

## Trial by Fire

As a student teacher, I'd thought I'd been prepared for anything. I was wrong.

My first practice teaching session had gone pretty well. I'd prepared and taught some good lessons, and my evaluation was positive. I was looking forward to this second, longer session in a grade 1/2 classroom.

I'd heard the usual horror stories, of course. While most supervising teachers are great at what they do, occasionally a student teacher will get stuck with a lemon.

After the first week or so in my second school, I was positive that I'd drawn the worst supervising teacher ever!

I should have known something was up when I arrived at the school early in the morning on the first day of my practicum. The school secretary handed me a folder and said: "You're Kathy, right? Our new student teacher? Mrs. Fitch, your supervisor, is away sick today. We'd like you to fill in for her. Here are your sub plans."

That was unfair. I'd never subbed before. College education students usually don't get the opportunity, unless they know someone in a school. Subbing meant covering the teacher's classes for the whole day. True, I didn't have to teach anything ... the plans would probably spell out exactly what I'd have to do. But still ... it was a lot of work, looking after a classroom full of kids I didn't know, for a whole day.

I went to the classroom and sat down at the desk. After starting my laptop, I looked over the plans Mrs. Fitch had left for me.

What on earth?? These weren't sub plans. They were ...

What they *were* was just outlines of what I should do for each class. In math: 'Review addition facts up to ten. Make a game of it'. In Art: "Show them how to draw something". In Social Studies: "We're doing 'Communities'. Have a classroom discussion about why living in a community is a good thing".

How was I supposed to teach lessons that didn't exist? I had no time to plan anything, and the instructions she'd left me didn't help much at all.

But somehow I got through the day. The kids were pretty good, and they participated eagerly. They all knew their math facts, and many of them were eager to learn how to draw the cartoon characters I showed them. And the discussions were great. I really got to know the kids.

By the end of the day I was wiped. I took a bus home and collapsed on the couch. At least I didn't have any lessons to prepare for tomorrow.

The next day I met Mrs. Fitch in the staff room. She asked me: "Well, Kathy, how did things go yesterday?"

One of the things I'd learned early in college was that you should never complain about the work load to your supervising teacher. At least, not if you wanted a good mark.

"Uh, OK, Mrs. Fitch. You have a great group of kids."

"Call me Margaret. And how did your lessons go?"

I told her some of the things I'd been doing. She seemed pleased. And then she told me: "I figured yesterday was a good day to schedule a dentist appointment. I hope you didn't mind."

What?? She'd planned to be away? On the first day of my practicum? What kind of supervising teacher was she?

But I didn't say any of that. Instead, I asked: "What do you have planned for me today, uh, Margaret?"

"Well, Kathy, today I thought you could help out with a little supervision. I've told all the elementary teachers you'll be taking their shifts today. When you're not doing that, you can help out in the Kindergarten."

OK, this couldn't be for real. First of all, I was supposed to be learning to teach, not doing hallway and playground supervision. And I had no interest in being in Kindergarten ... my dream was to have a grade one classroom of my own. Maybe even next year.

But I said: "Sure, Margaret. Tell me the details."

So I spent the day doing supervision. First came bus duty ... watching the kids get off the bus and making sure they weren't fooling around. Many of the students in Mrs. Fitch's class said good morning to me, and I cheerfully did the same. I even said good morning to some of the older students.

By mid-morning I was ready for a break. The Kindergarten kids were full of energy, and I was helping them with learning words. I was surprised at the material that was being covered. But there was no break for me ... I had to do hallway supervision. Fifteen minutes of patrolling the hallways, looking for misbehaving kids. But at least I got to meet some of the other teachers. And I learned the names of more kids. I'm terrible with names!

The day proceeded like that. More Kindergarten, and then a long lunchtime supervision outside. This was normally done by two teachers, in shifts, but I was doing all of it. I was

tired when I came in, but I'd had a good time interacting with the kids. I finished off the day with more Kindergarten, more supervision, and then bus duty. As all the kids boarded the buses, many of them waved goodbye.

I thought I was tired after the first day. But this was ridiculous. I could hardly stand up, my legs were so tired. I was packing up my things when Margaret mentioned: "Don't forget the staff meeting. I want you to meet everyone, and get an idea of some of the things we have to deal with."

