

Reading the book of memory: teacher narratives

Neeraja Raghavan

Which of us has not been influenced by some teacher or the other? And how often do we catch ourselves actually teaching like that teacher? Or even – reminding ourselves NOT to teach like that teacher?

This month, I would like to share with you a chapter from a book which talks of the role of memories on pedagogy. I had read this as a research paper some years ago, but when I recently searched for it, I could not find it. So I Googled the author and wrote to her, asking for a copy. She obligingly e-mailed that chapter. I now treasure this paper amongst my collection.

The author, Kathleen Pithouse has written a remarkable account of post-apartheid South African teachers reminiscing about their own school days.

Read on and you, too, will probably agree with me.

As part of a graduate course in curriculum studies in a University in South Africa, this author facilitated a Teacher Self-Study Project. She worked with 10 experienced school teachers (9 African and 1 Indian) in this project and led them through a process of examining their remembered school experience in apartheid South Africa. Using narratives and group discussion, the author drew out of the participating teachers their strong memories of their own school days, and encouraged them to share these narratives with each other. She took care to ensure that participants revealed only that which they felt comfortable to share in a group.

Paper is a chapter in a book: Pithouse, K. (2011). *“The future of our young children lies in our hands”: Re-envisioning teacher authority through narrative self-study.*

Title of Book: Memory and pedagogy (pp. 177-190) New York: Routledge.

Authors: C. Mitchell, T. Strong-Wilson, K. Pithouse, & S. Allnutt (Eds.)

The entire Project spanned six two-hour sessions. In this chapter, the author describes just two of the six sessions that she held with these teachers. I was struck by the powerful impact of just four hours of engagement with these teachers.

The teachers had been asked to write (but not send) a letter to any teacher who had had a lasting influence on them. In the first session, they read and discussed these letters with each other, and in the second, they presented these teacher autobiographies with the insights that they had gained in the first session. The second session therefore entailed their looking at how these experiences had fed into and positioned their present teaching practice. In her description of the authority of teachers in apartheid South Africa, I saw striking similarities to the traditional, fearful and punitive role that many teachers have donned in our country as well.

Pithouse had specified that the letter could be written to a teacher who had had a positive or negative influence on them, as students. To her (and their) surprise, *every one of the teachers* recalled a negative memory, despite their admitting that there had been teachers who had had a positive impact on them, too. She reveals her intent in initiating such an exercise by quoting Allenden & Allenden (2006): *“Unless we are consciously aware of what is driving our choices of behaviour in the classroom, we are all too likely to revert to the ways of the teachers who taught us – maybe for the good, but usually for the not so good.”* – page 179

The letters contained descriptions of humiliating incidents when these teachers had been slapped or punished as children, by their teachers. All of them had experienced corporal punishment and they now recognized that it seriously hampered their development as learners. They could see that it had demotivated them and alienated them from their teachers. They recognized that in apartheid South Africa, children had often been treated badly by their teachers in the name of upholding teacher authority.

Under the guise of discipline, they recalled how they had felt suppressed and silenced, ignored and undervalued. One teacher wrote in her letter to her teacher:

"I just wanted to tell you that you broke and wounded me and you took a lot of my self esteem with you in that one incident. It took me a long time to know that other people's opinions of me do not define who I am. I had to learn to love and appreciate myself." – page 182

As these 10 teachers read aloud their letters to each other, they realized that their own teachers had used abusive (and not educative) strategies. They also came to acknowledge that many of these abusive methods were still being used today by several teachers. Another teacher recalled how she had been ridiculed by her teachers for being overweight, and how this sort of humiliation was felt by her to be far worse than physical punishment. She recalled very touchingly:

"Emotional abuse is so hard to take but yet so easy to give. It lasts forever in our minds even when you are no longer a child but a grown person." – page 181

As the discussion unfolded, the group began coming up with more constructive ways of classroom management. They saw the need to involve students in this process and to strive to be fair and consistent. The letter-writing exercise thus brought home with great force how the impact of a teacher can be very profound and can last for several decades, as

expressed below:

"What I learned from this session and will or want to remember is that what we as teachers do to our learners especially if negative, it will stay with them forever." – page 182

And again:

"It was about 32 years ago, but the incident is still as fresh in my mind as something that happened yesterday." – page 182

As already described, the second session required their examining how these experiences fed into and positioned their present location. The teachers now began to wonder how many dropouts from the schools where they now taught were results of the behaviour of their teachers. Acknowledging that their own teachers had probably been unaware of the far-reaching consequences of their disciplining techniques, these teachers resolved to be more mindful of their own strategies from now on. They came to the realization that *"the future of our young children lies in our hands"* (page 183). They now saw the need to develop participatory, learner-centered strategies. In so doing, they admitted that their peers, school managements and parents often discouraged them from moving away from traditional ways of disciplining children. The reinforcement of traditional methods by the existing system was again brought out by a teacher and deputy principal, who looked at his own expression of teacher authority and had this very powerful realization: *"I remained the reflection*

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Courtesy: DAV Public School, Pokhariput



of my previous teachers who were unfortunately very harsh and unsympathetic towards the learners.” (page 185) He also noted that this behaviour was reinforced by the prevailing system and culture. As I read this, I could connect this to our educational system and the culture in many Indian schools too. I recalled my early years as a teacher and my struggle to adopt non-punitive, student-friendly strategies, when many of my colleagues resorted to these traditional methods of classroom management.

The participating teachers concluded this exercise by spelling out their vision of a teacher, drawing from the above insights. They began to question whether a good teacher is necessarily one who transmits the most information or one who engages with content and analyzes it critically. They articulated the importance of reflection by a teacher as well as a learner. This self-study made many of these participating teachers emerge with a firm resolve to be more compassionate and constructive in their approach to their own students. They began to redefine teacher authority to mean “*learner protection*” (page 186), rather than learner abuse.

Most remarkably, the teachers acknowledged the influence of their early experiences on who they were now, and also said that this was a revelation to them – as they had till now imagined that “*who I am only has to do with my personal efforts to be where I am*” (page 188). This reflective exercise resulted in some of them turning more aware and careful of



their modes of engagement with others – be it their learners or colleagues. While some of them wished to share these learnings with their colleagues at school, others recognized that their colleagues could well feel threatened by this exercise.

The author cautiously concludes that long-term sustainability of these resolves and changes remains to be seen. However, I found the short-term impact to be noteworthy in itself. All it took was for each teacher to take an honest look at his/her own past experiences! I wonder, therefore – would you like to try it out, too?

Now bring it into the classroom!

1. Write a letter to the teacher who influenced you the most.
2. Notice how your body and mind react *while you are doing this exercise*. What sort of feelings rush through you as you write this letter?
3. Share that letter with your colleague/friend.
4. Share also the feelings and bodily sensations that coursed through you as you wrote out that letter.
5. What does this tell you about the power of that teacher over you? Is this something that you knew all along?
6. Examine if and how some of your teaching practices draw from that influential teacher in your life.
7. Having done this exercise, what is your takeaway?

Please do share your responses to these suggestions at thinkingteacher22@gmail.com

Reference

Allender, J. & Allender, D. (2006) *How did our early education determine who we are as teachers?* In L. M. Fitzgerald, M.L. Heston, & D. L. Tidwell (Eds.) *Collaboration and Community: Pushing boundaries through self-study. Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices, Herstmonceux Castle, East Sussex, England*, (pp. 14-17) Cedar Falls: University of Northern Iowa.

The author is Founder Director of Thinking Teacher (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).