

A Day in the Life

Mindy Crouchley

Serving at Washington Elementary in Vancouver, WA

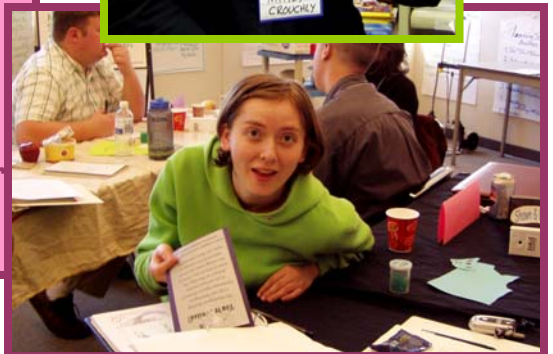
It's almost never the same. No matter how routine the material, and regimented the lesson plan - the first thing you'll realize about the educational system and tutoring specifically, is that there is no such thing as a "normal, routine day." Even if you sit at the same table in the same room, day in and day out, working with the same children...there will be a new challenge everyday. It will be something that will require your full and active engagement. Things will always be...interesting...

8:00am - Arrive On Site. Some of your co-workers have already been at the school for an hour, some half an hour. Grab your bucket (full of lesson plans, work-sheets, books, pencils, stickers, and timers) and start sharpening pencils. You should always have PLENTY of sharpened pencils on tap. Writing and reading go hand in hand. Glance over the lesson plans of the day - maybe scripted by a teacher, a reading specialist, or yourself. Start pulling the necessary materials that you must have when the children are dismissed to their small reading groups.

8:15am - Raid the teachers lounge for treats. There will almost always be at least an apple to munch on. Smile and say good morning to everyone you meet.

8:20am - Check your email. You will get staff email from your school site as well as email from WRC members and team leaders. If you are anything like me, this will be the highlight of the day. I'm a glutton for mail, no matter how dull. I will check this ten times in one day. Try to...moderate.

8:35am - The first few second grade students begin to filter in from their classrooms. Kay (Washington's reading specialist) will take her seat and begin to lead the group in literacy activities for half an hour or so. It's important to be around for this; either sitting and listening attentively or at least keeping an ear open if she should require assistance. Sometimes, the best part is just observing the children. Occasionally, there will be rewards to hand out. It's an awesome time to relax and have fun with the kids. It's good to observe Kay because there will be those days where she is OUT OF THE OFFICE. And your fellow WRC's will decline the opportunity to lead the group. You will want to know what you're doing.



9:15am - The large group is broken up into small reading groups. You are in charge of educating two, three or four children at a time. It will be difficult. They will not want to make perfect letters, stay in their seats, read aloud, listen to you read aloud, or recite the alphabet. They will want to ask questions, compete with each other, talk about their weekends, get drinks of water, and WIGGLE in their seats.

However, in the interim - you will manage to teach them their ABC's (words and sounds), how to spell their own names (neatly), how to differentiate between the words: what and wait...in short, how to become better readers. And what you will get in return is questions like: Are you going to come out and play on recess today?

When the period is over - they will leave quickly because it's morning recess. You will remind them to bring their homework the next day...or Thursday. They may or may not forget.

10:05-10:25am - Break time. Eat (granola bars), drink (apple juice), and be merry.

10:30am - Individual intensive sessions. These will be students who have severe learning disabilities, or are English Language Learners (ELL). They will be behaviorally challenged or incredibly shy - nervous to be reading and speaking in a language they have little mastery of. They will not be confident. The best thing you will ever do for these children is to listen to them. Correct them - positively. Don't tell them what they got wrong - ask them if they can figure it out. And tell them every three seconds what a good job they are doing. They will love you. And you will love them. You will begin to see the value of one-on-one sessions, and understand the idea that - "The best present you can give any child is merely your time."

