

First Time

I wasn't really sure that I wanted to be a teacher. I didn't think I could do it. Isn't that funny?

Let me tell you how I found what it's really all about.

I'm a third year education student. I've just finished my first practicum. It was an experience I will never forget. And I found out something about myself that made me sure that I want be an elementary teacher.

I was very nervous when I showed up at the school for my first day of practice teaching. I hadn't been inside an elementary school since I'd been a student myself, many years ago. And I'd never stood in front of a class before as a teacher.

There were two of us. Ashley was in my class at college, and both of us were going to learn to teach in the same school.

We talked for a while in the staff room, where the school secretary had directed us after we'd arrived a little early, looking bewildered and more than a little lost.

Ashley asked me "Are you ready for this, Sandy? I know I am!"

Ashley seemed to exude confidence. Like me, she was going to do her practice teaching in a grade two classroom, although we would have different teacher supervisors.

As for myself, I think I was just exuding fear.

I'd done pretty well in my college courses so far, although I'd had a difficult time making lesson plans for the various courses that demanded them. My plans always took so long to make ... I couldn't imagine how a real teacher could plan for a whole day, the night before!

Our first practicum was supposed to be a gentle introduction to teaching. If we were up for it, we might actually get to teach for a whole day towards the end of the four week practicum.

Gentle or not, I didn't think I would ever be ready.

"I don't know, Ashley. I'm not even one hundred percent sure I actually want to be a teacher. I guess I'll know in a few weeks".

"I don't think you should worry, Sandy. How hard can it be? Plan some lessons, teach them, and help a few kids here and there. As long as you keep control of the class, what can go wrong?"

I was thinking plenty. But I wasn't going to disillusion her.

At that moment our supervising teachers arrived in the staffroom. Mrs. Johnston was the grade two teacher who would be looking after me; after we introduced ourselves, she took me off to her classroom. She seemed pretty nice.

"Sandy, for the first couple of days, I just want you to observe me teach, and get to know the students, OK? Here's a seating chart so you can learn their names".

So that's what I did. When Mrs. Johnston wasn't teaching, I helped students with their work, and got to know them.

It didn't take me long to find out that grade two kids are fun to be with. They were polite and always enthusiastic. And most of the kids in the class were pretty smart.

All except for Alex. Alex was definitely having difficulties.

Mrs. Johnston had taken me aside on the first day and talked to me about Alex.

"Alex has some learning disabilities, and I have to work with him one-on-one a lot. You'll find that he isn't very friendly ... he's sullen, and he won't say much. But he will let you help him ... although probably somewhat grudgingly".

"Isn't that sort of ... unusual? For a grade two student, I mean?"

"Yes it is. Alex is being tested later this month so we can find out exactly what his difficulties are. He definitely has problems reading. I talk to his parents pretty frequently. In the meantime we'll just have to do the best we can".

I liked the way she said 'we'. As if we were a team. But I didn't feel very confident. I was starting to realize how little I knew.

Mrs. Johnston was an experienced teacher, although she didn't look that old. Her lessons were always interesting, and the kids seemed to love her. And they were always well behaved for her.

I hoped some of that good behaviour would carry over when I had to teach them.

On the second day Mrs. Johnston sat down with me after school and we planned my first lesson together. I didn't have to research this one; she told me exactly what to do. We even developed all the questions together.

"Don't worry about being evaluated, Sandy. I won't do that this time. Just concentrate on going through the material with the students, and asking lots of questions. You know about good questioning technique, don't you?"

I assured her that I did. In fact, most of one course last semester had helped me to learn the fundamentals. But I'd never practiced it.

After I left the staff room, I ran into Ashley in the hallway.

"Hi, Ashley? How are things going?"

Ashley wasn't really a good friend; we'd shared a few classes and eaten lunch together once in a while, that's all. I didn't know that much about her.

"I'm surviving. It's not much fun, though!"

"Oh? How come?"

"Well, I wanted to teach a few lessons right away, but my supervisor told me I just had to watch for a few days. It's pretty boring. I get to do a lesson tomorrow, though".

"Me too!"

The next morning I taught my first lesson. I won't say that it was terrific, because it wasn't. But the kids were with me, and Mrs. Johnston looked pleased when I was done.

I had tried hard to make sure all twenty students were involved in the lesson. I think I was able to ask a question to every student at least once, and I was very careful to give positive feedback every time, even when students got an answer wrong.

But I'd had some trouble with Alex.

