

A Teacher Remembers

by Erna da Burger Fex



So many people express the opinion that teaching is an easy job with all the holidays etc. Sharing some memories of my teaching career may give you different perspectives.

I well remember my first day of teaching at Creighton Mine Public School in 1962. I was excited and also somewhat apprehensive. I had also purchased a new dress to add to my confidence level. The 34 kids were great! Discipline problems were minimal. Special days like Hallowe'en, Remembrance Day, Christmas of course, lent themselves to planning enjoyable activities! It was wonderful to see the pupils having fun and learning at the same time. One of my pupils became very ill so I went to her home several times a week to help her keep up with the class. She did very well and passed with 80+%. I was very proud of her!

I got married December 28, 1963, and returning to school in January 1964, I wondered if the children would remember my new name. I had a jar on my desk for pennies for the Red Cross. Every Friday afternoon we had a relaxing hour of learning about the Red Cross and the wonderful work this organization did. That's why we were collecting these pennies. It was also a fun time with skits, stories, show-and-tell, the opportunity for my pupils to explain, learn to speak in front of their classmates, a skill they were developing without realising it. In order for the children to become accustomed to my new name, if they said "Miss de Burger", they had to put a penny in that jar. Decades later I often met some of my former pupils and they would remind me of that penny jar. We never know what children will remember in later years. Fascinating!

Sometimes my young pupils confided something that had happened at home. I had to impress upon them that this was private and should not be talked about to their classmates.

When I became pregnant in 1964 my resignation letter was requested by the school board. That's how it was then. I had no choice.

In 1967, I was teaching grade 3 at Naughton Public School where I had just 21 pupils. This small class made it possible to do many interesting activities teaching the pupils about Canada, our phenomenal, diverse country. It was Centennial Year, the song, "Ca-na-da, We Love You", reverberated throughout the school.

Near the end of June, while we were playing outside, a nine-year-old girl collapsed. I noticed immediately that her lips were blue and her skin was almost translucent. One of the children ran to get the principal who carried her inside and called her mother. At Memorial Hospital in Sudbury, surgery was performed, unsuccessfully. The child died. What an unbelievable shock! Her mother told us that she had a congenital heart defect unknown to the family. (911 did not exist, neither did CPR nor ultrasounds).

I really enjoyed teaching in the Primary level. Children are unpredictable and unexpected things happen. One day, a little girl said, "Mrs. Fex, Mrs. Fex , Ricky took his eye out." I couldn't imagine what she was talking about but Ricky had a glass eye, unknown to me - and he had indeed taken it out of its socket. I sent him to the principal and he returned with a large gauze pad over the socket and the eye in a small bag to take home. He began to do this more frequently, until the principal called his mother and it stopped! Another little boy liked the feel of my nylons and would run his hand up and down while we were in reading group. Cleaning up children's vomit happened now and then. I couldn't just leave it there! Nothing in my teacher's training had prepared me for any of these events. One child, upset because his Dad had not come to see him that weekend, bit the supervising teacher on her arm at recess to get her attention. A very bright boy in Grade 2 needed me to continually develop projects to keep him interested in school. We discovered that he was already reading at Grade 7 level and he was just 7 years old. That was an exciting challenge for me. The diversity of the roles of being a teacher was that I seldom knew what to expect when I left for school every morning but that it would be interesting.

Toward the end of my teaching career, in a different school, the children were constantly challenging me. A girl in Grade 7 told me that she was going to stab me and, "Throw my organs all over the yard at my house." Those were her exact words! In the office, shaking like a leaf, I told the principal. We called her mother who, to her credit, insisted that we call the police. The OPP officer arrived quickly. He spoke with me, the principal and the girl. He asked me if I wanted to lay charges against this 15 year old. Knowing this girl's history, I said "NO". Later I realised this was a big mistake on my part. She needed to understand that uttering a death threat was a serious crime.

I soon learned that many things happened with children which were totally unpredictable and I had to deal with them in the best way I knew how. It was never boring! This is what made teaching so stimulating to me.