

Rajni Dwivedi

School! Whenever I think of my schooldays, I end up remembering my friends - playing with them, making mischief and the simple pleasure and joy of being with them. I also think of the teachers who taught me, books in the library, reading and writing, games and sports and so much more. Like many, childhood and school are part of my fondest and clearest memories. I have similar fond memories of a lot of teachers from my later school and college years. This perhaps is true too for many of us. But for me, when I think of school, the most striking thing that I remember is the Principal or Principal Sir, as we used to call him.

My friends and I were engaged in studies and the various other activities that I mentioned above. We had a lot of space and freedom. We could talk to our teachers and many times do whatever pleased us.

Then one day we saw a new unknown person walking in the corridors of the school. We wondered who he was. He did not look like a parent and he was not a teacher that we knew. But he did not appear to be impressive or formidable in any way and was just like any other adult moving around the corridors of the school.

We, of course, briefly discussed him amongst ourselves, did not reach any conclusion and then forgot about him. It was not for us to be curious for too long because we had many other exciting things to do. But in the assembly next morning, our Head Madam introduced him to all of us and said he was our new Principal. Our previous principal had retired over six months ago but our notion of a Principal was still based on him. So we carried that image in our head and

*Everybody felt that they knew him personally and that he was very fond of them. In fact, often children walking out of the classes after the final bell would find him waiting and he would strike up a conversation about various things and their experiences in the school.*

did not anticipate a close relationship with the new principal.

We slowly got to know more about our new Principal. As we would go around our routine in school, we seemed to run into him here and there. In the beginning we thought, *Oh! The Principal is coming, let us move aside. He must be a busy person and must have many things on his mind. He has no time to waste on us. There is nothing that he needs us for and there is nothing that he would want to talk to us about.* We were surprised that whenever he encountered us he would stop and talk. This did not happen once or twice but almost regularly. Sometimes he would stop us in the morning assembly; talk to us in the playgrounds. He always had time to talk to us; he seemed to have nothing more important to do. We would often see him walking towards the hostel to see how things were and chat with children on the way. Soon I realized that it was not only a few of us to whom he was talking but to all the children. Everybody felt that they knew him personally and that he was very fond of them. In fact, often children walking out of the classes after the final bell would find him waiting and he would strike up a conversation about various things and their experiences in the school. He would talk about us, what we were thinking about, our dreams and ask us how were we in class, what our fears were, our favorite subjects and so on. He would also crack jokes on the current political and social situation. He nurtured our interest in sports and would ask us what we thought the chances of Indian football team were? He seemed to try and distance us from cricket and take an interest in other sports. Very unlike the Principal of the school; certainly not to the notion of the Principal that we had in our heads.

The initial fear and hesitation that we had in talking to him slowly disappeared as conversations became natural and we wanted him to find us and talk. Still we tried to avoid him when we had committed a mistake or broken a rule. We would feel that since we had made a mistake then there would be some kind of punishment and we would feel embarrassed and criticized. We were used to being scolded



or fined. When we had developed what we thought was a friendship with him, we were not worried. We thought that now there would be no punishment but that was not so. He was very strict on pointing out mistakes. But his punishment was unusual. The person had to either clean her classroom, a part of the school ground or wash utensils in the mess. Many children pleaded, "Please Sir, fine us instead. We will not do it again." He did not agree and said "*You do not pay the fine, your parents pay it. You were at fault so you have to pay. Since this is a mistake you have made so you should also take punishment*".

Slowly a few things in the school seemed different because of him. All of us and the teachers became extremely punctual, all classes were held and they started on time, and why not. He was always there in the school before anyone else and was the last to leave. He knew everything about the school. What is where, what is happening - when and where, who is responsible for what and needs what kind of help. He not only knew all that but also knew how to organize support and make people feel valuable and helped.

What are the responsibilities of a Principal? He had a full sense of this, what the school, teachers and his students needed and wanted, and he had the ability and the tenacity to battle with any one for getting them their rights. If he wanted he could have created hierarchy in the school as a Principal is authorized to take all kinds of decisions but he did not do that. He had a friendly and natural relationship and interaction with not only children, teachers, parents of children but with everyone else in the school as well. He was very firm and not at all a person to let insincerity and lack of commitment go. But his manner of intervention was so

different and fresh that you did not feel that you have been pulled up for not being up to the mark. You only felt advised, applauded and encouraged to do better.

One more thing about him, he was extremely energetic and quick. He would be seen here and the next moment at another place. He had everything on his finger tips. He was a quick decision maker and took steps needed for development of the school. As I am writing this I am not only remembering all that I experienced with him but am also analyzing it, but when as children we talked about him we only said "our Sir is fantastic".

I am not sure of the category of Principals - where you would place him in this category and what characteristics you can extract as features of a good Principal. It is, however, clear that we felt very open and comfortable. Everything seemed to be a bit smoother and we felt we had greater freedom even though we could not play truant or play as many pranks. It was clear he had a lot to do with it and teachers did look up to him. He was their leader. I still wonder if he was able to do all this and affect almost everyone positively. Was he merely charismatic or there was a method to what he did and hence we can derive principles from what he did.

I often think that in our discussions on Principals and of school adult leadership we forget the perspective of the students and how they perceive that person. I have known some very well run and managed schools but by leaders who were formal, distant and in a sense formidable. This particular person remains fresh as he was near us. I am also not sure if all other adults saw him as we did and if what he did made the school the best possible but for us he would remain an inspiration and a friend.

---

**Rajni Dwivedi** is presently working with Chattisgarh Education Resource Center (a collaborate organization of Vidya Bhawan Society). During her experience of 6 years in the field of education, she has mainly worked in the area of teacher training and textbook development with various state teams in Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. She may be contacted at [rajni@vidyabhawan.org](mailto:rajni@vidyabhawan.org).

