

16. Head teachers, leadership and courage

or, what kind of head teachers do you want for your children?

Head teachers have featured in the news recently. One reason is that the government is setting up a college for head teachers and is looking for a suitable candidate to be in charge.

Then, somewhat to my surprise, I found myself addressing three different conferences for head teachers in 1999. In each case I was asked to speak about the next learning system.

Next, a recent conversation I had was about head teachers. A friend observed that he had been to a large meeting in London to hear a head teacher who had made a reputation for turning around so-called failing schools. The head teacher paraded a whole series of aggressive techniques, based on domination, for the approval of the audience. The audience seemed to be impressed. My friend reflected that he seemed to be alone in regarding this head teacher as a licensed institutional bully, with somewhat fascist tendencies and devoid of any democratic ones.

This caused me to reflect on head teachers I admired, and what they had in common. The first head teacher that came to mind was in charge of the school where I began my first year as a teacher. He would, on occasion, take the whole school of 550 secondary schoolchildren for two hours a time, for hymn singing and mental arithmetic, armed only with a pianist and a cane. I expressed some guarded admiration to him for his achievement in crowd control, and confessed that I could not see the day when I could do the same. His reply surprised me. He did not want me to copy him. He said he had learned that his authoritarian methods did not work very well. He appointed young teachers from college, like me, in the hope that they would find better ways to do things. I thought that he showed considerable courage in admitting this to a young teacher on his staff.

Another head teacher that I met in a Copenhagen school a couple of years ago, showed another kind of courage. Whereas Denmark has a ratio of one teacher to 18 children, he had manipulated the resources of his school to achieve two teachers to every 18 children. He explained other adventurous ideas operating in his school, and complained bitterly that at 67, he only had three more years to serve before compulsory retirement. One of the visiting party commented, that even for Denmark, some of his initiatives were very daring. He smiled, and said, "in my experience, it is easier to obtain forgiveness, than it is to obtain permission." I thought that he showed the courage of a true innovator.

A different kind of courage was exhibited by a head teacher friend, who having looked into home-based education, decided that this was the appropriate course of action for his two young daughters. He then had to explain to his governing body why he thought parents should have such a choice. In a further bout of courage, he later persuaded governors, staff, parents and children, that the education in the school would be much more effective if the school democratised itself. The story is written up in a book, *Participation, Power-sharing and School Improvement*, (Trafford, B., 1998, Educational Heretics Press).

Currently, one head teacher is under siege by the government. Zoe Redhead, staying close to the principles of her father, A.S. Neill, continues to run Summerhill school by encouraging both autonomy and democracy within its walls. Courageously, she refuses to submit to the domination-riddled ideas of the inspectors. The school may have to go to the European Court

of Human Rights to defend its cause. It will be costly, and I would like to encourage all readers to send a donation, however small, to the Summerhill fighting fund. You do not have to agree with everything goes on at Summerhill - I have one or two reservations myself - to want to support their rights to exist.

I also respect the courage of a secondary head teacher who was put in charge of one of the 'schools of the future' at Telford. He developed it as a campus of small mini- schools working with maximum participation and democracy. Unfortunately, the government of the day had an attack of cold feet regarding the 'schools of the future' initiative. The head teacher resigned in mid-career rather than return the school to the standard authoritarian model. Instead, he joined the Small School at Hartland, then became head of the small parents teacher co-operative school at Ticknall, and then set up the experimental flexi-college in the East Midlands, now sited at Burton-on Trent.

One head teacher, whose courage I admire, I have never met. He is Daniel Greenberg of Sudbury Valley School, U.S.A. The 'daring' behaviour at Summerhill in allowing children the choice of whether to attend lessons or not, seems mild compared with the approach at Sudbury Valley. Here there is no timetable and no curriculum, until the learners set about devising one. What our domination-riddled OFSTED inspectors would make of this, since they cannot even tolerate Summerhill, is not hard to imagine. I imagine that they would demand immediate extinction.

I met a head a few years ago who had to cope with the extinction of his school on a regular basis. Piortre ran a school in Poland, in Gdansk, during the Russian occupation. His idea of a good school required a democratic approach with a learner-driven curriculum. The Russian inspectors required the domination-riddled approach of a national curriculum, formal teaching and incessant testing, the model since copied from the Russians by OFSTED. The inspectors sent Piortre to prison and closed his school. The school relocated itself during his absence. The head came out of prison, found the new location and resumed duties. The police came for him again. This happened so often that he decided to have a small suitcase ready packed by the door, so that when the police came in the middle of the night, he could go to his cell without disturbing the family. I think I must give him my top award for courage, but I doubt if he would be regarded as a suitable candidate to run our government's new head teacher college.

The Russians occupying Poland would have approved of the aggressive, authoritarian head teacher applauded for 'turning around failing schools', mentioned earlier, as a dynamic leader. This does of course, raise the question of what counts as good leadership.

The current fashion of describing leadership in terms of the authoritarian model of an 'action man' or 'action woman' contrasts with the democratic view. This has been expressed in these words: "*Of a good leader they say, when the work is done, we did this ourselves.*" (after the ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao-Tse)

Dame Patricia Collarbone suggests that a flexible, rotational model of leadership is suitable for the modern world: "Max De Pree likened leadership to jazz. For me this captures the essence of leadership and learning communities. Jazz bands are collegial. Their members learn from each other, follow each other, lead each other. They are passionate about what they do. They continually experiment, change the rules, take risks. And when it all works, it thrills and excites the participants and the listeners." (R.S.A. Journal 4/4. 1999.)

Who would I appoint to run a head teachers college, assuming that I thought such a college was a good idea in the first place? Well, I submit those listed above as suitable candidates. They are all capable people of courage, humanity and democratic in inclination.

More practically, those parents who still need to make use of schools have to have some idea of the kinds of heads and teachers they want. Do they stand up to the Robert Owen test, for example, which was, if you recall, "that they should be fit company for children."

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