

## Not a Teacher—An Actor

By Alison L. Russell

When I returned to Oakview Elementary school in Greer, South Carolina, for the first time in nearly a year, memories from my Teacher Cadet fieldwork experience flooded into my head. School had just let out for the day, and my eyes scanned the crowd of children waiting to go home. I spotted Julia<sup>1</sup>, a student with whom I had formed a special bond, and I waved to her as she stepped into her car. As I walked down the hall to the third grade classroom of Beth Wiltberger, I remembered how I had felt on my first day in her classroom, before the first lesson I ever taught, and after leaving her classroom for the last time. Thinking about my former students brought a smile to my face, and I realized how excited I was to speak with Mrs. Wiltberger.

After I stepped into her classroom, we greeted each other warmly. She asked me about college, and then I began to ask her about her class this year. One of the very first remarks she made to me was that one of her students was very poorly behaved. I was initially shocked to hear this; after working in her classroom during my senior year of high school, I had concluded that Mrs. Wiltberger's skillful classroom management would encourage any child to behave well. Tyler<sup>1</sup>, however, was a different story.

*"I have a student this year who has a lot of odds stacked up against him. He's adopted. His parents are white and he is black. He has ADHD. His mom is very ill...and he has a lot of behavior problems...We think that everything's getting better, and then he'll have this major outburst...He's very callous, very self-righteous, very...almost like there's no conscience about*

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<sup>1</sup> Name has been changed to protect privacy.

*when he does something wrong...He has some kids in here scared. They're scared to come and tell me when he does something because they're scared he's gonna retaliate. So it's definitely been a challenge, because I don't know what to do... nobody works with him [at home]...He'll get his grades and say, 'Oh, look, I got a 79, isn't that awesome?' For about the first month of school, he would have me so upset every day; I would cry, cry, cry...I thought about leaving. It's a bad situation...all the way around. He's very disrespectful" (Wiltberger).*

She explained that she and the other faculty members had tried countless approaches to deal with Tyler's disobedience, but nothing seemed to make an impact on his attitude or behavior. Mrs. Wiltberger tried to be extremely loving and patient with Tyler, and she spoke with his parents and the school social worker about his behavior. When these techniques failed to ameliorate the situation, Mrs. Wiltberger tried ignoring his disobedient behavior in the hopes that he would lose interest in "acting out." However, this only seemed to worsen his behavior. After six months of school, Mrs. Wiltberger felt frustrated and nearly helpless; she simply did not know how to help this boy.

Personally, I have also dealt with children who have behaved poorly and displayed negative attitudes toward learning. Whether I am babysitting, tutoring, student-teaching, or working in a day care, I always struggle to work with a "problem child" while still caring for the other children. Even if every child in a group of students is very well-behaved, I have noticed that there is always at least one individual who requires special attention. Giving this child the special attention he or she needs can be extremely challenging. Since some students can be quite difficult to manage and creating an orderly learning environment can be a demanding task, I wondered, why do teachers teach? Moreover, what, exactly, does an elementary school teacher

do? What should I expect as I embark upon my own journey to become a third or fourth grade teacher?

When I asked Mrs. Wiltberger why she teaches, she responded, *"I enjoy kids, and I've...been in other professions [where] I didn't enjoy the monotonous situations, and this is just challenging, and it's different each day. (Laughs) It's different each day this year!"*

(Wiltberger). Of course, different aspects of this profession motivate other individuals to choose teaching as a career. Some teachers simply enjoy watching children learn and grow, and others seek to correct the wrongs done to them by their own childhood teachers. For some people, teaching is a family tradition; for others, it is a way of giving back to the community. To some, their job as a teacher serves as a temporary position or a springboard into research or administration (Kohl 15-16). Whatever their reasons may be, thousands of individuals choose this profession every year. According to the United States Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, mainstream preschool, kindergarten, elementary, middle, and secondary teachers held approximately 3.8 million jobs in the United States in 2004. Of those 3.8 million teachers, per the Department of Labor, elementary school teachers make up the largest percentage, at 1.5 million.

