When the captain of the ship is drowning....

Neeraja Raghavan

A naïve dream

When I first became a school teacher, I dreamt of heading a school someday, so that I could implement many of my innovative ideas on a larger scale.

Oh, what a school that would be!

Where reading was like breathing, with everyone (students as well as teachers) buzzing with what they had been reading, exchanging views and discussing them in the corridors, over lunch, on the school bus.

Where teachers were bubbling with ideas to enliven their classes, and students looked forward to coming to school every day.

Where the walls were alive with artwork, poems, stories and thought-provoking writings.

Where staff meetings were fun, because teachers had lots to share and discuss, and often, exciting ideas were tabled for collective implementation.

Where testing and examination were not at all stressful because students did not feel judged. Instead, they used these as opportunities to learn better, and teachers designed the tests so that stress was minimal if not non-existent.

Where laughter and smiles were more prevalent than frowns and stress, and the school hallways and classrooms shone with the joy of learning.

Where parents exulted over all that the school offered their wards, and many volunteered to join in the activities whenever possible.

Far-fetched, you say? Well, in my youth and naiveté, I didn't think so. It honestly felt more than possible.

When reality hit

Not until I headed a school myself, did I discover that it wasn't at all like I had imagined. I had the (dubious) privilege of being vice principal and principal on a couple of occasions.

As vice principal of a day school, I frequently found myself playing the role of an inspector – had every teacher gone to their class on time? Were students attending assembly every day? Was any teacher taking leave without prior intimation? Were teachers taking up substitution duties diligently? Were report cards being turned in on time? Was each test administered on schedule? Were the laboratories in need of an overhaul? How well was the library being used? Which student was being sent to my office for a reprimand? And why wasn't the teacher handling this sort of thing on their own?

Do you get the drift?

This was what I spent the large part of each day doing. Troubleshooting, maintaining the status quo, ensuring that the boat didn't topple over. There was little joy in all this, as you will doubtless understand. As for reading, there was hardly any time to read, much less to discuss books with other teachers.

Along came a day when I headed a residential school. Here is one of my very early diary entries from that era:
A teacher approached me just now, saying the doorstop on one of the hostels has broken and it needs to be fixed. Funny how such an issue needs to be attended to by the principal?

Within a few weeks, I unwittingly slipped into the role of "errand girl": for I was approached every day (and several times a day) with similar requests.

While one teacher was facing some issue with a demanding parent, another was having trouble taking on substitution classes. Yet another was facing interpersonal issues with a colleague. An unruly set of students was bothering a houseparent in the boys' hostel.

And so it went on. I could barely walk from my residence to the office without being accosted by multiple people, each with a different request for action. I quickly fell into the rhythm of being the go-to person for all that needed to be solved. From the time I finished eating a hurried breakfast until late night (well after dinner), I was almost running on roller skates, attending to this, that, and the other. There was barely any time to think, as I was sucked into one chore after another, every single day.

A turning point

Things went on thus, almost unnoticed by me, until one afternoon, as I sat down to eat a late lunch after a typically hectic morning, the dining hall manager approached me.

"Akka," he said, "May I ask you something?"

Preparing myself to receive yet another demand for immediate action, I looked up wearily from my plate and said, "Yes, yes, tell me." What could he want now? [I should, of course, meet his request. After all, that was my job, wasn't it?]

"Akka," he said slowly, "I have been noticing that for the past couple of days, you are not your usual self. Is everything okay, *Akka*?"

In stunned silence, I bent my head as I could feel the tears pricking behind my eyes. Somebody was actually asking me *how I was*? Seriously? I mumbled something about being okay, and ate my lunch bemusedly. [After all, principals weren't expected to cry, right?]

On that day, I went home and wrote in my diary: *For the first time, today, somebody asked me how I was.*

That just about sums up my experience of heading schools.

I did not feel entitled to having any needs of my own. I was simply compelled to meet everyone else's needs. And worse, no matter how hard I tried, it was never enough. It felt like an utterly thankless job.



Illustration: Chaitanya Govande

Leading a school was as far removed from what I had imagined it could ever be. Firefighting, troubleshooting, meeting demands from one and all – so much so that I would have to snatch time to take a bite or even visit the washroom – it drained (instead of energizing) me.

Since it was a residential school, there were a few opportunities to engage with teachers in a relaxed manner: where we played games or discussed books together, but these occasions were too few and far between. Most of my time was spent attending to day-to-day tasks and addressing (or being held accountable for) just about every mishap. I finally understood the saying: "It's lonely at the top."

Not surprisingly, I ran away from such work and have never again taken up the post of school principal, despite offers coming my way.

A familiar experience

At the end of this experience, I wrote a rather long limerick (along with the resignation letter!) titled The Chair So High as shown here.*

*Reproduced here with permission. The poem first appeared in Azim Premji University's Learning Curve magazine, Issue No. XVI, March 2011 pp 90-91.

