

As I sit down to pen my thoughts on the milestones of my life in the past two decades I go into flashback mode and lots of feelings and thoughts come to me. What are these? I have experienced many joys and sorrows, hope and hopelessness, frustration and excitement and more such contrasting feelings. Experiences have been even more varied and with each new experience I went through different rides, some smooth, some rough and some like a steep rollercoaster. I would like to share my learning in a few areas.

Roll Back ...

1990 – the start of my teaching career! It makes me happy that there has been no looking back ever since.

2003 – opportunity to head a school with 2000+ students followed by my present innings since 2+ years as the head of an alternative school, Poorna in Bangalore.

Between 1990 and 2003 I had the opportunity of teaching in schools in Delhi, Kolkata and Bangalore; alongside I have also been a teacher trainer. As a teacher I had always enjoyed additional administrative responsibilities like managing the examination department, handling all outbound educational trips, being in charge of a house and the like. Presently, in addition to my full time responsibilities at Poorna, I have been visiting a few schools across the country as a soft-skills trainer.

Having worked in 5 schools, I have discovered that there are as many similarities as uniqueness in the schools across the country. The dynamics of human relationships, interactions among all the stakeholders (children, parents, teachers and management) and issues are much the same. Yet, each institution is unique – thanks to the individuality of each person, be it the teacher, the student, the parent or a member of the management. In this article I would like to share my experiences in three areas – from teacher to manager, keeping pace with technological developments and moving from conventional system to an alternate system.

Moving From Teacher To Manager

Having been a teacher-trainer for a few years, I started exploring the possibility of getting into academic administration. When I took on the responsibility of heading an institution with 2000 children and 150 staff members I

had very little idea of what was in store for me. Today, as I look back, I realize that as a principal there are numerous wide-ranging tasks and duties to perform.



- **T a k i n g responsibility for just not my actions but the actions of my team.**

There is no scope for complaining about anyone – it is very necessary that any issue be settled first and later go into the details of what went wrong.

I have stopped being defensive about my actions; I now listen to feedback, especially the not-so-nice feedback as this is what makes the institution grow. As they say in the corporate world, a complaining customer is far better than a silent one! Critical feedback certainly gives a lot of food for thought and lots more to do.

- **Delegating versus doing** - Often, I had felt, it is easier to complete a given work rather than delegate it to a colleague. As I look back over the last 7+ years the experience has been varied and enriching. I remember staying up late in the night completing the records for a Sports Meet. Slowly I realised that I must delegate responsibility, provide the required resources and ensure that the work is done!!

I have also learnt that all of us need to be given new opportunities, trusted and made part of the decision making process. This is much like parenting! I also realise that there is not enough time to do everything! A huge self-learning (a work still in progress) is not to micro manage; instead learn to coach from the side and then takes things in stride.

- **Being responsible and setting the direction for self and team** – In this role one has to take decisions that could be unpleasant to the team. Initially I would feel discouraged when there would be opposition to implementing new policies or ideas. One great satisfaction has been to convince my team on the importance of documentation. The teaching community does lots of work and we do not like to record what we do!

The other ongoing responsibilities are about how to determine policies or plans that are good for the institution, implementing unpopular decisions, recruiting staff, handling concerns of parents and staff, communicating sad news, taking risks with some ideas or policies.

Frank and regular dialogue with team members has helped me understand the team better and make it easier to tide over difficult decisions.

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Keeping Pace With Technological Developments

“Classes would be fun if lessons can be made exciting – much like the games we play on the computer or on the mobile phones.” This is a remark I have heard more than once. It was this comment that made me move out of my comfort zone, learn the use of MS Office, browse the internet to get current information and also become a teacher trainer in technology aided learning! Using the computer and projector now and then certainly adds some fun in the class.

Technology pervades all dimensions of our lives. Some of us are very comfortable using the various gadgets that are introduced in the market ever so often! It has been a pleasure to have upgraded the use of technology at school. The areas that we have addressed these needs are:

- Technology in the classroom - the computer, LCD projector, camera - these gadgets are useful aids (though not always necessary) in teaching and we are using these as and when they complement our effort. We see educational CDs, movie clippings to start a debate on social or environmental issues, understand how electricity is generated, understand complex concepts and much more!
- Technology in administration – Documentation of school records: student records, computation of marks, copies of student reports, staff data, staying in touch with all stakeholders through email/sms and more. Technology has certainly helped in reducing the use of paper and effectively storing records of many years.
- Technology used by children - One day I was speaking with the 13-14 year-olds on how one can chance upon pornography sites when browsing for information and

one child said that he actually visited the sites and cleared the 'History' of the web browser so his parents would not know! I realised then that I am quite behind the teenagers on the knowledge of the many features available in information technology.

