A teacher gets depressed: a real story in comics

The following is a highly unusual post — not only in form but in subject matter. David Lee Finkle, a middle-school teacher in Florida who draws the comic strip “Mr. Fitz” for the Daytona Beach News-Journal, writes and illustrates the story of his own depression, caused by changes that reform has brought to his classroom and his profession. Many teachers, undoubtedly, can relate to his story.

Finkle is the author of books for teachers on student writing and of three young adult novels: “Making My Escape” as well as “Portents” and “Portals” (co-authored with his son, Christopher). The comic strip can be found online at www.mrfitz.com and at the Facebook page Mr. Fitz Comic Strips, and you can follow him on Twitter @DLFinkle. He blogs at The Real Mr. Fitz, where this appeared.

By David Lee Finkle

There is an epidemic of teacher depression, demoralization and stress in this country, and for a while I was part of it.

The series of comic strips I have assembled below, is, at least for me, the most important series I have ever done. Drawing it meant I was past the events that inspired it. More importantly, I think drawing it may have helped some other teachers who have felt the same way I did know they were not alone.

When I began talking to people about the series I had planned, I called it “Mr. Fitz Gets Depressed.” I wondered if I could pull it off, because, of course, depression isn’t really
funny. Yet I took comfort in the fact that my cartoonist hero, Peanuts creator Charles Schulz, had made depression and anxiety funny for nearly 50 years. Maybe I could find the lighter side, too. Doing so would actually mean I was over mine.

Before I ran this series, I asked a question on my Mr. Fitz Facebook page. “This sounds like a downer, and you don’t have to give away who, but how many of you know a teacher who has suffered or is suffering from, a bout of depression because of what is happening to our profession? I’m curious. I have, and I’m addressing it in the strip soon.” That question resulted in 98 responses, unprecedented for my little Facebook page. Every single one of them was affirmative — yes they knew depressed, stressed teachers. Many of them admitted it was them. And most of them knew people who had thought about leaving the profession.

This series is based on actual events, but underplays and compresses them. My depression lasted, on and off, for nearly five years. Did I think about leaving the teaching profession? Very seriously. What caused me to be so depressed? Well, if you have ever felt a calling to a particular job; have held that job and been allowed the autonomy to work hard, be creative, and see the results of your work changing lives for the better; then had everything change through no fault of your own, then you may have a good idea what I’m talking about.

My teaching career didn’t begin easily — I had a rocky start with an extremely challenging group of students. But once I was up and running, teaching became my bliss. But while things were fine in my class room as I developed my craft, changed schools, began writing a comic strip, won county teacher of the year, got book deals to write
books for teachers with Scholastic, and generally had my teaching validated several different ways, things outside the classroom began to sour.

**Standardized testing** became the sole focus of education. Then came standardized teaching. Curriculum maps were written. Workbooks were distributed. All the things that had made me a great teacher — creativity, coming up with my own lessons and assignments, finding just the right resources to teach what needed to be taught — became liabilities. It was like having the rug pulled out from under me. Meanwhile, we were having our evaluations tied to our test scores. But if I had no autonomy over how or what I taught — how was I responsible for the results? Pretty much every single reform scheme designed to improve schools and teachers instead interfered with my ability to teach. They didn’t encourage me to teach better. They depressed me.

A number of events sent me into a spiral of depression. It seemed that the powers that be wanted to take my calling and turn it into a job. I didn’t see any way out of the situation. I didn’t want to stop teaching, but teaching was no longer a source of joy for me. I would be up at all hours of the night worrying about it. Newspaper stories and editorials slamming teachers and touting reforms would make my stomach turn. I began to have physical symptoms of stress. I have always been a “good kid” who did what was expected of me. Only now what was expected of me no longer seemed right. What seemed right ran counter to what was expected of me. It was kind of a nightmare.

In the comic strip, Mr. Fitz has a nightmare about the possible future of schools (which I have posted here as well), and wakes up depressed. The plot resumes here on the day after his nightmare.
I know you had a bad dream, Dylan, but they need you to get yourself in to class to teach today.

They want me to leave myself outside the class room.

And what they want us to do there isn't teaching.

By "them," I meant your students.

Mr. Fitz—you look so glum!

