

SAVING STRUGGLING LEARNERS: A TEACHER’S PERSONAL REFLECTION

by:

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Every school has a group of learners who struggle more than the rest. They are often placed in what we call the “lower section,” a label that quietly carries stigma and lowered expectations. Yet behind every low-test score, incomplete activity, and silent presence in the classroom is a child with a story. My journey as a teacher has brought me to far-flung beachside communities, remote mountaintop schools, and now to a central school serving pupils at risk. Across these different assignments, one truth has remained constant: struggling learners are not incapable. They are often carrying burdens too heavy for their young shoulders.

I began my teaching career in a coastal community where families relied mainly on small-scale fishing for survival. Many of my learners woke up before sunrise to help their parents prepare nets or sort the morning’s catch. Some came to school without breakfast. Others were absent during peak fishing seasons. Education was valued, yet daily survival always came first. Later, I was assigned to a remote mountaintop school accessible only through rough roads and long walks. Isolation and limited resources defined the educational landscape. Books were scarce, internet connectivity was unreliable, and multigrade teaching was common. Today, in a central school, I handle pupils identified as at risk—learners struggling with academic failure, behavioral challenges, and chronic absenteeism. Though the settings differ, the roots of their struggles are strikingly similar.

One of the most pressing realities is financial hardship. Poverty shapes a child's ability to focus, attend school regularly, and access learning materials. Research from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development emphasizes that socioeconomic disadvantage significantly affects students' academic performance and limits opportunities for upward mobility. In my classroom, this translates to learners sharing worn-out textbooks, writing on recycled paper, or studying under dim lights at night. Hunger, fatigue, and anxiety over household income silently compete with lessons in reading and mathematics.

Family instability also leaves a deep imprint on learners. In both remote and central school assignments, I have taught children raised by single parents, grandparents, or relatives while their parents work far from home. Some have experienced separation, conflict, or loss. Reports from UNICEF highlight how family disruption can contribute to emotional distress and negatively affect children's learning and behavior. Inside the classroom, this distress may appear as aggression, withdrawal, or a lack of motivation. I have learned that behavior often communicates what words cannot.

Another frequent challenge is limited parental educational attainment. Many parents in the communities I served did not complete basic education themselves. They deeply value schooling but often feel unequipped to assist with assignments or academic guidance. The sociocultural theory of Lev Vygotsky underscores the importance of guided interaction in learning. When such support is minimal at home, the responsibility on teachers becomes even greater. Bridging that gap requires patience, empathy, and creative strategies to ensure learners do not fall further behind.

Beyond these factors are additional barriers – learning gaps accumulated over the years, low self-esteem from repeated failures, limited access to technology, and peer influences that distract from academic priorities. Studies cited in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Global Education Monitoring Report stress that inclusion and equity remain global challenges, particularly for learners in

disadvantaged and remote communities. These realities are not abstract concepts to me. They are daily encounters reflected in the faces of my pupils.

Confronted with these challenges, I realized that teaching within classroom walls was not enough. Home visitations became one of my most meaningful interventions. Walking into my learners' homes whether by the shore, along mountain paths, or within crowded urban neighborhoods allowed me to understand their circumstances beyond academic records. Conversations with parents shifted from defensiveness to partnership when they saw that the school genuinely cared. Trust opened doors to collaboration.

Non-stop interventions followed: remedial reading sessions, numeracy drills, peer tutoring, individualized learning plans, and constant monitoring of progress. More importantly, I intentionally nurtured their confidence. A struggling learner needs more than correction; they need affirmation. They need someone who believes in their capacity even when they doubt themselves. Intervention must be continuous, not occasional. It requires persistence and heart.

I once heard an experienced educator say, "When a child is drowning academically, we do not stand at the shore and shout instructions—we step into the water." Those words continue to guide my practice. In every far-flung assignment and in my present role, I have learned that saving struggling learners demands involvement beyond duty. It requires compassion beyond compliance.

Handling the lower section is not easy. It tests patience, resilience, and emotional strength. Yet it is also where the most meaningful transformations happen. I have witnessed learners who once refused to read now volunteering to recite. I have seen those who frequently absented themselves complete a full quarter with perfect attendance. These victories may not always make headlines, but they are triumphs of hope and perseverance.

From the beachside community to the mountaintop school and now to a central institution serving pupils at risk, my journey has affirmed that education is not merely about delivering content. It is about restoring dignity, building confidence, and opening doors of opportunity. Struggling learners are not statistics to be manage. They are lives to be nurtured. And sometimes, the greatest measure of success is not how high the top students soar, but how firmly we lift those who are at the bottom.

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