

Never Take Things for Granted

Tan Winnie, Bendemeer Primary School

A proper home to return to, three meals each day, family members to welcome you home or a conducive environment to study in are basic necessities that many, including Ms Winnie Tan, have once taken granted for. Read about how she learnt not to take these things for granted after embarking on her journey as a teacher.

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I have been fortunate enough to grow up in a nurturing and supportive environment that was conducive for learning. After interacting and working with students from challenging backgrounds, I have learnt that I should be grateful for what I have and not take things for granted. I wish the same for my students – to cherish what they have and make lemonade when given lemons.

I teach and interact with students from various family backgrounds every year, some of whom come from malfunctioning families with low socio-economic backgrounds where they cannot afford healthy meals, or those who lack a conducive home environment where they can revise and complete their homework in. More often than not, one's family background and parental influence play a major role in shaping one's character and attitude towards life. There are times which call for an educator to step up to the occasion and ensure that students from challenging backgrounds grow up to be confident, well-adjusted and motivated in their studies.

My Experience with Ben

One such student who left a deep impression on me was Ben*. He was an overage student in Primary Five when I first taught him. I remember spending two long hours counselling him after taking over the class for the first month. His mother, who worked long hours every day, had approached me to speak with her son as she had difficulty managing him at home. Ben often enjoyed hanging out with secondary school teenagers, playing basketball after school till late in the evening. I knew that Ben would not be convinced if I were to preach about what he should or should not be doing. Therefore, I took a different approach – I spent time finding out the rationale behind his temptations and then worked with him on how he could take on concrete actions to show his mother that he was mature enough to be responsible for his decisions. Eventually, the relationship between Ben and his mother improved tremendously and the trust between them grew. His mother gave him greater autonomy in decisions-making. Ben also became more sensible and focused in his studies, which resulted in his excelling in his Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) the following year.

Passion for Teaching is Infectious

In spite of the success stories such as Ben's, teaching has, and will never be, a bed of roses. There were times when I felt exhausted and disappointed especially when I encountered difficulties in engaging parents or getting them to send the students to school punctually or regularly. Nonetheless, I am fortunate to be surrounded by experienced teachers who have retired but returned to teaching because of their passion for it. They have also helped me reflect on the reason why I first decided to join teaching – and that is to make a difference, be it big or small. Listening to their stories and how they have lived their lives making a difference in the young ones have given me strength to continue what I am doing, even if it means having to overcome obstacles along the way. Having experienced how the passion for teaching can be highly infectious, I would definitely want to continue sharing this passion with the younger teachers who have just joined the fraternity.

A Level Playing Field

I strongly believe that all students, regardless of their family background, are able to excel and develop if given the right environment and resources. This belief has been fundamental when I plan and implement school programmes. Through these initiatives, I hope that students acquire and apply essential 21st century competencies such as critical thinking and collaboration. Most importantly, I hope that they can also develop important values such as excellence, resilience and confidence as they learn to lead environmental programmes in school and at national platforms such as Clean and Green carnival. When given appropriate platforms, preparation and encouragement, these Junior Environment Ambassadors (JEAs) and Environmental Activists who used to be self-conscious and insecure have transformed into confident individuals who are capable of sharing their environmental projects with both their peers in school or members of the public in events such as open house or environmental carnivals. Through the environmental platforms, I hope to develop students' intrinsic motivation to excel aesthetically in their respective areas of strengths.

From 'Karang Guni' to Environment Leaders

It was beyond my wildest imagination that I would ever be an environment education coordinator, especially when I had neither prior experience in planning environmental programmes nor worked with external partners such as National Environment Agencies (NEA) and Semb Waste Pte Ltd. Though apprehensive, I viewed it as a golden opportunity to fulfil my aspiration of providing platforms for students to develop important values for example confidence and respect for others, and life

skills such as effective communication, critical and inventive thinking as well as basic leadership skills.

By collaborating with Environment Club and other departments such as Pupil Management, Values In Action (VIA) and Physical Education (PE), JEAs were no longer viewed as 'Karang Guni' who were merely involved in the mundane collection of recyclables in class. They were given more leadership responsibilities in running environmental initiatives such as designing game booths during Earth Week, monitoring the cleanliness of school infrastructures, leading water conservation campaigns, putting up skits and presentation during assembly to raise awareness of environmental conservation. The shift in their roles was crucial in motivating the JEAs whose peers now look up to them as JEAs who had inspired them to contribute to environmental conservation in their very own ways. The great sense of satisfaction derived from simply watching the positive transformation of the students motivates me to continue what I am doing in environment education.

My Teaching Philosophy

Teaching is a meaningful career because it impacts the students that I work with. It may take a lot of effort to overcome challenges when I teach in class or plan school programmes. However, it is important to remain steadfast in my belief – providing a conducive environment for students to learn and develop into confident, independent and dynamic individuals with positive influence over others around them, and contributing to the nation in their unique ways.

**Actual name has been changed.*