



# Nature's role in the education equation

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Granted, nature without proper nurturing will not bring out a child's full potential. Nonetheless, children have varying levels of intellect and natural ability. And very often, anxiety arises when parents of children with differing abilities come together and share ideas.

The mother of an intellectually gifted child tells another parent that her child attended a particular enrichment centre and can now read fluently at age four. The other parent gets anxious and enrolls her child, in the perhaps misguided belief that the programme at her child's pre-school is not good enough.

It is understandable that parents do not want to feel guilty that they did not do enough. Yet often, instead of accepting that their children are less academically inclined, parents try all means to help them succeed and get angry when there is little improvement after spending a fortune on tuition. The children, in turn, feel they are never good enough and will never be accepted for who they are — just what they can achieve.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD

One of the things parents need to realise, over the course of their child's education journey, is that early childhood needs to be treated as a stage quite separate from that of formal education which ensues in Primary 1.

Child development theories note that a child before the age of seven is not ready for this kind of formal learning. Parents should not jump the gun and try to prepare their kids for Primary 1 by teaching them spelling and Hanyu Pinyin, or sending them to all sorts of enrichment and tuition classes.

Not only is this counterproductive, it also creates a great deal of stress for both child and parent. Over-preparation also means that when the child enters P1, he or she easily gets bored in class and may become disruptive.

There are good reasons why spelling is introduced in Primary 1, just as Science is in Primary 3. Most children can read by phonics; only some can read by sight by age six. A

seven-year-old is biologically more prepared to withstand the stresses of learning spelling and accepting failure than a six-year-old.

## STRESS COMES FROM EXPECTATIONS, NOT THE SYSTEM

Education is not about finding ways to beat the system or prepare ahead. Some children need a longer time to learn and succeed — that is nature.

Let the system do the work of streaming students based on their strengths and weaknesses at a particular point in their education journey, so they can learn at the same pace with others of similar level.

As international studies like the latest ones show, Singapore's education system is world class, and not just because of its students' grades. It caters to the whole range of innate abilities and those who develop at different speeds, and provides multiple paths to success. Parents need to trust the system more.

Many have criticised it as a stressful system. It is not so if parents believe it is fine to allow their child to progress at his or her natural pace (having, of course, put in reasonable effort).

For instance, the place of the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) is being hotly debated. We can suggest all manner of ways to fine-tune it but, at the end of the day, if parents cannot accept their child's capabilities, no amount of tweaking the system can reduce stress levels.

So I am glad the Ministry of Education decided to stop announcing the top scorers in national exams. We should go beyond that and highlight those who went on to do well in life in spite of their PSLE results, to drive home the point.

## NOT QUITE NATURALLY GIFTED

Then there is the Gifted Education Programme. This is meant to cater to the naturally gifted, not those who undergo "special" training to ace the test. Yet, that is precisely what many parents put their children through. How is such a child genuinely gifted?

Similarly, the Direct School Admission exercise is for schools to admit students based on talents in specific sports and academic inclinations.

There are parents who get their children to take up a particular CCA (co-curricular activity), or golfing lessons for example, merely to get into the desired secondary school. Should they not focus instead on discovering and developing their children's natural talents and passions over the six years of primary education?

In any case, the secondary schools are likely to pick only students who have won medals in the required sport or awards in global competitions.

Finally, parents should be careful when choosing tuition or enrichment centres that trumpet the fact that their programmes produced top students. Often you see parents queuing up to enrol their kids. Yet ask yourself, why is it these centres do not always produce top students year after year? It depends on the inborn abilities of the students they get.

Nurture is only half of the equation. Nature is the other half.

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