Staff meeting? Was she serious? During my previous practicum, I hadn't had to attend staff meetings, or do any supervision. I'd only had to prepare lessons and teach classes. This was too much.

But I knew there was no way I could say no. My supervising teacher had suggested it. Someone told me once that I should treat all suggestions by my supervising teacher as things I was *expected* to do.

So I went to the staff meeting. It wasn't that bad ... at least I got to sit down. And the teachers spent most of the hour discussing ways to help certain students ... I learned a lot.

The next morning I arrived prepared to teach something. Or plan something. It was time, wasn't it?

But no such luck. Margaret handed me a big plastic tub. "Here, Kathy. It's some marking I've been saving for you. There are worksheets from the past week or so in here, and I told the grade 3/4 teacher you'd mark some of hers too, so I threw them in there as well."

I couldn't believe it. She expected me to do her marking for her? And for some other teacher too?

"You can work in the teacher workroom ... it's quiet in there."

So I spent most of that day marking stuff. First, worksheets from Margaret's grade one class. I was amazed at how she could assess what they had learned, even though they couldn't read very well yet. And the grade two sheets used a lot of words that I'd noticed posted around Margaret's classroom.

When I got to the marking from the grade 3/4 class, I had to slow down a little. The answers were a little more involved, and I had to be careful to make sure I understood what the students were really saying before I marked things right or wrong.

By the end of the day I was wiped again. I met Margaret in her classroom.

“All done? That’s great! Kathy, I noticed you have a laptop. Do you have internet access where you’re staying?”

I told her I did.

“Well, we enter our marks on-line here. You’ll need the address of the site, a username and a password. Here you go.” She handed me a slip of paper. “A little homework, OK?”

I was fuming. But I smiled. “Of course, Margaret. I’ll do it as soon as I get home.” *I’ll do all your work for you, you lazy ...* but I didn’t say anything.

Entering all the marks took me about an hour. While I was on the site, I could see from Margaret’s entries that she collected and marked stuff a lot! There were about thirty entries for each student, and that was just for the last month. And it looked like she had entered anecdotal records for each student as well ... a lot of work.

The next day I was given a new assignment. Still no teaching.

“Kathy, on Monday all the elementary classes are holding a Math Fair in the gym. You’ve seen some of the work they’ve been doing. Each class has to make a game that practices something they’ve learned. All the classes will spend the morning playing all the games. Sort of like a carnival.”

“I think I understand ...”

I’d like you to prepare the game that our class will be setting up. You’ll need to come up with an idea, plan it, buy the materials, create some stuff ... use today and tomorrow. You can handle it, right?”

What could I say? “Sure, Margaret.”

“We don’t have any budget for it ... the teachers usually just buy what they need. Here’s five dollars ...” she handed me a bill “That should help. Are you OK paying for the rest? There’s a dollar store down the street.”

“Of course”. *Whatever you say, Margaret. I’m your slave. I’ll do whatever you ask. Just let me survive the next couple of weeks!*

But I didn’t say any of that.

So I spent Thursday and Friday planning a math carnival game. The stuff I’d marked for Margaret gave me some ideas, but I figured I’d better check the curriculum documents just to make sure. I had them all on my laptop. Did I tell you how much I rely on my laptop?

It didn't take me long to come up with an idea for a game. I'd actually done something like this before when I was in high school, preparing games for Student Council events. I visited the dollar store, and had to spend seventeen dollars of my own money to get what I needed. What kind of supervising teacher would make her student teacher buy stuff for the class?

I had the game made by the end of the day on Friday. Expecting I could go home now and enjoy a quiet meal with my parents, I somehow wasn't surprised when Margaret made another 'suggestion'.

"You'll probably want to go set it up in the gym now and try it out. That way you won't have to do it really early on Monday morning."

*Sure. Why not!*

"Sorry I can't be there to help ... my husband is taking me out to dinner!"

"OK, Margaret. See you Monday." I pretended to be happy about it.

After several hours in the gym setting up my math game, and helping the other teachers with theirs, (they had some great ideas), I finally got to go home.

Monday morning was fun. I have to admit it. All the kids had a great time, and they even learned things. The games the teachers had made were really imaginative. My bowling game wasn't the most popular ... that honour went to the grade six class whose teacher was the target for a pie-throwing competition (after answering a skill-testing question, of course), but all the kids had fun at my event.

