

'You have crossed the line!'

Sarah Gravett

Tom Allen sighed and looked for a headache tablet. He had had a splitting headache since his meeting, earlier that day, with the school principal. He felt humiliated. As he swallowed the tablet, he asked himself again, 'How did this happen? How did my best intentions result in such a mess? Have I really done something wrong? I can't believe that the school principal took the parents' part – he should have defended me! He knows how hardworking and committed I am. How do I explain to the A Team we won't be continuing our special sessions?'

Surviving at Prestige High

It was Tom's second year of teaching at a rather unremarkable secondary school. For many years, the school's matric results, which are often used to judge a school's quality, had been average. Learners passed, but not many excelled. In the light of this, Tom had at first found the name of the school – 'Prestige High' – quite ironic. After starting his job there, he had soon realised that the culture of the school was extremely traditional – 'stuck' and 'stagnant' were the words he had used to describe the school to Dinah, his friend from university. The majority of the teachers had been teaching at the school for many years and some did not welcome innovation or change, as was evident from staffroom talk, which had seemed to focus on administration and trivial issues, instead of on improving teaching and learning or supporting the learners.

Tom had overheard one of the older teachers remarking to a co-teacher that the 'new teacher, Tom, clearly does not know his place'. This was following a staff meeting at which Tom had contributed some ideas about involving the children more actively. He had observed that the school seemed to be equating good teaching with passive learners listening obediently to their teacher. Another thing that had bothered him in the staffroom was the often-negative remarks about learners. He had told Dinah, 'I find it shocking that teachers are gossiping about learners. Many teachers seem not to like children. Why be a teacher if you find children tiresome?'

Tom's first meeting with the school principal, Mr MacKenzie, had been quite pleasant. 'Your CV is very impressive, Tom,' the principal had told him. 'We need a good English teacher. I am pleased that you decided to join Prestige High. Welcome on board!' However, it had soon become clear that Mr MacKenzie was both firmly set in his ideas and ruled the school with an iron fist. The staff had never opposed him, even though they grumbled in private.

An incident that had illustrated the culture of Prestige High was an interaction with Ms Pienaar, the teacher responsible for the Speech and Drama Club. Tom had indicated that one of his majors at university had been Drama and that he would love to be involved in the club. Ms Pienaar had responded: 'The Speech and Drama Club has been my responsibility for many years, and I've done very well. I don't need help, but thanks for the offer!'

As a result, Tom had decided that in order to survive he would lie low and keep quiet. But he had also resolved to look for a post at another school as soon as possible. Apart from the fact that he experienced the school environment as rigid and unwelcoming, he was also quite lonely. He did not know any young people of his own age in the community.

Tom's saving grace – the children

In the meanwhile, Tom had put his heart and energy into teaching. The learners had found him a little peculiar at first. He had gathered this from their responses when he dramatised a short story while reading to them, when he requested them to convert the short story into a play in small groups, or when they played language games. But gradually the majority started to respond positively to his seemingly odd ways. However, there was often much noise in his class, which was frowned upon by his colleague next door. Nonetheless, Tom felt that the children worked hard and that they were learning. He was aware that some teachers complained about his class's 'unruly behaviour', but he decided not to be swayed by their views.

Tom felt an 'energy high' when a sullen group of boys also started participating. To his delight, one of the particularly withdrawn boys revealed a talent for writing. Tom loved watching the boy as he read the affirming feedback that he received on his essays. The boy's shy smile was a huge reward. Tom often found chocolates on his desk – small tokens of appreciation from the 'kiddies', as he affectionately referred to his class members.

Despite his earlier misgivings, Tom began to feel at home in his classroom at Prestige High. He also became less judgemental. He realised that some of the 'traditional teachers' really cared for the learners, even though their style of teaching and interaction with the learners differed radically from his. Even Ms Pienaar warmed to him, and invited him to become involved in an aspect of the Speech and Drama Club's activities. He worked long hours in preparing the learners for a speech contest, and he felt exhilarated when they received straight A and A+ symbols at the contest, which had involved many other schools in the area.

After Mr MacKenzie's first visit to his class, Tom expected criticism about his teaching methods, which were rather unorthodox in comparison to the methods commonly accepted at Prestige High. To his surprise, however, Mr MacKenzie was quite complimentary and affirming. He was particularly impressed with how Tom managed to involve even some of the 'difficult' learners. He remarked with a smile and a twinkle in his eye that parents were curious to meet the new, 'cool' teacher, according to their children, in the school.

