

There was an article in the Straits Times on Oct 9: the headline reads "From F9 to 1st class honours". The story is about a boy who was busy playing soccer from primary school till Sec 3, when after failing his mathematics exam, decided to work hard to achieve something worthwhile. There are several factors that contributed to his successful turn around. In the story it was mentioned that he had 2 close friends who studied with him. He has a mother who always has faith in him. Other factors include his discipline and perseverance to work very hard to achieve his goal. And the last factor is that the boy most probably has an above average IQ. Not everyone can turn their grades around whenever he wishes. This brings me to my topic today. Nature or Nurture?

I have pondered over this debate for many years. My current view is that both are equally important but nurturing is easier when you have nature. Being early childhood educators, we have the privilege to observe how some children understand concepts faster than others. Those who are able to master after a few tries will be able to learn more within a given period of time while others need more practice. As a result, the early bloomers will breeze through the education system while the late bloomers will have to put in more effort.

I remember 2 of my genius classmates who skipped lectures during Junior college because they were very involved in their CCA. They photocopied lecture notes from us but still scored straight As in their 'O' and 'A' levels. Last year we had a gathering and we were talking about the education system and I asked them about their views on nature and nurture and how they managed to score so well. One of them replied, 'I just know that I am different from others when I was in primary school.' The other said, 'We already have analytical skills even before entering university instead of entering university to develop our analytical skills.' They are firm believers of nature and somehow they know they have it.

There is this debate in the papers about whether children should be trained for gifted programmes. My take is: giftedness is nature, it should not be something to be acquired through training. That's why it is called a gift, something which is given, not something to be pursued. I would rather be the best of the worst than to be the worst of the best. There is no need to go for special lessons to prepare your child for the gifted test in P3. Let the test do its job of sieving out the naturally gifted. If not, the child will be like the worst of the best if he just struggles to get in. Then no matter how hard he tries, he will be the last few and it won't be good on his self-esteem. It is better for him to remain in his existing school, work hard and be one of the best in his school because the gifted ones are transferred to another school. Even though the worst of the gifted might be better than the best of the non-gifted, children below 12 do not see things that way.

Whether or not our children are gifted, we should focus on some areas which will provide the foundation for their future success. The first is discipline. I wanted to become a doctor when I was 9, because at that time, our PM LKY said that the best vocations are doctors, lawyers and engineers. So I worked very hard from then till my 'A' levels. Even though I didn't become a doctor, I have developed the discipline to work through what I want to achieve and it continues to apply in many areas of my life. Getting children to be involved in sports or music will help greatly in developing their discipline. So I hope the new talent showcase will inspire some other children to take up music and develop the skill of discipline.

The second area is character. Wendy and I are very concerned about the social and emotional development of our school children. She always exceeds her period on Thursdays during our character development lessons. The children will ask questions and she will make it a point to answer them as much as she can to clarify their doubts. Recently one of our ex-students came to visit us during the PSLE marking days. We were very glad that the character development programme has benefited her as we could see that she has become a very well-behaved, respectful and sensible girl. She used to ask many questions during the programme and was very attentive to everything that Wendy said. It is important to ensure that our children develop to their fullest potential in terms of academic achievements. It is even more important to ensure that they develop a good personality so that they are well liked and respected by others.

The last area I wish to mention today is perseverance. Our children need to know that they can make mistakes and should continue trying until they can do it. Some children in our school are not willing to do something because they are afraid to make mistakes. They don't want to try because they are not confident of doing it correctly. This cripples their learning. My motto is: if you never try, you won't know whether you can do it or not. If the task is too difficult, we can help them to break it down into smaller tasks if possible. Sometimes it is about managing their expectations. If they expect to do it after the first try but couldn't, they will give up. We should encourage our children to try again whenever they didn't get it right even after the first few tries. Avoid over criticising or over praise. When we criticise too much, they won't try because they are afraid of being judged. When we over praise, they won't try because they are afraid of not being praised if they can't do it. Children seek our approval in whatever they do.

Like the mother of the boy in the story, we as parents should never give up on our children and have faith that they will be able to contribute to society when they grow up. In our busyness in making more money to send our children to all sorts of enrichment classes, let us not forget to take some time off to bond with our children and to understand their needs, discover their talents and provide them with the moral support necessary to ensure their future success. Thank you.