Sharada Gade

School – as teacher, researcher and educator

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Will you write a three-page piece over the weekend? I will certainly try! Now that sounds just like school. Never enough time, yet all the hopes of the children as well as those of the world to address. Not having had enough of these demands, I even pursue research and find time once again, to tell my tale of what Vidyaranya meant for me as a teacher and what it means for me as an educator.

As a teacher, school provided me with three significant opportunities. In the first, it was possible to build relationships with many for teaching-learning. While I came into contact with many students who were in the classes I taught, I interacted with many others at morning assembly or on school trips as well. These interactions allowed my getting acquainted with Michael Jackson or WWF on the one hand and the possibility for students to share with me the books they read or the kind of food they enjoyed, beyond our mathematics, on the other. I met parents of students as well, some worried, some happy, some articulate and some just plain folks who trusted what I was doing and why. So was the case with my colleagues. Some were helpful, some critical and some friends enough to share an evening together. It can be said that it was difficult not to belong. The second opportunity stemmed from the first. Embedded in the many relationships that were fostered, there was trust, plain and simple reading of one human being by another for the purpose we all shared – that of educating children. It was this strength that I drew upon to experiment with various aspects of teaching-learning – one day a puzzle, another day an anecdote, routine homework. This brings me to the third opportunity I had – that of making mistakes. While some of these were obvious to me in no time, I came upon others only much later – education by enterprise isn’t for the immediate and now. I wish for every teacher a school where one can nurture sustainable human relationships as I have had opportunity to, have the possibility to experiment with one’s own ideas and vitally realise the invaluable right of a teacher to both make and learn from mistakes that are made.

Years of experimental teaching were rich preparation for conducting research. This meant becoming acquainted with current knowledge and a science behind a practice that distinguishes us humans from all other fellow beings. As a species we care for and raise our young over many long years, giving rise in turn to many related and contentious issues – what for, in what manner and how we should raise our young for their future. Understandably, educational research is multidisciplinary and enormously challenging. And current research is beginning to recognise the importance of the practical knowledge that resides in a teacher, one which she uses with great effect at the spur of the moment,
with her students in her class, for the subject she is teaching. Only she seems to know when it is best to solve equations, discuss a passage of history or bring to life the essence of a poem. It is entirely possible that even she does not recognise how her praxis, as it is called, enables her to create and actively transform the world of her students, as well as her own in the classroom. The practical knowledge that I point to is easy to recognise in a teacher but difficult to theorise in research: 'Do questions 5, 9 and 17 in this exercise,' 'In groups of two, search through the library and find ...' The gaining of such practical knowledge and praxis needs all the experience that I was fortunate to have as a teacher. It is such experience I wish every researcher, since its very existence challenges the formulation of educational theory that is worthwhile in everyday, routine, day-to-day practice. A distinction is also made in research between research on education and educational research. While the first could survey what is already learnt, it is the latter which promotes learning, is personally demanding, nurtured by practical knowledge and praxis and accommodating of the ground realities of practice – an aspect a teacher-researcher is most suited and prepared for.

As an educator I find modern day schooling caught up eternally in a game of catching up. Apart from the conventional expectations of having students learn to read and write, schools have become increasingly caught up in the demands of traditions, nations and economies. In such a scenario there is great danger that the interests of children are jeopardised. I think such a scenario was addressed at school by two simple tenets – making learning fun and not promote learning at the very expense of the child. Though difficult to deny in theory these tenets are very demanding of any school to implement in practice. These need for a school to have all those intangible aspects that demand great character to bring about – love, compassion and an unwavering quest for greater harmony in life. Cultivating these also demands a group of people to come together and have the courage to prevail both individually and collectively – for the love of children and childhood. I wish every society a group of people so committed as to rise above the everyday, that they come together to make a difference, as else they would have lived merely by circumstance.

As I conclude my piece for this commemorative volume written hurriedly over a weekend, I am acutely aware that any school, including Vidyaranya, is not a happy place for many. Being happy at school is no ticket as well to being happy in life. Schools by social construction are destined not to be able to meet everyone’s expectations just as expectations themselves vary with time and place. So I end with a memory of mine, one that symbolises how the devil may be in the detail. It is a summer afternoon and my students and I have some maths to do. I walk up the flight of stairs, enter the classroom and wait. Soon there will be algebraic expressions on the blackboard and student workings in their notebooks. But it is the back of Sharon’s notebook that has caught my eye. There is a time-table of eight periods for the five days of the week in which Sharon has filled his dream time-table. On each of the five days he has filled the first seven out of eight periods with the PT, the initials for physical training or sport. For the eighth period on each day he has MATHS in capital letters. I am happy that he and I and mathematics, besides life itself, had a fighting chance!

Sharada is currently Assistant Professor in Mathematics Education at Umeå University, Sweden. She taught at Vidyaranya full-time from 1986 to 1995, and three years part-time thereafter and was a Vidyaranya parent from 1986 to 1997.