

## PoP Book Club

# Educated and educators

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# PoP Book Club

As a part of this school year's options for being a part of Pedagogy of Play (PoP), interested staff members at International School of Billund could - among other things- choose to join the PoP Book Club. The Book Club meets 6 times per year in the afternoon when the school day is over to discuss different types of pedagogical literature- or perhaps a TEDtalk. The discussions we have in the PoP Book Club can be structured in a number of ways, depending on the type of literature we have read. Sometimes different themes or chapters from a book will be discussed in groups, sometimes a guest will join us and sometimes we'll compare understandings. One thing is for sure: We always leave with new perspectives!

One of our colleagues suggested reading Tara Westover's *Educated* in our PoP Bookclub.

The book is Tara Westover's memoirs, written when she was around 30 years old. In the book she looks back at her childhood and youth, growing up in Utah as the youngest of 7 siblings, with parents that were highly sceptical about any form of public intervention, such as school and health care systems. Tara Westover eventually finds her own way through the educational system- despite the difficulty in understanding what was expected from her, despite big gaps in conceptual understandings and knowledge of the world, and despite having close to no one to lean on.

*Educated* is an interesting and fascinating book- full of strong memories and so many details that serve as great discussion starters.

# Unpacking a detail from Educated

In *Educated*, about a hundred pages in, we hear about how Tara's mother lets Tara take dance classes despite the fact that they both know that Tara's father would not approve of it. Leading up to a dance performance at Christmas, the dance teacher calls Tara's mother to talk about the costumes they are going to wear for the performance. We only hear glimpses of the conversation, but it is clear that Tara's mother won't allow the skirts to be too short or too see-throughable- otherwise Tara will not be allowed to join the Christmas performance.

The following Wednesday when Tara shows up for her dance class and all the girls are waiting excitedly to get their costumes, the dance teacher presents a box full of dull, grey, oversized sweatshirts for them to wear for the performance. The dance teacher has tried to make the sweatshirts look nicer by sewing big Santa Clauses on them and embellishing them with glitter and sequins- but they are what they are: Grey, oversized sweatshirts.

The teacher changed her plan to include a student she realised was different from the rest of the group. In doing this, she disappointed the rest of the group, but she included the one who was an outsider.



**The teacher changed her plan to include a student she realized was different from the rest of the group.**

**(...) she included the one who was an outsider**

# Picking a perspective: Educators

There are many ways to discuss books and plots, and so many different aspects and perspectives of *Educated* that we could have taken up and looked into in our PoP Book Club.

But, sparked by a particular detail in the book- the very short yet powerful description of an educator - the dance teacher - and her actions, our talk ended up being about educators. The educators we personally have encountered. The educators who have made an impact on us - positively or negatively, the educators who have left a mark on us and meant something for us as human beings, as well as professionally as educators.

We have all met a teacher that made a difference in our lives. This is an attempt to share the stories and memories of them.

**We have all met a teacher  
that made a difference in our lives**



# Opening my eyes for literature

When I was 15 years old, I took my last year of elementary school at a Danish Efterskole- a kind of a boarding school. My literature teacher at the school was the one who opened my eyes for literary qualities and many different types of literature. She wasn't afraid of letting her students know who her favourite writers and poets were, giving us a part of herself in sharing that passion- without being indoctrinating: There was room for many favourites! My teacher's excitement about writers and literature rubbed off on us as well as it was a part of her, making her authentic and reliable. We read different texts and got different types of assignments in connection to the text types.

The room this teacher created for learning was a room everyone wanted to join. And this teacher was mildly dyslexic. She shared that with us, because she knew that there were areas where she wasn't completely certain about spelling or grammar. She showed us a weak spot, and it made her more reliable.

Whenever I hear someone saying "teachers nowadays don't know how to spell" I think about that literature teacher, and about how appreciation of a language and its literature is not made up by your spelling-skills.

Sille



**The room this teacher created for learning was a room everyone wanted to join.**

# Fascinated by storytelling

There's a positive memory as well as a negative memory about teachers I'd like to share. And even the negative memory has still been inspiring for me.