"Alex, why are communities important?"

As soon as I'd asked him the question, I realized he wouldn't be able to answer it. He had trouble with anything above the level of straight recall, and this wasn't a recall question ... I'd asked it to lead the students into the next part of the lesson. And I shouldn't have asked Alex.

I gave him a full five seconds to think. That's a long time when the person answering doesn't know the answer.

"Well, Alex ..." I wanted to say something positive, but I wasn't sure what would be appropriate. Alex was glaring at me, as if he resented being made to look stupid.

"Think about it some more, OK, Alex? Let's see if anyone else knows the answer".

It was a spur-of-the-moment response, but it must have been all right. Mrs. Johnston talked to me about it.

"I really like the way you handled Alex, Sandy. It's difficult to get him involved in lessons, and most of the time when he's asked a question, he won't say anything. I suspect he doesn't respond even when he knows the answer. The important thing is to keep it positive, and smile at him a lot. I noticed the looks he was giving you".

"Yeah. I don't think he likes me very much".

"Oh, I don't know, Sandy. Maybe he'll come around. I get those glares one in a while too. And he really is a good kid".

Before the next class began, Mrs. Johnston asked me if I would mind staying after school to help her with something. Of course I said yes.

After school I met her in the staff room.

"Sandy, next Monday we're holding a Science Fair in the gym in the evening, for the parents. We'll be working on projects in science class all the rest of this week, and I'll expect you to help students then. But what I want to ask you is whether you'd be able to stay after school to help them set up their projects, and then help with the cleanup afterwards."

"Uh ... next Monday evening?" I'd planned on going to a movie with my brother.

"Of course, Mrs. Johnston. I'd love to!"

How could I say anything else? The next four weeks was a learning experience, and I wanted to get everything out of it that I could. Besides, science fairs are fun.

I'd also been told by one of my college instructors that you should never ever say 'no' to anything your supervising teacher asks of you. I thought that was pretty good advice.

"And one more thing, Sandy. The grade two class has never done science display projects before. I wonder if you could make one for tomorrow as an example, so they can see what a good one looks like!"

"Uh, sure. For ... tomorrow?"

"Yes, if that's all right. And don't forget the math lesson you're planning for tomorrow".

Apparently I would have a busy evening.

After school ended I stopped in at the 'Dollar' store on my way home. I'd decided on a topic for my sample display project ... I picked an easy one. It would be about Saturn.

Not very original, I know. But it was only supposed to show the kids what a proper exhibit would look like. I wasn't trying to win any prizes.

I'd always had fun when I'd had to do science fair projects in school. I remembered the project I'd done with my sister when I was in grade nine, about making giant bubbles. I'd actually won first place for that one.

I needed some supplies ... I purchased a large ball, some tissue paper and glue, and a large sheet of Bristol board.

And, yes, my evening was busy! I researched and planned my math lesson first. It was actually pretty simple; I just had to review some things Mrs. Johnston had been doing already, and then ask lots of questions to make sure they understood everything. I spent a lot of time making sure my questions covered all the expectations in the curriculum guide. I wanted to show Mrs. Johnston that I could do a thorough formative assessment.

The science project kept me busy until nearly midnight!

First I had to do some research. I'd never really been interested in astronomy, and anything I'd known about Saturn was long forgotten. Fortunately my laptop had internet access, and it didn't take long to find some up-to-date facts.

And I learned something interesting. School textbooks don't change all that often. I'd brought home a science textbook from the school library, and I discovered it was four years old. You wouldn't think that would matter much. But in science ... particularly in astronomy ... it did! A lot of information in the textbook was wrong, or at best, way out of date, according to the NASA website I'd found. It surprised me. I'd have to remember that. Textbooks could be wrong!

The next day I set up my display at the back of the classroom. I went over it with the students during science class, so that they could see what they had to do. They were nice enough to ignore the fact that my model of Saturn sort of resembled a fried egg.

And my math class went perfectly. I was practicing my questioning techniques, and I think I was getting better at it. I'd even gotten Alex to answer a question!

"Alex, give me an example of a three digit number that's less than one thousand. Can you do that?"

"Uh ..." He had to think for a minute. "Five hundred and one?"

"Yes! Good work, Alex!"

I didn't point out that the number was an example we'd already covered, and was still on the whiteboard. I'd known that, and I didn't care. I just wanted him to participate, and to get something right.

Although he still glared at me. How could a grade two student be so grumpy?

