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A MATTER OF PRINCIPAL

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Mentor wishes its readers a very Happy Diwali!!

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# NURTURING CREATIVITY AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Dr. Geoffrey Fisher

An experienced educator and a dynamic school leader, Dr. Geoffrey Fisher, is the Head of Academy at the Aga Khan Academy Hyderabad. His career has spanned positions as Principal, Headmaster, Founding Head, and an IB school leader across various academic institutions in Asia, Middle East, Europe, Australia and South America. He has a diverse educational background himself, having completed his education across different countries. Dr. Fisher holds a Doctorate in School Improvement and Effectiveness specializing in school leadership. MENTOR interviewed Dr. Geoffrey Fisher to find out his views on the future of education. Here are a few excerpts from the interview...

*“Education is the only force available in the modern world that can create and sustain social change! A modern life and employment requires persistence, creativity, flexibility and the capacity to apply knowledge and learning into new areas. Good education will assist development of these characteristics through a mixture of rigor, diverse challenges and diverse tasks. The skills of learning and how to adapt them is the key.”*

The Aga Khan Academy, Hyderabad represents a new idea in education by being a

school with a social purpose acting as a bridge between development and education.

The mission of the Academies is to educate students for leadership by providing world-class education for exceptional students with strong leadership potential, irrespective of social or economic background or ability to pay.

To achieve this vision, all Academies deliver their curriculum through a partnership with the IBO (International Baccalaureate Organisation). All academics, sports and



activities are delivered through a values framework emphasizing 5 strands - ethics, pluralism, civil society and governance, economics for development and cultures and heritage.

**You have over 20 years of experience in education! What do you think has changed over the years? What is your opinion on the Education Industry in India, as against the world?**

It is fascinating how technology has brought changes in the teaching and learning environment. As an educator, I would say that teaching has become a more interesting profession since it involves active engagement of both the teacher and the taught. It has become engaging and that of course, is a welcome change.

The Indian education space is very diverse both economically and culturally. So it can be both challenging and interesting at the same time since it brings opportunities to blend contemporary and classical learning values. Again, in the recent past, the Indian system





Organisation requires us to provide professional development courses for all teachers. Our teachers are updated constantly through development in knowledge and in building capacity for learning situations. Our social purpose requires us to support the development and further training of government school teachers through our Outreach programmes. In this context, the quality of English is developed as well. While some courses we follow are IB school mandates, there are other initiatives for developing the pedagogical skills and teaching expertise of teachers, such as IT and computing, and is based on their needs from time to time.

of education has seen a drastic change. Today, the quality of educational services in India has become world class and this, along with its diversity, makes it an interesting and exciting space in which to learn.

- Empathy and care for human beings matters

**How does the Aga Khan Development Network work for the development of students and teachers?**

The Academy is mandated as a 'centre of education excellence' and has two goals that work towards raising the quality of teaching and learning in India and Telangana. One is to provide a world class education for students who would otherwise not be able to access this opportunity. Our global network allows us to network between countries through exchange programs for instance. Students come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. This blend helps promote empathy and creates an exciting learning environment. We are a very unusual school!

**Tell us about a recent book you read and your key takeaways from it as a school leader?**

I am reading a book by Steven J. Gould, a noted essayist in the area of science and evolution. He challenges the way I think through his exploration of history, faith and science. I value that enormously. It is important to challenge your thoughts and existing beliefs from time to time. This helps you evolve.

**Your views on the educational needs of a child or needs of the next generation?**

My son is both a lawyer and a film maker. I admire his capacity

**“ Our students come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. This blend helps promote empathy and creates an inclusive learning environment ”**

**What directed you into entering the field of education? How has the journey been from Africa, London to now? What would be your key takeaways?**

Teaching is in my family. A fourth generation educator, I started to teach quite naturally in between two courses that I was pursuing. I loved the profession and eventually took it up seriously. The journey so far has been a roller coaster with different locations contributing to my development. I have learnt some things that I shall remember for life.

- Passion is important in all that you do
- Never get out of date

The International Baccalaureate





to manage a portfolio life. It is a skill which all people will need in the future. Moreover, I feel that education for the future must be a blend of problem solving and creativity skills. A classic blend of these two skills would be essential for the leaders of tomorrow. They must be able to earn a living on the one hand, using problem solving skills and exercise creativity on the other, to follow their passion!

**What are the key highlights of the advice you would give to your teachers/ staff at the beginning of each session?**

I often tell them, having taught myself, that we are blessed to be teachers and that we are responsible for making a difference in the lives of our students. This is both a privilege

and a challenge that must be lived up to.

**“ Diversity must be nurtured in an education space to develop tolerance and open-mindedness ”**

**How would you groom teachers/ staff to become leaders of tomorrow? What kind of learning activities do teachers engage in for professional development?**

In my journey, I have mentored 25 of my staff members into leadership positions as principals or heads of schools.

