

# The power of reading

Neeraja Raghavan

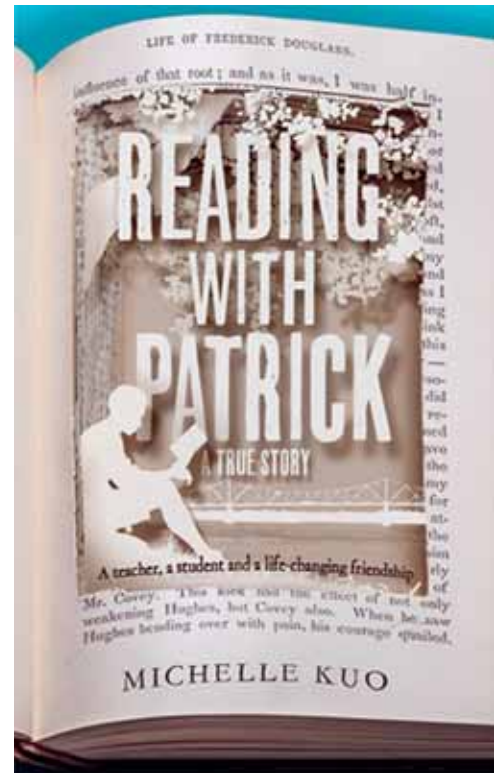
Teachers are expected to be up-to-date with all that is happening in the education sector: well, if not *all*, at least the significant developments. Given the packed day of a teacher, however, there is scarcely any time to browse through the literature and cull out the valuable findings of researchers and educators. Thinking Teacher is launching this series with the intent of bridging this gap: we will bring to the readers of *Teacher Plus* the essence of one research paper in each article. Along with the gist of the paper, we will also suggest ways of putting into practice the main import of the paper through some strategies that can be implemented in the classroom. We invite your responses – if and when you do practice any of these strategies at < [thinkingteacher22@gmail.com](mailto:thinkingteacher22@gmail.com) > .

In our exploration this month, I invite you to dip into a very moving book that I just finished reading. Titled *Reading With Patrick, a teacher, a student and the life-changing power of books*, it is a true account of a teacher who visited her former student when he was in prison and read with him – first weekly, then twice a week, and finally, every day.

You may well wonder why such an account falls under this section titled Research in Action, but after you read this inspiring book, your question will be answered.

I finished reading this book feeling deeply moved by the power of a teacher, literature and sheer humaneness. In many ways the book was an eye opener for me as regards the condition of African Americans even in today's America. In fact, the slowness of court settlements in the Mississippi Delta of Arkansas was so familiar – to one who has hardly ever seen speedy settlement of court cases in India. Some of the racial discrimination that the author describes struck a chord in me, as I could connect these to much that happens in India to this day.

Michelle Kuo is an Asian American whose parents migrated from Taiwan to USA. Their aspirations for their daughter are those of any immigrant: that their daughter makes it 'big' in this land of opportunity. And their daughter does begin to tread that path as she graduates from Harvard University with a degree in Social Studies and Gender Studies. Michelle describes how the ambience at home was one which pampered anyone who was studying: even if it meant denial of comforts and conveniences to her parents. Nurtured thus, she grows into an aspirant for Law School, but first becomes a *Teach For America* Volunteer and teaches for two years in 'a tough school' (an alternative school) in a small town called Helena in the Mississippi Delta.



**Title of Book:** Reading with Patrick – A Teacher, A Student and the life-changing power of books  
**Author:** Michelle Kuo

I found many elements in this school that reminded me of any one of our schools for the underprivileged. Michelle's primary challenges were to get the children *to attend school regularly*: a challenge that she confronted head on, by visiting the homes of children who were irregular. I chuckled with amusement when she described a 'permanent substitute History teacher' (the school had not yet found a replacement for the History teacher who had quit more than a year ago) who used his time in school to play Minesweeper.

What took me by complete surprise was the utter lack of awareness amongst these families about historical events that had deeply impacted their own race: African Americans. For instance, when Michelle showed the class a picture of white Americans walking with coloured Americans and Martin Luther King, one of the boys declared that this was a 'photo-shopped' picture, as there was no way that whites and blacks could walk together. The Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement were not in these children's field of awareness! And this is a true account of less than a decade ago.

