

HOW PATRICIA BECAME A GIFTED TEACHER

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For the past few years I have been collecting life-stories of school teachers who live in and around Bangalore, as part of my research on the teaching profession. The motivation for this project came from my own previous experience as a school teacher, from observing colleagues and from my memories of being taught by some very inspiring teachers. Over time it has become one of the most enriching projects I have undertaken, not only in 'research outcomes' but in terms of life-lessons. The stories that I have heard have been moving, engaging, amusing and thought-provoking. My interviewees have amazed me with their dedication to their students, their deep sense of vocation and their resilience in the face of obstacles. They have inspired me with their wisdom and insight. For the most part, I interview teachers who have been introduced through friends and acquaintances in the profession. But in a couple of cases I interviewed my own teachers. Here's one story from Patricia, my primary school teacher, now retired after a career spanning more than thirty years.

The eldest of three sisters, Patricia failed twice in high school. "I was always more interested in sports than in studies," she says, "and I preferred to spend hours on a craft project rather than on my Hindi homework. As a result, I repeated the eight standard once and then also the ninth, which meant I ended up in the 10th standard along with my younger sister.

"It was humiliating. I almost decided to drop out of school. But my teachers called my parents and insisted, 'Whatever happens, Patricia must take her exams,' so I did the 10th standard board exams thinking that after that I would have nothing to do with formal education."

"In the 1970s in Bangalore there weren't many options for girls who did not go to college. I was good with my hands so I decided to sign up for a course in hair-dressing but as I was returning from the salon, I met a friend. She was going to put in an application for the two-year teacher training certificate [TTC] at Sacred Hearts School [the TTC is a qualification that enables high school graduates to teach in primary school]. I accompanied her to meet the principal of the TTC."

"While looking at my friend's application, Mother Fatima asked me about my own plans. I told her what I intended to do. 'Why hairdressing?' she asked, 'Why not teaching?'

"I explained my predicament. I wasn't even sure if I would pass my board exams. How could I apply for the TTC for which the minimum qualification was matriculation? 'I think you will pass,' she said. 'Have faith and don't underestimate yourself.' On her insistence I applied for the TTC and to my surprise I later passed the 10th boards with a first class."

At the teacher training college Patricia quickly realized that an interest in art and sports were assets for a primary school teacher. She was appointed class leader and her confidence grew. After she finished the course she began her career as a teacher in the school she had graduated from two years earlier.

Patricia's story showed me what a difference a teacher's simple words of faith and encouragement can do to change a student's life. Mother Fatima had no 'hard evidence' that Patricia would indeed pass her exams or that she would become a good teacher afterwards. Yet as her student I can vouch for the fact that Patricia became an exceptional teacher. Kind, firm, encouraging and creative, she had an amazing

ability to harness a child's curiosity whether it was about what would happen next in a story or how long it would take for the beans we eagerly planted in the small patch of land behind our classroom to sprout. She was always interested in the little details of our lives. Students would go up to her desk and whisper their troubles – a fight with a best friend, a sick relative, the birth of a younger sibling which diverted mother's attention from themselves. And everyone received a word of encouragement, a sympathetic ear, a pat on the back. She was especially empathetic with us when we 'failed', a skill (I now realize) which came from a very personal experience of failure.

After Patricia told me this story I have become increasingly sensitive to the ways in which teachers can influence a student's life and the lives of many people that the student comes in contact with later. I have felt deeply grateful to all the teachers who encouraged Patricia to finish school and especially to Mother Fatima who insisted that she fill in the application for the teacher training certificate. Without their faith and encouragement hundreds of students would have been deprived of a great teacher.

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