

Mentor's Introduction to Asavari Thatte

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I first learned about Totto-chan and her adventures with her classmates from Asavari Thatte. Totto-chan, and her daily encounters at school with her classmates and headmaster, is the protagonist of the novel *Totto-chan: The Little Girl at the Window* by [Tetsuko Kuroyanagi](#). Set in Japan during World War II, the novel is comprised of numerous chapters in the guise of quirky, touching, and mesmerizing short stories set in a school that resists conventional definitions. Borrowing inspiration from Totto-chan, both the little girl and the book, Asavari's dissertation offers stories of learning and inquiry as life lessons worth locating at the center of curriculum. Like the novel, Asavari's dissertation is as much about the stories of a magical site of learning as it is about the processes of learning hidden in the stories of the daily lives of learners, and their teachers.

Writing an introduction to Asavari Thatte's dissertation research is a joyful task. The joy of seeing a student complete successfully her dissertation research is among the most rewarding experiences I have as an advisor and mentor. There is also joy in the numerous preceding moments, for they contain footprints and foundations of the dissertation. I remember when, in her second year in the doctoral program, Asavari conducted a pilot study to investigate the role of after-school arts education experiences of underserved children in non-profit organizations in India. As is often the case with pilot studies, Asavari's

visit provided a research experience and data that became the foundations for her dissertation work. During this study, Asavari made contacts with three organizations in India and secured their invitations to visit and conduct research about their programs. One of these sites was the Learning Home, a special and unusual school in Pune, India.

Asavari's findings reveal a key characteristic of the school is what she calls engaged relationships among the students and teachers in the Learning Home. She also notes the importance of a self-awareness of their own personal growth in the process. Ultimately, from her analysis of formal and informal learning experiences of students and educators, Asavari puts forward the notion of engaged curriculum, a pervasive and interdependent way of learning, living, and being in the Learning Home.

Asavari's dissertation encourages readers to seek unusual lessons embedded in quotidian experiences. Her work encourages readers to appreciate the moments and interactions that comprise regular school experiences.

I would hope any encouragement, attention, feedback, and resources I have been able to offer Asavari as she took ownership of her own research is somehow part of what will become an ongoing search within herself for interests, abilities, and curiosities, and to make them her own. Throughout her doctoral studies, Asavari grew at her own pace. She made space to maneuver through her data, build her confidence, and trust her uncertainty. I watched her move gracefully and elegantly through her revisions, epiphanies, and decisions. I delighted in witnessing Asavari learn for herself the importance of being aware of when to stop along the way, when to gain a wider sense of others and their experiences, and when to take ownership of her own emerging awareness and confidence as a scholar.

Her dissertation is a story of stories. It is a story about learning. It is a story of education as a life-long pursuit.

In the Prelude, Asavari draws a parallel between Totto-chan's experiences in school and her own lived experiences and lessons learned. Like the stories of Totto-chan's own learning experiences, Asavari's dissertation tells a story of a scholar who has "set [herself] free from the confines of a regular school, and discovers great joy in an unusual school." In essence, this is the crux of Asavari's dissertation and the single most powerful impression it made on me. Asavari's dissertation voices ways in which teaching and learning, at their best, are creative

undertakings. Her study encourages readers to consider lived experiences and embodied pursuits of learning through an interconnected and interdependent set of relationships. Asavari examines these relationships through the lenses of place and design.

In the end, Assavari's study of the Learning Home offers the field of art education an animated set of lenses to reimagine what, where, and how learning might be. Like the story of Totto-chan, Asavari's study underscores the dynamic narratives of learning that exist within the interdependent lived experiences of learners and educators in schools, and the rewards of looking closer at their interrelationship. Asavari's work inspires me to seek out dynamic stories and learning experiences located in sites of teaching and learning, and to think of those sites as "learning homes."