

THE TRULY SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL

RESPECT & FOSTER THE GIFTS OF EVERY PERSON

Business leaders call for greater priority to be given in education to preparing pupils for the world of work. They look for a high calibre of skilled work force to emerge from our schools. In contrast, Church leaders have stated that education must not be led by the demands or the patterns of the market place. Rather it must prepare people for the whole of life, including, most importantly, its spiritual and moral dimensions. Only in this perspective does human life take on its full meaning and education find its true purpose. The difference between their views is quite profound.

An approach to education based on the needs and philosophy of a market economy is dangerous, for sooner or later it will give absolute priority to the successful. The money will go their way. The failures, in market terms, will inevitably lose out. In this system more and more attention must be given to enterprise skills. Other dimensions of life will be neglected.

Still fresh in my memory is the image of a slightly built, rather frail, Cornish lad. Surprisingly, Barry could kick a football with astonishing precision and power. I met him on a summer camp for teenagers, and I remember talking to his Day about this remarkable ability. ‘Oh yes’, he said, ‘it was the key to everything’. He then told me that Barry has been a shy, secretive child, falling behind in school and making no friends. But eventually a caring teacher noticed Barry’s passion for football, even though he wasn’t able to compete at all. In partnership with the father, he had encouraged Barry. They spent hours with him in the back garden, until both his ability and self-confidence grew. The transformation was not long in coming. Barry quickly caught up in his schoolwork and found his place among friends.

This teacher’s approach was based on the belief that in every child there’s an array of gifts to be developed. Since life comes from God and each person is a unique creation, then no one is without their special gifts. With patience and hard-work the deepest personality of each pupil can unfold, bringing about a sense of worth, of self-respect and purpose. It’s impossible to predict what precisely the key will be. But if the parameters have already been set by the demands of the market place, then many doors will remain locked and many God-given talents neglected.

The truly successful school then is one, which helps its pupils to discover who they are, and where they are going; not just to the top of the industrial ladder, but to their eternal destiny with God. And in this worthy enterprise the specialists are the teachers together with the parents.

Education is much too precious to be left to political fashion or to market forces. With these there are always losers, but in education there should be none.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols

