

Teacher- A Blessed Soul

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Abstract

Brad Henry quotes, "A good teacher can inspire hope, ignite the imagination and instill a love of learning." This statement proves true to every teacher who enters a class with an aim to bring the desired change in his or her pupils. A teacher can not only bring about change in behavior and conduct of the students but also helps them to acquire knowledge. If an appropriate balance is maintained between impartment of learning skills and values, motivation and attitudes, a strong belief formation can take place among students. A teacher is a lot more than a reservoir of subject knowledge and understanding as her or his real ability lies in bringing about a coveted change in the student. Present paper will study the characteristics of teaching are evident in E.R. Braithwaite's novel *To Sir, With Love* (1959) a British teacher who goes to teach in a school in South of London.

Keywords: Teacher, E.R. Braithwaite's, and *To Sir, With Love*

Main Text

We all have been students in our respective lives, from kindergarten to higher education we have come across a number of teachers, prolific in their subject area, which played an important role in building us what we are today. They touched upon our very lives and yet remained distant like a cool summer breeze on a scorching hot day. Sometimes they made us laugh and at other times, they reprimanded us, and if necessary even used punitive measures. At times, they influenced our personality, leaving a deep impression on our souls, which we carry even today as we make and move in this world.

Do you remember your first teacher? I remember mine. On the first day of school, I was scared, I cried all the way from my home to school. Nevertheless, this inconsolable child wiped her tears when she saw a beautiful woman smiling at her in the classroom, Nursery- A. Her smile was invigorating which helped the child to muster up courage to leave the hand of her mother and walk into the class to the smiling face. She not only taught me my first alphabets and numerals, but also made me learn how to move about in the world on my own. I had left my mother's hand that day to which I used to cling upon whenever I was frightened. It is not that my fears vanished, but my teacher strengthened me to fight them.

A teacher applies knowledge, skills, and attributes to meet the educational needs of the society and the individual. Her job is not limited to, meeting curriculum outcomes, but emphasizes the development of values. She guides students in their social relationships, by employing practices that develop a positive self - concept in students. Although the work of a teacher is typically takes place in a classroom, but her success lies in the application of her teachings by the students outside the classroom. There have been instances when we have applied their teachings in the real world bringing their effort to a fruitful resultant.

All these characteristics of teaching are evident in E.R. Braithwaite's novel **To Sir, With Love** (1959) a British teacher who goes to teach in a school in South of London. *To Sir With Love* is an autobiographical account of E.R. Braithwaite's experience as a teacher in England in the 1940s. Following his discharge from serving in the Royal Air Force, Braithwaite is unable to find work in his desired field of Engineering.

Although eminently qualified, having earned advanced degrees in Physics from prestigious institutions, both in England and in the United States, Braithwaite is a black man and is unable to overcome the culture of discrimination dominant in England during the 1940s. The reality of such discrimination is reinforced in the novel when a white woman refuses to sit next to Braithwaite on the bus.

This man could have garnered hatred against the whole society because of the treatment given to him by the society. The rejection in a number of job applications because of his skin color could have left this man dejected. Yet he decided to fight these prejudices. Although, he was disheartened yet his attitude towards the haters was lenient and he does not believe in holding grudges. One day, an old man sitting nearby him at the beach, advises him to take up a job of teachers and acquaints him to the workings of a city. He declares that a city moves at its own pace ignorant of the happiness of its citizens, paying no heed to their problems. Braithwaite follows his advice and applies for the post of teacher.

The old man himself comes as a teacher in Braithwaite's life, unexpectedly, as a benevolent guide to show him the right path. This man is the first inspiration not only for Braithwaite, but also for any teacher or person for that matter. Like a good teacher, he mentors his student when required and otherwise, letting them be what they are. In the same way, a teacher too needs to extend the support when her pupil is about to shatter, but always keep standing behind the back of the pupil without ever letting him or her know about your presence.

A teacher might be an independent variable while a student, a dependent variable in the process of teaching, but both the entities participate equally in the course of education. Braithwaite was almost forced into this profession since he has been unemployed for eighteen months and he was willing to do anything to get this job. He did not have a good start in the school or outside it. On the very first day as he was, travelling by bus a woman insulted him, as she would not sit with him because of the black color of his skin. Offended by her act he got off the bus and walked towards the Greenslade Secondary School on London's lower East Side, a rough, lower class area of the city.

This school has a completely different method of teaching with no permission to punish students at all. Alex Florian, the headmaster of the Greenslade School, empathizes with the students and urges all other teachers do the same. He clearly puts his vision for the school in words as he is very well acquainted with the pathetic state of being in which these students strive to exist. They come from households, that cannot provide them with the basic necessities of life leaving aside luxuries. Living in crumpled and dingy holes, school is the only place where they can blurt out their aggravation, irritation, annoyance, etc. They have been through such circumstances in their life which no other child of their age could have ever experienced in its life. This has also lead to early maturity in them.

Braithwaite replaces a teacher named Hackman, who left the school because he could no longer put up with such unruly kids. Braithwaite could have been another "Hackman", intolerant of these students whom he preconceives to be unintelligent, rough, uncouth and racially intolerant. However, what saved him from this

disaster was his will to continue working with the school as well as the kids. In addition, advice imparted to him by the domestic science teacher, Miss Grace Dale- Evans. She not only conveys the difficulties faced by a teacher in the school, but also prepares Braithwaite for them. She opines that although these students are difficult to handle, but at the end of the day, they are only kids who are to be treated with love and not hatred.

Braithwaite was given the senior most class to teach and he was no different from Hackman for the students except the fact that he is black in color. In the weekly review, students mention their new teacher only as the “new blackie teacher”. In the very first class, he asks them to read from their textbooks and was disappointed by the performance of almost all them except Pamela Dare. This girl with red hair read so well that it seemed words were flying into the picture from her lips. Most students were not interested in learning weights and measurements that Braithwaite taught to them. Nobody answered his questions or responded to him.

They left no stone unturned to disturb him while he taught them. They would on purpose call him “red” repeatedly and even bang the desk with a loud thud sound to break the momentum of teaching. One day he found Denham reading an adult magazine, another time he found a student playing with a miniature of a nude woman and red painted bosom. These students were getting on his nerves with their wisecracking, trick-playing, desk-banging, shades-wearing, porn-toting, crude-mouthed mockery. Yet he continued to teach them with an exemplary calm. He tried to behave as properly as he could but all in vain. These students would not budge.

It was soon that he left his cool and burst out in anger when he saw one morning smoke coming out of the classroom. He went inside and found smoke rising out of the fireplace in the class. A girl has thrown a “used” sanitary napkin in the fire and the class was full of smoke and foul smell. Braithwaite lost his temper reprimanded all the girls terribly. Braithwaite could no longer keep his calm and burst out dreadfully, all the girls were terrified of him. He went straight to the staffroom and felt bad for chiding the kids. It was then that he realized his mistake and decided to correct himself.

Braithwaite was acting like a good teacher but students were not ready to listen to him. It was getting difficult for him to cooperate with them. Therefore, the next day he laid out some regulations in his class. A code of conduct was decided which was to be followed by the teacher and the students. He found the key to his problem in his own attitude towards students. Since he was treating them like “kids”, they were acting like a bunch of unruly kids. Therefore, he decided that they would treat each other as adults, by calling all girls as Miss, boys by their last name and the teacher was to be called either “Sir” or “Mr. Braithwaite”.

He asked them to follow certain decorum in the class which was to be followed them in a few months in outside world. In this way, he was able to create an environment of respect, good manners, modesty, demureness, etiquette, and politesse. Students initially faced problem adapting to the system but gradually

they were attuned to it. They learnt the value of good behavior in society and the need to be prim and prude. Braithwaite not only gave those students lessons from the book but also taught them necessary lessons of life, which would come handy in the larger prospects of life.

