



## HighLight Key – Educating the whole person

Education is much more than academic and practical knowledge; it involves the heart and spirit of the learner. The school's curriculum must address physical, social, emotional, moral, cultural and spiritual development in addition to intellectual and academic development. Providing knowledge and attainment without also developing character and an ability to form and nurture relationship is counterproductive. In our 'knowledge- economy' intellectual skills and abilities enable people to become influential and powerful. It is important that responsibility is promoted alongside this authority to ensure the widest possible benefit.

Character development, therefore, must be part of a school's responsibility. (See HighLight KEY: 'Developing Good Character') Education, in its broadest sense, involves life-long learning. In terms of youth it embraces the experience of youth work and many out-of-school activities in the wider community which, in conjunction with schools, prepare pupils for adult participation in adult life.

### What does it mean to be human?

It's a question simple enough that a 5-year-old could give an answer and yet it's also deep enough that people have wrestled with it for centuries. It's a question that provokes another: Why think about it? That is, why would educators think about this question?

The reason is that every system of education, in theory and in practice, assumes an idea of what it means to be human. We have to make assumptions about what people are and what they can become. These ideas, when we put them into practice make a difference to what we do. Ideas have consequences.

A Christian worldview answers this question by stating: 'People are created in the image of God' and quotes Genesis 1: 26-27. To be human, for the Christian, means to be re-created by a spiritual experience, through believing in Jesus Christ, who gave himself in obedience to Father God as a sacrifice to redeem all who would receive him. Responding in faith to him means we are delivered then from the destructive power of sin, which is corrosive in its power to ruin our lives. To be human is to love God and to love people, as demonstrated by Jesus in his life of service on earth. Only in schools with a distinctive Christian ethos will this approach in education be evident. Such a

school will give time for Bible study and will demonstrate a Christian worldview in their approach to the curricular subjects. Religious Education will, of course, assume greater importance in such a school

Think about your own context. Are some subjects valued more than others? Or, think about a child you know. Are some of their abilities valued in school and wider society and others less so?

### Doing the splits

When trying to talk about what it means to be human there is a long history of saying people are made up of various parts. Some well-known 'splits' include:

- Mind / Body
- Body / Soul
- Head (thinking) / Heart (feeling) / Hands (doing)
- Social / Emotional / Behavioural

In recent times you may have heard people in schools talk about left-brain/right-brain tendencies or 'visual', 'auditory' and 'kinaesthetic' learning preferences<sup>1</sup>.

At least in the West, since the Enlightenment, some of these parts have typically been seen as more important than others. This has made a difference because education or training is then brought to focus on these areas, sometimes to the exclusion of others. We can think of the status given to the academic over the vocational (the 'life of the mind' given priority over the 'work of the body').

If we think about this for a bit, we find that these splits don't work very well in describing life as we experience it. To say that vocational work (be it nursing, bricklaying or being a fitness instructor) is mindless would be as odd as saying that those doing academic work do so without relying on their bodies. Nevertheless, these splits continue to have a profound influence on the way that many people think about the focus and priorities of education. Not only does this mean we tend to value certain subjects or skills over others but it also means we can tend to value certain people over others. This is something to be strongly rejected.

### Educating the whole person

To say that you wish to 'educate the whole person' is a phrase that educators have used to try and incorporate a holistic approach. It assumes that there is integrity and dignity to every human person. Even if there is a focus on different parts of a person at one time or another it is always

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<sup>1</sup> These modern typologies are much disputed and widely discredited by the most recent literature.

related to the whole. So when a teacher focuses on any one part of what it means to be human they will be alive to the physical, mental, social, emotional, moral, cultural and spiritual dimensions of what they are studying. This doesn't mean that they feel the need to draw out all of these things at once or in every lesson. However, they teach, recognising the value and interrelatedness of all these dimensions as part of educating the whole person. They are not educating to form compartmentalised people who know many things, yet struggle to relate to others. Nor are they educating to form those who can do many difficult things but think only of their own benefit.

Some teachers feel uneasy being asked to think about the development of character; they feel much more confident in their subject teaching. And yet, character is being formed in schools one way or another, and by the action of teachers. The issue is whether a teacher is mindful and intentional in the way they think about character formation. For example, the teacher who teaches about business without talking about ethics implies that they are unrelated and have little to do with each other. The teacher of science who ignores the social dimensions of science hides the collaborative nature of much of science work and the significance of 'controversy' in the history of science and in the role the sciences play in societies across the world today. Such an approach may be more challenging for the teacher – indeed it may well stretch their own subject knowledge if this has become narrowly focused on particular curricula. Being alive to the multiple dimensions of any one part of an educational endeavour makes for a richer classroom experience and an appreciation of the rich texture of the world we live in. It also asks the teacher to go on learning along with his/her pupils. In a school with a distinctive Christian ethos, principles of wisdom from God's word will be integrated through the subjects. The values of the school and relationships within it will be founded on biblical values – the greatest of which is Love, as demonstrated by Jesus Christ. (To study this approach more fully see HighLight's Key Christian papers: 'Developing Good Character' and 'The Teacher as Role Model').

Since the approach of educating the whole person values a broad range of knowledge and learning, it also recognises that a school is not the only place that people learn – far from it! Rather than schools (or universities) having a monopoly on learning, the school and its teachers, pupils and parents feel free to value and celebrate the education that takes place in the home, in youth work settings and in out-of-school activities. Indeed, an attitude of collaboration and co-operation rather than suspicion or competition will flourish. It is then not the case that a school does 'proper education' and these other places are involved in some kind of 'soft education-lite' approach that may improve our quality of life but does not prepare us for the hard world of work. This view is to be avoided as it sets up other splits (soft/hard, life/work) and makes enemies of those who are friends in the task of education. For the Christian, this kind of educational approach is rooted in an idea found in the Bible.

## A holistic approach

The first is the command to 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with your entire mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself', found in Luke 10:27. The Christian seeks to be shaped by a love of God which encompasses the whole of their being. It is not that some parts of us matter and others do not or that some parts are valued by God and others are not. This love of God is closely allied with love for our neighbour, where neighbour is a very expansive term. This love is not self-focused but outward in nature. If this is the reality of the Christian life, it would be strange for education to be one place in which the cultivation of an orientation of overflowing love to God and to neighbour was not central; and one that encompasses and values the whole person.

### You may wish to consider the following questions:

- What do you think your educational setting values (e.g. your school or your classroom)? How is this shown?
- Does this mean, in practice, that some children feel more valued than others?
- Would your young people give the same answers? (Why not ask them?)
- Do you provide more opportunities for some students' abilities, passions and future aspirations than others? What might you do about this?
- How can you 'be alive' to the many ways in which your subject is connected with other areas of knowledge (these may not be considered part of the subject you are focusing on at any one time)? How could you help other teachers in this?