

# MORE SPACE TO RATIONALITY OR FEELING WHILE TEACHING TO TERMINAL CHILDREN?

( The Role of a Teacher in Relation with “Terminal “ Pupils )

## Two stories to compare

An Italian Dictionary defines: “Terminal” (med.) as an illness from which one cannot recover.

Such illnesses are often seen in hospitals both large and small, and sometimes more than once a year.....

How the presence of a teacher, who has to forget most of his or her role as a teacher? Terminal illness alter programs, methods, the rhythms of learning, evaluation....perhaps these are entities that lose their strength and meaning.....Our rationality as teachers sometimes makes us feel useless....perhaps our attention should be directed towards those pupils who are nearer the end of their term or those who are going back to their Original School. But there are other aims that a Hospital Teacher cannot forget: the welcome reception of both parent and child, the strength of hope, the contact with an external reality which MUST go on being a “ chief support “ so that the illusion that “ life goes on “ be present in the child till the last minute.....

It is perhaps a pitiful performance which, nevertheless helps us to give hope to those who no longer have hope, including family members, care givers, and of course, our students.

Sometimes emotion makes us feel out of place: why talk about Education to a family who is facing an upsetting reality?....As for the pupils who are at death's door, why should they be pushed to spend their last energies in an activity which steals precious time spent with friends and family?

Some teachers cannot tolerate impact with such a harsh reality....We fear introducing ourselves in an effort to avoid yet another heart-breaking; we are afraid of not being grateful to their parents, our lesson may lack content or be too difficult for our pupils.....And we all know stories of teachers who can have experienced suffering and who do not want to risk being involved again....But we MUST , in order to grant hours of serenity to those who cannot cope with pain any longer. Our support and encouragement can allow our pupils to say “ if they want me to study, it means that next year I will be back at school ! “

G. S. 's story started when her health was already very poor. Her nurses told me she was miserable and there was no hope of improvement.

I immediately began an interview with this young woman who had been attending a Classical lycée and who had received many academic honors.

She smiled gratefully as soon as she learnt of the existence of the Hospital School which allowed her to go on studying without missing any lesson until the end of the school year.

She chose Greek as the subject to begin - an exhausting choice for one in an exhausting situation. She hoped later to add other subjects.

Unfortunately, every time a teacher went to teach her, some problem or other got in the way but between the pain and all her medications she started studying.

Time was passing and as Coordinator, I went by her bedside to discover how she was getting on and whether she liked studying the following lesson. I spoke thoughtlessly both to her and her parents, because I felt the serenity and availability of good health care around us and I wanted to reinforce the idea that everything was going well.

One day, at the close of the school year, I presented myself with a proposal to add more subjects to her study, because we were short of time.

Meanwhile she was getting worse: she now had a small oxygen pipe in her nose and yet she was breathless.

My pupil did not give any sign of reluctance and said: “ Well, let’s start with maths!” Yes, maths, that subject which is most painfully endured and the hardest for most students, the one which requires so much concentration, as much as for Greek... Her will to study has emerged once more!

The maths teacher has been waiting for G.’s confirmation of interest, but sadly , G. passed away one day, quietly, as if on tiptoe.

I wrote a letter to her parents saying: “ My heart is in pieces - the loss of a jewel such as she was is difficult to accept. Yet I saw her smile till the last day we met.

Her eyes had shown me hope, and she fell asleep.

I must also praise her parents who surrounded her with a serenity that nourished her till the last moment!” ....

Collectively, we teachers noted that: “ If it depended on us, we would give G. an honorary degree for the work she accomplished, for her obstinacy in asking for more subjects to study even when she was breathless. If you would like us to inform her school of all her efforts, we are ready to demonstrate all that she wrote.”

One of her teachers from the School of Origin has also wrote to me saying: “I am G.’s teacher of grammar, that sweet angel who flew away 10 days ago! I’m writing to you answering to your mail G.’s father has forwarded to me. I would like, together with the Class Board, to share with you all that G. has produced during her last weeks to contribute some way so that her figure will be remembered by people of the same age , those she loved and was loved by with great affection.

