



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Catholic schools score in values and character development



Education Minister Heng Swee Keat wants values and character development to be a priority for schools. They have always been so in Catholic schools. Professor Tan Cheng Han (left), the new chairman of the Archdiocesan Commission for Catholic Schools, reflects on how our schools have worked at fulfilling their social mission.

AS THE father of three school-going children, I am often struck by how much emphasis we parents place on how academically 'good' this or that school is. While I understand fully the importance of academic rigour, it sometimes strikes me that we over-emphasise this at the expense of other important dimensions.

After all, children are born with the innate abilities that God has seen fit to bestow on them. Unless we are grossly negligent in our care, our children will tend to find their level whatever school they attend, given that in general, schools in Singapore are of good quality.

Indeed, parents are in danger of doing a disservice to their children by stressing one aspect of developmental growth, academic education at the expense of other equally valid aspects.

As parents, we do right by our children to give them as many opportunities as possible to maximise their gifts. Sending your child to the 'right' school is an important consideration. However, the opportunities we open our children to ought to go beyond an academic education.

My view is that what the 'right' school is depends, to an extent, on your child's personality and, at least at primary level, the type of childhood and overall educational experience you want for your child including values education.

I remember with much fondness the time when my children were in kindergarten. All too soon, it was time to choose their primary schools.

Many of their kindergarten friends wanted to go to a leading primary school with a reputation for being extremely demanding of its pupils. Much as my wife and I would have liked our children to go to the same school as their friends, we were certain that we did not want our children to study in such an atmosphere.

We preferred schools that regarded the academic element as important, but also placed high value on nurturing children in a more holistic way. So we sent our two sons to Saint Joseph's Institution (Junior) and our daughter to Methodist Girls' School, given that my wife was an old girl and a member of Wesley Methodist Church.

We have never regretted our decision. Both schools proved to be balanced in the academic demands placed on our children. Just as importantly, they reinforced the values we wanted our children to have.

It was also a bonus for our children's Catholic faith that they attended mission schools. So I was pleased when my children decided for themselves to continue into secondary school at SJI (Independent) and MGS, as I wanted them to continue in environments that regard values and charac-

ter development as important.

In many ways, perhaps, my view of education was shaped by the type of education that I received in SJI in the late 1970s.

I was struck by the goodness and selflessness of the Christian Brothers in the school. This no doubt set the tone for the entire school, a tone which still exists today even though there are fewer Brothers teaching there.

I also recall the strong values that were an integral part of my scouting co-curricular activity (CCA) in the 2104 Pelandok Scout Group. We were always taught to look out for one another in big things or small.

Once, we were at camp and had hung our newly washed clothes out to dry. It started to rain and some of us quickly gathered our clothes first. Our scoutmaster yelled at us to gather everyone's clothes! There were red faces all round, because our instinct was to look after our interests first. It is a lesson I never forgot.

As an educator, I understand that the best way to provide a values- and character-based education is to make it pervasive throughout everything the school does, so that it becomes embedded within the student.

Being an academic and practising lawyer, I am constantly struck by how some of the most successful people I know are those with a strong moral centre.

I believe that possessing a strong sense of values maximises the prospects of a person succeeding in his or her career. This is perhaps not surprising after all. Taking the legal profession as an example, a lawyer who has compassion is less likely to treat his or her client as a mere business transaction; he or she is more likely to put in the extra effort to advance the client's case.

This lawyer is also likely to have good emotional quotient. At the same time, such a lawyer will probably have a strong moral compass so that while advancing the client's case as best as possible, it will not be done at the expense of the high ethical standards that



Generations of boys at St Joseph's Institution have gained from attending a Christian Brothers school where values education permeates all aspects of school life, including co-curricular activities.

the profession demands. This in turn will win the regard and trust of other members of the profession and make professional life both easier and more rewarding.

This combination of a strong work ethic, coupled with good emotional quotient, and topped off by high ethical standards is a great recipe for success and fulfilment.

Such traits are difficult to fake over an entire career. They are ingrained from young.

This is why I feel that sometimes we in Singapore are in danger of missing the point. The overwhelming focus on the academic only serves to nurture a somewhat one-dimensional type of person.

Indeed, the constant focus on achieving a particular type of academic excellence may cause the development of a certain rigid way of thinking that is not well suited to today's

knowledge-based world.

Parents, of course, play an important role in all this. We must avoid the temptation to see our children as our proxies so that their triumphs become ours.

Such an attitude can lead to the tendency to think short-term since all that can be compared are test and examination results, semester upon semester.

We need more schools and parents to break the mould, to understand that ultimately a child needs to be properly grounded with right values and character traits if he or she is to thrive in the world beyond childhood.

This is where I think our Catholic schools have done better than most.

The Church's social mission in education, as often exemplified by the work of the religious orders that established so many of our Catholic schools, has always meant that the bigger picture was not lost.

With the call by the Minister for Education to re-emphasise values and character development, the great value of Catholic schools will be better appreciated again.

Under its previous chairman, Mr Bernard Chen, the Archdiocesan Commission for Catholic Schools engaged the management committees and principals of Catholic schools on the ethos and culture that should permeate all our schools.

This is an affirmation of the added value that a Catholic school gives its students over and above a good education, which is also an important part of a Catholic school's mission.

What's the right school for your child?

“Sending your child to the ‘right’ school is an important consideration. However, the opportunities we open our children to ought to go beyond an academic education. The ‘right’ school depends to an extent on your child’s personality and, at least at primary level, the type of childhood and overall educational experience you want for your child, which should include values education.”