

## COMMENTARY

## My Frustrations

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Teaching is certainly not a profession for everyone but most people do teach at some point or another. One clear example of a teacher is a parent. Professional teachers have many roles but all the roles have one common element and that is care. However, teachers encounter certain problems when they try to create a conducive teaching-learning atmosphere wherein both the teacher and the student can benefit from. Due to that inconvenient circumstance, especially teachers are exposed to be subjects of appalling behaviors. That frustrates the teacher. That frustrates me as well.

I believe sometimes it is difficult to speak about frustration, or to identify why somebody feels like that. In professional contexts though, I think this issue must be dealt with, since it really affects teaching, students' learning and the whole system. It seems that teachers' frustrations are often diffused into

students in class.

Here I am trying to speak of my own. What I am about to say in any way is not aimed to reflect the viewpoint of any teacher other than my own. Believe me this is my genuine feeling. I have thought about it long and hard, and I have made sure I was in a decent frame of mind when I have given it the greatest amount of consideration. My reflection is not about any one student or any one class or even any one year of my teaching.

When we are trying to deal with a frustration, we should exclude the idea that a teacher is like others and we shouldn't forget that he is a human being. Anything that can frustrate any person can frustrate the teacher in not less a degree it does in others. Any person at work is likely to be frustrated. However what makes the difference is the sources of frustration.

I think it is okay to have frustration, because things don't always happen the way we want; we can feel frustrated anytime anywhere. But the point is to be able to hold it at that particular moment, do your best not to allow this negative energy get outside and hurt anybody else. To this end, first we should find out the reason for our frustration. Meanwhile, we need to learn how to do self-adjusting and self-encouraging. So the first thing for the teacher to do would be to jot

down and reflect on the situation. That is what I most often do.

**Apathy**

One of the most frustrating issues that I deal with on a daily basis is apathy and complacency/lack of motivation and initiative. It really concerns a teacher while students lack learning responsibility which is an essential component of the 'knowledge for knowing'.

Based on my experience, I shall be frank to freely opine the fact that students just don't care about the education they are about to receive in class or anywhere. My students have gotten used to being spoon-fed and catered to and they simply don't want to do their own work. They want someone to do it for them. They simply don't want to even to think of it.

So many people who have idealistic views about education insist that good teachers can motivate their students. According to these people, if students fail to have the drive, that clearly indicates their teachers have failed. I'd love to agree with this statement (and I do think it can be true in so many cases), but sometimes, students simply don't care. As a teacher, I do my best every day to motivate my students to do their very best. But I've also learned, over the years, that I'm just not able to motivate.

I find it really frustrating when people become too lazy or too afraid to say what they are thinking but instead of showing their concern they simply agree with everything you say. It bothers me a lot when people don't put any effort into what they are working on. To the best of my understanding, many students sit idly in the class for the marks and are not interested in anything else - they only pay attention to what I say if they know they are going to be given tests and take notes only for that narrow end/purpose. Lots of times pupils try and copy me, even opinion work! As far as I am concerned, if you are not willing to do the work you should be willing to fail, even though it affects other people in your class when you don't participate.

I usually assign group assignments, and they all come in on its dead line and their only response is that they didn't "do" it. Some of them request me to understand their lame and in most cases fictitious excuses and others question the relevance of the learning activity itself. This drives me crazy.

Some even try to utter their lackadaisical attitude direct and in front of me. It is disheartening to hear students' baseless excuses like; "Sir you know we are extension students and have lots of commitments and all what we need is...", "We are old enough...", "You know I am here just to be certified", "Sir, you know I am here just to scale up my status and replenish my personal file of records at my working place". The list goes on. Most of them try to convince me that my effort is worthless.

I can exert my energy into creating what should be an

interesting learning activity, but the whole effort on my part can be undone by apathetic students. So my reward for all my hard work is something thrown together at the last minute by some students and not even attempted by others. The result of this apathy is better explained by the instrumental/operant learning theory. This theory tells me that my response operates on the environment as it is reinforced. Therefore I try less hard next time.

This is a cycle, a sort of vicious cycle rather. They don't care, so I try less; they still don't care, so I try even less; they still don't care, so I try even less again; they still don't care, it goes on. See what you would feel as a teacher. Actually the issue goes beyond personal feelings. I want to know I have lived a life of significance. Teaching like this does neither of those things, and frankly speaking I feel like quitting altogether when I don't believe I make a difference. I think of the intrinsic need to succeed and excel but not to any avail.

What happened to cause such an epidemic of apathy? I can say, apathy in the students' side partially stems from the worth they attach to the learning activities or outcomes. I think most of my students have their own opinions about some issues, but they don't believe that discussion and reflection are worthwhile tasks. They don't believe that learning how to communicate effectively will have any impact on their lives.