And then the afternoon. Margaret volunteered me to do the cleanup. For all the classes! I had a few grade 6 kids to help me, but still ... this was unfair. Student teachers shouldn't have to do all the drudge work.

I went into school the next day wondering if I'd ever get to teach anything. And Margaret surprised me.

"Kathy, I'd like you to teach two classes this afternoon. Right after lunch you can take my grade two Science class. We're doing 'colours'. I'll show you the reference in the Curriculum Guide. You can take the morning to prepare. I'll be there to evaluate your lesson."

"Uh ... and the other one?"

"We have a teacher away sick today, and the office can't find a sub. When that happens, teachers who have free periods usually give them up to help out. My free period is the last period of the day. You'll be covering Mr. Cassidy's Science 9 class. Don't worry ... he always leaves detailed plans."

*Unlike you*, I wanted to say. But I was good.

I spent the morning preparing a lesson plan for 'colours'. The objective was to teach the students about how two different colours could combine to make a third. This was more like it! I'd prepared and taught quite a few lessons during my first practicum, and I was confident I could do a good job.

I taught the lesson the next day. I thought things went pretty well, despite a little accident with the paint container. I looked back at Margaret several times during the lesson, and noticed that she wasn't writing much ... just watching. I hoped that was a good thing.

We sat down after the lesson to talk about it.

"You did well, Kathy. But I expected you would. I'll write something up this evening."

"I don't understand, Margaret. You haven't really seen me teach a lesson yet ... why did you expect ..."

"Oh, I called your previous supervising teacher the week before you got here. We had a nice chat. She told me you were a confident, well-prepared student teacher, and had taught some wonderful lessons for her. If you'd had any problems there, I would have been having you teach more here. You see?"

I didn't. But I thanked her anyway. "But don't you have any things you can tell me about how I can improve?" That was standard practice in all teacher evaluations.

"Well, of course. Goodness, on any given day we can *all* find things that we could do better. Let's see..." She thought for a moment. "Kathy, you need to learn to connect with your students. Instead of standing at the front and teaching *to* them, you need to teach like you're sharing a lesson *with* them". She paused for a moment. "But that will come. Part of the problem is you don't know the kids well enough. When you have a class of your own next year, you'll do fine. I can tell you really care."

That was what I hoped. "OK, Margaret. I'll remember that. Thanks."

"By the way, good luck with Grade Nine Science this afternoon!"

I'd almost forgotten about that. I had no interest whatsoever in becoming a Jr. High teacher. But I guess I had to do this.

It went remarkably well, considering how rude and obnoxious some Jr. High boys can be. That wasn't the case here; they were polite, and reasonably enthusiastic about the lesson, which Mr. Cassidy had laid out for me in great detail.

But it was a Jr. High class. The last comment I got as I was leaving was “Hey, Miss Kathy, you’re way better looking than our regular substitute teacher!” Boys!

Wednesday I got to teach two more classes, but this time they were for the grade 3/4 teacher, and I had to prepare for both of them in the morning. Margaret sat in on both of them to evaluate me. This time, though, she didn’t say anything more than ‘Great job, Kathy’ as I wrapped up the second lesson.

On Thursday Margaret had me sit in on all the other elementary classes, all day long, and just observe. I was a little miffed about that; I’d done my observation sessions well before my first practicum, and I thought I was past all that. I wanted to teach!

But Margaret threw me a curve. My assignment while observing the classes was to make notes, not about what I saw, but about what I would do differently.

What was that about? Why would I do something different ... these were all experienced teachers!

But I did what she asked.

Friday morning, we skipped the assembly and sat down together to talk about what I had observed. “So, Kathy ... you watched a lot of teachers yesterday. What would you have done differently?”

“Margaret ... I don’t know what I should say! They’re all good teachers, and they did a wonderful job teaching the lessons I saw. Why would I ...”

“Did you make notes like I asked you to?”

“Well, yes, of course.” I showed them to her.

“Hmmm... let’s see. In the LA class, you said you would have sat on the floor to read to them, instead of standing. And in the Math class ... what’s this? You would have let them solve some problems their own way, before discussing the methods that might work? Interesting!”

“I didn’t mean ... “

“And in Social Studies, you would have had them generate questions themselves, instead of ... hmmm!”

Now I was worried. She’d made me look like a fool, trying to second-guess experienced teachers who were good at their jobs. What did I know?