Monday afternoon arrived. When school was over, some of the staff met in the gym to set up tables and chairs for the science fair. I'd volunteered.

Mrs. Johnston was struggling with a large table. I went over to help her.

"Hi, Sandy. I'm glad you could stay. We're a little short-handed here, as you may have noticed". She grinned.

"That's OK. Where's Ashley?"

"Oh, her supervisor told me she couldn't stay. She won't be here for the fair, either. It's too bad. We could have used her".

That surprised me. Why wouldn't Ashley have wanted to help? I hoped she was feeling all right.

I also helped students set up their projects when they began arriving. And Mrs. Johnston asked me to be a judge!

I don't think I'd had so much fun in a really long time. The kids were amazing, and the ones in my class did a great job of explaining what they'd learned. I laughed with the kids when they talked to me about their projects. They thought it was funny that I was a judge.

The final chairs were put away and the last table was stowed by about ten o'clock. I went home exhausted, but strangely, feeling like a teacher for the first time. What was that all about?

The next day I met with Mrs. Johnston before school started. She wanted to tell me about my next teaching assignment.

"Sandy, I'd like you to teach a whole unit in Art. It's the one on 'colour theory'. Please follow the curriculum objectives closely, and I'll evaluate all of your plans and your lessons. OK?"

I tried to hide my smile. "OK, Mrs. Johnston. The whole unit?"

"Yes, I think so. You can evaluate them too, any way you want to. How long will you need before you're ready to start?"

“Oh, I can start tomorrow. If that’s all right ...”

She looked surprised. But she smiled. “All right, Sandy, tomorrow it is!”

When she left, I couldn’t help grinning. I’d prepared that unit as an assignment in one of my lesson planning courses. I had the entire unit ready to go, along with a simple test I’d made. I’d gotten an ‘A’ on the assignment. And it was all there on my laptop. I never threw anything away!

I spent most of that day helping students in various classrooms. Mrs. Johnston had asked me if I’d wanted some experience in other grades, so I’d volunteered. I was starting by helping out in the grade five and six rooms.

I really thought that if I were to become a teacher, it would be at a grade one or two level. But I figured that a little extra experience wouldn’t hurt.

When school was over, I stayed behind to help some of the elementary teachers put up bulletin board displays in the hallway. I loved it. I’d always been fairly artistic, and designing displays was a lot of fun.

Ashley passed me in the hallway and stopped to talk.

“So they roped you into this, eh, Sandy? They asked me too, but I’ve got more important things to do with my time. Besides, I hate doing stuff like that!”

“How’s the teaching going?”

“Pretty good, I think”. Ashley frowned. “But there’s all this other stuff that my teacher keeps trying to get me to volunteer for. She doesn’t get it. I want to learn to be a good teacher. That doesn’t mean I have make stuff. Or stack chairs! That’s what they have custodians for!”

“I noticed you weren’t at the Science Fair last night”.

“Yeah. I had some lessons to prepare. No time for that other stuff. Do you know they actually asked me to buy things for the kids’ projects? I couldn’t believe it! Doesn’t the school have a budget??” She stopped to take a breath. “Besides, it didn’t look like much fun. And I figure that, after three-thirty, my time’s my own. Right?”

“Uh ... right”.

So the next day I started teaching art. I’d discovered that Mrs. Johnston had a well-stocked art cupboard, so the only things I had to prepare were the smocks the kids would wear when we were mixing paint.

I bought a box of black trash bags, and made holes in them for arms and heads. But when I was done, they looked kind of boring, so I spent a couple of hours covering them with stickers and making large name tags for each kid. I had fun matching the decorations to each kid's personality. I knew them pretty well by now.

Alex got horse stickers. I'd found out that he liked horses.

Do you know how expensive stickers are? I couldn't believe it! Mrs. Johnston always put them on the kids' work when she returned things; I figured she must go through a lot of packages of stickers in a week!

My art lessons that week went great. The nice thing about teaching art is that the lessons are short; most of the class time is spent helping kids. And trying not to laugh at their ... creations.

It was during my fourth lesson that it happened.

The kids were eventually supposed to do some painting, but I wanted to show them how to sketch first. I thought that the kids would have more fun if the things they were painting actually looked like ... well, the things they were trying to paint! So I inserted several lessons on sketching. Mrs. Johnston said it was OK.

We practiced sketching houses. I showed them how chimneys actually go 'up', and not at an angle. And I showed them a little about perspective, although I think most of them didn't really get it.

