

FORTY PLUS YEARS OF TEACHING AND STILL GOING STRONG

By

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Editor's note – In this issue, we welcome this first episode in a new feature. Like many of us who have spent our careers at the middle level, Dr. Beal finds it helpful to reflect on ways that teaching has changed over the years and how some of the most important elements remain the same. Her insights help us continue to focus on the heart of the matter. DS

Greetings! David and I discussed the idea for a teacher-to-teacher conversation when we last met at NC State University. He and I are contemporaries and when we get together we compare notes about students at his school, Western Carolina, and at mine, NC State, and share ideas about how to prepare college students for the real world of classroom teaching. There's a fine line that we have to walk, especially when we know what's best for middle schoolers and don't always see current policies and practices supporting early adolescents and their teachers. Theory to practice is made all the more difficult today with spit-back testing, four teacher teams and the resurgence of the junior high school model, but those are thoughts for other columns.

There's something about being chronologically gifted that causes one to look back and at the same time consider what's going on today and what might come in the future. As you might expect, things have changed a lot since the late 60s when I started teaching. If you think times are challenging now, consider the following stories.

When I began my teaching career everyone wondered why someone who could teach in Virginia would take a \$1,000 salary cut to come to teach in North Carolina. After all, why pass up the chance to make \$5,000 a year teaching in Virginia and come to North Carolina to earn only \$4,000 a year? Yes, I know the cost of living was less "back in the day," but ground beef at 33 cents a pound, rent at \$165 a month and other costs do mount up. But I am getting ahead of myself. First, I had to get a job down here and therein lies a tale.

I graduated from the College of William and Mary in 1968 and was to marry a graduate student at UNC, hence the need for the teaching job in NC. I got out my map and targeted the counties and cities around Chapel Hill. Two of my interviews were particularly memorable. The first one introduced me to a very particular form of school-wide

integration. The superintendent with whom I spoke offered me a job as the head of the social studies department at an African American high school in his county. When asked how I would be received as the head of anything, given my complete lack of experience, the fellow told me that he wasn't going to integrate the kids until he had integrated the faculties. His plan was to take new, white teachers and place them in all African American schools and transfer experienced African American teachers to the white schools. I have since become familiar with other parts of the country where there was the same approach to integration, Austin, Texas, for one. Wisely, I declined his *generous* offer and told him that I was sure that he had a much more experienced candidate who could fill the bill. Thanks, but no thanks.

Another of my interviews began with the question, "Do you take birth control pills?" Stunned, I asked him why he would inquire about that. His response was, "I'm fed up with all the young teachers getting pregnant and leaving the classroom. If I know you are on the pill I feel confident that I will have you teaching for me for at least a year." I have shared this story with my middle grades teacher education students at NC State and they are flabbergasted that anyone could get away with such a question. It wouldn't happen today and, if it did, legal action would be taken. Times have changed. Thank goodness!

My first job was in seventh grade in a newly integrated Durham County junior high school. Here I was introduced to the idea that students could miss a week of school in order to help their families slaughter hogs. The kids always made up all the work, and, in addition, treated me to tales of bloody horror as they offered blow by blow descriptions of the life-ending process. Talk about a babe in the woods! It was very clear, very fast that I was no country girl! This class was the most basic of the 7th grade groups. Few could read on level, and anyway, the books were several levels higher than the grade they were in. There were no teaching materials and they had a fresh out of college inexperienced teacher. Sounds like a recipe for disaster? Actually, no. There's something about being new and believing that anything is possible, and I plunged right in. This first year experience taught me all about curriculum integration and differentiated instruction.

I taught language arts and social studies. Back then, seventh grade social studies was NC history. I had already read many books about NC history. I knew the facts and the stories and I had a plan. I queried the kids about what they wanted to know about their state. We made up a long list of questions to be answered. I combed the library for books of all reading levels that told about NC. Every day I read aloud an exciting story about NC. If it wasn't exciting I found ways to share it so that the kids were dying to know the facts. They needed the facts because we wrote our own books about NC history. We also put on plays about famous happenings. And, in teaching the social studies we used and improved our language arts skills. As we moved through the years of history, the kids would share the facts they had discovered because they had postholed down to find out answers to their own

Big Questions. Those Big Questions were part of that long list of questions we had made up when we started. Parents and grandparents shared family stories. We learned all about hard work and hard times and came to value the road that our extended families had walked. Stories told with heart and feeling about your family made everyone appreciate one another just a little bit more. No issues of integration in my classroom, just a bunch of kids getting to know one another.

