

Look Back, Get Ahead

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History teacher Ms Premlatha d/o Selvaraj believes that learning about the past prepares students for the future. Here's how she convinced her students (and their parents) that there's more to the subject than endless lists of names and dates.

“Cher, stop forcing us to pay attention la. History is just about memorising dates and dead people. What use is it to us? Total waste of time!”

My first History class was nothing like I had intended it to be. Despite my animated attempts at trying to get my students' attention, Michael* had stood up in the middle of my lesson to let me know what he really thought of it. His words were endorsed by resounding applause from his classmates.

It was my first day as a History Teacher, but there was already so much resistance to the subject. I had to keep trying to get my Secondary Two students to sit up, stay awake and participate in the planned activities, which I had spent an entire week preparing. Never did I imagine that it would be my students who would teach me a lesson instead.

Michael's comment made my heart sink – but I soon recovered. In the ashes of that failed lesson emerged a flicker of hope that I had a special mission at hand. I had to create a love for this subject that my students viewed as redundant. I had to help them see the relevance of it for their future. I had to make each and every one of them fully understand that they need to look back to get ahead. It was a lesson that defined my purpose and strengthened my belief that I was in this profession to make a difference.

In teaching History, I have become more conscious of the value of the subject as one that helps us develop thinking skills, to ask questions, to reason – traits that are important when we navigate the shades of grey in today's world.

One idea was to immerse the students in the role of Historians and get them to be involved in investigative work to create a narrative of the past. I wanted to make my students see that History is relevant to them today – that it is more than learning dates and facts but being able to “analyse” and “understand” better. Together with a team of colleagues from the Humanities Department and Citizenship Education Committee, we decided to document the community around us and turn the facts and happenings into heritage stories.

The students did research, located pioneer residents and conducted interviews to rekindle and document the memories of the then Pasir Ris in terms of the lifestyle led, amenities available and unique landmarks. They also made use of archived

sources like photographs and news clippings to make comparisons of the past and present and engaged in class discussions to deduce the need and implications of the changes over the years. For instance, in the 1950s – 1960s, children from the Pasir Ris-Loyang villages attended various schools based on ethnicity unlike today. Malay children went to the nearby Tanah Merah Besar Malay School, the Chinese attended the Yook Kiau Chinese School or Sin Ming School while the Indians attended Changi Tamil School located at Wing Loong Road. This prompted critical inquiry into the rationale for English-medium schools and the benefits of it. Likewise, they questioned and made fascinating connections between the types of traditional games played and the lifestyle led by the residents of the past. For instance, the students theorised that chapteh, one such traditional game was probably popularised because of the chicken farms in the past since it was fashioned out of colourful chicken feathers.

The enthusiasm the students gleaned from making discoveries through their inquiry was immeasurable. They described it as an unexplainable sense of achievement in giving identity to the otherwise forgotten and buried treasures of this place. Seeing students take ownership of their learning and thoroughly enjoying the process of it when they proudly shared their discoveries in excitement was heartwarming. In their quest for historical information, the students gathered public records and documents on the very neighbourhood they lived in which they went on to share with their families and friends as well.

Over the years, the research was documented and developed into a website, mobile exhibit and a 'Heritage for Kids' series constituting four books, in collaboration with National Heritage Board. Our students are now trained to share these heritage stories with primary school students. The course of the development and implementation of this project provided many opportunities for students to be meaningfully involved in their learning in authentic contexts. Digging through hundreds of newspaper clippings for one, taught them resilience and the principle of backing assertions with evidence. They learnt that heritage was not just static, archaic information bound in textbooks. It was about understanding where we come from and why we arrived here. This made them innately feel a sense of belonging and helped them better understand abstract concepts like 'nationhood' and 'identity'. The learning process became more interactive and it was a positive experience for both the students and me. Seeing them understand that History encompasses many life lessons continues to excite me.

Fuelled by the belief that only when the child feels valued and understood, the child becomes more engaged in learning, I also paid attention to the little details about them to initiate casual conversations about their interests and personal circumstances. Once, I noticed my student, Sarah* had a tattered 'Mickey Mouse' pencil case and needed new stationery. To encourage her, I presented her with a new pencil case. Upon receiving it, her eyes welled up in tears as she confided in me about her family's difficult situation. I realised the extent of impact of this small

episode when she presented me with a similar pencil case on Teachers' Day, with the words, "Thank you for noticing me. Because you cared, I started caring about my studies."

Undeniably, more than the preparation for the lessons, it was the learning experiences with these students that fulfilled me as a teacher and spurred me on. The book titled, 'Still Ours to Lead' by Bruce Jones, which analyses America's status as a superpower and issues like global stability holds special memories for me. It is not special because of its content but rather because of the context in which it was introduced to me. Dhilan* was a challenging, at-risk student who had to be continually coerced to turn the pages of his History book. But, it was the same Dhilan, stirred by a lesson on Cold War in class, who took time off his March break to borrow this book to learn more about America's position in the changing world. When he extended the text to me, he even sheepishly remarked, "Read it and let me know whether you find this reliable. I think it is biased."

When your student takes on your role and engages you in an intellectually stimulating conversation thereafter, any student-centred teacher will feel like a winner. Truly, I felt so too. Indeed, to me, education is not a sprint, but a marathon. We need to focus on equipping our students for the long-haul and not just on preparing them for exams.

History lessons are interspersed with nuggets of historical information on subject matter that pique their interest, ranging from aircraft to movies and sometimes even current controversial issues or events that grab world attention. Till today, many of my students associate me with the phrase, "Nie Wieder" which is a German phrase that means "Never Again", alluding to the stories and photographs of my visits to the concentration camps in Germany that I had shared with them to highlight the life lessons it held for us in the present. Never again did they describe History lessons as boring.

**Actual name has been changed.*