

The Christian Family and Social Movement

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What do we want out of education for our children?

The new school year commenced in January, and my children reluctantly bid their school holidays farewell, to return to school.

We are all familiar with our education system, having experienced it ourselves and now getting our children to go through it. It is demanding, to say the least, on the average child. Many of us Singaporeans are proud of it for - didn't its rigor brings out the best in our children? (so we are told). Did Singapore's students not win regularly at various international math and science olympiads (international quizzes/competitions)? Is it not true that some schools in the USA are looking to the Singapore school syllabus as a model and adapted our school text books for their use?

Conventional wisdom holds that that the education system should support the economy by churning out people with the necessary competencies, i.e. the math, science, language (and recently, computer) skills that will enable them to be productive when they join the workforce – and as we mechanically recite: “♪...so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for the nation ♪.”

We, world citizens are now so proud of our present that we often forget that our world is built upon learning and technology accumulated over thousands of years of civilization and development. Latest common practice requires our children to grasp all these thousands of years of accumulated discoveries and learning made by humanity, in their 10 to 15 years of formal education. This requirement itself is a marvel of our human brain capacity and our children's learning capabilities. The truth is, there is simply not enough time for our children to engage in experiential learning, self-discovery, or to learn by trial and error. The most cost and time effective way to “bring their competency up to speed” is therefore by spoon(some would say forced) –feeding, or input-learning. By the time they leave the full time education system, they must be and should have the basics to be useful citizens of the world and possess “immediate deliverables” so that they can immediately contribute to its economic growth. Working adults know that more often than not, the Corporations and business organizations are more concern about the immediate short - term tangibles, such as *deadlines, the bottom-line, productivity and market share.*

The basic assumption of modern economic and business management theory is that companies compete to survive and will pay their employees according to the value they bring to the company. If the company wants good talent (employees), it will pay for it; and conversely if talents want good pay, they will work for it. And in the competition to get ahead, each employer will try to outdo the other for better profits and only employees who help towards this agenda get better pay. One of the basic principles that every economic or business management student is taught is that ...

*"It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their **own interest**. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages."*¹

Adam Smith

... by addressing the self interests of others, we fulfill our own self interests.

In the recent UN Bali Conference of World Climate Change, we learn that modern man's relentless pursuit of *economic progress* and *self interest* is the major cause of global warming. This is the irony. If climatic change or if Earth becomes inhospitable, all our economic progress will be our self destruction. Yet many nations insisted on and got a precondition for their endorsement - that the efforts to ensure the survival of planet earth should not come at the price of economic progress!

The world's concept and agenda of progress, as measured by productivity and material wealth is therefore a distorted, a short-termed expedient, - a "narrow minded" value-system. Yet, this appears to be the very agenda that forms the rationale of our modern world's education system.

Wikipedia defines "education" quite differently, it says "education" is derived from the [Latin](#) *educare*, meaning "to nourish" or "to raise" which is also related to *educere* meaning "to lead out."

The definition suggests that there is something inherently good in a person that can be "led out". It assumes that the child has a gift, be it talent or personality that can be of value to society. If we believe that we are created "in the image and likeness" of the God, then God dwells in us. God use each one of us to contribute something to the world to make it better. Since God is infinite, our contributions (as God's channels) have infinite possibilities. Each person is therefore unique with different gift(s), which may or may not command *a dollar value* within the limited agenda defined by our finite and transient world. In order to know God's gift in us, God's calling and God's plan for us, we need to know God, and to know ourselves intimately. We need to *master ourselves*:

*"The "mastery" over the world that God offered man from the beginning was realized above all within man himself: **mastery of self**. The first man was unimpaired and ordered in his whole being because he was free from the triple concupiscence that subjugates him to the pleasures of the senses, covetousness for earthly goods, and self-assertion, contrary to the dictates of reason."*

Catechism of the Catholic Church – 377

The economic world views education as learning competencies that help us deal with the product of material goods and services. Our Christian-point-of-view is to know God, and ourselves (and our gifts); to know God's plan and participate in it so as to make visible creation "good" (despite our concupiscence).

The paradox is: Education is supposed to be nurturing a person, to bring out all that is God-like in that person (knowledge of self and God), whereas economic progress requires the education to produce a person driven by their human desires, self interest. To put it simply, one goal requires a person to master his desires, master self, for the world, while the other goal train the person towards harness his basest desires to make them work for self.

In the modern society, education of the young is in the hands of three main parties: the family, the school, and the employers. Each of these assumes the other two are doing their job. The employers (corporation/ companies) assume that the people they hire should be delivered to them educated in the currently desired skills, and work attitudes/values, either in school or from their home. The schools assume the home teach these values or virtues (they have no time for it. They have to cram the children with the accumulated technical knowledge of mankind). Yet, in our society, in most families, both parents work outside the family for income – Where is there time for them to teach and transmit the values and virtues our children and young adults need?

For the past two hundred years, the developed economies have thrived on the foundation of a value system that is developed and refined over thousands of years. Today, between investing time and effort in character development and learning competencies, and, one that provides skills to feed the economy, it is clear which one would bring quick measurable returns in the short-run, and wins favor. How can our society continue to function if scant attention is given to the teaching of values?

What society is turning to is an expedient short-cut , a soft option, substituting building a strong value system with one with a strong regulatory system. Some say that nowadays an accurate measure of “successful and developed society” is by measuring how tightly regulated it is: in other words - No need for the people to have values. Just have tight laws, strictly enforced.

We have seen this, in many societies including ours, where highly trained and skilled professionals get “caught” for unethical and illegal professional conduct.

There is a big difference between a highly trained person and a well educated person. It is apparent that our formal education system (that of school and employers) is doing only half the job to prepare people for a civilized society. The more important half, - that which concerns their character and which ultimately impact society for the long term, - that of values, still lies with the family, with you.

.....article by.....andrew leong

CFSM Reflections

As our children begin their new academic year, what are the goals, how do we want to educate our children? What is our Christian’s view on Education?

To work for the economy, - to create wealth?

To “Lead out” the value in the person?

To arm them with values for building a lasting society?