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Deloitte Siyakhula Project

Being a Teacher and being Taught

This year, I volunteered to take part in Project Siyakhula funded by Deloitte. To be frank, I did not completely know what to expect and was utterly surprised. All I was told, initially, is that I would give class to grade 10, 11 and 12 learners and act as a mentor throughout the week to the various students. I would take up the mantle of teacher. While I was eagerly excited to take on the role and be a mentor to students, I was not entirely sure what would happen. All I knew was that I was going to teach, and surprisingly, I felt like I was the person who ended up learning the most.

During this week, I taught English to a tight-knit group of about 17 grade 11 students and it was interesting, to say the least. As a student who matriculated in 2017, I have not forgotten much of my schooling experience, although there are some things I try to consciously forget from my high school experience (as we all try to do). High school is an extremely wild, fantastical, stressful, frightful, insightful, developmental and, sadly, sometimes even a terrible experience for all of us. While I was not necessarily utterly excited to go back to high school, I was extremely excited for the role reversal and to see things from the perspective of a teacher.

The one in front, the one with the chalk, the one with the bellowing voice, the one with the responsibility, the *teacher*. I am certain all of us have one teacher that we have etched into our minds and hearts. This teacher may not necessarily be from an educational institution, but it still is a person we have learned so much from. A person who did not merely perform their job or a social or contractual obligation but someone who cared. Someone who taught us something. To me, this person was my high school English Home Language teacher. She was insightful, witty, sarcastic, full of banter and someone who did not treat me as a child as many other teachers did. She recognised me becoming my own person and treated me as such. She gave me a perfect blueprint to follow in becoming a teacher. If only teaching were as easy as following a blueprint...

I tried to incorporate everything fantastic she exuded into the job I was about to undertake. And I was in for a surprise.

Monday started early, and I spent the night before going through the first two lessons and familiarising myself with work I mostly had shoved out of my mind to make room for so much more. I made notes in pencil all over the teaching guide they had given us to highlight common pitfalls in the work and to bring in some interesting details and facts to make things interesting. I even did some research into the Latin origins of some words so that I could give them useful and interesting definitions to words often lost in translation. I was prepared. I had a clear vision in my head. I was going to entrance these students. That did not happen, at least not in the way I had hoped it would.

I arrived a little early with my co-teacher, Thelma, at the classroom and we sat and waited for all the students to come shuffling into the classroom and then introduced ourselves. After the niceties and mechanical greetings, the real work was about to begin. Today's topic was Comprehension and what that entails. We were given a few practice questions and a passage to work through with the students and I read and reread all of them, making ample notes and thinking of answers in advance for any questions the students might ask. We started with the questions and when I asked the class to give me their input and what they thought the answer was, I was greeted with something I did not anticipate – dead silence.

A wall of stone faces and hollow eyes stared back at me. "What did I do wrong?", I thought to myself. Even with the initial cold response, I continued, thinking that they probably just needed to get used to me and the subject matter. Soon I began to see some students loosening up and starting to answer some of my questions and began talking (what I hoped to be about the subject matter) with one another. However, I soon realised that it was only a fraction of the students. I also soon recognised that the same three people continuously answered my questions. I was delighted for any response after the shock of silence at first, but I wanted to intrigue them all.

After the lesson, I had a map of the class in my head and of the students. The girl with glasses that sat closest to the door that was always eager to answer, the boy in the corner at the back of the classroom, who only sat and stared out of the window to look for something I could not figure out. I had them all placed, all neatly organised and situated. It was a fun day, it was fun teaching, but I could not help but feel a little defeated. The day, however, was not over and I later saw them again when we were deciding on moot court groups. This was an undertaking in its own right, as this time I did not have Thelma's stern voice to grab the students' attention (which helped quite a bit). I was on my own. We were instructed to gather a group of about 5 students each and help them with a fictional case. They were going to be the legal team, 3 attorneys who would gather information and plan out arguments and 2 advocates who would present and read these arguments to a panel of judges. This was all light-hearted and was merely a way to encourage social bonding and learning cooperation and public speaking skills. However, there was still a challenge in that no one, in particular, wanted to be an advocate and speak in front of the judges and the rest of the students in my group. I discussed with them that we still needed people to do it and I assigned the two people myself. One of the girls seemed quite scared to speak in front of people, but I could see why she specifically needed to be one of the advocates. She was quiet and shy, and while those are not inherently bad traits, I still saw that she needed a push. I knew this because that is exactly what my English teacher did for me. She pushed me and encouraged me whenever we did public speaking and if I never faced that challenge, I never would have been able to speak in front of anyone, let alone 17 grade 11 students whilst teaching English.

