

Overview

Aristotle Motii NANDY

Part I includes the personal narratives of six teachers of events in their professional journeys. It points to the various reasons for which different individuals decided to join teaching. Their reasons may be myriad — for satisfaction, to accommodate finances and seek scholarship, to change the system, to fill the void in their lives, or in search of self — but while reading the stories in this section, one realises that their purposes converge on the well-being of their students (Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992). Further, these purposes have been achieved through varied means, each of which has unveiled a hidden corner of the teaching world. However, in this entire process — a process of understanding, realisation, action, inaction, awakening and change — teachers are not the sole entity; they are but a part of a larger context — the school, the families of students, the society and the nation. The context has played a major part in shaping their teaching, their beliefs and their identity (Bruner, 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

These narratives also shed light into the oftentimes unknown waters of working with students. The experiences of interacting with students are as varied as the social and cultural backgrounds of the

students, teachers' beliefs about their personal and professional roles as educators and the contexts in which the teacher–student relationship plays out. However, from all the narratives presented, it is evident that the rudder that keeps teachers on course in their teaching voyage is the tenacity of their beliefs as educators. As teachers interact more regularly and connect more deeply with their students, they discover more about the inner or other worlds in which their students live, and, especially in cases of challenging situations where their emotions are strongly churned, they are inexorably led to reflect upon their underlying motivations for entering the profession.

The stories also bring to the fore the unpleasant dimensions of some teachers' work in the professional milieu when working with students. Due to the fear of facing difficult students or students with difficulty, teachers may ignore reading the underlying signs of trouble, show lack of empathy, and even try to prove themselves right; and in the process, they may lose sight of the purpose of their becoming a teacher and in doing so move away from the noble and larger task at hand.

As one reads through the stories, one shall find rare awakenings. In “Courage, Tenacity and Care — Inspirations from Working with Low Ability Upper Primary Pupils”, Marianne observed that a student in her class was inattentive and lazy, only to find dark clouds lingering over the nine-year old girl. It dawned upon her that “everyone has a story and that there is so much more than meets the eye.” In another class, she observed that a student leader who was well-known for his charisma and endearing personality was actually suffering in silence, unbeknownst to any of his teachers and friends. Citing the two examples, Marianne discovered that the high correlation between socio-economic status and academic performance was due to the cultural capital of the child, which spurred her to be more determined to become a “pillar of strength” for herself and her students.

In the story “Learning to Teach and Understand Gifted Students”, Chen Chen shares her understanding of gifted students and the assumptions that teachers harbour about them. Because such

students are gifted, that is, intellectually more capable, it is assumed that all about them is perfect including their familial situation. However, this may not be the case and thus such generalisation may ill afford any help to the teacher. Fortunately, she observed a minute problem which revealed a deeper malady — why a gifted student who had been doing remarkably well in class could not cope with work assigned to be completed at home. The story also highlights some of the far-reaching social impacts of economic downturn and unemployment. It also puts the spotlight on the unawareness of the boy's teachers of the predicament faced by him. At the heart of the matter is the notion of the role of a teacher, the grave implications on the nature of a teacher's relationship with students and how it impacts students' growth and development.

Joyce, in "The Bull and Leopard", reflects on her struggle with the professional milieu and also highlights teachers' fears in handling rebellious students. Having struck a positive cord with a student, she listened carefully to the problems that her colleagues had with the student with a view of coming up with a resolution. How she struck a balance, what difficulties she faced and what realisation she was left with are worth taking note. Many a time we, as teachers, ignore basic courtesies that our students are entitled to and infringe upon their sensitivities, not realising the effects it may have on them and also on our relationships with them.

Bernard's story, "Confessions of an Accidental Teacher", too, hints at a similar story where a student is considered a cause of trouble to teachers and to whom teachers fear to teach. However, the story also reveals the genuineness of one teacher that caused the student to open up and let the teacher into his world of experiences, thoughts and feelings and helped effect a dramatic turnaround in the student's behaviour and academic performance. This affirms that positive teacher-student interaction influences learning and development of students, and forms an important aspect of adolescent development. The story stresses the utility of the support system in the form of annual medical checks that have been well placed by the Ministry to help students and how such a system can help detect a problem at an early stage and help provide a solution.

Another teacher, Lawrence, carried lofty notions of being able to “change the world” at the onset of his teaching career but had a reality check when he was assigned to teach a Secondary Three (Normal Academic) class. The whole experience proved to be a culture shock to him. The story takes one to a journey of an “emotionless teacher” to a teacher who let go his “‘cold professional’ façade”, thus reflecting upon the change in his belief about his role and identity as a teacher.

In “‘Caring Teacher Award’ or ‘Caring Student Award’ — A Tamil Language Teacher”, Sivagouri, the teacher, struggled to deal with her own emotions when she found out that one of her students who had been absent from school had been sexually assaulted by a family “friend”, and that she, as the little girl’s teacher, had been completely unaware of this. The story also shed some light on the indifference of some teachers towards their students.

In conclusion, the emotional nature of a teacher’s interactions with students (Hargreaves, 2000; Day & Leitch, 2001) is highly visible in all the narratives in this section. The narratives show that for effective teaching and learning to take place, it is imperative that teachers not merely be competent in the mastery of the subject matter they teach, but more importantly learn to build good working relations with students. This entails taking up the opportunity to start conversations with students, develop an interest in them, and be aware of any signs or indications in their work or behaviour that may be of concern. It is also essential that teachers develop a reflective and reflexive disposition, which would help them continually review themselves, in particular with their interactions with their students.

References

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