A little yeah.

You should be happy! Teaching is easier than it's ever been! We've done all the planning for you!

I like planning!

I feel like I'm fighting for the right to work six times harder than you want me to!

Well, that's just silly!

I feel like all the creativity has been sucked out of teaching! It's so depressing.

I don't see "creativity" anywhere on this rubric for teaching. Apparently creativity isn't something teachers need!

Maybe you could take up finger painting on the side as an outlet or cartooning?

Thanks. That helps a lot.
YOU LOOK DEPRESSED, MR. FITZ.
I CAN'T IMAGINE WHY.

DIRTH, PLEASE GET TO WORK.
I DON'T WANT TO! I HATE SCHOOL! THIS CLASS IS STUPID!

YOU LOOK EVEN MORE DEPRESSED, MR. FITZ.
I IMAGINE SO.

DO YOUR TEACHERS SEEM GROUCHY A LOT OF DAYS? YOU WANT TO KNOW WHY?

WE ARE OFFERING YOU EDUCATION! EDUCATION MAKES YOU SMARTER AND WISER. IT BENEFITS YOU IN EVERY CONCEivable WAY! IT MAKES YOU HEALTHIER, WEALTHIER, HAPPIER, FREETER, AND ABLE TO HELP OTHERS!

WE OFFER YOU EDUCATION, AND YOU REPLY: "YOU ARE FORCFeeding US EDUCATION, AND WE DON'T WANT IT! WE WANT TO REMAIN IGNORANT, AND WILL RESIST YOUR TEACHING IN OUR EVERY THOUGHT, WORD, AND INACTION. WE RESENT EDUCATION!"

WHEN YOU PUT IT THAT WAY, I CAN SEE WHY YOU'RE ALL GROUCHY!
THAT'S JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG.

I HATE TO SEE YOU SO DOWN, DYLAN!
I'M TRYING TO READ SOME INSPIRATIONAL STUFF.

FREDERICK BUECHNER SAYS THAT YOUR VOCATION IS WHERE YOUR GREAT JOY AND THE WORLD'S GREAT NEED INTERSECT.

DID THAT CHEER YOU UP?
I JUST REALIZED THAT MY JOY IN TEACHING HAS BEEN KILLED, AND I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO MEET MY STUDENTS' ACTUAL NEEDS...

MAYBE YOU SHOULD READ SOMETHING DEPRESSING.
Are you feeling any better this morning, Dylan?

My shoulder hurts from carrying my big school bag. My neck is stiff from stooping over papers, and my throat feels weirdly constricted.

No. I meant emotionally.

Also constipated? Maybe you should take a sick day.

I made it to lunch. Only 3 more periods to slog through.

Maybe I'll look up my symptoms online.

Shoulder pain and throat constriction.

I need to go now. Let me finish grading.

No... I'm thinking now. I did a search for my symptoms. I got this result.

What? A possible heart attack?

Let's go! Now! Good grief! When did you do this search?

At lunch. You taught 3 classes thinking you hold off till a break. Other bodily functions always do.

I figured it would be having a heart attack?!
Describe your symptoms to me, Mr. Fitz. How does your shoulder hurt?

Like something hot is jabbing it, like a light saber!

And your throat? Like Darth Vader is using the Force to strangle me.

I want to make sure he's coherent. Is this kind of talk... typical?

Oh, yes. I think this shows he's very much himself.

So, Mr. Fitz, your heart is fine, but I think that you are displaying signs of stress.

Is your job stressful? I teach...

Is that stressful? It used to be stressful—until the past few years...

I'm glad to hear that.

Now it's Uber, ultra-stressful—-in bold, all-caps, and on steroids.

So the dr. told me my heart is fine, but I need to des—

What did he say about your throat feeling tight?

It's called the globus sensation. It's stressful and depression related.

I almost wonder if it's symbolic of your "voice" as a teacher being choked out.

I had the same thought...

When English Majors marry English Majors, it's a theme, "too!"
I looked up the phrase "teacher depression" online...

What did you find?

An epidemic. Morale is at an all-time low, and teachers all over are stressed, depressed, and having health issues...

I feel reassured that I'm not alone! But it's also depressing.

It's spring break! Why don't we all go out for ice cream?

