

Small Victories

Twice I found myself in that situation. It was the end of the year celebration and our principal asked each of us to stand for a student. Who had we helped? Who had we touched? Whose life had we changed? And again, I was at a loss. After three years of teaching Spanish I had had over 800 students and I could not name *one*. Once more I felt like a failure.

There is this universal expectation that teachers change lives, that we all remember teachers from our childhood who became our role models and guiding stars. Well, I haven't been that teacher for anyone. The only students I could think of in that moment were the ones that made me wonder if teaching was really for me. Students like Andrew.

He was the social type. Talkative, athletic, he had a swag. He would come in humming or singing, wearing these long basketball shorts and a jersey from a team I did not know. On his way to his desk, he would always crack jokes or drop funny comments to several of his friends who were already seated. He was daring but sweet. He was not the popular type, but he was liked by most, if not all, of his classmates.

Sitting at my desk, I had on my dark pants and button-down shirt. I was sweating in the non-A.C., sun-filled room, pretending to be focused on my computer, but in reality, observing it all from the corner of my eyes and compulsively looking at the clock, calculating in my head what was the best moment to stand up, close the door, and demand silence. It was the sixth or seventh time I had been in that same situation with this group. And it felt just as hard as the very first encounter.

I once had a little in common with Andrew. I was also talkative, athletic and I also had a bit of a swag. But not in my new role. As his Spanish teacher I had become stiff, nervous and serious. I had lost, in just a few weeks, my spontaneity and the joy I used to do things with. I felt robotic and my days were filled with anxiety.

That day, at 8 o'clock on the dot, I stood up, called for everyone's attention, partially in vain, and started my lesson. I continued talking over a few students who were chatting about their weekend plans, and we were now almost ready to start a turn and talk activity. Students were somewhat doing what I had asked them to do, and I was trying hard to remember what was the next item I had on my lesson plan.

Was it the video? No. That was supposed to go after the worksheet and before the homework assignment. I think it was vocabulary game now, in a circle, on the floor. But wait! Did I need a bean bag for this one? Or music? Oh geez! Let me look it up quickly, as the volume of the class

started to raise. I run back to my computer in search of my lesson plan, which should have been printed, probably. Wrong folder. Twice. Yes: game with bean bag. Class volume is noticeably higher now. I try to quickly find the bean bag and when I turn around Andrew had decided he could put his feet up on the table, lean back his chair and check in with the friend who was sitting directly behind him. I could simply transport him to a pool party and his body language would fit right in. Unbelievable.

When I turn around to face the scene, I could only make my classic “Seriously?” face and he put his feet down, banging the front legs of his chair on the floor. I knew my reaction was not appropriate. I should have said how unacceptable that was. Did he forget he was in a classroom? My classroom? What was he thinking? Instead I called everyone to the rug and we played the vocabulary game. We moved on, but as always, I was feeling I had no control over the situation.

Andrew was not the only student that made me cringe before every class. Of the 300 students I had that first year, I could name at least one “Andrew” in each one of the 15 groups I taught. My first year as a teacher was the hardest year of my life. No joke. Nothing I did before was as hard as being a teacher. Absolutely nothing.

Teachers are on a stage all day. You feel judged and tested and challenged at every lesson, by your administrators, by your peers or by your own students. It is a profession that takes you to task every day in a very real way. *Did you plan well? What was the objective of your lesson? Did your students learn? How could it have been better? How can you make that one student engage? How can you challenge that other student a bit more?* You ask yourself these questions after every single class. All the information spins in your head, making you doubt each decision you make. People just don’t realize it! I certainly didn’t until I became a teacher.

During my first two months I went home crying and looked for jobs every single day. I was in despair. I could not think or talk about anything else, except how miserable I was. But at a dinner party, a friend of a friend who really did not know me that well, saw me in tears and gave me one suggestion that stood out among many others: “just write down one thing that worked well each day.” It did not matter how simple it was, I just had to think of one.

I found one of those yellow pads and slowly filled up two pages. *Class ended on time. I remembered to take attendance before 8:15. I did not forget the puppets in the office. I had worksheets ready when class finished the task early. Students counted the days on the calendar together. I had extra prep time because 4th graders had a field trip! Andrew asked for help with math homework before class.*

Yes! He did! Can you imagine? I know he should have done his homework at home, but the fact he had chosen me to talk that over with meant a lot. I read the problem twice because I really did not want to mess up that opportunity. Imagine I help him and we do the problem wrong. No! We did not want that! So we talked through it and he told me how he thought he could solve it. I read it again – just to be sure! – and agreed he was in the right path. He went off to his seat and finished up the problem as the other students came in.

And I started to be able to add more than just one thing to my list every day, and with time, each item was becoming slightly more meaningful: *I got a smile back from my 6th grade student on the hallway. Students were excited about the video project and worked well independently. I successfully created a breakout EDU for my 4th graders. Got an email from a Kindergartner parent saying how much her daughter enjoys Spanish. Teacher said students keep saying “pegamento” to refer to glue in her class.*

The truth is, that small math homework incident with Andrew had been a turning point. For sure Andrew had no clue how important that had been for me. In fact, he left school two months before the end of the year and did not even say goodbye. But that did not matter. Not at all. I will never say I touched Andrew's life in a meaningful way. Because I honestly do not think I did. He touched mine though, and I became a teacher.