You might ask about evaluations and tests and wonder how you grade a student when their work is not on level. My answer is that you do what is the most fair and positive way to evaluate. You do continuous informal assessment to show you the areas that still need work, focus on those as you move along, and when you think all the safety nets are in place, you give a test that will allow kids who really never had a chance in other classes to succeed. Most gained a great deal in one year. Some made enormous progress, others not as much. But everyone loved social studies and language arts. And when I gave that final test and asked for them to share what John White found carved on the tree when he returned to Manteo with the supplies for the colonists, one student answered that he saw a sign posted saying, "Welcome to the Lost Colony." Incorrect, yes it was, but score one point for creativity.

I can hear the skeptics saying, "Well, you cannot teach like that today." Funny, but that is exactly what I would do today. Yes, I know all about NCLB, Blue Diamond and Project Achieve, but I also know that you have to capture a child to be able to motivate her and move her from where she is to where she needs to go. Social promotion, lack of reading practice and failure to study, broken homes, gangs and drugs, all of the things that we know might stop learning dead in its tracks have been with us before. If you can slip into the skin of middle schoolers and determine what it takes to excite them, you can teach them. When I teach today or when I observe a student teacher I always ask if I would like to be a student in this classroom. If the answer is no then it's back to the drawing board (my own included) because if I'm the teacher and I don't want to be there, how long do you think I will last in the profession?

Here's a point at which I will digress for a small story that illustrates what I mean about slipping into the skin. I will forewarn you that on one of my teaching evaluations I got the comment that while I was a really good teacher I did like to "go on." Did I mention that I teach insightful students? In any case, in addition to teaching middle grades I have also taught 4 year olds. One day in my four-year-old classroom we had Bug Day and everyone brought bugs from their yards. It doesn't take much to know that fours love the study of bugs. We put all of the bugs in a terrarium and put a screened top on our bug community. It wasn't long before I heard, "Candy, come quick 'cause the praying mantis is eating the grasshopper." Sure enough, it was an early snack time for the praying mantis. What happened next was every teacher's dream. Small groups formed. One group went to

the costume corner to get a play together about the drama in the bug community. Another group hit the bells and the drums and worked on a short song about the tragedy. Yet another group drew pictures of the carnage. Finally, a few talked about a redesign for the mechanics of the grasshopper to allow him to escape sure death. Tactful to the end, they did not blame me and the screened top for the grasshopper's demise. I reveled in this great teachable moment. It, alone, may be the foundation for my belief that we need to challenge our students more. Yes, I know these were four year olds. But what happens between Death in the Bug Community and death in some of our classrooms?

The response of my colleagues, whom I thought would be over the moon with this chance happening, was disappointing. "Disgusting" pretty much summed up their take on the death of the grasshopper. I know all about PETA. I have seen Food INC. and will admit to my failure to observe the balance of power in the bug community. More to the point, I believe that we need to be able to perspective take from the students' point of view. Slip into their skins and know their point of reference and what turns them on to learning. If David and I can get back to our middle school days and remember the joy of learning, we know that educators younger than ourselves can too. It's those Ah-ha moments that will keep you teaching for years and years. And keep your kids coming back for more.

Many more "Beal, The Early Years" stories come to mind but they will keep for another day. How about you? Have you got any early stories about the trials and tribulations of your first years teaching that you would like to share? I'd love to hear them if you began last year or many years ago. Drop me a line at candy_beal@ncsu.edu and I'll gather them up for another column. Teacher to teacher, I want you to know that I know 1968 isn't the same as 2009, but even though the times change the challenges don't. We need to rally around one another and share our craft wisdom because there is a lot of it out there and it's what makes for success for teachers and for students. Until next time.....CB