

Defeat

I had waited that day with the same high expectation and enthusiasm as I had waited it more than 25 years ago when entering a class was an adventure full of challenge, pleasure and worries. Motivations were different this time. It has to do with self-proof and national pride before those who were appalled when seeing one from that backward country invades their modern distinguished education kingdom.

- You can't fit in Layla. (He said). Teaching here is different from what you had experienced back home
- Dear "Mr." Paul, I am aware of the differences, it doesn't worry me, I am very good in coping
- Still not the same; in Australia it is different. Teacher-student relations break the barriers; that old perception about teacher being the leader and students are the obedient followers is not accepted.
- I know what you mean, and I am good in it
- Students here are tough, they have no respect to teachers. They don't see in them idols or authorities that should be obeyed
- Believe me, I coped with more difficult situations. Back home my students were militias; they would carry a gun in one hand and a book in the other; they were soldiers when a battle erupts and students during a cease-fire. They were not only the equals, they were the superiors in all aspects. They were physically stronger, hold more power and earn more wages, though I handled them properly
- I know how things go back there. Last year I had an Arab teacher, Egyptian I reckon, stayed for the whole period standing beyond his desk. He never moved an inch outside that desk.
- I am different Mr. Paul (ignoring my answer he kept going)
- And you are also over forty, difficult to change the habits you gained
- But I gained experience with age, I am aware of all modern educational theories; besides, teaching is a second nature in me, a part of my being, it grew with me like any organ in my body, stronger healthier and more mature with age.
- Don't rush Layla. You are a potential teacher Layla, but not now. It is too early. I hate seeing you fail in your first step in this country. Give yourself a space to think and consider. New migrants normally need four or five years to fit in.
- You just said it, I am over forty; I don't have enough time to lose, besides I have a family to support
- Means of living is not a problem in this country. There are other alternatives
- I hate the alternatives you are implying. My self-respect doesn't allow them
- At the end it is your decision. My duty is to warn. That's it

In the teachers' room I was sincerely welcomed. Most of teachers were warm and friendly

- My name is James (said one of them) Welcome to our hell

I felt proud of myself, they see it hell, while I see it an exciting journey of discovery, challenge and pleasure.

- Is this your first trial? (Asked another lady)
- In Australia? Yes
- Unlucky you!...Ms?
- Layla (I answered)
- Be prepared Layla. You are in a difficult situation. Hard case
- I wonder (said a third lady) what makes them assign you in such a school for your first practicum
- I will be fine
- You can object.
- You better do
- I like the challenge
- Believe me! You will not like it this time

I answered with a smile and said to myself; they don't know from where I am coming.

The supervisor teacher, who was about the age of my daughter, walked me to my class. All the way long she kept 'preaching': Don't touch any student. Ignore their cruelty no matter how bad they go. Don't put your expectations high. It is not important how much you can teach, the most important thing is to bring them to sit and listen. Don't lose your temper. Don't isolate. Don't send out. Don't forget: you are in Sydney not in Beirut.

My first class was a mixed year eight with 18 students. Their mission was to make my mission impossible. While they walked in, they made faces mocking me. I stayed quiet and smiling. They fought over the places, two of them clashed with hand, others started singing loudly, others drummed the tables, two or three girls blew balloons with their chewing gums and made them crack loudly adding another ugly tune to that outrageous symphony. I stood quiet with a smile waiting for them to empty the extra energy they have. Rage slowed down, but for a while, since one or two kept bursting it every time it fades. Without any thinking, I found myself using the old traditional technique: I yelled with the loudest of my voice. They were taken by surprise for a moment, but some of them picked up the trick and mocked me by imitating my yelling. A mad idea struck my mind.

I raised my voice singing a very popular song. Who can do it better? (I said)

They rushed to the "ring"

- By turn (I said).

And that was the first order to be obeyed. With extreme difficulty I was able to finish one third of my lesson, which I was pretty sure, fell on a barren fruitless land.

That night I didn't go in a deep sleep like I used to do. All night long my mind was busy in creating "tricks" that could bring my students to sit and listen. I ended up including music, dancing, charades and person to person contacts.

An hour, or more earlier, I was in the playground hovering to catch members of that class and start a friendly conversation with them. Results were fine, some of them responded positively, others were double standard: A friend outside the class an enemy inside. At last, I broke their hostility and gained few of them to my side.

This half success pumped me with confidence and hope. I still have plenty to do to have a class that looks normal for an outsider. No one could congratulate me for such a class, especially those who aim to pick the negatives. It's time to deal with those individuals who erupt the sleeping volcano. Those who can stir the still water with a tiny stone. Linda, Andrew and Jamil, were the field of my battle.

- Andrew I need a word with you. He stepped aside, knocking his feet to the ground as a sign of reluctance and impatience. When class emptied and we became alone, I approached him in a motherly way. I said in a friendly loving voice "Habibi (dear) Andrew can we be...."

He stepped back, shrugged with anger and said with a shivering voice: Don't touch me. Don't touch me.