Slowly, Michelle brings into her classes the habit of reading and delving into American history, poetry and prose. As the boys and girls begin to read, they slowly learn to write. One of her students, Patrick Browning, catches her attention for several reasons. "Patrick never teased people, never bothered them – not about their appearance, not about who their family was, not if they struggled with reading." When Patrick begins to write, he does so very slowly, with his left hand. His paper is full of words that he crosses out, from 'mind' he changes it to 'blank mind'...his teacher observes how each word presents a difficulty for him. At the end of his painstaking effort, he brings to her a poem that leaves her dumbstruck. *It was his first effort and 'was, in some fundamental way, a real poem'*. After he turns it in, Patrick stretches his neck, making a loud crack – and it is then that Michelle realises what hard work writing can actually be! *"Physically, it changed you. You forgot to breathe. Your hand hurt. Your shoulders were sore. But it carried emotional challenges, as well. You risked a lot when you decided to write. You took off a mask."*

That her students begin to take such risks as her association with them unfolds is a tribute to this teacher's methods and intent. She begins a practice called 'free write' which, she says is writing on *anything* for seven minutes, with the assurance that the piece of writing will not be graded or even

corrected. The students are free to choose whether or not they wish to share that writing with their teacher. At first, students are full of disbelief that such a thing can even happen. *"You're supposed to teach us,"* one of them declares. But once they get convinced of it, *"every student wrote. And during this strange time of silence – the heavy, deep sounds of breathing, the arrhythmic scratching of pencil, the surprising absence of talking – there was a palpable sense of desire."* This exercise works well with students like Patrick, who bends his head immediately and begins to write, crumpling a draft every now and then and putting that into his pocket. Best of all, *"when the seven minutes were up, they always asked for more time."*

The heart of the memoir begins after Michelle completes two years in this school and then moves on to join Law School, where she pursues Law. Her description of the years in Law School is perceptive as it is vivid: the sudden experience of having and spending large amounts of money, as compared to her years in the Delta, is just one of her new experiences. Having secured a position thereafter in California, she is in her final semester at Law School and soon to begin her new job, when, three years after leaving the Delta, she receives the devastating news that Patrick Browning has been arrested for murder.

The news shakes her so much that she seeks leave from her Professor and makes a trip to visit Patrick in jail. An awkward meeting ensues with Patrick's first words to his former teacher being: *"Ms Kuo, I didn't mean to."* During their conversation, she learns that he dropped out of school some time after she left. Being the conscientious teacher that she is, she asks herself whether he would have dropped out had she stayed on...She returns to Law School promising to write to him.

A year later, just before joining her new position, she visits him again. She now learns that Patrick has a daughter who is less than a year old by now, and her name is Cherish.

What begins as just this one visit slowly pans into her deciding to return to the Delta (postponing her joining the new job) and visit Patrick once a week, then twice – and finally, every day, for seven months.

And what do they do together? They read, and they read and they read! She gives him homework which he diligently does. He writes: letters, poetry, prose.

The amazing transformation that this engagement brings about in Patrick has to be *experienced* – by reading the book. Michelle chooses books that bring home to him his heritage, American history, literature, poetry – and each time she solicits his views on the lines that he likes, she has to emphasize: *“There is no right answer.”* From a struggling reader, Patrick reaches the stage of appreciating poem by W.B. Yeats:

*Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half-light;  
I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

What I found most remarkable was when Michelle asks Patrick *why* Yeats chooses to repeat the words ‘feet’ and ‘dreams’ in the last four lines, Patrick comes the answer: *“Cause it’s all he has.”*



## What are your beliefs as a teacher?: Teachers' responses

*Teacher Plus* would like to thank its readers who have been writing in to share their views on the article *What are your beliefs as a teacher?*, which was published in its July 2017 edition. We give the responses here.

A teacher, if she does her job well, can be the guiding light and inspiration to not just a few but to all whom she comes across. If she takes on the challenge, she can inspire not just students to reach unfathomable heights, but also parents who can be an inspiration for a better society and better human conduct. In a nutshell, a teacher can be the change agent of a society.

