair and she needs advice on how to get ready for a county inspector / auditor. Two other staff members are in the meeting. One of the women, a counselor, announces she is leaving her position to begin a private practice. No explanation seems necessary; everyone seems to understand the wisdom of her choice.

3:15 p.m. – Meeting is over. Ms. Ray returns to her room and begins cleaning out the desk of a student. I have observed that that student has an acute motion disorder, and he just can't keep things orderly, but the mess drives her crazy. So she takes on the task.

3:20 p.m. – The kids return and it's time to "Read to Self". Ms. Grace comes to watch the children while Ms. Ray takes Greg to another room to do a "running record" assessment to gauge his progress in reading.

3:22 – 3:42 p.m. – Ms. Ray attentively works with Greg. He does really well, and she is exuberant. She worries that when another teacher tests him, though, he won't do as well. He might become shy and nervous.

3:45 p.m. – Dismissal! Greg comes to get Ms. Ray for the "hugging ritual" they do at the end of the day. At his insistence, she tells him three things each day: "You followed all the directions, you acted like a second grader, you're going to third grade." Then they hug.

3:45-4:16 p.m. - Ms. Ray straightens desks and puts away materials. Ms. Grace is cutting and pasting to create journals for the students.

4:17 p.m. - Ms. Ray fills out a daily behavioral report for Maddy. She then moves several desks around to move her to a new group, as her mother requested.

4:35 p.m. - Ms. Ray begins entering elective grades and comments into report cards. If another teacher is accessing the file, she has to wait and do it later. She makes notes as she goes.

4:43 p.m. – She open her email for the first time today. There are 18 that need a response. She decides to do that at home. Ms. Grace says goodbye for the day.

4:50 p.m. – She begins preparing for the parent conferences the next day.

5:20 p.m. – Ms. Ray puts the morning work question on the board.

5:30 p.m. – Ms. Ray leaves, with plans to grade papers, answer emails, and send parent reminders after dinner.

It had been a ten-hour day. I was merely an observer, but I was exhausted. I later calculated that based on Ms. Ray's take home pay and hours she works, she earns \$11.86 an hour. According to recent [reports](#), the national rate for babysitting nationwide is \$13.44. Ms. Ray teaches 24 children.

- A Concerned Parent