Cheers, Dad! It's break time!

Cheers up! You've let them throw you off your game.

You need to get back to that place where teaching is challenging and fun and creative again. You need to find your...

Sweet spot. Nice.

Maple-bacon ice cream!

Excuse me... did you used to teach at Buhlwar-Lyttton Middle School? Still do...

I was your student there a long time ago! You're Mr. Fitz, right?

Jasmine?

You remember me...?

Tom! Jen! Laura! This is a former student—Jasmine!

I loved your class! I loved you... I have former students. I feel like you've had the same students for years!
I thought you hated my class. Awful, Jasmine! Your whole class was... well... challenging.

We were middle schoolers... it's what we do. But I appreciate everything you taught me... now that I'm in law school!

Law school? That's great! Remember Andy? He's going into sports medicine! And Leonna? She opened her own business!

I guess your success unit finally sank in, Mr. Fitz... Mr. Fitz?

I think it's taking a minute for what you said to sink in.

Mr. Fitz? I thought that was you! Is that... Jonathan?

Yes... Jonathan of the low U-skunk scores! But let me tell you, you taught me to write really well, and now I'm doing it freelance! It's great!

And the whole test scores thing...?

Turns out the whole bubbling answers thing is irrelevant later in life. So I didn't change your test scores...?

No just my life.

I texted Stephanie - she was in your class with me - and she says to say hello to you. Say back!

She says she loved your class and still remembers writing her short story about witches on a cruise ship! What's she doing now?

She's in England! She's studying to get her masters in English literature!

Wow! This is the best trip for ice cream ever! Interesting, since you've been talking so long your ice cream just fell to the floor.
Was it good to see your former students and hear what they were up to? He has former students? Actually, I was hoping they'd tell me more about how I'd added statistical value to them via their test scores, thus preparing them for a life of corporate minion-hood.

April fool! April fool! It was great!

It was great to see my former students! It took me back to a time when I could focus on my students and just teach! When I was lighting the fire, not filling the bucket... when teaching was... fun!! Meeting my former students made me feel like I was meeting my former teacher-self, too! I'm meeting him again, too...

So, you feel like you met your former teacher-self. What did he say? Great teachers can never be powered by stress and depression. All you'll do is pass stress and depression on to your students. Great teaching comes out of passion for your subject, love for your students, and enthusiasm for learning. Ignore everything and everyone that gets in the way of your passion, love, and enthusiasm. Be the teacher you were meant to be...

My former teacher self was wordy, but he pretty much said, "Teach happy."
All of the symptoms Mr. Fitz has in this series, I had. The heart attack scare happened pretty much exactly as written. My wife, the real Mrs. Fitz, was endlessly supportive in the midst of all my angst. I can draw cartoons about it now, but make no mistake — I was not in a good place. Having the series run in the newspaper was interesting; I had people asking after my health at church and at school functions. Our next-door neighbor and one of my college professors said they were afraid I was going to kill off Mr. Fitz and end the strip. I told the neighbor that she could have come over to our house and ask how it was going to end, and she said she preferred to read about it in the paper to see how it unfolded, to live with the suspense.

The final sequence, about Mr. Fitz meeting former students, didn’t all happen in one place, but it is all based on real encounters with former students, and they did indeed help me realize what really matters about my teaching. My former students rescued me, and helped me to find my “Sweet Spot” again. My wife rescued me, too, by reminding me that I should listen to those students. My own children, in fact, were also my students for all three years of middle school, and they reminded me of what I’d done for them as well. And, it should be noted, I am blessed with an administration that values real teaching and encourages me. Not everyone has that. For a while I didn’t appreciate their support enough. Now I do.

In the end, Mr. Fitz’s decision is my decision, and drawing the ending to this series help me firm that decision up in my mind. If I allow the reformers’ agenda to drive me from being a public school teacher or ruin what is best in my teaching, I let them win. Enough teachers have left in disgust, and I can’t blame them. For the time being, though, I have decided to keep teaching the way I know best, and to speak up about why these reforms are so wrong. Any agenda for public schools that can send a teacher like me into a tailspin of depression has some very serious flaws, and that’s an understatement.
I followed up on the series with this strip just a while ago, and it was the perfect epilogue to the series:

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