I felt sad for the boy. If I were his long-term teacher, I would treat the matter differently. I felt sad for the teachers in this country, they are, as James said, deprived of showing any innocent compassion towards their students lest they would be accused of child molesting. Now I learned in which way teaching here is different from teaching there. It has nothing to do with your abilities and qualifications. It has nothing to do with Paul's discriminatory perception.

Time is passing. I am about half way through my practicum and Paul didn't visit me yet. The supervised teacher said this is not normal. They usually ignore visiting those who want to fail them.

My optimistic nature and my self-confidence refused to admit these doubts. I continued my battle as obstinate as a headstrong mule.

The most difficult "knot" was Jamil. Nothing worked with him. He intended to come close and utter the rudest words in the Arabic language every time he sees me in the playground: "manuckie", "neeck," "ayr". Sharmouta".....

Frustration took its way to me heart, vengeance as well. This is the first time in my long career I felt vengeful. Normally, I leave my problems hanged beyond the door of the classroom before I step out.

Frustration led to negative thinking and raised depressing memories. I remembered that movie I had watch with my husband on SBS few weeks ago, which made him comment: "You have to reconsider workings as a teacher in this country dear". I laughed at the time and said: It is only a movie; some one's imagination.

What if I faced a situation like the teacher's in that movie? What if I were humiliated with false accusation? Sure I will end up to the same destiny of that poor teacher.

Do I have to sum up the movie to satisfy your curiosity my dear reader?
I better do so.

A small boy, around ten years of age, lives with his father who travels frequently. Once his father was in, he refused to go to school. Seeing the boy's insistence to stay home raised the father's suspicions. He kept asking questions till he pushed the little

boy to make up a story about his teacher molesting him. The warm nature of the teacher and his friendly way with his students worked against him and he was announced guilty for that ugly offence. The next day, the poor teacher found hanging himself in his humble room. Later on, the truth was revealed and the boy admitted that he made up that story to keep the company of his father whom he missed.

If this an imagination, what about that poor colleague Rodney who was hit two weeks ago by an eraser from behind then lost balance and fell with bad injury in the back? Rodney is still suffering in the hospital and the board of the school is still discussing the matter.

- Student should be sacked (said one of the teachers)
- No other school will take him in
- Suspension for a long term then
- Suspension doesn't solve the problem. It adds to it. Imagine what bad habits he would pick with this free from schooling days. He might turn up a thief, a drug dealer, a homeless at the least.
- Let him pay for what he did.
- A victim you mean!
- So what!...he brought it to himself.
- This is revenge and revenge is not on a teacher's calendar
- What about the poor teacher?
- A soldier injured in a battle
- To hell with you're theory Robert
- It's not my theory mate! It's the theory of The Ministry
- Yahl!...we really are ancestors of convicts
- And this is what makes us a distinguished nation
- Admitting and accepting the weakness of mankind.

Quit Layla!...Quit. Nothing worth this agony.

Quit!...Surrender!...Admit that you are not good enough to be a teacher in this country! Admit that you are inferior!... Give Paul and all his kind a proof to their discriminatory theory!...Allow for a bunch of children to defeat you? Where have gone all your ideals, all your claims about being the mission impossible teacher? What will you do after that? Are you good in anything other than teaching?

Choosing the challenge made me more relaxed. I became more tolerant towards my students childish behaviour. Instead of getting angry when they hid my bag, I joked about it.

- You are doing me a favour guys. It's only an old bag, I will claim it to the insurance and get a better new one, and they laughed.

When they tarnished the chair with chalk, I pretended not knowing what they had done and I sat on the chair. When they burst laughing I laughed with them and I didn't dust off my pant, I turned my back and said, OK guys! We've got a new interesting board who dares to erase it.

I was absolutely sure of my success in the long run. My experience tells that it is only a matter of time to overcome all childish difficulties, but for the time being I have to move very quickly. I need this silly paper to be acknowledged as a teacher in NSW. Paul will not give me a pass if he saw such a class. Jamil is the biggest problem; only him can be the solution.

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That morning while I was brushing my teeth a mad idea stroke my mind
Bribe! Yes! Bribe is the solution.

- Jamil!...wait a sec please
- My name is Jimmy
- Okay Jimmy, a sec please

He waved his arm and said “hilly anni ya” (rude version of leave me alone)
I don't know what made him look back to catch my stretched hand with a bar of chocolate I can't remember whom of us made the first move.

- This is an award for being good boy in the class today
- Thanks Miss. Next time I prefer it Mars

Things went smooth after that. Jimmy stopped his naughty games and stopped encouraging others to play them. Only minor problems kept occurring but still in the range of reluctantly acceptable.

I was given a pass to my practicum and I was qualified as a teacher in NSW. It is true that I won my battle, but the bitter truth was that I lost self-respect. I felt that I am not a teacher any more and I don't deserve the honour of the profession, which I honoured for more than a quarter of a century.

24 Sep. 06

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