When I was a 5th grader in Yugoslavia, present Bosnia, I had a remarkable history teacher, who was very inspiring. I still remember vividly how he talked about Mesopotamia - the cradle of civilization, ancient Egypt... and all these stories- I was just so fascinated by his storytelling that it actually inspired me to go deeper into history, and eventually become a historian later. So, this teacher was the one who inspired me to explore history academically. First on a hobby level, and later in life as an academic career.

So, this was in Yugoslavia, and then the war came a few years later, and I came to Denmark. I was a teenager, so I began in high school (Danish Gymnasium), and I had this contact person at the school. She was a student counsellor. And because I didn't speak Danish, she didn't think that I would finish high school. All the time she kept saying "Maybe you won't be finishing this school, perhaps you'll find something else to do". And it made me think "Why does she keep telling me this?" I figured out that it was probably just because I didn't speak Danish. Then I spent the next three-four months learning Danish because I wanted to show her that I could finish school by learning Danish. So, I finished high school on time- without much hassle. Just to prove her wrong.

Those are two very different memories I carry with me.

Dino



**So, I finished high school on time - without much hassle. Just to prove her wrong.**

# That was what I wanted to be

I also have a couple of stories to share. One is negative- or not so positive, and one is nice. I'll start with the not so nice one.

My literature teacher in Junior High was the granddaughter of a famous Mexican writer, very important in Mexican literature, who wrote these novels during the revolution. My teacher was a very elegant lady, and she would always look at us sternly. One day we were talking about Mexican writers and poets and she made a comment. It was a minor comment and it was really quick, but I have never forgotten it. She said: "This Mexican poet wrote her first Christmas story when she was just nine years old. Something that you could never do- even when you're fifty years old!"

We didn't say anything, we were all quiet. Maybe she didn't mean to be offensive, I don't know, maybe she was just having a bad day, but I've thought about it a lot, and especially in terms of thinking about the kind of teacher I want to be! It's just one of those things that I have never forgotten. Anyway, I wish her well!

The second memory is about a biology teacher. She was this lovely, lovely teacher. I was in an all-girls catholic school, and she was my biology teacher, and she was.. just so smart and so sweet. When we had PE lessons we would just go upstairs to put on our shirts and our skirts and she would say: "Don't do that! Go to the bathroom and change. Have that little time of care to yourselves and put on your skirts in the changing room. Just do that, please." And I will never forget that: She cared- and she showed it like that. She was a really sweet person. She was just such an amazing person that that was what I wanted to be - and I started studying biology right after High school. I started because of her. Lovely person!

Gaby

**I'ts just one of those things I've never forgotten ”**

# When we share personal stories, we create a relationship with others

In our school we had this PE teacher. He was leading a very healthy yoga lifestyle, which was quite uncommon in the little town where I come from in Ukraine.

Sometimes in PE lessons he would take us for walks. We would walk to the forest and he would share these life stories, personal stories, with us. We enjoyed being around him, and we were interested in what he had to say. Maybe all of it wasn't true, I don't know, but we believed him because we were children, and because it was always interesting to hear what he had to say. He was our teacher for 11 years. He is more than 80 years old today, but he still teaches kids chess. That's very impressive.

When I came to DK and did my internship at Engårdskolen, I remembered him. Because there was this teacher, Dorte. The way she caught children's attention was fantastic. She would come into the class room and she would not say "Be quiet and sit down" - or anything like that, she would say "You know what? My grandchild- do you know what she did the other day? She went to the kitchen and she opened the cupboard, and there was this..." - and she would catch the children's attention with these personal stories- and the children would just be quiet and listen. So I remembered my old teacher and the personal stories. When we share personal stories, we create a relationship with others. With the children. And when I finished university here I wrote to Dorte and asked if I could attend a few classes with her at Engårdskolen- just to get inspiration. And she said YES, you can come! I'm a big fan of Dorte!