Close to the end of his first year at Prestige High, Tom changed his mind and decided to give the school a chance. He would stay, at least for another year. He felt affirmed when many learners expressed disappointment that he would not be teaching them again the following year. They would miss him and they had enjoyed his classes, they said. He realised that Prestige High had grown on him. And a new challenge lay ahead: He was given two matric classes – quite a responsibility for a ‘rookie’ teacher!

The matric experience

Tom was not much older than some of the matriculants, which meant that he had to work hard to earn their respect. However, he never felt that they took advantage of his youth and inexperience. The relatively small age difference was actually something of an advantage. He developed a good rapport with the learners and became especially drawn to a group of them, mainly girls but to his delight also two boys, who showed huge potential to excel. Not only were they distinction candidates, they also clearly craved what he offered them freely and enthusiastically. They eagerly read books that he lent to them, and they responded positively when he invited them to stay after school for extra lessons. During these lessons he also, from time to time, shared with them music that he loved and his passion for plays. He realised that some of them had never been to the theatre. This encouraged him to arrange outings for them. Tom started to affectionately call them the ‘A Team’.

As the year progressed, he drew closer to the A Team. His work with them also intensified, because he was determined that they would all achieve distinctions. It soon became apparent that the time they spent with him after class during the school day was no longer sufficient. He had an idea: Why not invite them to his home on Saturdays? He could then spend more time with them in an informal environment. His idea worked well: The gatherings at his house were successful and popular. The learners worked hard and felt ‘special’. They started to call themselves the A Team at school. In addition to the hard work, there was time for fun. They shared laughter and food. Tom was thrilled to be making a big difference in their lives, not only as an English teacher but also as a friend.

One day a matric learner made a remark, which was echoed by a few other learners, about the favouritism with which Tom seemed to treat the A Team. Although Tom believed such a view to be petty, he nevertheless wished to make the situation clear: To those learners who complained he explained calmly and directly that there was insufficient time during the week for supporting the learners working for distinctions and that therefore they worked together at weekends. He also expressed his certainty that there would be many distinctions.

A call to the principal’s office

On the Monday following the fourth Saturday meeting of the A Team, the school secretary sent Tom a note saying that Mr MacKenzie wished to see him. The young teacher was not concerned, since he had developed a good relationship with the principal. However, on entering the principal’s office, Tom immediately realised that something was wrong – very wrong. Mr MacKenzie looked stern and unhappy.

Massaging his aching forehead, Tom vividly recalled the principal's words: 'Mr Allen, several matriculant parents have complained about your conduct. They indicated that you have invited a select group of matriculants to your house at weekends. Is this the case?'

Nodding, Tom had replied, 'A group of matriculants have indeed been gathering at my house on Saturdays. These are work sessions, not social events. We use this time to prepare the extra work that will enable the learners to get distinctions.' Tom had expected Mr MacKenzie to accept his explanation, and even to commend him for giving up his weekends in supporting the learners.

However, to Tom's dismay, Mr MacKenzie had continued to frown. 'I'm disappointed to have to tell you,' the principal responded, 'that it is unacceptable for you to invite learners to your house. Apparently, you have also taken this group on outings. How do you explain that?'

Tom had shifted uncomfortably in his seat and tried to explain that he had only the best interests of this talented group of young people at heart. 'Mr MacKenzie,' he had begun, 'I feel that a true educator's role extends beyond the classroom. In order for powerful learning to occur, teachers must gain the respect of learners.'

Mr MacKenzie had not let him continue. He was adamant: 'You clearly did not think this through. How do you justify singling out certain learners for special attention? This is not fair towards the rest. You should be treating all learners equally. Furthermore, what if something had happened to the learners when you took them to the theatre and to restaurants? Have you thought of the consequences? And what might the community say about a male teacher socialising with female learners?' His voice had risen. 'I forbid you to continue. You have crossed the line! You are their teacher, not their friend. I expect you to behave accordingly.'

A few hours had passed, but Mr MacKenzie's words were still ringing in Tom's ears. Had he truly done something wrong? How could his best intentions be misinterpreted in such a way?

Questions

1. What is your view on Tom's approach – his invitation to learners to come to his house for extra classes at weekends?
2. Mr MacKenzie believes that a teacher should not single out learners for special attention, and that all learners should be treated equally. What is your view on whether or not certain learners should be given special attention?
3. Mr MacKenzie stopped Tom continuing the extra weekend classes. How should Tom handle this issue with the members of the A Team?