

Assembly 26 November

A Tale of Three Countries

Over the course of my career, I have taught boys in six schools across three countries; England, Australia and now Hong Kong. I am often asked: what are the main differences between English boys and Australian boys and Hong Kong boys, particularly with respect to the way they work at school and play their sport? Of course, my reply is that teenage boys are basically the same the world over. But I have observed over the years some key differences that I would like to share with you this morning.

English and Australian teenage boys like their sport. In both countries, the boys enjoy the physical challenge of running, jumping and throwing particularly when that involves a ball of any size or any shape. Equally as important to the physical fitness that comes through playing sport, the boys look to friendships that come from being part of a team. There is nothing better than the mate ships and close bonds that come from being as member of a basketball team or a member of the swimming squad. Ask any of your classmates who are team members why they keep attending training week after week. They will tell you that they enjoy the game; that they like to keep fit; and, that they like being with others who share their interest in that sport.

You will find the same replies from boys in England and Australia. What is interesting, however, is that boys in Australia have another reason for playing sport, a reason that goes beyond wanting to participate, stay fit and have fun. Australian teenage boys play sport to win. Indeed, there is a side to the Australian character that says winning is important. No matter if you are playing hockey or beach volleyball or chess, you play to win. This is a fundamental difference between English teenagers and Australian teenagers and is a difference that starts very early in life and continues into adulthood. It also explains why Australia is so incredibly successful when it comes to all sports be they played by boys or girls. Australia has a disproportionately high number of world champion teams and individuals from a nation of only 21 million people. Compare this to Hong Kong's population of 7 million. Do we have a third of Australia's total of world champions?

The Australian attitude to winning, however, goes hand-in-hand with sportsmanship. You learn how to compete to win but you also learn how to take defeat. It is important that at the end of the match, when the result has not gone your way, that you congratulate your opponent, and then start planning how you will win the next time you meet. The Australian teenage boy will work out very quickly what he needs to do to improve his personal performance or what the team needs to do to play better, and then come up with a plan to make sure that the next match ends in success. This Australian characteristic is not seen to the same degree in English boys and I would suggest is also not seen in boys in Hong Kong.

I would like to congratulate you again on your participation in last Wednesday's heats of the Athletics carnival. As I said at the Opening Ceremony, a record 724 students signed

up for the events, with a staggering number running in each of the heats of the 1500 metres. Well done to the six House Captains and their House Teachers. If this were an Australian school, however, the Houses would now be planning for 2008 and aiming for 800 plus participants. Furthermore, each House would be drawing up a plan of action to make sure that they are the Champion House by the close of the Carnival. This also applies to the individual. Each of you who took part last week should already be planning for next time. You should be asking yourself: how can I run faster; how can I throw further; how can I jump higher? It is important that you look to improve on your personal best. I imagine this is going through the minds of all of you who will be competing in the Finals this Thursday. Not everyone can win but you should all strive to win. You never know what you can achieve unless you try, and try very hard.

Unfortunately, this Australian sporting characteristic does not always carry over to the classroom. It is in school work and study that the boys I taught in England outshone their counterparts in Australia. The English students tend to have a love of learning as well as a desire to do well. Gaining entry to university is very much their priority but it is at school that the real study takes place. The English boys are focused in all that they do, be that classwork, homework, fieldwork, laboratory work or private study. It is not only their desire to perform well in tests and examinations. There is recognition that good examination results require hard work and effort at school over the days, weeks and months before the final examinations. Every aspect of study is taken seriously.

Can we say the same of students at our school? Maybe it is because of the structure of our assessments, where almost everything depends on examination performance, that students see examination week as being the only important time of the year. But what about the other times, the times when week by week you are acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to tackle those examinations? Can we honestly say that these times are always taken seriously? I think you would agree that the answer is no. There are some of you who adopt a casual approach to study, being more concerned with showing off in front of your classmates and acting the fool. There are even more of you who do not take homework seriously, aiming to complete the tasks as quickly as possible, if at all, with a minimum of effort and preferably by copying from somebody else.

I say that a great deal can be learnt from the English approach to study. Schoolwork is serious business for success or failure will shape your future. Every day at school is important not just the examination weeks. Each of you should be reading widely, taking detailed notes, working through practical exercises. The key to success in all subjects is study, study and more study. I also say that a great deal can be learnt from the Australian approach to sport. Your aim should be to improve on your previous performances. Each assignment or project or drawing or presentation, as well as each test or examination, should be better than the ones before. Your marks in Form 3 ought to be better than they were in Form 2; the quality of your musical performances ought to improve each year; and your passion for study ought to increase as you move up through the Forms. I am sure that you can think of many other examples.

Some of you have a long way to go. I believe that your teachers are telling you repeatedly to settle down in class; to concentrate on your classwork; and, to complete your homework. Quite clearly, some of you are not listening and certainly not heeding the advice that is being given. Unlike my experience with boys in England and Australia, some boys at our school have a great deal to learn about classroom behaviour and responsibilities.

In order for you to gain fully from an education at St. Paul's you must be more dedicated and determined. I urge each of you to rise to the challenge.