“Kathy, there was nothing wrong with the way those teachers presented their lessons ...”

Oh, oh! I was in for it now!

“... and there’s nothing wrong with the ideas *you* came up with, either. What I wanted you to see is that there are many ways to teach a lesson. We all do it differently. You’ll need to find ways that work for you, when you become a teacher. No one way is the best way, as long as your students are learning.”

I didn’t know what to say. Margaret really did know what she was talking about! I thanked her.

“Now, Kathy, here’s what I have planned for you next week. We’re starting a new unit in Social Studies. It takes about five days to complete. I’d like you to plan and teach the whole thing.”

Social Studies was the second period of the day. It would be a lot of work ... but this was the kind of work I’d been expecting to do.

“You’ll have to do all your planning this weekend, and during the evenings, because when you’re not teaching my Social Studies, and taking all my supervision, I’d like you to help out with the grade 5/6 class. There are some very weak students in there who need some one-on-one help, and I told the grade six teachers you’d be more than happy to pitch in. They might ask you to prepare some remedial worksheets or other materials. They’ll discuss that with you on Monday. Oh, and don’t forget we have *two* staff meetings next week.”

*And maybe you’d like me to wash your car, too!* But of course I didn’t say that.

So the next week was pretty busy. The planning and teaching for Social Studies was a lot of work, but, like I said, it was the kind of work I’d expected. It was fun creating the lesson plans (although I had to put in some late nights), and the lessons went well.

Margaret stuck her head in once in a while to see how things were going, but she didn’t watch me teach. The only thing I was worried about was that she would prepare and administer the assessment herself on Friday afternoon. But I wasn’t too worried; I’d started by making my own test, directly from the course objectives, and had constructed my lessons to meet those goals. I was sure Margaret had done the same thing.

Helping with the grade five and six classes was hard work! There were a lot of kids with learning problems, and, as usual, this meant a few behaviour problems as well. I was constantly having to keep the kids around me on task as I helped individual students. But as the week went by, I learned a lot. Mostly I learned the best way to help certain students ... not all kids learn the same way. And every night I had to prepare materials to help them.



On Friday afternoon the grade 1/2 class had their Social Studies test. Margaret used a class discussion, where she asked them to tell her what they'd learned. She asked lots of questions, and they told her what they knew.

At the end of the day we talked. "It looks like you did a fine job with the Social Studies this week, Kathy. And your planning was excellent." I'd given her a copy of the Unit plans I'd made.

"Here's what I have in store for you next week. On Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday I'd like you to be me. You're going to do everything I would do. All day, for three days."

"Uh ... where are you going to be?"

"I thought I'd just relax in the staff room and catch up on my reading. I've just started the latest Daniel Silva novel ..."

My expression must have given away what I was thinking. She laughed. "I'm just kidding, Kathy. I'll be right here in the room watching you teach. But don't rely on me for anything, OK? The class is yours for the full three days. You can have all of Monday to plan. We won't be doing any work that day; there's a field trip that the whole school is going on."

So I borrowed her plan book so I could see where she had left off in each of the subjects she taught. I stuffed my knapsack full of books and resources, and headed home for a weekend of planning.

Monday was quiet. I spent the day in the library with my laptop and a stack of resources, and finished off my planning.

The next three days went by quickly, although I don't think I've ever worked so hard in my life. Margaret had one forty minute prep period every day; that's when I ate my lunch and used the washroom. The rest of the time I was busy. And, I have to admit, having a lot of fun. Margaret sat in the back of the room and made occasional notes, but she never said anything. Although she did smile once in a while.

Even the staff meetings were interesting. I knew enough about many of the students now to appreciate what was being said, and I was even able to contribute several ideas.

Friday was my last day. Margaret had taken the morning off so she could meet with me to discuss my evaluation.

I really didn't know what to expect. During the first week I hadn't been doing much teaching, and she'd hardly seen me teach at all, and for sure hadn't said much to me. How did she expect me to improve? And all that other stuff she'd had me do ... I was still a little ticked off about that.

Margaret. handed me the completed evaluation. I glanced at the last page. Every single entry was an A plus. How ...?

“You can read the comments later, Kathy. Don’t worry ... they’re all positive. I did mention a few things you might do to improve, but they’re all minor. Let’s just talk, all right?”

“Sure, Margaret. But how ... why...” I didn’t know where to start.

