

## Lessons learnt for life

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Saluting our teachers who equip us with the values and skills so essential for our journey through life

I have learnt many lessons from my teachers. In school in Chennai, where I studied, we had an English teacher, Srimathi Buch. We were rehearsing for the annual day. I was in the English play and, in the next classroom, rehearsals for the Tamil play were on. 'Srimathi miss', as we called her, was watching the rehearsals, which featured L Ganesh, who was doing a fine job.

She came into our room where we were rehearsing for the English play and asked us to watch the Tamil play. She told us that Ganesh was doing a terrific job and we could learn from him. She quoted Charles Dickens to us — "It is wiser to learn from others' mistakes than commit them yourself." Nowadays, I watch people as they perform tasks and learn from them.

Our principal, Srinivasan, would visit me every day, after my father passed away, and take me for a walk. I felt forsaken, with my father having died and my mother studying abroad, and I would weep. Srinivasan would gently divert my attention. He would ask me to watch a bird or point out a plant and explain it to me. A lesson in learning to 're-focus', that I have not forgotten.

My aunt Prema taught us math in Class 8. Sometimes, the subject would be difficult to comprehend. She would relieve the tedium by telling a story. I learnt about the power of positive distraction from her.

My mother taught geography in another school, yet many of my classmates would come to her to learn their lessons. She would make geography exciting by telling us about the history of a region, the lives of the people there, the food they ate and, once, even took me and my friends to watch a film *Born Free*, to understand the terrain of Africa. Our geography teacher taught us in the 60s, embedding knowledge through visual aids, a technique followed now.

In Class 9, Srinivasan taught us geography. He found that many of us were not interested, so he would send us to the USIS library to prepare a note on the topics he gave us. It was then that I learnt to think in diverse ways.

We were learning poetry in Class 10 and our teacher Leela Sampath Kumar was teaching us a Wordsworth poem. She wanted to enliven the class and so, acted out the poem. I can still quote lines from it after 45 years. She honed my memory power.

Gomathi taught us chemistry. We did not have biology as a subject, but she was proficient at it. One day, she took us out of class to watch a tree, as she explained the chemical

reaction by which chlorophyll is formed, a lesson I have never forgotten. Rangamani taught us Indian history and Sarasa, American history. The former was gentle and would explain historical incidents through simple stories. She would talk about wars that were bloody with such deep empathy for the vanquished that many of us would feel sad for the defeated. My first lessons in empathy, I learnt from her. Sarasa was matter of fact, yet would engage the class in a debate. Many of us acquired our early debating skills from her.

Tara, our headmistress, would insist that we showcase our talents. She would pick some of us and have us either perform, give a speech or sing. That's how I learnt to speak confidently in public. Alamelu Krishnan taught us geometry. She was a math teacher also brilliant at music. To help us appreciate classical music, she would take some of us with her to music sessions she would organise with an eminent artist. A few of her math students went on to become proficient musicians.

Saraswathi taught us geography in Class 11. One of the course requirements was to draw a map of India free-hand. She taught us to draw it to scale. So efficient was her method of teaching that a classmate Venkat went on to become one of Chennai's most reputed architects.

Jayalakshmi and Krishnaswami taught us Hindi. Both of them knew that the language was foreign to most of us. So they would read the text and then explain it to us in simple language, sometimes resorting to English and Tamil too, to help us understand. I learnt from both these teachers how to put things into context.

Rajalakshmi and Ramamurthy taught us physics. It was a tough subject, but they would kindle our interest through experiments. Learning by doing made us more retentive.

Vasudevan taught us general math in our final year at school. Being fresh out of college, he would engage in banter with us and indulge us. We learnt the meaning of true companionship from him.

Alamelu Gopalan also taught us general math, though sadly she never taught my class the years I studied in the school. However she once came as a substitute for another teacher and taught us for a few days. She was gentle, patient, affectionate and considerate.

I was neither very studious nor very good at math. When she noticed my discomfort and lack of understanding she called me after class to the staff room and went over the complete lesson. I was upset as I felt inadequate. She restored my confidence.

Our physical instruction teacher Navraj Chellaiah, a Tamil scholar, equipped me with selling skills. He would give us tickets for the public performance of Tamil plays he had written and ask us to sell tickets for him.

Scout masters R. S. Mani and A. Srinivasan taught us the values of discipline, thoroughness and excellence. If I have turned out 'good and proper', and many from my school have gone to make a name for themselves, all credit is due to our teachers who were advisors and co-travellers with us.

Thanks are due to them wherever they are.

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