

The Same Cloth

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They have me distracted for a few minutes, as I turn my back to write out the words they claim they cannot spell (“HIV”, among them). I hear muffled laughter. Then a white object soaring above their heads catches my eye. What is that? I swing around. A hand shoots out and grasps the white object out of the air, stuffing it into an open bag. I walk over. “What did you just grab and put in your bag?” Silence. I try again, “What was that?” A grin. Then a chubby hand reaches into the bag and pulls out a pair of bright white boxers. Who would have thrown underwear across a classroom? This is something new. After a year of teaching in urban classrooms in California, I thought I had seen a lot. But this was just bizarre. I didn’t have the heart to ask who threw it or, the scarier question, why. “Give me that”, I demand, and take the underwear with my left hand, somehow finding the will not to check if it is clean. I turn back to the front of the classroom to continue the lesson.

Every teacher has thousands of similar stories to tell. The details might change a little – books instead of underwear, passing instead of throwing, hissing instead of laughing. But we all have them. Without them, one doesn’t really belong to the fraternity of teachers. And this holds true across the world. Well, I can’t really speak for all countries around the world, but my limited experience with education in Bangladesh, Singapore and the US has reinforced my theory: teachers are the same and students are the same, all around the world.

To put a finer point on it: despite income levels, social backgrounds, types of schools and language or cultural differences, there are archetypes of teachers that hold true across national boundaries; and teenagers are, well, teenagers. This is not an obvious point; at least, it was not obvious to me until I returned home to Bangladesh after seventeen years abroad. In coming back and working here, I realized that east and west are not so far apart as they sometimes seem.

It’s been a year since I left San Francisco to embark on a soul-searching journey back home, to Bangladesh. I returned to reconnect with family, to explore my roots, and to find out what it was like to live at home as a working adult. Personal concerns aside, I have to admit I was apprehensive about the professional aspects of life in Bangladesh.

The last time I had ‘worked’ there, I had spent a summer working in my mother’s school to design a teacher training program. That was 6 years ago. At that time, I had found that the working environment in Bangladesh was quite “conservative” in that the working relationships between men and women were strained, technology was grossly underutilized, open channels of communication

were not established, and the school seemed to be largely peopled by teachers and management personnel without qualifications or relevant experience. At that time, it seemed that the educational system in Bangladesh was very different from Singapore or the US.

Bangladesh has changed considerably in the past 6 years. It has seen a rapid rise in income per capita, significant foreign investment, and tremendous growth in the export sector. A new crop of hospitals, hotels and shopping malls have opened in Dhaka in the past 2 years, the retail sector has grown considerably, and the education sector has boomed. In particular, the market for English-medium private education has grown remarkably quickly.

Since the last time I worked in Dhaka, the teacher training program I had created had grown and developed into its own entity, a company called Services for Professional Education and Enterprise Development. At the same time, my mother's school has grown into practically its own little school system, with 6,000 students and 7 campuses across the capital city.

Along with its change in size, the professional culture in the school has also transformed in recent years. Working relationships have become more transparent and comfortable, and more teachers are qualified and seek out professional development opportunities (although only 4% of our faculty of 400 has degrees in education).

But these are all developments towards the kind of working environment in the west that I had been expecting. What I did not expect was to find so many similarities in the educational culture: although we might expect students around the world to have the same basic interests, behaviors and codes; for some reason I had not expected to find such similarities in the teachers.

In so many schools that I have visited, I have found that same passionate young teacher who studies relentlessly, constantly seeks out advice and gets completely involved in the lives of her students; there is the teacher who can't stop talking as if she were lecturing in class, whether she is at a dinner party or in a meeting; there is the one who has been teaching for so long that her students and their children tell the same stories about her; there is the teacher who is well-meaning but so dazed and confused that no one can understand what he is saying, even when he is making the simplest of requests; and there is the funny, passionate, committed teacher who makes an impression that changes you forever.

And they all face the same challenges: students who demand challenging and enriching educational experiences, teenagers who seek out ways to push the boundaries, kids who need guidance and counseling, and young adults who are

becoming who they will be for the rest of their lives. In a rapidly changing world, where some talk of a 'clash of civilizations', it's nice to know that at least the teachers are cut from the same cloth.