I have learnt that reflection, discussion, study and the capacity to face challenges can aid in supporting people to become the leaders that they are capable of being.

**What are the key challenges that you go through as a Principal/ School Leader and how do you overcome those? Specifically, challenges faced by you due to the blend of students coming from different academic backgrounds.**

Running a school effectively is complicated as it involves up to date knowledge of pedagogy, HR, administration, finance, operation, curriculum development etc. Maintaining quality in teaching methods and learning, as well as taking care of education facilities and administration is a tough task. You have to be broad and focused in your management. This is difficult but essential. You have to learn to turn off, and in my case to get away from the office.

It is important to be aware of equity for inclusion. When you walk into the classrooms here you will not be able to tell what kind of socio-economic background a student comes from. Policies and procedures, to extend additional support





for students who come from underprivileged backgrounds helps us maintain equity. The Academy helps in that regard. For example, all students need access to technology - notebooks, iPads etc. If a student does not have access to individual personal devices, these are supplied on an as-needs basis. Our financial aid can extend to the provision of shoes and uniforms if necessary.

An advice you would give to leaders of tomorrow?

- Be flexible
- Be calm
- Be professional in your approach
- Develop professional skills

“ Stewardship and service are the two most important values that must be instilled in students...we must ensure that we give back to the world what we have ”

What are the challenges faced by the school in terms of governance? How does the



**Foundation help run the school?**

We are extremely fortunate that the Aga Khan Academy Hyderabad is a member of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) and as such has a unique vision and extraordinary mission. It also has a governance structure which facilitates development. To work for the AKDN has been a revelation for me and something I appreciate enormously.

**How do you/ the school meet the current needs of students, considering the world has become so much smaller today?**

As opposed to my school days, the classroom has become

a place of engagement and diversity today. Classrooms are now sustained by appropriate use of differentiated assessment and applied technology.

As a result of a much deeper understanding of how people learn, the teacher's role has become significantly more demanding requiring more expertise. Assessment for learning technology in the classroom or use of technology differentiated instruction and project-based learning, are all essential parts of a good modern teacher.

Good governance is important





to meet challenges that are so dynamic in nature. We try and make arrangements for the students to be exposed to the world. For example, we have had 50 different overseas universities visiting in the last few months. Exchange programs also help students learn and imbibe different cultures. Furthermore, we take students for trips within and outside India. This helps students to see and be part of the global space. These trips are structured, have an education purpose and must involve learning activities irrespective of being a trekking or a sports trip. It is not the requirement of a curriculum but a requirement of good quality education, I would say.

**How is the school infrastructure and what are the latest tangible deliverables offered by the**

**school to meet the demands of students today?**

The Academy is set in an extraordinary 100 acre campus with outstanding sports, arts and IT facilities designed to support learning. A good education demands a holistic approach, challenging and supporting students physically, intellectually and emotionally. Modern education demands familiarity and expertise in the use and the application of technology. At the Academy, we have a matrix one-to-one strategy that is supported by being a Microsoft Showcase School.

- Again, spaces matter. Students must move around the space to be able to engage in learning and be interested. This helps create an interesting learning environment which is important.
- Opportunities must be

provided in order to help people learn and be creative in their approach.

- Classrooms must be flexible.



The Academy blends with trends: creative learning for example, music, drama, fine arts have been shown to develop the skill of persistence, team work and personal confidence to a greater degree than anything else. These skills then impact academic results and life outcomes. All students should





be involved in the demands of such creative opportunities.

Diversity must be nurtured in an education space.

**What are the key values that a school/ institute must instill in students?**

Stewardship and service are the two most important values that must be instilled in students. We must do justice to what has been given to us. Again we must ensure that we give back to the world what we have. These must be nurtured through activities in schools.

**How does the school deal with discipline and life beyond classrooms?**

Some ways in which we maintain discipline would be:

- By defining clear policies and practices.
- Clear expectations
- Living up to expectations
- Kindness and treating individuals holistically.



## tête-à-tête QUICK 7

**MENTOR in conversation with Dr. Geoffrey Fisher**

1. I would describe education as....  
The future

2. What are the 3 leadership qualities for a dynamic principal in today's times?

- Focus
- Professionalism
- Care and kindness

3. What are the 3 key skills that teachers must have?

- A teacher must be
- Flexible
  - Calm
  - Professional

4. What are the three things that we in India must imbibe from the education space abroad?

- An education which is:
- About development of the student's future
  - About community
  - About tolerance

5. List three things in the Indian education system that can be shared with the rest of the world

- Value of family
- Value of respect
- Value of community

6. Your biggest learning from life has been...

Enjoy today as much as you anticipate tomorrow. Do not rush into things or into decisions likewise.

7. Life is the mother of learning! Your view?

Learning through experience is the best way to learn.

