

My effort to search for meaning in camp life

I am Ethiopian by nationality, I joined the camp in 2011. Since I came here I have been living in Kakuma 3, Zone 1, and Block 1. I am going to tell you a story about how the teaching profession, which I embraced in the camp, gave me meaning and strength to cope with challenging situations for several years; and finally, I talk how the meaning turned down into worries.

When I was heading to Kakuma refugee camp in the year 2011, which I thought was a very remote place at the far end of Kenya, I carried six second-hand books, a wooden mirror, a Philips model radio, and a few needles, thinking that it might be difficult to get such items in the camp. I chose Philips radio because of its strength though it was expensive. Back at home, I saw how farmers who were living in rural areas benefitted from that type of radio. I considered books very important items because of the comfort, they would bring as I made adjustments to a new life. It seems funny but the plan I had with the books was to read one book every two months so that they would help me for a year. I also thought of buying one more year by rereading them. After that, I thought, I would be able to move along with life. At the time, I had no idea that Kakuma had so many businesses, primary and secondary schools, and international online universities. Though it is called a camp it looked to me like a village like other villages I saw in remote areas. The issue of curfew and restrictions didn't occur to me as a challenge at that time - this is another story.

I did not expect that the majority of the camp population consisted of minors. When I was confronted with all these realities my initial perceptions had changed and gave me the strength and the opportunity to find a sense of meaning and to live and persevere. Right after arriving, I began teaching in one of the camp's primary schools. Soon, those books became only a reminder of my previously limited knowledge about Kakuma. I continued teaching and helping students in primary, secondary, and postsecondary training centers for thirteen years. Though the job is a volunteer position with a meager incentive, this opportunity has helped me to learn and work with students living aside other life challenges. However, as the year goes I also started reflecting on not only the opportunities afforded by camp education but also its many shortcomings.

My day of awakening was a day when a passionate madam teacher decided to resign from her new job because of her students' poor performance. She was a new employee who taught math and chemistry to Form 3 and Form 4 students for only one term. At the end of the term she gave exams to students and the grades were distressing to her, actually, nobody passed her exam. This fact was true for all other teachers as well, especially in math and science fields, but for her, that was not completely acceptable. She said, "I would have returned if I got one student." She meant it; she didn't come back. Her actions left a message.

Her statements and decisions ate me from the core and I questioned the meaning I thought I got from teaching. I asked – did the school that animates refugee students' hopes have covered my sight and couldn't see the fact she saw"? Is that the scene that

I see when I walk to school early in the morning -the many passionate elementary and secondary school students putting on their uniforms and rushing to school chatting and laughing overwhelmed me? Of course, the excitement – indeed, exuberance – is everywhere. Moreover, such catchy excitement can lighten a tense camp surrounding – a tense camp is the one I was afraid of when I traveled towards Kakuma. Am I using such students' scene to hide my whatever.....? So many things came to my mind - and the meaning I thought I got from teaching turned down into worries. I started following up on students' performance, calculating their grades, and seeing what they think about their performances. It is true that the result was disturbing. And as the year went by these worries haven't remained in my mind but gradually sunk into my body – now my expression, my tone, my usage of languages, and every other thing of me speaks my search for.....meaning.

This doesn't mean that the field has not favored me, it really does in many ways. The teaching field, as I said before, was new to me and learning how to teach, I mean deliver a well-structured lessons, knowing different peoples behaviors, especially from a diverse community have been an enlightening experience. Especially staying and discussing with students who have emotions challenges has helped me to be aware of my own emotional issues and find ways to hand them.