Tuesday, I decided to take a more direct approach, because the work demanded it. We were doing summaries and the teaching guide I had did not provide a distinct memorandum, so I needed the students to participate and see if their answers were correct and if their train of thought was on the right track. I began "banning" certain students from answering my questions so that I could get answers from other students who normally would not answer. While this method gave me some results, most of the class were still reluctant to answer. But I soon became intrigued by a girl who sat just under my nose. Throughout the whole class, she would whisper and mumble under her breath the right answer, almost every single time, without fault. I began asking her to say her answer aloud in class and began to realise that as the class went on and the more she answered, the quieter she became. So quiet, in fact, that I could not hear her even though she was an arms-length away from me. I began to realise that I became the teacher I loathed as a student myself. The one who forced you to do things. After that day's lesson, I felt quite defeated yet again, but also disappointed in myself. I did not want to be this kind of teacher. I did not want to treat students like children who needed to be told what to do and how to do it.

Whilst that was gnawing at the back of my head, throughout the rest of the day, I realised the moot court event was about to start and was ecstatic to see how my team would do in the competition. I even had a front row seat as I was asked to be one of the judges that would rate the students' performance. Students continually impressed me throughout the course of the competition, stating their arguments, using the correct legal jargon, stating their counter arguments and genuinely

enjoying the experience. However, the defining moment for me was when my team came up to present their arguments. They were the last team and I visibly sat at the edge of my seat. Donned in borrowed advocate robes they presented with all that they could, especially the shy and quiet girl. I know I did not change her nature, nor did my English teacher. I still dread public speaking and I still visibly shake when I stand in front of a crowd, and so did this girl. But what it did do for me is give me confidence. My English teacher taught me that even though I was scared and shy and quiet (and still am), that despite all of this, I still can do it. It might not be my forte, but I did learn the confidence to do it as best as I can. I learned that I *can*. I hoped I taught this girl that too.

Wednesday, the last day of teaching English arrived and I wanted to do something else. I wanted to be organic. No blueprint and no expectations. I just taught, in a way that felt good and natural to me, and it clearly made a difference. I left the girl under my nose alone and she went on giving the right answers, but I kept her to do it her own way. To be contently left alone. I left the student in the corner to gaze out of the window to see what he needed to see or to look for whatever he was looking for. And I let the girl closest to the door answer as many times as she pleased. Interestingly enough, I even got a few other students to participate in class discussions this time around. I even had a couple of answers collectively yelled at me by the majority of the class. It was a very good day. I began to see just how difficult a teacher's job really is and how they need to cater to a diverse group of people and still be able to get the same content across. In the end, I think I was the one who ended up learning the most. This train of thought was even more pronounced when I had my very last session on Thursday. I did not go to teach, but simply to invigilate a grade 12 Accounting exam.

For those 2½ hours, I sat there and became quite well acquainted with the students. For a few hours, I sat and stared at a very distinct group of people and how their inner workings manifested when writing a test. Surprisingly a lot is revealed when students write a test. How they frown, whether they prefer pen over pencil, if they use rulers or if they freehand lines, how they sigh and how they react and behave so instinctively themselves. It was interesting, and I see now why my English Home teacher was so successful. She saw the individual and all that that entails. The person's strengths, weaknesses, traits, quirks, potential and personality. I learned how to treat people differently because they are so inherently distinct. People do not need a blueprint, they need a blank canvas. They need something blank to create something for themselves. They need to do things themselves. I still find it so incredibly ironic, that me being a teacher, still felt that I was taught the most, and I am eager to be taught even more.

The Siyakhula Project gave me insights into a world only ever experienced from one side, the side of the student. I know now what the other side looks like and what it ought to be. I learned how to interact with students, how to interact with a diverse group of people and how to keep learning things for myself. I really loved working on this project.

In the end, I still hope that whatever lessons I taught in those isolated hours in class stuck with the students as well as the lessons that they taught me have stuck with me.