



\*\*\*\*

G GAUTAMA

*Teaching Tales, Learning Trails* (2018)

Edited by Neeraja Raghavan, Vineeta Sood, Kamala Anil Kumar

Notion Press

This is an unusual book—with snapshots of experiences of people, students, teachers and parents, in school, out of school and with themselves—that takes the reader on an enquiry into everyday issues of teaching, learning, schooling and more. It has anecdotes and stories, all conveyed in a conversational style, through the diary entries of individuals or mails and letters that individuals share with each other. While one may be tempted to call it a book for teachers, it is not a book just for teachers. Life and learning are one, and this book is about the discoveries of people like you and me, whether teacher, parent or child.

The style of presentation makes the book easily readable and helps one approach bigger questions with a light touch, one that is usually found in skilful writing for children. This may not be accidental as all three authors-cum-editors have vast experience with children, schools, parents and education. It is interesting to see a refreshingly similar approach used in a book largely meant for adults.

The book opens with teacher chatter, and the sharing of perceptions, questions and dilemmas by teachers. Without getting pedantic, it points to the preoccupations of teachers, all too human that enter into their work and are an inevitable part of life at school. It gently points to the learning possible if one is open to a senior colleague or retired teacher. The contemporary dilemmas regarding the place of the computers in education are also creatively met in this chapter. Through this chapter one also encounters a widely prevalent reality—fear of speaking among colleagues. It points to the paradox of school where teachers may love children, but are often wary of colleagues.

The next chapter has a new principal attempting to create contexts for reflective learning among teachers on the issues they face daily—corrections, parents, subjects, and learning that is ‘encouraged by small victories’. Teachers and principals could learn much from the slow, reflective, inclusive and non-pedantic approach of Shalini Gupta, so simply expressed—small changes, small victories, small shifts that administrators and teachers work for, not knowing, never certain, that it will all add up and be worthwhile for the individual and the child. This brave endeavour, on a daily and annual basis, is what separates the teacher who finds energy and well-being in this situation from one who has settled into cynicism.

The next four chapters boldly flesh out the barriers students experience if they wish to pursue art, dance and craft, as well as barriers to the acceptance of their beings if they are seen as different from the norm. Through the lens of students, teachers, head of school and parents, all in communication through conversations, letters and reflections, the journeys portray dilemmas and solutions that leave one whole. Reading these chapters, one experiences the multiple approaches that well-intentioned parents and teachers may draw upon for solving the difficulties they encounter. It demands humility, awareness of one’s predilections and willingness to drop one’s guard and move towards a gentler less end-oriented approach to teaching and learning. The reader may discover suddenly that he or she is in the story being



narrated, not as a listener, but both as a listener and a participant. The value of relatedness in the moment, buried in all these stories, takes a further turn in one of these chapters, with the issues of special needs education, of responding to children with learning difficulties. Repeatedly, gently, and through the exchanges, these narratives point to the need for a dignified and non-judgemental relatedness between child and adult. All through these chapters the support that adults derive from each other is also shown in many ways.

The next two chapters deal with the binaries created by testing and exams, success and failure and the inevitable demands of becoming. Tensions, fears and anxieties that may be familiar to many a reader come alive in the narratives. Staff meetings in most schools are dull rituals that one has to get through. In one of the chapters, 'The stuff of staff meetings', one of the authors dips into the memory of a different kind of encounter in her school, which opens creative approaches that invite teachers, as a collective, to learning about being a teacher. One may be tempted to ask whether drawing teachers in, to take ownership and responsibility, is really so complex and difficult.

'Winter Sun Reveries' ends the first section of the book on bigger questions of life's journey that are difficult to answer definitively. The writer questions the purpose of education and its praxis with respect to the individual's sense of well-being and discovery. Why does one get educated? Why does one enter school teaching? Does it really have any meaning? Many of these may have been encountered by the reader earlier.

Section Two tries to gather in the ripples that the book creates when students, teachers and parents read the material contained in the book and speak their thoughts to each other. Not only does it act as a summarising device for points articulated by the group, it allows for a digestion of the issues unfolded. It is refreshing to see a new approach—people whose thoughts and stories contributed to the book, reflected here, and added to the insights of the authors.

Many a reader will be able to connect to these stories, the pains, the struggles, the challenges one encountered and the little considerations that made a difference, the people that affirmed one's being. This is a book that portrays hope and a solutions oriented approach to the dilemmas of being a parent or teacher, and makes teaching a humane career worth following. The challenges and the answers are not pat unidimensional

formulations; the complexity is unravelled through humble sharing, listening and learning together with colleagues.

If there is one single major point the book draws our attention to, it is the need for a teacher to be engaged without losing hope, being emotionally available to children, and in a learning mode. It also seems to suggest that if individuals, teachers or parents, collaborate in spirit and letter, a good education for children is possible.

The book is set amidst the middle and upper middle class ethos and therefore does not carry narratives from the more economically disadvantaged sections of India. Since the narratives are lodged within a particular strata of society, this may make it difficult for some readers to connect with the specific characters. This shortcoming is offset by the fact that many of the issues are similar in all types of schools—whether for the rich or the poor.

There is one other question one may ask at the end of the book. Is there a role for the teacher and the school beyond affirmation of the being of the child, and whether life and education is mostly about this? If children could be given unfettered choice with regard to subjects they learn, and be supported by caring adults and a conducive atmosphere, would that be all? As a teacher in a Krishnamurti school, one may ask, “what about the religious dimension, or enquiry into the fundamental questions? When, where and how would one create opportunities for that?” This question is not to take away from the inviting beauty of the stories and the directions pointed out by the book, but to become aware of the human mind’s capacity to settle.

Lastly, the book, while being readable and approachable, also provides case study material that offers rich opportunities for discussion and learning, especially for the contexts of teacher development and teacher education. It points to the individual as a creative participant in the daily life of the child and school. *Teaching Tales, Learning Trails* is a valuable addition to the literature available on teaching, learning, and being human, and the authors deserve appreciation for finding a new teaching-learning trail.