EDUCATOR INTERVIEWS

In the first of our series of educator interviews, Luke Heokip talks to three remarkable and experienced educators - Shalini Advani, Graham Ranger and Vivek Ramchandani.

Shalini: Like a lot of little girls of my generation, I loved the enormous power which a teacher seemed to have. All those students standing up to wish you and offering to carry your books seemed terribly attractive at age 8!

Of course once I became a teacher I realised the secret is not to exercise power but seduction. You have to seduce young people to see the joy of new learning, the excitement of making new connections. They have to want to learn and then your job becomes simple. And it is easier than you think, if you feel passionate about it.

So my path into education started from being a teacher. And then I began to theorize and run trainings on the craft of teaching, for teachers and teacher educators.

And that led me to an interest in educational policy and how that big picture shapes the classroom. My book *Schooling the National Imagination* published by OUP traces the connections from the macro to the micro of classroom practice.

Vivek: I started out as an enthusiastic, naïve and untrained assistant teacher at my alma mater, in search of a quick route to independence that didn't involve being cooped up in an office and ended up an avowed crusader for quality education.

Not having enjoyed classes much during my own school days, I was driven by the challenge of ensuring that the classes I taught were always fun while actually facilitating meaningful learning. Similarly, as a school planner, my cardinal principles dictated that the school environment should appeal to children, tickle their curiosity and not constrain their exuberance.
I am a particular fan of Kurt Hahn, founder of Gordonstoun and the Atlantic College Wales, whose philosophy laid the foundation for the outward bound schools movement and the International Baccalaureate.

Graham: For most of my career, I have worked with less privileged schools and communities in my home country (England). Paradoxically, my father, though keen that I should not become a teacher, inspired me to become one. He was an orphan who had relatively few formal education opportunities but never had a bad word to say about his orphanage schooling. He went on to play football and to play the trombone at a high level, as well as being a natural enquirer with a love of language.

My personal heroes are people who stand up and be counted, those who are voices for independence or for minorities. Inspirational figures in the news of late are Aung San Suu Kyi and Arundhati Roy. The castigation of Arundhati Roy in some of the media is a disgrace. When we seek to charge writers with sedition for this kind of self-determination speech, we are not far away from burning literature and eroding democracy.

How did your own schooling experience hone your personal educational philosophy?

Shalini: Like many children, I was unhappy, disaffected and bored for much of my school life. In fact I was even expelled from one particularly unimaginative school which I will not mention by name.

But in my last 4 years I changed to a school which had a small, personalized, nurturant culture,
and suddenly no longer felt like an insignificant cog in an impersonal factory. It made me understand how educational institutions need to at least attempt to be all things to all people. All schools need to recognise those who are not going to achieve the highest grades but are talented at art or are good organisers or technologists. At Pathways, the school I now head, we put into place lots of flexibility in the systems to enable multiple approaches to learning of different types. I don't think you can only leave it to the good teachers. I think the system itself needs to celebrate children for what their strengths are.

Vivek: Despite being an annoyingly curious child, I never enjoyed studying, which I deeply regret. I was also frequently in hot water, if not for questioning authority, or allowing my attention to drift in class, then for some harmless, high-spirited prank. I felt grossly misunderstood and resented most teachers.

Once on the other side of the fence, I was determined to prove that it need not be so, armed with common sense and acute memories of what school was like for me. Convinced that children were given a raw deal in the traditional school model, I set about challenging convention in search of child-friendly solutions. That's all it took!

Graham: The biggest influence in my own schooling was in the primary school, in Year 6. The teacher was an enthusiast for outdoor education, for fieldwork, for archaeology, geography and history. Archaeology was his passion and it became our passion as we hunted the coast for
Neolithic stone axes and flint chippings. He inspired the detective in me, the enquirer, to sift evidence and to view things critically.

**What makes a good teacher?**

**Vivek:** A good teacher is one who enjoys interaction with children, understands what gives them pleasure and can speak their language; is compassionate and has the capacity to listen to, trust and respect children as individuals; understands basic child development principles and is sensitive to their needs; knows his/her subject; can present content with flair, flexibility and a sense of drama; and, most importantly, has a strong sense of humour and fun.

**Graham:** A good teacher loves being with young people, cares about their safety, security and well-being and has the ability to create learning opportunities that support, challenge and engage. There are very few truly memorable lessons in schools.

