

# Waiting for an Epidural

Dr. Steven Van Zoost

**S**o there I was...waiting for an epidural. Leading up to this appointment, I had plenty of time to debate the pros and cons of this injection that would pierce into my back. After all, we tend to consider a wide range of options when we are in pain or feeling strained. I was also keen to distract myself and so I considered metaphors for the procedure as I sat in the waiting room of the pain clinic. What magic relief needle could be injected into our public school system?

It would be easy to say “money.” Too easy. Undeniably, money is a substantial part of an imagined epidural injection that would ease the strain in our education system. Increased funding could provide greater technology integration into our classes and programs. Increased funding could better connect student learning with their lives beyond the classroom. However, as I have witnessed in my travels, money alone does not solve societal problems.

As a mid-career teacher (the happiest kind, I’m told), I am not anticipating any magic injection that will resolve the strains of teaching. In fact, I am pessimistically looking at the aging baby boomers and the demands they will place on our health care system and the challenge governments will face juggling education funding in our province in the future. Hopefully the general population, and not just the government, realizes the importance of a strong public education system in sustaining a province’s social and economic health.



*“What magic relief needle could be injected into our public school system?”*

Instead, I control what I can: my reactions. Below, I practice some facetious responses to my professional pain triggers. Okay, truth be told: I haven’t used any of these responses...yet. But I do wish I had a better repertoire ready for when these situations arise. Instead, I just smile and keep these slightly passive-aggressive thoughts in my head.

**Stress Trigger 1:** “It must be *nice* to have the summers off!”

**Response 1:** It *is* nice! You should try it! I think the university process to enrol in Bachelor of Education programs usually begins in October and November for the following year’s admission. Why haven’t you become a teacher?

**Response 2:** I agree. The summers are the best in Atlantic Canada, don’t you think? Every summer, I work in graduate teacher programs in several different Canadian provinces. I am always amazed how fortunate we are to be living on the East Coast! Have you been to Gander?

**Response 3:** Some of my teacher friends refer to summer

as a time to “re-charge.” This usually worries me, of course. I wonder how depleted they are and how draining their work must be. Surely, their work must have an “off-switch” during the school year?

**Stress Trigger 2:** “Please excuse this interruption, but...”

**Response 1:** But what? All learning can be stopped so we can find someone’s cell phone in the building? I’ll tell you “but what”: but that student who was in the middle of her film shoot has to restart the shot; that student in the middle of reading his novel has to restart that paragraph, and; those students who were talking through a problem with several steps just had to start again. So much for the “flow” of learning. My school does a good job of minimizing these interruptions, but my classroom does not exist in a vacuum – it’s in an institutional setting that inevitably and necessarily permeates the classroom walls.

**Response 2:** What interruption? No big deal. I’m interrupted all day anyway with the “paperwork” of schooling. After recording attendance, lateness, behavioural observations, homework and the borrowing of school books and equipment, the class is ready to start. “Paperwork” in schools is funny, isn’t it? I carry a piece of scrap paper in my pocket to make quick notes throughout the class so that I can enter my digital record-keeping later while sitting at the computer when the students aren’t in front of me.

Contrary to popular belief, the students are rarely, if ever, the cause of stress and strain in my work. True, I do worry about them and this can be tiring: Will they get their work done? How did they make out with that tricky social situation? How will they be able to focus on their school work while they are working so much at that “afterschool” job? That jacket isn’t really their “winter” jacket now is it?

So, if no magical epidural is going to relieve me from my strains of teaching, what can I do about this? Change my reaction. This will take work – repeated practice over time. It will take a lot of intentional re-training of my emotional and verbal responses. But I am tired of becoming defensive about my “summers off” and tired of being wound-up about classroom interruptions and therefore I am motivated to make these internal changes.

Here’s my plan: when someone meets me and tells me, “It must be nice to have the summers off,” I am going to try one of the carefully rehearsed re-

sponses below. I admit, they are still slightly passive-aggressive, but at least they are more positive in my head space. You, gentle reader, might understand them as overtly positive. You’d be right, of course. This is part of my re-training process: I need strong language with clear direction in my mind to help me make the shift from a negative to a positive response. I’m also using imagery and calling on my emotional experiences to help anchor this new direction in my mind’s eye.

**Response 1:** The summers are nice, but it’s not the best part of my job. You know what is even better? That look in a student’s eyes when they experience one of those “light-bulb moments” in my classroom. Somehow, the excitement of learning something new – even making a new connection – energizes me as much as it energizes the student. It’s as if our classroom experiences are a form of renewable energy! And, of course, it feels good to contribute to Nova Scotia’s social and economic future, knowing that quality education is pivotal to societal success. Right?

**Response 2:** Yes! For sure! It is good in the summer to be out of the school building (it gets terribly hot in there anyway) and have a wider range of life experiences that inform my teaching and classroom decisions. I try to be careful not to confuse experience and intelligence. After all, I work with many students who rely on my life experiences as much as my intelligence to stretch their thinking about themselves and their worlds. For example, my studies and travels in the Middle East have helped me understand some of the cultural contexts of what we discuss in the classroom. Thankfully, the summer provides teachers with unpaid time to seek out these experiences.

With a lot of practice, I might be able to re-train myself to respond to my stress triggers with less angst. I don’t like the idea of my work satisfaction being dependent on an external world that is beyond my control. If I can adjust my internal responses, perhaps my stress triggers will transform into moments of celebration and focus on what I love about teaching. I will try. I will try my very hardest. But just so you know, in the pain clinic that morning, I did opt for the epidural needle to relieve the pain and strain in my back.

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**Dr. Steven Van Zoost teaches for Avon View High School and Nova Scotia Virtual School in the Annapolis Valley Regional School Board.**