In the second class we practiced drawing animals. And that's when I made my discovery.

Alex could draw!

Most grade two kids draw like ... well, like grade two kids. Their people look like aliens, and other things in their pictures are usually unidentifiable. Except for the sun. They all can draw pretty good suns.

But Alex had talent. His people actually looked like people, and he was very good at putting expressions on their faces. And his horses ... well, if somebody asked me to draw a horse, it wouldn't look anywhere as good as Alex's.

"Alex, you're really good at drawing. I like your pictures!"

Alex looked up at me. I couldn't believe it. He was smiling! I don't think I'd ever seen him smile before!"

"I like drawing, Miss Sandy. My dad can draw good too!"

I had an idea.

“Can you show me how to draw a horse, Alex? I’ve never been very good at that”.

So I sat beside Alex and he proceeded to teach me how to draw horses. He didn’t say very much, but I could tell by the smile on his face that he enjoyed the attention.

I must admit that my classroom control techniques were forgotten for a while. In fact I mostly ignored the other students while Alex was showing me what he could do.

But I noticed that Mrs. Johnston had left the table at the back of the room where she’d been making notes on my lesson, and was stepping in to help kids with their questions. I caught her eye and mouthed a silent ‘thank you’. She winked at me.

Alex finished, and he looked at me. “Now you try!”

“Well, OK, Alex. But I’m not very good!”

“Well ... think about it some more. Then try”.

He was throwing my words back at me. I looked at him to see if he was making fun of me, or being sarcastic. But no, he was serious.

“OK”. So I drew a horse. I tried to draw it the way Alex had. He seemed to be able to outline the shape of a horse using one continuous line, without lifting his pencil. I suspected he’s drawn a lot of horses.

Mine sort of looked like a hippopotamus.

“That’s pretty good, Miss Sandy! Why don’t you try another one?”

Eventually the class ended. I think I must have spent almost half of it sitting beside Alex, watching him draw, and then letting him help me.

When I got a chance to talk to Mrs. Johnston, I asked her about him.

“Did you know he could draw like that?”

“No, Sandy ... I had no idea. The only art we’ve had this year has been crafts. I never suspected he had talent.”

“Yeah, it was pretty ...”

“Sandy, do you know what you’ve done?”

I sat up straight. Had I done something wrong? But no, she was smiling.

“Sandy, you’ve made a connection with Alex. The two of you were talking about something together for most of the class. And he seemed happy. And ... and ...”

She was at a loss for words. I helped her out.

“And we’ve found something he’s good at!”

“You’re right. And we can use this, to help him participate more in other classes. I’m always drawing things on the whiteboard to illustrate my lessons, and I’m a lousy artist. I could get Alex to come up and do some drawing for me. And I could get him to help me prepare worksheets by doing the illustrations ... and I can help him learn his numbers by ...”

I could see the excitement in her eyes as she thought of more ways to get Alex involved. She’d just learned something about one of her students that would help her to help him learn.

Never mind all the extra work it would mean for her.

It was right about then that I knew I wanted to become a teacher.

The rest of my practicum went by quickly. So quickly ... I didn’t want it to end. I was having so much fun teaching and helping the kids.

My lesson planning and teaching went really well. Mrs. Johnston was always pointing out things I could improve on, and I tried really hard to do the things she suggested.

I was even able to involve Alex in my lessons ... well, more than before, anyway. When I asked him a question now, he wouldn’t always smile back, but he never frowned. And he would always try to respond, even if he didn’t know the right answer. Mrs. Johnston was really pleased with the change in him.

Anyway, I passed my first practicum. There wasn’t any final grade, just ‘acceptable’ or ‘unacceptable’, depending on how it turned out. But all the lessons I’d prepared were full of useful comments, and my teaching evaluations all received good marks. I was happy.

I met up with Ashley in the hallway after saying good-bye to Mrs. Johnston.

“Hi Sandy! So, how’d it go?”

“Oh, I did pretty well. How about you?”

“I passed. My supervisor said my lessons and teaching were excellent”.

“That’s great, Ashley!”

Ashley wasn't finished. "But she said something to me as I was leaving that I didn't understand".

"Oh? What was that?"

"She said that I should consider very carefully whether I really wanted to be an elementary teacher or not. What's with that? I got good grades, didn't I?"

I was pretty sure that Ashley didn't really know what being an elementary teacher was all about. But I didn't say anything.