In order to attain their teaching positions, these 1.5 million elementary school teachers first needed to receive educations and obtain licenses. Requirements for licensure vary by state, and some states have created reciprocity agreements to facilitate licensure in more than one state. However, according to the Department of Labor, "all States require general education teachers to have a bachelor's degree and to have completed an approved teacher training program with a prescribed number of subject and education credits, as well as supervised practice teaching." Most states also require testing, such as the Pre-Professional Skills Test that I will take in order

to become certified in Indiana, in order to ensure teachers' competency in basic skills and in their particular subject areas. In Mrs. Wiltberger's case, prior to beginning her teaching career, she had obtained a bachelor's in business administration. She returned to school to receive her teaching certification from California State University and later had to become certified in the state of South Carolina in order to be considered "highly qualified." Beyond undergraduate work, many teachers also obtain graduate degrees in specific subject areas. Most school districts will provide higher salaries for teachers with master's degrees or doctorates, and, according to the Department of Labor, "a number of States require that teachers obtain a master's degree in education within a specified period after they begin teaching" (Department of Labor).

With her teaching certificate in hand, Mrs. Wiltberger set out to teach her first class. The Department of Labor's job profile indicates that, as an elementary school teacher, she would be instructing her students in a variety of subjects. She would plan and implement lessons, make assignments, grade papers and tests, and discipline the children. However, Mrs. Wiltberger soon discovered that her job required far more than imparting knowledge to students.

*"I am not a teacher. I am an actor – I'm serious! My job is to facilitate learning. I am a playground supervisor. A lunch monitor. At times, a nurse. I'm a paper pusher (laughs), a computer lab technician...but this is what you do. It's not just coming in and teaching the curriculum...you teach them discipline, responsibility, for them to try to be independent. At times you're a parent, sometimes you're a friend"* (Wiltberger). She explained to me that teaching involves playing many roles and using different skills in order to help her students become educated, responsible members of society. Most importantly, teaching involves caring for the children. Elementary school teachers, who work with children during some of their most vital

stages of intellectual and moral development, are particularly important in a child's personal growth and attitude toward learning.

From an early age, teachers play a key role in the life of a child. In turn, teachers have a great impact on society as a whole. Every great mathematician, politician, doctor, and social worker was once instructed by a teacher, and mandatory public education helps to integrate all individuals into society. The importance of education makes it a vital issue in communities and in the government. Currently, three major issues in education are the No Child Left Behind Act, science education, and teaching English to students who speak other languages (commonly referred to as ESL, TESOL, or ESOL education). I discussed each of these issues with Mrs. Wiltberger during our interview.

President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has recently come to the forefront of educational legislation. This plan, according to the U.S. Department of Education, seeks "stronger accountability for results, expanded flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work." The No Child Left Behind Act mandates statewide assessment of math and reading via standardized testing in grades three through eight. This legislation allows parents to remove children from failing schools and place them in more successful public schools or charter schools. It increases funding for reading programs, asks schools to place "highly qualified teachers" in every classroom by 2005, and tests students with limited English proficiency to ensure that they are learning English. One study, completed in a large, urban school system in North Carolina, set out to test the effectiveness of increased teacher education (a key component of No Child Left Behind) by posing the question, "What is the effect of training teachers in curriculum, data collection, and data-based decisions on students' alternate assessment scores?" (Browder 269).

Twenty-nine children with profound disabilities, autism, moderate mental disabilities, or multiple disabilities were selected for the study. Their teachers received manuals and intensive training that instructed them how to help these exceptional students reach their individualized educational goals. By the end of the project year, “eighty-nine percent of [the students] were rated proficient or distinguished” by North Carolina educational standards (Browder 275). Only thirty-three percent of these students had been rated “proficient” in their academic skills prior to the teachers’ training. In this case, increased teacher education, as required by the No Child Left Behind Act, was extremely beneficial to students’ learning (Browder 270-276).

There is, however, another side to this story. When I spoke with Mrs. Wiltberger about her opinion of the No Child Left Behind Act, she responded, *“As far as testing is concerned, I do believe that there should be some accountability. But on the other hand...who is to say that because a child doesn't do well on a test that it is the teacher's fault? Some children just don't test well, plain and simple...Do I agree with No Child Left Behind? Pieces of it I do; most of it I do not...To tell [a teacher] that she's not highly qualified...is saying to the public that we don't have the confidence in [the teacher] to do what she needs to do. In some cases, that can be damaging to someone's profession. For instance, when I came here, I was considered 'not highly qualified' because I had my California teaching certificate, but I didn't have my South Carolina certificate. No Child Left Behind forced me to display a letter in my classroom stating that I was not 'highly qualified,' but, in essence, I was [highly qualified]. So that put doubt in the parents' minds. So there are good things about it, and there are bad things about it...The testing part of it...well, this year, my class will take four sets of tests...It's a lot of classtime, class instruction that's taken away. If they're gonna hold me accountable to the standards, I need to teach to the*