Tetiana

 I remembered my old teacher and the personal stories



# I always try to see the kid beyond what they can do

I think it's funny how a negative experience with a teacher can stick out so much in one's head. I remember when I was in the first grade, there was this teacher- it wasn't my teacher- but it was a teacher in the same grade, and all the kids were giving her hugs as they were walking down the hallways. I was with some of these kids, and I gave her a hug too. She looked at me and she took my arms away and she goes "I don't know who you are!" I don't remember how she said it, but in my head it was like a shut down, and I swore that I would never ever do that to any kids or any person, ever. Even if I don't recognize a kid or I don't know a kid, if they come up to me I'll find their name out in a funny way, like: "Oh- how do you spell your name again?" or just pretend that I know them.



As teachers we are very visible, and there are so many kids- so of course we don't know all their names. We might not recognize them, but they all know us, and that has just stuck with me.

I was maybe 6 years old when I had this experience, but I will never forget how it made me feel. It has always been my goal to never do that- to any kid! We never know if that one comment will stick with them forever!

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When I was in high school, I had this phenomenal history teacher. I don't know if he was just on caffeine all the time, but he is the most energetic person I have met in my entire life! He would run marathons and he was also the cross country-coach. He talked me into running cross country in my last year of high school and I was ..awful. I was just awful at it. I was the slowest one on the team and I barely made the team each year, and I was always the last one. At the end of the year he did this award ceremony and he had a full paragraph for each member of the team, and they were SO personalised. With the things that actually made us great! He talked about how I stuck with it and persevered- and I was running with kids who were winning state, so I was really far behind them- but the things that he wrote about me made me think "Oh man. I'm a good runner!" and totally skewed my self esteem for the rest of- forever! He made me feel like I was actually a good runner. But how personalised he spoke to me, and not about how good I was at running or not, was the thing that stuck with me. So- I always try to see the kid beyond what they can do because there's so much that goes into the kids beyond academics. That is important to recognise. This teacher retired a couple years ago, and he had probably 800 kids come back to his retirement. In a tiny town in Idaho! The fact that 800 students came back to his retirement is a testimony!

Naomi

# These memories stick with me

I had one of my favourite teachers for 3 years in a row. I have a lot of positive memories about her, but I also have a few salient memories of weird things that I remember. Like a time when we were doing Maths drills. And we were supposed to swap papers with a friend and correct each other's.

My friend had gotten it all right, and I was going to put a star on her paper. My Grandpa had just taught me how to make a star by putting two triangles together- which essentially ends up looking like the star of David: the six-pointed star. So I made a star on my friend's paper because I just learned how to do it. And the teacher called me over to tell me, not in front of the class or anything, but she called me over to tell me that what I had made was the sign of the devil. I am not sure if she just didn't know the difference between a star and a pentagram, or if she was actually racist- I don't know. Nor why she felt she needed to tell me that. But it was not a good feeling, especially because my grandpa had just taught me how to make the star.

Another time where I was asking about the spelling of a certain word she gave me the spelling of a different word. I realised it later, and it's just a dumb thing, but: I had the right word and you told me something else!

And it's funny:

These memories stick with me but didn't necessarily ruin my experience with this teacher. Other times she was great in so many ways- and we did have a good relationship. The relationship was good enough to cover for these experiences!

As teachers, as long as we have a solid positive relationship with a student, it can make up for those times when we just don't get it right and say or do something stupid.

Karli

**I have a lot of positive memories about her, but I also have a few salient memories of weird things that I remember.**

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# She made a space for us to be highlighted

I remember the first rap that I ever wrote. I was in P3- which is my favourite age to teach. The rap went like this:

Friends are really, really cool  
Especially when they're at your school  
They never take drugs  
They never eat bugs  
That's what friends are for- uh huh!  
That's what friends are for- UH HUH!

- I have since gotten better at writing raps, but I remember this first rap because of a great teacher. I had spent what felt like hours (but probably was just minutes) writing this rap with my friends. We had rehearsed it over and over, and we ended back to back, with our arms crossed. We wrote the rap, we illustrated it, we practiced it- and my teacher asked, "Would you guys like to perform that in front of the class?" She pumped us up even though... that was not a good rap! She recognized a passion or an enthusiasm and made space for us to perform in front of the class. Afterwards she said, "That was really good". Then she made an appointment for us to visit other classes and perform for them, and they would all give us a moment and clap. Now, as a teacher, that's something that I try to do. It would have been so easy to say "Can you put that away?", or "Stop rapping, it's time for math," or "That's not what we're doing now- that's not what we're learning." Instead, she acknowledged our interest and made a space for us to be highlighted.

