

The Secondary School Experience

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Preparation for the SEA examination is normally accompanied by trauma, anxiety, hope, and, for some, the confidence of success and the satisfaction of a race well run. As secondary schools across the country welcome a new intake of students in September, it is well worth bearing in mind that the main forces that propelled the young primary school student are the ones that will continue to exert long-lasting influences on the secondary school entrant—teachers, parents, peers, and social norms.

There are many lessons that young students will learn through the secondary school experience. However, if parents and teachers were to view the secondary school as the canvas on which young people's hopes and possibilities are painted, then more attention would be paid to the the deciphering of codes in their lives and the ascertaining of relevant needs. By so doing, it is more likely that a student's talents and gifts would be unearthed and developed by encouraging practices that stretch the young person toward a lifestyle of self-discovery. It is only through varied experiences that this can be accommodated.

The concept of self-discovery from an early age is crucial if we view the secondary school experience as a journey that may well determine the course of one's adult life. While academic preparation is one of the main goals set out by the curricula, it is the unwritten curriculum that really equips students for life at the higher academic levels. Notwithstanding the skills that can be learnt within a classroom environment, many adults will testify to the richness of their own learning through participation in extra- or co-curricular activities. These activities require time management skills, responsible attitudes, and personal sacrifice. They also engender a sense of self-confidence and improved personal interaction skills. Within the offerings of the secondary school, then, the young student has the option of personal development through the exposure to all that a school has to offer. Parents are advised to monitor and encourage participation, and to welcome the opportunities that schools provide to enhance their children's overall growth.

Performing on stage or in a competition of some sort are unforgettable school experiences. Whether it is the cricket match, steelpan practice, the art competition, or the dramatic production, the involvement in and commitment to such activities provide invaluable lessons for a young student. Constructive use of free time provides the frame for the student's sense of accomplishment, and the inclination and desire to continue on such paths in their adult life.

Whether it is at tertiary level institutions or in the workplace, the young adult is expected to be competent at decision making, goal setting, and personal management, for example. The secondary school provides for these through class or school projects, committees, and group work, to name a few. Adhering to deadlines and regulations is an excellent way to prepare oneself for life after secondary school. Some other ways in which schools can encourage psychological and social growth in young students are by developing

systems that encourage peer tutoring, and even by students tutoring teachers in areas such as computer literacy, modern entertainment, or games. Schools may also be used as centres for parent-and-child life-skills development, either during or after school hours.

Seen as a continuation of the primary school and as a nurturing partner of the home, the secondary school is expected to be a model of ideal practice on the part of all staff—ancillary, non-academic, academic, and administrative. Because secondary school students are at a particularly challenging stage of physical and emotional development, it is important to constantly guard one's tone and message when communicating with them, whether it is oral communication or in the wording of notices and rules. Very often, in school office areas I observe notices posted that mostly include “don't,” and hardly ever “please.” Calling out to a student by saying “hello” instead of using his or her name encourages negative reactions. If schools today are inclined to complain about the students' home environment, surely it is the school that should strive to be the caring and inspiring organisation from which students can learn for life.

Students entering secondary school must do so with the understanding that secondary school is much like a gym—you are required to stretch all your capabilities, and you will need to monitor yourself for much of the time. Secondary school is the place for students to shape themselves into the persons they want to be.

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