*standards. I can't be as creative with some of my lesson plans...I can't do some of the things that I think are important because we don't have the time" (Wiltberger).*

I was extremely shocked to hear that Mrs. Wiltberger had been forced to display a letter stating that she was not "highly qualified" to teach. To me, this measure seemed to suggest that the school and Department of Education did not support and recognize Mrs. Wiltberger as the highly-skilled professional that she is. Along with the majority of other teachers with whom I have personally spoken, Mrs. Wiltberger felt that while the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act were important, the testing and programs that it mandates can be harmful to teachers and students. When the educational standards of No Child Left Behind are as strictly enforced as they are in South Carolina, teachers lose the freedom to employ creative teaching methods and emphasize the parts of the curriculum that they believe are most important. One of the aspects of teaching that I enjoy most is the opportunity to plan creative, enjoyable lessons from which students can learn as much as possible. In the future, I hope that the No Child Left Behind standards do not limit the lessons that I plan for my classes. As the No Child Left Behind Act continues to be a controversial and important issue in education, I suggest that the federal government seek to improve this plan by working with more teachers and incorporating their ideas into this legislation.

Effectively teaching science in the nation's schools has also become an issue of concern. "A strong science education for all students is not a luxury but a necessity. Given the complexities of a society increasingly dependent on emerging technologies, understanding science has become vital for all individuals: to help them manage their personal lives, to become involved citizens, and to contribute to both the economy and their own welfare as skilled and intelligent workers...Elementary school science education lays the foundation for all later

science education” (Michelsohn and Raizen xiii). In the 1980s and 1990s, a movement formed with the goal of improving science education. Many students, particularly females, emerge from the public school system with an aversion to the sciences. In order to reverse this trend, science classes at the elementary school level must continue to improve in order to increase students’ interest in science. The National Center for Improving Science Education (NCISE) suggests that, in order to pique students’ curiosity in science, elementary school teachers must “learn...that science can be exciting to do and valuable to their and their students’ lives...If they learn that science helps them see the rest of life more clearly, they will know that science is important for their students, too” (Michelsohn and Raizen 78).

Mrs. Wiltberger, who now teaches science to two different third grade classes, cited her own childhood experiences with lackluster elementary school science as a possible reason behind her initial aversion to the subject. *“Growing up, I was not a science fan – I didn’t like it, I didn’t understand it, I didn’t want anything to do with it...anything I had to schedule, I took the minimum amount of science that I had to, in high school and in college...I never had the interest in it. I think it had to do with not having an interest when I was growing up, in elementary school”* (Wiltberger). Outdated science textbooks and dry lectures during my elementary school years have also led to my own disinterest in the sciences. Fortunately, Mrs. Wiltberger has seen improvement in elementary school science and hopes that this growth will continue. *“Nowadays, you’re seeing more and more kids with an interest in science...which is a good thing”* (Wiltberger). She also agreed with the NCISE’s assertion that science must be taught with enthusiasm and have everyday applications for children: *“In teaching science, the more hands-on you can be, and the more real-life connections you can make, the more effective it is”* (Wiltberger). For example, rather than simply teaching a lesson about how matter breaks down



through composting, Mrs. Wiltberger helped her students create their own compost piles and make observations. When she spoke about this scientific process during a lecture, her students could relate their firsthand experience to the information that she presented. As a future teacher, I want my students to enjoy and appreciate learning about science and the “way our world works.” I plan to use hands-on activities to help my students understand and enjoy science. In general, teachers must continue to update and enhance their science curriculum in order to teach through engaging, hands-on activities and maintain their students’ interest in the sciences.

