

As I pondered on the title of this article, I thought about all the school heads I've known over the years. The one face that kept coming back to me was that of the founder Principal of my own school, a small, relatively unknown institution at the time but now quite a famous school in Kolkata. What made me remember her so vividly after more than 30 years, I wondered? I remember her teaching us, but have no recollection of what she taught, except that it was English grammar. I do remember though, how she knew every little detail about each student, down to our family circumstances. I remember how she would stop children in the corridor to ask after their siblings, parents or even grandparents. We were awed by her ability to know each child intimately and thought she had supernatural powers! Now I realize that she knew a crucial truth about teaching – good teachers teach children, not subjects – and when we grow up, what we remember about our teachers is not what they taught us but how they made us feel. She knew that students' personal circumstances and emotional states affected their ability to learn. This was a school leader who did something unimaginable: she thought about creating a child centric, safe and happy environment where each child could fulfill his or her potential – at a time when all other schools were chasing marks and examination results. She gave creativity a very important space, and gave as much importance to art, music and theatre as to academic subjects. A good school leader needs to be forward thinking, and the head of my school was in fact much ahead of her time.

The next school leader that I remember with fondness and respect was the head of the first school that gave me a job as a teacher. Although I worked there for only a year, what

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I learned about teaching in that time is valuable to me even today. As she herself had been a teacher for many long years, she had a deep understanding of what happens in the classroom: the whole teaching-learning process.

As a result when an inexperienced teacher like me went to her with my lesson plans, she could tell me at once what would work and what wouldn't. She gave advice, but never belittled fresh, young teachers. She praised good ideas and gave solutions for problems. In fact she had the wonderful ability to mentor her teachers and bring out their best, without ever creating unhealthy competitiveness in the staff room. She herself was so excited about teaching it was difficult to not get infected by her enthusiasm! The best school leaders seem to be those who are good teachers themselves and have a thorough understanding of curricula. It's necessary in fact for all school heads to continue to teach and be involved in the daily activities of the school, in order to be more effective as leaders. Unfortunately, very few school Principals see this as a priority as they get more and more caught up in administrative duties. In the same vein, it's quite as important for a school leader as the teaching staff to participate in training sessions, to stay updated and to refresh one's skills and knowledge. I have found in my experience that quite often school leaders think it a waste of time for them to participate in any training that has been organized for their teachers.

A good school head needs to always keep in mind that it's the children who are the most important. Parents, teachers, timetables, curricula, various school activities – must all be focused towards one end, and one end only – the development of children. Once we understand this it becomes obvious why differentiation should be every school head's goal. It's time we all realized that the 'same size fit all' policy that so many schools follow actually kills a lot of human potential.

The third person who comes to my mind as an inspiring and great leader is someone who has by now established two well known schools. She has a sense of humour and



an intuitive understanding of children and how their minds work. Many a frazzled parent of teenaged children have held on to their sanity with her confident assertion “This too shall pass” ringing in their ears. Clarity of mind, quick but well considered decisions, a searing honesty and deep compassion were a few of her qualities that made her stand head and shoulders above almost everyone else, despite being actually quite diminutive in size!

In trying to think of ‘my notion of a good school head’, I have remembered some truly remarkable leaders that I have had the good fortune to come across in my life, and this list would not be complete without a mention of my mother who built a school for underprivileged children in the backwaters of

Kolkata with nothing to begin with but passion and a dogged determination to overcome all hurdles and problems. Her single mindedness of purpose and complete humility earned her respect and friendship and brought her help from several quarters to realize her dream. Her ability to stay focused on the goal to the exclusion of everything else helped others involved to stay focused as well. My mother passed away very recently and I know this determination of hers is what we will remember, and will help us to keep her dream alive.

I wonder, is it simply coincidence that all four of these people, who worked selflessly to build and shape such wonderful places of learning, are all women?

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