

Case study: Mr Sampson

WHEN CULTURES CLASH...

Mr Sampson teaches at a multicultural secondary school. Many learners come from a middle class economic background but a large number come from struggling circumstances. Mr Sampson is an experienced Life Orientation educator and has mentored several student teachers in the subject. Life Orientation is also viewed as the 'step-child' subject but Mr Sampson prides himself on his pedagogical and content knowledge of the subject as well as his ability to inspire student teachers to fully embrace the subject. In particular, he focuses on infusing lessons with current news and topical (sometimes even controversial) events.

Ms Botha is Mr Sampson's Grade 10 Life Orientation student teacher. Not only is Life Orientation Ms Botha's major methodology but it is her passion. The mentor and student quickly establish a good working relationship. They spend time chatting about content, teaching strategies and reflecting on Ms Botha's lessons. While Mr Sampson is a willing sharer of information and knowledge, Ms Botha is also a willing recipient.

The Grade 10 Life Orientation class also enjoys Ms Botha's teaching style and they have established an easy rapport with each other. Mr Sampson advises Ms Botha that one way of connecting with learners is, where possible, to share her own experiences and insight when discussing Life Orientation subjects. Grade 10 learners enjoy Ms Botha's laid back and easy style of teaching.

During one of Ms Botha's Life Orientation lessons, she discusses the sub-topic of work ethic and how it applies to passing a grade. As the discussion progresses Ms Botha comments that she does not understand how anyone could possibly fail a year or more, and do so badly. She herself has come through hard times but has managed to persevere, study hard and pass Matric with flying colours. She ends her point by stating that coming from a poor background should be no excuse for missing school or not giving your best. The class falls silent. The robust discussion has come to a screeching halt and there is an awkwardness in the classroom. Fortunately, the bell rings and the learners bustle out.

During reflection, Mr Sampson praises Ms Botha's easy and natural teaching style as well as the fact that she has taken the initiative to open up to the learners and to create a connection. However, Mr Sampson cautions Ms Botha to be aware about being too forceful on what her view points are, and making assumptions when not fully understanding the background of the learners. Ms Botha counteracts the feedback by saying she does not quite understand what Mr Sampson is trying to say. She feels she handled the lesson well and maybe the silence meant that the learners were taking in what she had said. Not wanting to make a mountain of a molehill, Mr Sampson backtracks on the point. He does not want Ms Botha to feel she does not have freedom to express herself, particularly as Ms Botha has been managing the classroom and lessons effectively.

The following week passes by uneventfully and Ms Botha falls into a comfortable groove. Her self-confidence is at a high and she is enjoying the comfort of the classroom and the relationship with her mentor.

On Friday, Mr Sampson has tea during second break in the staffroom. He has only one more class to teach and is free afterwards. It has been a busy week and he has not had time to copy and staple his test papers for Monday. He calls Ms Botha over to ask: "Ms Botha, are you up to teaching our last period for the day by yourself? I want to finish our Grade 10 paper for Monday." Ms Botha is pleased that Mr Sampson trusts her and is eager to assist.

After the staff meeting on Monday, Ms Botha is summoned to the principal's office. Mr Sampson thinks it strange. Maybe Ms Botha needs to complete some student teacher paperwork? Ten minutes later, an announcement is made asking Mr Sampson to come to the principal's office. Mr Sampson hurries to the office and, upon arrival, finds Ms Botha and a set of parents in the office. Ms Botha is in tears.

Allegedly, Ms Botha, during a discussion on religion, divided the learners into different religious groups. When the learners asked where should they go if they were Christian but believed in the ancestors, Ms Botha was outspoken about her views on 'ancestral worship' and had said that the two religions were not compatible. The learners had to choose, and those who regarded traditional African beliefs as their main religion were asked to rather sit out the activity.

Subsequently, some of the learners had felt aggrieved and alienated and had told their parents, who had taken great exception to a young student teacher criticising their belief system. They had come to the school to lay a complaint of intolerance with the principal.

The principal turns to Mr Sampson: "Mr Sampson, as Ms Botha's mentor teacher, I would like to hear your explanation." Mr Sampson was at a loss for words....