A third challenge in modern education is teaching English to speakers of other languages. In the year 2004, it was documented that 946,142 immigrants arrived in the United States, and 133,118 of these individuals came from Central or South America, two largely Spanish-speaking regions (Office of Immigration Statistics 13). Thousands more hailed from Mexico and Spanish-speaking parts of the Caribbean. An increasing number of students speak mainly Spanish, and they face the daily struggle of learning English in United States public schools. As a Teacher Cadet working in Mrs. Wiltberger’s classroom, one of my first tasks was to work with Maria<sup>1</sup>, a South American student who had recently moved to the United States. Like many other immigrants in classrooms across the nation, Maria spoke only limited English and struggled to read and write in her new language. Since most children who attend Oakview Elementary are native English speakers, the school could only offer very limited assistance to Maria. Teachers often struggle to help integrate these students into their classrooms. Mrs. Wiltberger stated, “*At this particular school, the challenges are that we don’t have very many ESOL students. So, the challenges are that they don’t get the extra help that they need to become proficient in English. Just this year, we have had a pull-out program because we have more than the allotted number...the district put somebody here part-time. The kids only get seen, like, once or twice a*

*week...It creates a problem...math, they usually do fairly well in, but especially in the upper grades, they have such a hard time with the language arts...even science and social studies...Last year it was hard. I knew some Spanish, but, you know, I didn't know much. There are a lot of challenges with that, and I think that each school – no matter how many ESOL students they have – needs a program to accommodate these kids” (Wiltberger).*

Programs to teach English to speakers of other languages have been varied and controversial. In some cases, these programs are nearly nonexistent, and in other cases, administrators and teachers disagree on methods used in bilingual or TESOL education. Some individuals believe that students should be completely immersed in the English-speaking classroom, while others assert that English language learners should be placed in separate classrooms where they can receive special attention. Three common reactions to ESL students are that their teachers: believe that, because ESOL programs are limited, they cannot truly help a single student learn English while teaching an entire class; rely entirely upon ESOL programs to help the student; or assert that the students must be placed in mainstream classes and either “sink or swim” (Moore 27-28). None of these approaches or attitudes, however, is entirely conducive to helping the student learn English. As of today, no program has been found to be a “foolproof” method; for progress to truly be made, teachers must be educated in this area, and further studies must be completed in order to determine the most effective TESOL method.

Clearly, teaching presents many challenges. Poorly-behaved students like Tyler can make a teacher's job unpleasant and difficult. Controversial issues such as No Child Left Behind, science education, and teaching English to speakers of other languages can create tension between teachers, administration, and the government. According to Mrs. Wiltberger, certain time periods during the school year and certain tasks, such as faculty meetings and grading

papers, can also become tedious. An additional challenge faced by Mrs. Wiltberger is achieving a balance between her home life and her role as a teacher. *"At times, it's hard because I have to take time away from [my kids] to do something for school...I try to get everything done here now. I've had to restructure my day...I don't socialize during my planning period anymore. Plain and simple. I don't do it...I try not to take any time from the kids...they come first, and there are times when something won't get graded because of them. Some of that has to do with because they're young...[but] they will always come first. We do what we gotta do"* (Wiltberger).

On the other hand, overcoming the obstacles of teaching can be a welcome challenge to many teachers. Teaching can be a source of great joy for instructors. *"I would say...ninety percent of the time, [teaching] is rewarding, because...my favorite sound is to hear somebody say 'Oh!' or 'I got it!'"* (Wiltberger). Mrs. Wiltberger loves being with children. Moreover, she particularly enjoys the different challenges she faces each day; to her, teaching is not nearly as monotonous as were her previous jobs in insurance and marketing.

Like any other profession, teaching has both negative and positive aspects. Overall, however, Mrs. Wiltberger appears to truly enjoy her career as a teacher. Despite her current problem of dealing with Tyler's misbehavior and other bumps along the road, she says, *"it has been rewarding because I've seen a lot of changes, not only academically, but behavior-wise...I had a girl two years ago, and she came up to me the other day and said, 'Mrs. Wiltberger, you're my favorite teacher!'"*...it's that kind of stuff that keeps you coming back. *They end up being part of your family...They are my kids"* (Wiltberger). After observing Mrs. Wiltberger teach, I have surmised that her love for her students, coupled with her determination to help them succeed academically and behaviorally, makes her both an effective educator and an individual

who enjoys her job. Her own appreciation for her profession has played an important role in her excellence as a teacher. For Mrs. Wiltberger, her job as a teacher is more than simply a way to earn money; it is her vocation. After graduating from college, she worked in the business world, but she has only found her passion in teaching. Speaking with her about her own experiences as a beginning teacher also provided me with insight into approaching my own future career as a teacher. She advised me, "*don't get frustrated your first year. Don't get frustrated your second year! And your third year...well, just keep on pushing. It'll come. It keeps getting easier*" (Wiltberger). With some time and experience, I also hope to attain such a favorable position of being a successful elementary school teacher while simultaneously enjoying my career.

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