

Teacher Observation

For my observation of a classroom teacher, I chose my teacher role-model, Tabitha Conti. Mrs. Conti is a fourth-grade teacher at Greensboro Academy, a National Heritage Academy charter school in Guilford County. Mrs. Conti has taught fourth grade for sixteen years.

I arrived early without meaning to. Her class of twenty-seven students were about to take a grammar test before going to their daily specials time. Today's specials class was art. As she passed out the test she gave a reminder that they had seen the entire test yesterday in their review. She also reminded them about the rules for test taking – no talking or they get a zero and why? Because she doesn't know that they aren't cheating. She also reminded them to start with putting their name, student number, and date on the top as an easy automatic three points of the test grade. After announcing the test had begun, she quietly walked around answering questions of students who had their hands raised. I could not hear what she said to each individual student she helped. She seemed to spend as much time as she needed with each one, not rushing from one to another, or walking away quickly. I noticed she gave lots of back pats as she leaned over each student she spent time with during the test. After about ten minutes, she gave a reminder to get out a book when they were finished. At about 9:10, Mrs. Conti gave instructions to line up for art in boy-girl order. Those who had not finished the test would be given time after art to keep working. As the students lined up, she said things like "I like how Logan is standing with his hands by his sides." When the class was fully lined up, she announced "We will walk on the right side of the hall to the art room." She led the class out of the room with the students following her. She returned about two minutes later.

While she was escorting her class to art, I surveyed her classroom. The paint was off-white and the carpet a fairly dark blue. But, throughout the room the walls were covered with bright colored bulletin board displays and posters equally colorful. There were brightly colored curtain toppers on the windows and coordinated table cloths on the tables and her desk. There were lots of colorful bins all with large labels. One whole corner of her room was an expansive classroom library.

While the students were at art, I had the opportunity to sit in on a conversation with Mrs. Conti and one of the other two fourth grade teachers. They were reviewing the results of both the recent mid-year standardized testing and the current math lesson homework. Mrs. Conti advised Mrs. Gilbride toward which skills she should incorporate into her lesson plans for review before addressing the current math lesson homework. Mrs. Conti reminded her to evaluate what she was assessing in the homework and to adjust her grading to reflect that assessment.

When the students returned from art, they resumed testing, some had a snack. Those who were finished sat and read. After about ten minutes, the tests of those finished were collected. A second test, this one on vocabulary, was passed out. Instructions were given to finish the grammar test then complete the vocabulary test. Mrs. Conti continued to walk around assisting students. About twenty minutes was needed for all students to finish the grammar test, some with her reading the entire test to

them. Directions were given for self-grading using high-lighters. Mrs. Conti sat in the front of the room on a bar-stool height chair and called out the question number and letter answer, often saying things like "Number 2, B, B as in bouncing baby boy." She continued down the answer key, calling out answers and watching the room at the same time. The tests were collected and students began to transition to math. The three classes of fourth grade are intermingled and positioned in a class with students most comparable to their math skill level. Most of Mrs. Conti's students left and an entire class-room full of students came in. As they were coming in she was giving directions. "You are sitting in the same seats as yesterday. You have your homework out. Aiden will collect your papers." After papers were collected, they were directed to their opening work problems. Mrs. Conti walked around checking each students' work, giving candy, pointing out little things like "Check the signs on that first one." She then called two students to the board to work the problems.

The next thing they did was a daily word problem. As she goes over the problem, she starts by reading it. Then she says. Let's begin with what we are given, a picture, and starts describing what the picture tells in relation to the question, and how this leads to the answer.

The next thing the students do is a three minute multiplication drill. Mrs. Conti starts a stopwatch from online-stopwatch.com which has a long fuse with a cannon ball on the end that is counting down from 3:00. When the timer goes off there is a loud bomb blow-up sound that continues to make blow-up sounds until she turns it off on her desk computer. During the drill, Mrs. Conti writes an "I can" statement of the math objective on the board. Students on the right side of the room are instructed read off their answers to the drill. Instructions were given to write homework in their binders and to study their note cards for a possible pop quiz.