11:10- 12:10pm - Two sessions of extended day kindergartners. Or as we lovingly refer to them - The Kindis. Basically babies dressed up in big kid clothing, carrying around wide eyes and backpacks which almost engulf them. They will giggle and hug you (nearly everyday). Hesitate to sing out loud, unless they hear you doing it. Pull things out of their "packbacks" and present them to you as if they were precious treasures. They will be your little half shadows - and listen to everything you say. You will teach them their alphabet, because you will work on it everyday. They will learn how to spell their own names, but it WON'T be neatly. That will come next year. Working with them you might find some of your happiest moments.

12:10-1:15pm - Lunch. Prep time for afternoon session. You will eat in the teacher's lounge, or venture out in the wild world of Vancouver (Chinese Joint on 4th Plain is: Da Spot). You will want to meet with your fellow AmeriCorps members at this time and rehash the morning's trials and tribulations. It's a good time to catch the ear of Ginnie or Kay (site supervisor and reading specialist), they will be excited to talk to you and discuss progress, setbacks, and solutions. Very good things will come of these meetings.

1:15 -2:45pm - Afternoon Session. Once again, Kay leads. This group...will be a bit rowdier. Now you are dealing with fourth graders. A bit more defiant, talkative, but also more mature and educationally advanced. It's from this bunch that you will field some of the most difficult questions, topics of discussion, and also have to deal out the most reprimands. They are curious about everything. What they are reading, the world around them, whether or not YOU like horror movies and pro-wrestling.

Like the second graders, they will also grow bored of the oft-times repetitive instructional materials and segue to keep themselves entertained. It's your job to listen, respond appropriately and guide them back to work. Two people talking at once NEVER accomplishes anything, so body language is important. Here's A Quick Hint: correcting, timing, listening, managing and breathing CAN ALL HAPPEN AT THE SAME TIME. Deep breaths and extreme patience will carry you through until the end.

And you will discover there is one student who lingers after the other students have left - talking to you. Asking for more books to read. You will see the difference you are making for one student. You will forget the last hour of insane multi-tasking, because someone stayed behind to get a few more seconds with you. That will buoy up your patience and enthusiasm for weeks. And it happens nearly every day.

2:50-3:30pm - Husky Reading Club. The First Graders trickle in along with the High School tutors. Your strict, regimented materials fall away into board-games, worksheets and books. Sometimes snacks. You will feel more relaxed, because you realize a great deal of the pressure is off. These are kids who are "strategic" - which means they just need a smidge more reading help. Just a light push to topple them over the edge into full blown readership. They will be your last kids of the day, and it will be like a gentle landing compared to the rough take-off of the morning. You will laugh more; laugh off the stress and frustrations and setbacks of the day. Eat an animal cookie. Make funny faces and ALWAYS lose at whatever game you are playing. It may seem like bad luck...but you'll feel pretty lucky.

3:30-4:00pm - Paperwork Schmaperwork. Tedious but VERY NECCESARY, and made fun with friends (other WRC members) to chat with and entertain you. This is also a good time to plan Literacy Event stuff, plot lesson plans for the next day, check and respond to emails, generally all those responsible type activities that REAL JOBS entail. Wrapped up in a nice little half an hour package, delivered at the end of the day. It's like a long slow, warm bath of pencils on paper, before heading out into the "real world."

4:00-8:00pm - This is a SOMETIMES thing...as in sometimes there is a literacy event at another school you may want to help out with. Or...sometimes there is a literacy event at YOUR school. These are totally exciting and fun, because other WRC members (outside of your school site group) always volunteer, you see kids outside of the school environment, you see their parents, and you show off your own creative side.

There are usually several stations to volunteer at, free pizza to eat, and much bonding to be had. Two enthusiastic thumbs up - a must attend. For those participating in the planning, these events do require some stress and hard work...but the payoff arrives the night of. There is serenity, peace and an incredible wholeness in doing things for others - no matter how tired you are at the end of the day; you will feel achievement and success.

It's a shared success. And after 22 years on this earth, I feel like that's the best kind.

