

The path to glory



Schools and parents have a mutual responsibility to nurture and develop the whole child, not just to ensure they achieve great grades, says **Lucy Elphinstone**

The bags of confection hanging on their numbered rails behind the glass all look inviting. Which to choose? In the end, you opt for the Jelly Babies, those brightly coloured, delicious cherubs. You pop your money in the slot, type in the code and out they come. The process is easy, the product reliable.

A generation ago, the vending machine method of independent education was standard: parents dropped their child off on the first day, slipped the cheque to the Bursar, and, hey presto, picked up the child some years later, all packaged and ready for Life. With the stratospheric rise in school fees and the collapse of our financial systems, this approach is



Above pupils from Francis Holland School, London

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common once more. Anxieties over the quality of some state school provision have forced many parents to make sacrifices to secure an independent education for their child. “The most important investment we’ll ever make”, they say, the very phrase suggesting an economic transaction.

And day schools have seen a surge in demand. Competition for places has destroyed the sense of an easy purchase and for some parents the response has been to throw more money at it – bring in the tutors, send the child on revision courses - anything so that the child can enter the exam factory and come out on the conveyor belt, having passed quality control. But very often this happens without the real abilities, needs and wishes of the child being considered. And it is usually examination league tables – measuring narrow academic data without context – which determine

the choice, rather than spiritual, moral, creative and social values and skills.

But while some parents might abnegate responsibility for their child’s education, others fret over it to an unhealthy degree. These “helicopter” parents hover over their child’s every activity, demanding excellence. The joy of childhood is devoured by the need to perform and achieve. Throw into this scene the influence of “celebrity-culture” and you have a toxic situation.

Exhausted, pressurised and stressed, the cheerful child turns into a tortured teenager likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, eating disorders and anger.

Horrified by the fragility and dependence of their children, parents and schools turn to the experts. Psychotherapists, counsellors and PSHE programmes all seek to address the problems. The frequent response to a child’s erratic behaviour is to expect the

school to sort it. But the real answer is a partnership between parents and schools from the earliest stage.

Parents of my age, often the product of liberal 60s and 70s parenting, can feel at a loss as to how to introduce boundaries – when the very word seems antithetical to freedom and self-expression. But the traditional ground of a clear moral and spiritual framework is being increasingly reclaimed. Family life should offer clear rules of behaviour, sharing of domestic tasks, a safe, non-judgmental place to confide, laughter and fun, but empathy in defeat or sorrow, encouragement in aspiration, a sense of mutual respect and courtesy, family meals and shared experiences.

As in the family, so in the school. Every child must know that his or her value isn’t dependent on achievement – or looks, status or fame. Unconditional love is vital and this brings us to my final point. At our school, it is not only academic intelligence, which is prized. We also celebrate creative, musical and spatial intelligence; we recognise that the world of work demands not just geeks who are good at exams, but people who think outside the box, who are flexible, tenacious, unorthodox and intuitive.

Emotional intelligence – the ability to empathise, communicate, make connections, cope with stress, work in a team and lead – is the main quality sought by employers.

So let us see our child’s education as a partnership in nurturing a precious young life, and seek a school with a clear moral vision, a community for whom the journey, not the destination, is the goal.

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