**What is indispensable to creating a great physical environment in the classroom/school?**

**Vivek:** Approaching the design from a child’s perspective; ensuring that the school is bright, cheerful and aesthetically and sensorially stimulating to children at different levels; providing plenty of ‘hang-out’ space for peer-group ‘me’ time; ensuring high standards of safety and security; and bringing the outdoors into the classroom both physically and metaphorically.

**Graham:** The human environment is much more of an influence than the physical. Having worked in
inner cities of England, in Cameroonian rainforests without classrooms and in Hong Kong high-rise schools, I feel buildings are not all-important. However, given the opportunity, we should all seek to creative spaces for learning in which students feel comfortable but in which they may be stimulated. As flexible as possible to cater for differing learning activities.

Books that you would highly recommend for any teacher/educator's bookshelf.

**Shalini:** Books which create an understanding of how education works as a system, as a way of empowering some and disempowering others, an understanding of how our education system is centrally shaped for middle class children who are good at book work but not for those with other forms of knowledge. Because when you recognise this, you can think about what you want to strengthen or change.

I think books like *Schooling in Capitalist America: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* or McLaren’s *Schooling as a Ritual Performance* are essential readings. Or alternative forms of education like Steiner’s *The Foundations of Human Experience* or Tagore’s essay “Ideals of Education” or Krishna Kumar’s “What is Worth Teaching”

Then there are the indispensable books on how learning happens, like Vygotsky’s classic *Mind in Society* or on differentiation like Carol Ann Tomlinson’s *The Differentiated School*. The NCERT’s “National Curriculum Framework” is a wonderful document too. And of course the vast new body of work on educational needs of the 21st century – on the importance of collaborative learning, problem solving, using technology intelligently for learning.

**Vivek:** *The Third Teacher* (Compilation, Published by Abrams, 2010)


*Teaching the iGeneration – Five Easy Ways to Introduce Essential Skills With Web 2.0 Tools* by Bill Ferriter/Adam Garry (Publisher Solution Tree, 2010)

*Drive – The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* by Daniel H. Pink (Published by Riverhead Hardcover, 2009)

*A Place Called School: John Goodlad* (Publisher McGraw-Hill, 2004)

*Teaching to Transgress – Education as the Practice of Freedom* by Bell Hooks (Published by Routledge, 1994)

**Graham:** *What’s Worth Fighting for In Your School?* by Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves. *From Good to Great* by Jim Collins.

Policy changes/rehails that are essential to making the school of tomorrow.

**Shalini:** I think that in India, the biggest changes we are looking for are in fact at the policy level. Our state schooling system is crippled with bureaucracy which pays almost no attention to learning processes.

There is no focus on or reward for innovative teaching practice, on creative pedagogy. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 laid...
down a wonderful series of recommendations but they have not been properly implemented.

To give a tiny example, it is absurd that if a teacher wishes to take students out on a trip to a museum, they have to apply to a babu in the administration for sanction. Or School inspectors check if a teacher has ensured that the class has answered Question 1-5 at the end of a chapter, with no focus on what the children have actually learnt.

Of course we need a system of checks, but the policy framework has to reconstitute the controlling authority to focus on what children are actually learning. It needs to support and empower the people on the ground – Principals and teachers. I think we need a rehaul of how we deliver quality education at the last mile.

Vivek: Abolish the present ‘licence raj’ through privatisation and complete liberalisation of the education sector. Develop and adhere to non-negotiable quality norms in government schools, backed by improved teacher training and certification standards, and ensure teacher-accountability.

A free market will encourage badly needed private investment in education. A for-profit environment and the huge demand in India will encourage competition and force tuition fee rates to settle at respective buyer-driven market levels for low-cost, mid-level and high-end school segments.

Graham: Ban the use of bells.

What values from the school of today shouldn’t be lost in the school of tomorrow?

Vivek: The human touch: courtesy, kindness, decency...

Graham: The value of active listening.

One reason to rejoice during your typical workday.

Shalini: When a child comes rushing up, dizzy with excitement because she has just designed a keychain or a pulley system for picking up marbles. Or has doubled his marks in a Maths test. Anything which shows the ‘Aha’ moment which makes new learning exciting and meaningful.

Vivek: Naughty, twinkling eyes above the smile of a child.

Graham: My best moment lies in the interactions with students and parents at the school gates at the beginning of each day.

If you weren’t a teacher/educator then what would you have been?

Vivek: A professional golfer.

Graham: A journalist.

What do you carry in your bag?

Vivek: My office – laptop, mouse, external hard drive, USB modem, headphones, iPod, swiss knife, a good book and mints.

Graham: Hand sanitiser. I shake so many hands.