One of the reasons that I love teaching P3 the most is that this is where I recognize children having their early identity. They are discovering 'I'm the funny one', 'I'm the debater', 'I'm the leader', 'I'm the sidekick!', 'I'm the artist'. That's what I see: The beginning of their self-identity. And from then on, I was the performer! That was the first time I remember someone not shutting down my interest for being off-topic, but instead making a space for it- highlighting it.

John

 She recognized a passion or an enthusiasm and made space for us to perform

# That was a turning point for me

I was in secondary, so I was about 17 years old- and I wasn't doing well in school. I was probably the student that made teachers wonder where I'd end up, you know? After secondary school we had to decide where we wanted to go and what we wanted to study. We had to specialise in certain things and I didn't know what I wanted to specialise in. I didn't have any passion, I really had no ambition in life. So- to be provocative when the teacher asked "What do you want to be?", but also thinking about the history of Singapore where all of our leaders have all been male, I thought: I want to be the first, muslim, female prime minister of Singapore. And my teacher- I thought he was gonna say something like 'academically you're not there', but he said: "No you can't, because you're muslim". And I'm like: "What has that got to do with it?" And he says: "As a minister you have to wine and dine with other ministers of the world, and being a Muslim, you can't drink." And I thought- so that one is out because I don't drink? That was a turning point for me - that there are certain careers that certain groups of people can't do. That seemed so unfair. So instead I decided to be a teacher, and maybe change it. That was what I thought when I was 17.

I can't remember the teacher's name. I know he's a PE teacher. He was probably covering for someone!

Idah

**That was a turning point for me - that there are certain careers that certain groups of people can't do. That seemed so unfair. So instead I decided to be a teacher, and maybe change it.**



# Trust and Responsibility

Growing up, I think the teachers that had made an impact in your lives are those that believed in you and or had given or gained your trust. It means that the adult believes or trusts you to do something- whatever that task is.

I can share that it was my secondary 3 Maths teacher that had a huge impact on me. She recognised that some of the students in our class were quite weak in Maths, and so she started a maths club. What was different, though, was that she invited anyone from our class to come to her house for additional lessons or coaching, sometimes even on the weekends.

Her daughter also chipped in to tutor us as she was taking a degree in maths in the university.

Through the club, my maths teacher had started a community where eventually we helped each other, in and out of classes, and we continued this responsibility in helping each other progress in the following years.

This was impactful for me, and I remember her after all these years because she made a difference to our lives and she started a movement or a community in not just our class, but the rest of the students in our grade level.

I cherished what she did because it was not common for teachers in Singapore to let students into their personal space and lives, as they already have long and hectic workdays in schools.

Yusri

**I remember her after all these years  
because she made a difference to our lives**

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# He saw every student in the class

I had a teacher called Joe- and in Ireland the teachers are always Mr or Mrs- but he allowed us to call him Joe, so that was pretty cool.

He was our geography teacher and I loved geography. He was also our orienteering teacher and we'd go up the mountains with him- snow, rain, whatever- up the mountains for the whole day orienteering, and it was just brilliant.

He saw every student in the class. He saw us and he talked to us and he took time to find out about us.

And that's something that I try to do with the kids: I try to make sure I see every child and do my best to form a relationship with every child, because I think that makes such an impact on a child. I'll always remember this teacher. I didn't like his wife- she taught Home economics- but I liked him. He was great. He just took the time to see you, you know? And when you'd see him at school he'd always say hello - he always had a word.

Lorraine



**He saw every student in the class.  
He saw us and he talked to us and  
he took time to find out about us.**

# For the first time I felt really challenged

The first memories that pop up are about my mum who is a teacher and who has been an inspiration to me. But then I was trying to think about a teacher that I had in school. And then my English teacher popped into my mind. In Brazil the English lessons are just a few hours a week. It's a side-component in the curriculum.

