

## **The Struggle Unseen**

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Even teenagers who seem to be doing well can be fighting demons that aren't immediately obvious. Mr Tan Chin Guan shares why helping students discover their character strengths is the first step to helping them face their fears.

I embarked on my teaching career all zesty and eager, thinking about how all the years of academic training could finally be put to good use. I could not wait to challenge my students' thinking and stretch their cognitive abilities through my language and literature lessons. I was confident that all the academic theories and skills which I had picked up in college would inspire my students to become thinkers, scholars and future leaders. I saw that as my sole purpose and mission as an educator, to nurture thinking, to transmit knowledge and to sharpen intellect...

Until I realised I had gotten it all wrong.

Slowly but surely, I began to encounter more and more students who started off with great promise but, at some point in time, comfortably wrapped up in the cocoons of mediocrity that they have spun themselves into, grew complacent and disinterested in learning. I also met students who shone as leaders among their peers but had to constantly engage in lonely, painful battles against personal demons hidden in the shadows of their brilliance, away from public sight. That was also when I came to a rude awakening that teaching only with the mind in the absence of the heart was dangerous because it turned education into an economic transaction void of feelings, relationships and values.

Yes, the so-called 'high achievers' have struggles too. Yes, these struggles can be very real, very difficult, and very painful for their young hearts and minds, regardless how 'high-achieving' they appear. And yes, I realised that before I can nurture thinking, transmit knowledge and sharpen intellect, I have to listen, care and touch hearts. Here are two key lessons I have learnt from working with my students over the past four years.

#### **1) It's not okay to just be okay**

The belief that just being okay is *not* okay fuelled my drive to challenge the dispositions of my students. I made it clear to my students that every one of them had so much untapped brilliance to offer, and it was this brilliance that would create a positive impact on the world they live in. The quest for excellence was not about competing with other people, but rather, competing with oneself. It was about

challenging and pushing ourselves to realise our own potential. We were our sole competitor.

I started with something small – classroom cleanliness. I wanted them to see that their callous attitude towards classroom cleanliness reflected a similarly callous attitude towards daily learning. So with all my form classes, I got them to commit to a year-long cause of upholding a high standard of classroom cleanliness. I checked on them every morning without fail. I held them to task when they did not perform their duties. I showed them how to use a broom to sweep the floor properly – some of them had clearly not used one before! I celebrated their little success whenever their cleanliness scores improved. I empowered the class committee to lead the class to continue on this mission to maintain a clean, conducive and comfortable learning environment for all.

There were instances when students from other classes were brought to visit my form classes to see for themselves what a clean and tidy classroom looked like. My students were of course elated. From being a class that was notorious for being untidy and messy to becoming a model class for the school – what a transformation it was! It became a source of immense pride for them.

I used this experience to illustrate to my students that when they committed to a cause wholeheartedly, they could achieve greatness, which was what our school motto was all about – 自强不息 (*Zi Qiang Bu Xi*)\*. In order to do that, they had to start small, and carry that same spirit through to the other aspects of their lives, in a tireless strive for self-excellence.

They must have understood my point because later on, I started seeing my form classes change for the better, learning to work as a class, and understanding that they had a lot to offer, whether by organizing self-help groups for peer coaching, or uniting to perform at Teachers' Day Celebrations. Affirmation from my students about how I was '*the only teacher whom ... never gave up on a class like mine*' remind me that all the hard work in fighting off the monster of mediocrity was worthwhile.

## **2) Brilliance takes its toll**

The following story is one about light and shadows.

Jonathan\*\* was a star pupil in Secondary 2, who qualified for a highly selective academic programme and had been elected a student leader. In him, I saw a sense of moral courage that was particularly rare for an adult, much less for someone his age – How many of us have the maturity and courage to step forward and stop our friends or passers-by from doing something wrong? I saw in him a mind that was able to think and envision. I saw in him the drive and determination to persevere in times of difficulty.

However, a year later, things were not looking as rosy. While his strong personality and decision-making skills meant that he could lead and manage his peers, there were times he was misunderstood as being 'bossy', and this strained relationships. To make matters worse, his grades for his weaker subjects started to suffer and he was consistently near the bottom of his cohort throughout the year.

That year, I saw how a 'star pupil' who once shone brilliantly, struggled to fight off self-doubt, fear and hopelessness as he was slowly enveloped by the shadows, perhaps, of his own brilliance.

I knew that I had to intervene and provide him with the support he needed. I roped him in on a school project to develop resources for fellow student leaders. It served as a platform for me to interact and guide Jonathan to understand that leadership meant seeking a balance between people, process and product. In a way, the project was also a platform for introspection and reflection for him. The ensuing project was stellar enough for them to share with teachers from other schools, for which they received encouragement and affirmation. What better way was there to illustrate the experiential nature of our leadership programme than to get our student leaders to speak for themselves?

Jonathan went on to do well in his studies and remains actively involved in student leadership today. This for me is testament to us as educators that we are in a prime position to help students conquer their inner demons, move out from the shadows, and continue on their journey wiser, more confident and more mature. My experiences have shaped me into believing that as teachers, it is the child that we are teaching, and in doing so, we need to focus on making human connections in our classrooms. After all, education is about, as Parker Palmer beautifully puts it, teachers teaching *who we are*.

*\*Loosely translated as 'ceaseless quest for self-excellence'*

*\*\*Actual Name has been changed.*