“Kathy, I know what you’re thinking. Right now you’re half convinced I know what I’m doing, but I’m pretty sure the other half is telling you that I don’t have a clue about anything. And I think you resent all those things I made you do.”

“Well ...” I wasn’t going to say it.

“Let me explain, OK? I already told you that I contacted your previous supervising teacher, so I knew before you got here that you were a pretty good teacher. I wouldn’t have done things the way I did if that hadn’t been the case.”

I nodded.

“Kathy, in a few months you’re going to be looking for a teaching job. You’ll have a classroom of your own. Over the past few weeks you’ve had to do everything a teacher does. Every single thing. I threw everything I could think of at you, and you handled it all very professionally. I’m proud of you.”

I didn’t say anything. I was still trying to take in what she’d said.

“Subbing on your very first day let you practice classroom management without having to plan anything, and it helped you to get to know the kids. Then you spent a full day supervising.” She laughed. “I could tell you were angry with me. But you never complained.”

I was confused. “Uh .. should I have?”

“Heavens, no! Student teachers who complain about the things I ask them to do usually don’t get a passing grade. And you learned a lot about what happens in Kindergarten, so you’ll have a better idea of what to expect from your new grade one students next year.”

I hadn’t thought about it like that. But she was right. Again.

“The staff meetings were a nice touch, I thought. You can really learn a lot about how teachers try to help kids by attending them. And I was very impressed that you were able to make some valuable contributions during our last meeting. Do you know that I once had a student teacher who refused to do supervision or attend staff meetings?”

“Uh ...”

“I think he’s working at McDonalds ...”

I believed her.

“And all that marking! I really felt bad about that ... there really was a lot, wasn’t there? I usually don’t put off my marking ... I like to do an hour or so every evening, so I can keep on top of how the kids are doing. But you needed to see how I assess students. You also needed to see what was happening in the grade 3/4 classroom. The teacher really appreciated you doing that for her, by the way. I think she has a gift for you, before you leave”

“Margaret, I ...”

I was speechless. For me, that’s saying a lot.

“You also needed to see how we enter marks. A lot of schools are doing it that way now. And I hope you had fun with the Math Fair. I felt really bad about only giving you five dollars to help with it ... but I wanted you to see the reality of being an elementary teacher. Most good ones spend a lot of money on their classrooms ... there isn’t money in the schools for things like that. My husband complains about it all the time!”

“That’s OK. It was fun.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, Kathy. If this job isn’t fun for you, then you shouldn’t be doing it. That’s why I asked you to help with the clean-up after the fair. That was fun, wasn’t it?”

Actually, it had been. The other teachers and I had had a good time helping each other and generally goofing around. It was a good way to end the week. I told Margaret that.

“You did a good job filling in for Mr. Cassidy. He was most impressed. And you did an excellent job preparing that Unit in Social Studies. The students knew the material perfectly. The grade five and six teachers also told me that you were a big help in their classes.”

“I think I learned as much as they did!” I’d finally said something. “But, Margaret ... a lot of the time you weren’t around. How were you able to evaluate me ...”

“Kathy, don’t be silly. I gave you a lot of responsibility, but I had to make sure you could handle it. I checked everything you did, even the marking. I talked to all the other teachers, and they looked in on you all the time, when I couldn’t.”

I did remember seeing a lot of heads popping into the room when I was busy doing something. I'd thought they were just looking for Margaret.

"I have sort of an understanding with the Supervisor of Instruction at your college" she continued. "Sometimes if a student teacher can't handle the responsibility, or refuses to do the extra work, we send them back for reassignment somewhere else. I only want the best student teachers. And I think I really found a gem this time!"

I didn't know what to say. Again.

"Kathy ... my friend Mary, the teacher across the hall, is retiring next year." I'd met her. She had a grade one class. "If you'd like to apply for the job when it's advertised, I'll put in a good word for you."

I had the feeling that a good word from Margaret would probably guarantee me the job.

"Thank you, Margaret. To tell you the truth, I was a little angry at first at all the things you had me do. I just wanted to teach." There were tears in my eyes. "But now I know ..." I hesitated for a moment. "Now I know why you did all those things. And it feels like I've really ... accomplished something. Thank you."

She gave me a hug, and as I was leaving, she said "I'll look forward to teaching with you next year!"

I was looking forward to it too.