I was good at English, I liked English and I had this English teacher who decided to look at the students who could go further. He started an English club, and we would go- I would go to classes in the morning and then in the afternoon I would go to English club with him. He would teach us through music and I felt - I think- for the first time I felt really challenged and that pushed me to go further. I was doing well and I had high grades, but I would get the encouragement to get past what was being done in the regular class, and that was really nice.

Jessica

**I had this English teacher  
who decided to look at the  
students who could go further.**

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## It felt like a scene in a movie

I have a memory from gymnasium (high school). I was about to write one of the larger papers and had picked the subject of history and religion, and the teachers who taught those subjects had to guide me in writing the paper. And the history teacher was married to the religion teacher. They were husband and wife. And I am at a meeting with them where, you know, they're guiding me and asking questions to make sure I'm on the right path. And I ask them clarifying questions too, like, "This what I understand- does that mean so and so and so?" And the history teacher says "Yes! That's correct". And the Religion teacher says- "No, that is not correct: This and this and this" - and the history teacher disagrees "No: This and this and this!"

And they go on and on, back and forth, pulling out more and more books in order to counter proof each other- and I'm sitting there thinking "It's my paper.."

They kept on going back and forth and I'm not sure- looking back at it- if it was just a matter of proving each other wrong, or if it was to make sure I had all the facts right for my paper. But I was sitting there- and they just kept arguing back and forth, pulling out books. And then it ended with "Oh! Time is up- the meeting is over!" 45 minutes- and they didn't get to any of my questions! It felt like a scene in a movie. And I had to come back for another meeting!

Marc



**And they go on and on, back and forth, pulling out more and more books in order to counter proof each other - and I'm sitting there thinking "It's my paper.."**



## He got to know each one of us

I had a teacher at highschool who was my biology and science teacher. He joined the last three years of school, when we were 16-18 years old. He was fresh out of University- young and new. We had a lot of old teachers at our school, but he was young and hip and had all these new ideas. He actually made the subjects really fun. He made us do practicals, which no other teacher would think of, and he was just genuinely interested in us. He got to know each one of us, and went far and beyond. He would take us on camps and hikes: just so much extra life skills thrown in there. He'd go the extra mile to share that passion with us. He loved playing guitar and we would be singing around the campfire and he inspired quite a few of us to take up guitar playing as well. So I learned to play the guitar because of him- and he probably influenced why I wanted to study science at university as well.

Lou-Marie

He got to know  
each one of us,  
and went far  
and beyond.



# You can't always remember what people say, but you remember how they make you feel

As you were telling your stories there were two memories that came to me. It's interesting, that there are two things that several of you have said already: How a teacher made you feel and if a teacher cared for you. So I've got two memories.

There was this maths teacher. We had him from 9th to 12th grade, and my maths skills were not great. Some of you have talked about clubs and teachers going the extra mile- but what this teacher did in 9th grade when he started as our teacher was to give us an assessment just to see our skills- and then for the rest of the four years he basically worked mostly with the students who were already really good at maths.



He didn't have- I think now, looking back- he didn't have the patience. He was a brilliant maths teacher, he was very knowledgeable and passionate about maths, but I think he didn't actually have the patience to teach students like me. And to add an extra lesson, maybe. He didn't have the patience for all of us.

So he had 5 students and he would mostly work with them during maths classes. And there were probably 25 students in the class. And here's what's interesting: I remember that he was working with certain students- that was that- and then we'd have these tests twice a year. And for one of them, somehow I got a really high grade- and he just could not believe it. So he really wanted me to tell him where I copied it from. And I had actually understood it- but he would not believe me. I remember how he made us feel. How he made me feel.

For the teachers who cared, I think of my language teacher. She was this.. lady, and she was unbelievable! She was just so kind and so caring, and the way she would speak to you was with warmth and love. She was old and really passionate, and she never raised her voice. I can remember her being strict: there was something in her voice that would make us listen to her. And she was so focused only on students' strengths that we just loved her. People would not mess up in her lessons! You can't always remember what people say, but you remember how they make you feel, right? And she was super warm. Her voice had something special. So that was my moment in the 5th grade when I decided to become a teacher. Which in my forties I am reconsidering.. But I remember that was the moment- I wanted to be a language teacher like her. She died a couple of years ago.

Sorina