The idea of an honorary degree .....seems special. Do you think we can do something related to it? Or perhaps a scholarship in her honor! I think that what she has demonstrated during her short but intense life, should not be wasted!”

I answered her: “What G. left me was her enthusiasm to learn her eagerness to grasp the possibility of studying at the hospital, her determination in choosing subjects of study and her persistent effort to earn evaluations to send to her school.

(My objective had been to encourage her to trust in a future life, even when the official medical news was dramatic).

I do not feel the need to comment further on how much hope we granted her by orienting her thoughts towards the word “ future “....

In my view, it was just an invitation to us, as teachers, not to give up.

I have another story to tell, not yet finished, thank God, but one which has proved to be very challenging to the Institutions: the pupil’s stubbornness has prevailed, at least for now, by my own opinion.

It is M.N.’s story, ill with leukemia, who was to sit his final high school examinations. During the year he attended several weeks of lessons, receiving very good marks, but yet he was considered an ordinary pupil because of his many absences. His greatest wish was to participate in a 5-day end- of-year school trip, but his school’s refusal to accept responsibility for him, even with strong parental support and offers of medical assistance, cancelled the project.

Yet, during his periods of hospitalization he continued to study in hospital, but not always: these were very difficult periods and he simply couldn’t cope.

The end of the school year arrived, and still he needed two more evaluations to be admitted to the final examinations.

My contacts with his school were always disappointing , because the school answered indifference, sometimes refusal: My determination ,not to yield on the point of his participation in the final exams, was seen as an unwelcome interference.

Certainly, it would have been easier not to admit the pupil to the exam, for bureaucracy has no mercy!

This was an extremely difficult situation for both student and his mother who had always been perfectly and supportive, just as her child needed. But then, she too felt overwhelmed and decided to give lessons up.

It is now that our job started: and we looked for a creative intervention. If he couldn't cope with, nobody was forcing him.

We framed each academic task within the context of the medications this young man was all-too-familiar with.

We discussed each, as an optional "pill" which he could choose to take or not. Each of those two evaluations were considered a "pill", and although our student did not receive his usual high marks, they were sufficient for admission to the exam.

Medical staff were informed of our program and asked to postpone particularly nasty treatments on the days he chose an academic pill. Pill after pill he faced each challenge.

In moments of particular confidence, the pupil said: " I will overcome it and I will score 80% "

Eventually he received 72%, on his terms and in his own way, earning his degree in July; now he attends University, always with the ups and downs associated with his illness and supported with psychiatric therapy, to help manage his stress levels.

We see M. as a reminder that life, even when it is not easy, may continue a positive direction. In the meanwhile we wait for science to provide even better treatments.

Once more rationality and feeling, in a balanced way, were allowed to bring something to a pupil's life.

**We have Identified many Weak Points in our Program at “Gemelli Hospital” and Hope to Implement the following Improvements :**

- Promoting the establishment of a Permanent Forum which could provide teacher support, with a “Moderator” of the Forum who could answer questions.
- Continuous Updating of the Portal to insert creative and didactic materials.
- Simplifying the relationship with the pupil’s School of Origin through wider information.
- Gathering data, testing methods, materials for different subjects, topics and levels, with the necessary flexibility of both teachers and programs for a personalized lesson.
- Using innovative didactic methods: personalized, short and modular, including simulation of laboratories through new technologies.
- Using schemes and synthesis for different subjects, topics and levels.
- Preparing the data, tests, and different materials for different levels for use on the Internet ( with the name of the teacher).
- Ensuring the presence of a Psychologist in peculiar and difficult circumstances to evaluate a pupil’s learning capacity.
- Taking care of the documents which demonstrate the work of both pupil and teacher : essays, tests, newspaper’s articles etc.