There are new generations of mobile phones, itouches, play stations, smart phones etc., coming every few months. The best way to learn about them, I have discovered, is to discuss these with the children. This way I stay abreast with what the teenagers are doing today: whether it is the games they play, the features on the various mobile phones or the latest happenings on Facebook! In fact, many of my colleagues and I signed up on Facebook to understand why children enjoy that network site; incidentally I have also reconnected with many of my school and college friends!

We often have discussions, amongst staff and with children, on how we can use technology to our advantage and be aware of the dangers we may be getting into.

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Moving To An Alternative School

Presently I am working at Poorna (www.poorna.in), an alternative school located in North Bangalore. Poorna started as a home school. Indira Vijaysimha had decided, in 1993 to homeschool her children. Some of her friends requested Indira to teach their children and also helped take on the responsibility of teaching the children. Thus Poorna was born and today we have a hundred children and twenty staff members!

The shift to Poorna has opened up new experiences for me. I like it that here it is our endeavour to have a community that is a representation of society. Also, we make a conscious effort to include all cross sections of society – parents from various socio economic backgrounds, children with specific learning

disabilities, first generation learners along with children who have tremendous opportunities and exposure, ranging from art to environmental issues to scientific research. We staff members, too, come from diverse backgrounds – teachers, farmers, engineers, artistes, scientists - all who have made a choice to work with children. We are a community where children, parents and teachers are learning from each other all the time. Parents volunteer in the areas of their expertise; children explore and learn about the world around them through walks and excursions.

Exchange of numerous ideas from various perspectives has enriched my learning. I really enjoy our morning assembly when we discuss wide range of topics of sports, art, politics, environmental issues, social causes – I realized that I now

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listen to students differently!

Vertical grouping was another new concept for me - Children are grouped vertically and the groups are named by a theme chosen by the students; the themes change every year – this year it is endangered species and we have the tigers, white rhinos, red pandas and more! The groups are fluid groups where children move from one group to another according to their academic and emotional readiness.

Our alumni have been doing good work and excelling in their chosen fields – educational eco tourism, sports, automobile design, fine arts, performing arts, Sanskrit studies, event management, alternative medicine, teaching and research.

For a casual visitor we look like a large, joint family/ community. There are challenges here, too.

- Prospective parents visit us and are sometimes unsure of whether our system will work in the real world. I have found it useful to introduce them to our alumni and have them interact with our students. Those who are convinced admit their children at our school. Sometimes parents, who believed in such a system, suddenly start wondering if their child will be able to face the world outside the safe environs of the school. Once again, dialogue and interaction with our present students and alumni helps.
- We have relatively few schools that follow alternative methods and most of the teachers who come with experience are teachers who have not worked in such a set-up. It takes a year or two for us to understand the teaching-learning process here. Our system has no laid down rules to refer to and while we welcome diversity we also have to be very careful that members who join our community understand our beliefs and have similar beliefs.
- Children who join us midstream suddenly discover freedom of expression and it takes them a while to retune themselves to a life of implicit discipline. As we do not believe in punishment it is common that new students do not do follow-up work at home. It takes us a lot of discussion, without sermonising, for students to understand the importance of regular work in the absence of imposed punishment or fear.

In the years I have been at Poorna I have learnt humility and questioned some of my beliefs: for example, a formal relationship with children and the teacher being superior to students. Students at Poorna feel free to question what they disagree with, address issues and resolve conflicts directly; the same applies to adults, too. We agree to disagree and are open to feedback and suggestions from one and all. We are also comfortable giving our feedback to others. A colleague shared that her husband had remarked, "After you have joined Poorna you are able to ask for your rights!"

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In conclusion I would like to state that these and other

experiences as a principal have humbled me; while I still have lots more to learn I also feel happy that I have done my

best and hope to continue learning, growing and contributing in the years to come.

Renu currently heads Poorna, an alternate school in Bangalore. Having taught students and facilitated teacher-training in different schools, in different parts of India, she has had an opportunity to observe the similarities and differences in schools across some parts of India. She is also a volunteer counsellor at a counselling centre in Bangalore. She enjoys travelling and meeting people. She may be contacted at renusrinivasan@yahoo.com.