The desire for competitiveness among my students is lower compared to my school days (thanks God I am old enough to witness my generation). I believe

our society does promote mediocrity, but it's interesting that at the same time, it promotes the "must have" syndrome - must have the car, villa, the newest cell phone, the latest computer - and our students aren't taught to work hard for those things - they wish just to be given to them from the blue sky.

Sometimes I get myself in a web of thought that students' apathy relates to some extent with parents who do not value education very much and certainly have no desire for their student to have an advanced education and hence the bare minimum is fine with them. I understand why my students are largely unmotivated. I'm not making excuses for them, but students today live in a very different world than that of mine and sometimes the pressure just causes them to fold rather than perform.

Though I am "a black horse" with 'little' track record", I am always struggling with frustration resulted from students' apathy. I think I have been able to survive in my career due to my personal attitude of 'be ready to expect the unexpected regarding the teaching profession and students there from'.

At the final resort, as I usually do, I push back the issue of apathy just by saying I am only one teacher and can only do as much as I can do. However the fact is always there and I know that what I can do is not enough.

### **Decline in authority**

The power relationship between teachers and students is dynamic. In the past there was almost an unquestioning attitude on the part of the students. When I was growing up, there was a healthy respect for education and educators. Education

was assumed by many of us and our parents as the key to upward mobility. The teacher was right. The school was right. That probably was going too far, but today that respect is dying or may be in its deathbed.

The majority of teachers now say that discipline is their number one problem. I am here to share this concern. When I was a student peer pressure was always on the side of the teacher when a disruption breaks out in classroom. Today I am alone as a teacher. The peer pressure has shifted to the side of the disruptive student. I sometimes feel helpless and this drives me mad.

### Criticisms

Virtually all institutions and professions are being questioned by the public. Educational institutions are of course not immune. They have been the subjects of the same criticism and lack of trust. And students, who are raised in this environment, pick up on this. The genesis of all of it is frustration, frustration at school, frustration with life and society.

There are too many sticks to be beaten with in teaching and from students as well. It's too much, and there is too much weight given to any concerns raised, whereby a case can be built against a teacher that might not actually have done anything incorrectly – it's the fact that someone has perceived something incorrect that is the problem. Quite often, criticisms are made and are expected to be corrected over things that the teacher has no control over. Yet it is somehow still considered as the teacher's problem. This really frustrates me as well.

### Changes now and then

Part of my frustration comes from the fact that there is always some new government initiative and

updated specifications that need to be taken into account. Some of these changes become impossible to cope up with, and at times become quite meaningless to me as well.

Teaching should not be subject to fads and fashions in this way. It's a serious career with a very important job to do in society, and it cannot be subjected to reform after reform. Real meaningful change does not come this quickly and to this extent. It happens slowly, takes time to perfect, and does not get thrown away easily and momentarily either.

### The Teacher at Last

A lot of modern businesses realize that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century success is all about people, and connections between people. It's the modern way to work, and it's what people value most over anything. Teaching doesn't get that. Teaching has to get that or it will not be teaching any more.

As to my experience, in education, I presume most of our managers put people at last. You and I already know that, but this is just such a simple way of expressing what's wrong with educational management.

Can you imagine if people were always put first in teaching? Teachers bouncing around happy, knowing they're doing well and what's expected of them, and knowing they can go home and have a life after it. Students shall have genuine and respectful relationships and connections.

### Low Status

The status of teachers in our country can be summed up in the popular promise of Ambassador Genet Zewede, who was the former Minister of Education. Once she

said, 'the Ministry will work on improving teachers' life.' She pledged also that the people of Ethiopia shall once again reiterate the old song/ adage: *wesedate astmare* (married to a teacher).

Nowadays in our community most people think that teachers need at least a lip service. People employed in other professions think that they are privileged for the simple reason that they are not teachers. This puts teachers at an immediate disadvantage.

We teachers are not only allocated a low social status, but also a low status in terms of earning potential. It is widely accepted that teachers have lower salaries than comparable jobs, and a lot take on additional work to help make ends meet.

Teaching is as essential to the running of the "Growth and Transformation Plan" as the engineers, doctors, lawyers and bankers of other professions, and should be a high status job that gains respect from all. I find it really frustrating when I think this will never happen soon in my life time.

Dear readers, if you haven't figured it out yet, I am not joking. There's nothing funny about my frustration, so let you get serious about yours. Anyway, to wrap it all up, let me close my article by disclosing my belief that frustration always has been and always will be at the heart of teaching.

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