The Chair So High

'Come, climb up on this chair,'
One day, Life said unto me,
'And, while you are up there,
Look around and oversee.'
'It is perhaps way too high,
I regret I'm not so tall,
Gingerly I shall try,
But I fear that I may fall!'
Though it heard my words of doubt,
Life did not in any way falter,
Instead it reached all out,
My Fear into Hope to alter.
With beauty to meet the eye,
And warmth and goodness, too,
The chair that seemed so high
Moved down a notch or two.
Yet there was something strange
In the way the chair would slip
And its height would often change
Sometimes, I'd even trip!
As soon as I would think
That the chair was feeling easy,
Its legs would start to sink
And turn my stomach queasy.
Often, as I got off the chair,
Almost everyone around,
Would put me right back there,
And then question my ground.
'How can you talk to us thus?
'From above, how can you tower?
'We thought you were one of us,
Are you coming down from power?'
'No, no!' I'd hasten to reassure,
'I really mean you well,
But whoever this chair secures,
Will ask: and you must tell!'
'That isn't what we're used to,'
The answer shone through a glare,
'We can only work with you,
If you come down from this chair.'
So scamper down I would,
In all haste and ready cheer,
Then find things weren't so good,
As all order would disappear.
With untiring patience and zeal,
To my chair I would return,
And speak so as to appeal,
But I would try not to be stern.
A frown, a shrug, a glare,
Would make the chair seem higher,
So as soon as I was aware,
I would push aside my ire.
It became an exercise steady,
I was in an eternal gym,
My inner muscles got ready,
My temper: it got slim!
Yet, a slip in word or tone,
At the end of a tiring day,
Would do the work alone,
Of washing all my effort away.
'She's tough and harsh and rude,'
The winds would blithely sing,
'Why must we bear her moods?
Why must she hardness bring?'
'Soft and gentle is our grass,
Hurt not our feelings bare,
If at all this way you pass,
Speak only when you care.

'We will not give unto you,
What you ask from your chair,
For we have feelings, too,
Of which you'd better beware!
'Our feelings to you must matter,
Show us tender, loving care,
Then perhaps we will gather,
Guardedly around your chair.
'But should you hurt us once,
With your look or word or tone,
We will upon you pounce,
By leaving you well alone.
'You will not hear our laughter,
You may not see our smile,
We hope that therein after,
You will watch and wait awhile.'
So I'd watch and take my place,
In the hope that therein after,
By slowing down my pace,
There would be peace and laughter.
But then the chair would call,
For me to oversee,
If two persons could work at all,
In peaceful harmony.
To set their swords aside,
And help them meet each other,
Upon the chair, astride,
I'd sit and be their mother.
So you see, I was off and on,
This chair that stood so high,
And now I am so far gone,
As to leave it high and dry.
Not a single one knows
How hard I tried to fit,
Yet my patience, as it grows,
Says it matters not a bit.

For, as Life is always wise,
What does a high chair hold?
With ardour, I have tried,
Now let the truth be told.

Was this experience unique to me? Sadly, no.

The Learning Curve is circulated to schools across the country. (In those days it was the print edition.) After my poem appeared in print, to my surprise, I received an email from a principal of a residential school in Ooty, who wrote: "At the end of each tiring day, I go back to your poem, read it, smile, and go to sleep."

Familiar story, said many a head of school who read it. What a pity!

If the person who runs an institution is (more often than not) running and stressed, what can we expect of those who work there?

More than one head of school that I have met has confessed that they spend more time in firefighting than in doing anything meaningful. As an education consultant who engages often with heads of schools, I have seen for myself how rushed almost every administrative head is: why, how harried even most teachers are! If a mainstream school compels them to achieve the best results for their students, they are rushing to squeeze in as many activities as possible in an alternative school. That all are rushing is a common factor, whether the school is mainstream or alternative. They are simply running after different things.

What can be done then?

This has led me to ask: when and why does the day's work slip into mechanical firefighting and lose its meaning? (Why) Is this especially true of heads of schools? What is the way out? Is there any?

The myriad responsibilities that need to be shouldered by those running a school can span diverse domains of expertise. For instance, drawing up and monitoring the school budget requires some knowledge of finances. Designing an efficient timetable and overseeing its implementation demand skills that are very different. And yet again, motivating and inspiring the teachers to infuse their classes with a new spark every day requires some mental space and a reserve of enthusiasm that no overworked principal will have.

I have heard of a few schools that divide these responsibilities among three roles: an academic head, an administrative head and a finance officer. Accountability and authority need to be aligned for each role, for it is unreasonable to hold someone accountable for work that they do not oversee.

The administrative head takes care of timetabling, arranging for substitute teachers, granting or not granting leave to a teacher, drawing up the school calendar and ensuring things like parent-teacher meetings are held regularly.

The finance officer makes the budget, monitors payment of fees and salaries, and is the go-to person for large-scale expenditure.

This allows the academic head to approach the dream that I held as a young teacher by removing administrative troubleshooting from their daily tasks and giving them room to think about energizing teachers with new ideas. This role will also encompass interfacing with parents and getting their buy-in for programmes and courses being offered in the school.

Yet, far too often, the principal of a school is all three of these persons rolled into one. Small wonder, then, that the daily demands swamp the principal and leave little time (if any) for enhancing teaching and learning.

Unless we give more room and mental space to those who run our schools, and those who teach our children, we cannot expect rich and meaningful learning to happen on a daily basis. When I was in my Master's Programme, student suicides happened at a high-pressure IIT: one every semester that I was there. Today, it is not uncommon for school children to commit suicide.

The stress has started creeping in much sooner.

The stress of a school principal percolates down to their teaching faculty and from them to the students.

When efficiency overrides all other concerns:

- We will get our board exam rankers and 100% results.
- We will prepare our students for the IITs and IIMs.
- We will continue to have drained-out principals and harried teachers.
- We will have little time to think about anything other than keeping the boat afloat.

We have kept it afloat for a long time now. Are we happy with where it is headed?

Neeraja Raghavan is Founder-Director of **Thinking Teacher** (www.thinkingteacher.in), an organization that networks with teachers across the country. **Thinking Teacher** aims to awaken and nurture the reflective practitioner within each teacher. **Thinking Teacher's** goal is to help build deep inquiry and rich learning into the teaching process. The author can be reached at <neeraja@thinkingteacher.in>.