During the 37 years of a rich career, I have stood by a fundamental principle of the relationship between a child and a teacher and that is to develop a bond of trust and faith, which opens doors for effortless learning, interaction and love between the learner and the mentor. In today's age and time, this is supported and accelerated by millions of teaching aids and technology which didn't exist before. While this makes a child's life richer in experiences and gives us a canvas to provide him with greater learning, it also requires careful monitoring, parental discern and prudent application in a child's life. Grammar and vocabulary lessons can be replaced by songs and education series on a tablet without forgetting that parenting, teaching, mentoring is still equally relevant. My lesson to parents today will be – do not forget the three precious words – "under parental guidance". Give your child a fuller, bigger, better view to this world of learning, more than what it was in the past, but with the care and love which is eternal and unalterable.

**Saroj Bhasin**  
Former Headmistress and PRT-Science  
Bal Bharti Public School

As a teacher, I found it really challenging to pen down my teaching philosophy. But the challenge was worth it.

Yes, our usual route of planning a lesson, implementing it and then assessing students was something that I felt was definitely the best approach towards the teaching-learning process. But going on with the reverse process demands a thorough revision of one's perception of the instructional strategies.

Thinking over again and again and to be honest, I must confess, I went through the article at least 3-4 times to absorb it and develop my comprehension for a new way of designing instructional strategies. Yet, I would say that penning down my teaching philosophy, identifying the core ideas of what is to be taught, listing out the main concepts within the core ideas and then designing my assessment method needed exercising all the faculties of my brain and I felt confident that this way I will be able to really develop my students into *thinking individuals rather than letting them grow up into dogmatic beings.*

**Smita Sharma**  
Principal, SGJ DAV Sen. Sec. Public School  
Haripura



Michelle Kuo with her student Patrick Browning

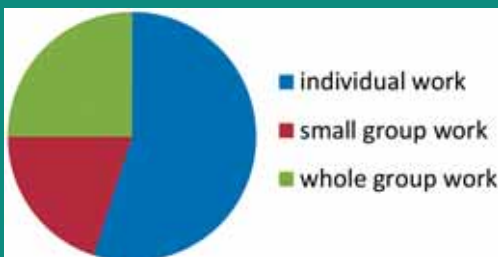
In an interview that Michelle Kuo gave to the *NY Times*, she confessed: "I started writing these really long letters to my friend. They were my way of sorting out whether I had let Patrick down." Letter writing was the trigger for this book, as she added: "I have this really spiritual poet friend who told me that all writing has to be contrition. It's totally worthless if it doesn't prepare you to embrace and love the world again. That's really intense, but I think it was true for me. Those letters were really contrition." Michelle gets Patrick to write letters to his daughter, which begin as guilt ridden pieces to fresh, happy pages of writing. Kuo declares: "I really didn't expect how quick and extraordinary Patrick's growth would be, without much help at all. I gave him pen and paper, and a lot of books, and a lot of personal attention. When he first started out, his letters to his daughter were just a repeated apology: 'I'm sorry I'm not there for you. I'm sorry I messed up.' But by the end of those seven months, he was writing these intricate and complex poems to her. They became prose poems, where he's picturing her listening to the sound of trees and canoeing down the Mississippi. He would tell her lines of poems he really loved."

My teaching philosophy: Self discovery and learning through enquiry, observation, analysis and cross analysis of information based on one's own beliefs and opinions. Students should be confident, articulate and be able to convey their ideas and beliefs. Students should be able to read, understand, analyze and comment on text of different genres and complexity.

Identify and interpret various literary and poetic devices. Coherently present ideas and use language to interest and convince readers of one's understanding and perspectives. Be able to write for various purposes ranging from creative to formal writing. Apply various grammatical concepts with appropriate usage while writing.