Initially, he was only pitiful towards the students but now he started to empathize with them. He gets to know about the obstacle- ridden environment in which these students grow. Some have ailing mothers, some take care of their younger siblings, some have abusive fathers, and some are poverty ridden. Braithwaite was shocked at the treatment given to him by larger society after he left Royal Air Force. He was considered “too black” for all the jobs that he applied. This school was the only place, which accepted him, and gradually he could relate the problems of his past with the predicament of these students.

The students accepted him only when he got rid of the preconceived notions, biases and prejudices that he had garnered against these students. A teacher needs to be free of all these vices otherwise; he would never be able to make her students understand her point of view. A biased teacher could lead the student to disastrous results unless he purges them off. Braithwaite learnt this fact very soon. Gradually, he realized that students are with him now and not against him. He gave them the freedom to ask questions on any topic that they want. Being a teacher of soon to be adult students, and a number of questions revolving in their brain, he made them easy with the anatomy of human body, their sexuality and above all, the basic respect that is to be bestowed by one individual to another.

Braithwaite used interactive method of teaching where he demonstrated the concepts and related them to their day-to-day life. For instance, he taught students weights and measures by relating it to the idea of buying vegetables with which almost all the students were familiar. Similarly, all other concepts were taught in this manner. This made it easier for the students to grasp concepts with which they were earlier alien. The students started to interact with the teacher; they questioned and learnt new things outside their textbooks. He even indulged them in debates, dividing them in two groups, where Braithwaite headed one group and the Headmaster headed the other. Class discussions were an everyday affair in his class. The students would not even go out in the lunch break, as they would always be busy with the discussion with teacher.

Once Denham tried to force him in a match of boxing and Braithwaite beat him hard. This made him not only realize the fact that physical force was necessary to win over the students in consonance to their background. He was finally able to grow up in their eyes. Nevertheless, even to achieve this right conduct was required. The same tactic of overpowering students with physical prowess when applied by Mr. Bell reacted against him. Braithwaite was not only involved in the classroom teaching method but also helped them manage some of their personal affairs. He helped Patrick Ferman in coming out of a court case by preparing a school report for him and by standing beside him during the court trial.

The racist attitude of the society does not alter towards the skin of his color. A woman because of the color of his skin bluntly refused him a room, which he wanted to rent. This woman turned out to be the mother of

his student, Barbara Pegg. She apologized for her conduct later but he knew that he might not be able to modify the conduct of the mother. He found his triumph in his student who forced her mother to ask for forgiveness. He was able to change the attitude of the students towards racism in his society. Pamela Dare too stood up for her teacher when two women in train try to insult him. Both the teacher and the students were able to learn from each other by changing their ways.

However, the real victory came Braithwaite's way only when his students gathered at the funeral of their black classmate's mother. Though all of them refuse to attend it because of the social prejudices attached with it, yet they all assemble for the funeral leaving their teacher teary-eyed. He was relieved with the fact that he could make his students intolerant of racism and classism prevalent in society. He could make a difference in their mindset. He taught them essential human qualities. Moreover, tomorrow when these students would step out in the world they would be able to make a difference.

Mr. Wetson, another teacher in the school is a personality in contrast to Mr. Braithwaite. He is prejudiced, intolerant and narrow-minded. For him his students are 'snotty little tarts' and 'blithe spirits'. He always claim that he is a teacher only for the money. The special task of bringing a change in society through his teachings makes a teacher a blessed soul. A teacher like Mr. Wetson would never be able to beget respect from his students leave alone the idea of bringing a change in them. Braithwaite was commendable in his attempt to transforming a class of unruly bumpkins into a polite and well-mannered class. He was able to achieve what he wanted for his class through his dedication to bring a change.

He created the necessary path for students by enriching them with values, meanings and choices. He empowered them to make and move their own world. He made responsible for their actions and trained them to be polite and respectful towards fellow citizens with no aversion to their castes, creed, race, or class. He made them assess their self so that they can make an intelligent choice for themselves in life. Braithwaite started as a man with no experience in the field of teaching but he gradually learnt all the aspects of teaching which make his students love him. He was the best teacher that they could have and he was worthy of being labeled as "To Sir, With love".

Bibliography

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