It is now time to check homework. She tells everyone where they are supposed to be, homework out, ready to check their work. One student is not with it. She tells him she might need to squash his silliness like a bug and that she just made good use of a simile.

Mrs. Conti calls the student by name then reads the problem. After going over homework, she moves to the lesson: Metric Measurement. Her computer is down and she cannot retrieve her lesson plan slides for display on the board. She has to improvise. She begins with a review of yesterday's lesson and last night's homework which was customary measurement as she moves into metric measurement. She draws a chart on large construction paper of length measurements doing a side by side comparison of customary to metric measurement.

As she begins defining the metric system, I detect voice inflection when she says *ten* millimeters equals *one* centimeter. A *centimeter* is less than an *inch*. She moves through each metric unit in the same way. She draws an index card example on the board for students to make out of real index cards. She writes the unit at the top, gives an estimation of size such as a millimeter is about the size of a pencil lead tip. Then she moves into the metric measurement units such as $10\text{ mm}=1\text{ cm}$. $10\text{ cm}=1\text{ dm}$, etc.

After handing out the homework worksheet, class is dismissed by shirt color to return to their regular classrooms. It is now time for lunch. Before leaving, I have a few minutes to ask questions. I found that she spent most of her time during the grammar test reciting the grammar jingles the students are taught to aid them in answering their test questions or she would sometimes read the questions out loud for the students. She explained that she does this so that students will often start reciting the jingle themselves or she will stop right before giving them the answer to see if they recall the rest of the jingle themselves. She calls this modified assessments. She feels it is better to make modifications and have students learn and pass than to do nothing and let them fail. What do they learn then? was her comment. When Mrs. Conti read the questions out loud to students, I saw certain students actually get engaged in taking the test whereas before one in particular just sat and started at his paper.

I was supposed to arrive after the specials class of the day and have a few minutes during the second test to talk with Mrs. Conti before observing her math lesson. However, I got my time wrong, and spent much more time than I needed to observe her for this assignment. I could have left when the students had gone to art, but really wanted to stay and observe the lesson time.

What I found is Mrs. Conti has a strong air of authority in her classroom while also being highly nurturing. She has positioned her more challenging students in strategic locations in the classroom for maximum control. Her daydreamer who would rather lose himself in a book than pay attention to the lesson is sat in the very front next to her high chair close to the board. Her "aggravating as all get out" girl is also sat in the front for control purposes. Her ADHD student is sat nearer the back close to her desk so that his movement does not distract others and she can work more directly with him when she is at her desk. She did not spend much time at her desk since I was there and the computer was off-line, but she says she circles the room continuously during most of the day like she did during the tests. She seemed to pat each student on the back in a gentle almost back-rubbing way, as she helped each one. It was as if she was in that small gesture expressing comfort and support in more ways than just singing a jingle to reactivate prior knowledge.

Mrs. Conti did an excellent job of controlling her class. There were little if any outbursts or need for her to address behavior. When she was observing students work time on opening problems and word problems, I found she was always positive and pointed out what they knew, what they were given that would help them. She was always using direct statements for expectations. Instead of saying in a commanding way "walk down the right side of the hall to art" she had said in more of an expectation of behavior "We will walk down the right side of the hall."

I feel that I can learn a great deal from this observation. I realized it is important to know the students and their special, individual needs. They will be in classes and modifications may need to be made to provide them instruction. Another thing I can learn from this observation comes from the way Mrs. Conti spoke to her class. She stated her expectations. She frequently gave reminders of expectations and rules. She also drew from the content to aid in answering the problems. For example, during one math question, she drew the class' attention to the drawing they were given with the problem and how

that would help them answer the question. These verbal cues are excellent tools for instruction and will be important for me to remember when I am working with students.