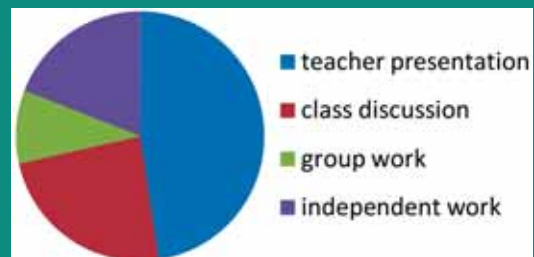
General organization chart

Individual work 55%  
Small group work 20%  
Whole group work 25%



Learning Environment Chart

Teacher presentation 50%  
Class discussion 25%  
Group work 10%  
Individual work 15%



The teaching and learning environment in my classroom is more teacher-driven than student-driven which I would say is not exactly ideal as a student-driven learning environment would be more desirable.

I can make the environment better by assigning more group work and whole class discussions and assignments to encourage student-driven learning.

Michael Moses  
Kalimpong



One of Patrick's later poems is reproduced below:

*I do not wish to be a dream in a grave  
A guitar untuned whining at night  
Howling, with the inflection of a wolf,  
Complaining, of things that won't be heard.*

He is urged by his teacher to write to the mother of the man he murdered, and that letter, too, is very touching.

As a teacher, I learnt from this memoir many ways of unlocking the minds of students – no matter how resistant they are to reading and writing. Above all, the manner of engagement of the teacher and student through reading brought home to me the power of the teacher-student relationship, especially when it is embedded in mutual respect and a love for learning.

### Now bring it into the classroom!

- How aware do you think your young students are of historical events like Partition, the Independence Movement, the Dandi March, etc? Test your assumption by showing them pictures of these events/pictures of memorabilia, and have them identify these...
- Do your students resist sharing their views on whatever they have read? If yes, try Michelle Kuo's oft repeated prodding through stating and restating: "There is no right answer."
- If they do share their views freely, then get them to write – by using Michelle Kuo's practice of 'free writing'.
- Use letter writing as a means of getting your students to unlock their minds: they can write to anyone they feel close to: it could even be an imaginary person. Help them take off their masks through writing.
- Use writing as 'an act of contrition'. Ask 'enemies' to write to each other: with the assurance that they need not share the letters with anyone unless they wish to.
- Can you read this book with your colleagues and share the experience with us at Thinking Teacher?

Please share your responses to these suggestions at [thinkingteacher22@gmail.com](mailto:thinkingteacher22@gmail.com)

#### Reference

- <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/30/books/tell-us-5-things-about-your-book-reading-with-patrick.html>. Interview of Ms Kuo with NY Times

The author is Founder Director of Thinking Teacher ([www.thinkingteacher.in](http://www.thinkingteacher.in)), an organization that networks with teachers across the country. Thinking Teacher aims to awaken and nurture the reflective practitioner within each teacher. By taking (action) research out of the classroom, Thinking Teacher develops the (action) researcher in the teacher. And then, by bringing research into the classroom – as in this series – Thinking Teacher's goal is to help build deep inquiry and rich learning into the teaching process. The author can be reached at [<neeraja@thinkingteacher.in>](mailto:neeraja@thinkingteacher.in).

# Unfolding

Does proficiency in a subject at the college level and a penchant to teach suffice for entry into the practice of teaching? It seems to be so as today we can see many organizations/institutes recruiting teaching volunteers with an outstanding performance at the college level. The notion of 'anybody can teach' is further exemplified through a pool of passionate professionals from different fields entering into teaching to fix the impending issues in our education system. In this current scenario, it becomes pertinent to dig deeper to understand if there is any other component of a teacher's content knowledge that separates a subject graduate from a qualified teacher. The larger questions that need to be answered are what constitutes this knowledge and how can this be developed through teacher professional development.

My recent interaction with an IT professional-turned-teacher throws some light on the questions raised above. A brief account of the interaction followed by an analysis of the same is provided below.

### A teacher's perspective on content knowledge of teaching

Shruti, a post-graduate in computer applications, unable to cope with the pressures of the IT industry, gave up her career to become a full-fledged teacher. Having graduated in pure science, she was confident that her sound understanding of mathematics and science would be an enabler to begin this second innings of her career. Shruti was right as she gained entry easily as a mathematics and science teacher in the primary section of a renowned CBSE school in Bangalore.

However, teaching was not as simple as Shruti had imagined it to be. In her words, "Children used to come up with a variety of questions, I used the same pedagogical