

A very good morning to all of you. Thank you for coming to support your child or children in this yearly event. This year our school has a special record: 3 siblings in the same session! Let's see if you can spot the 2 brothers later in the same performance.

Our theme this year is about occupations and dreams. When I grow up, what do I want to be? A doctor? An artist? A chef? A teacher?

When we talk about dreams and occupations, it should be our child's own dream and not our unfulfilled dreams. When I went for my blood test when I was down with dengue fever, a student doctor attended to me. I chatted with her and mentioned that I was a doctor wannabe. I was surprised when she replied, "It's alright, you still have your children." You know what was my reply? I told her, "I will not impose my unfulfilled dreams on my children. They can be whatever they want to be when they grow up". I felt like asking her whether she wanted to be a doctor because of her own dream or her parents' dream. But since she was going to draw my blood, I kept quiet. We should avoid saying things like 'We hope you can become a doctor' OR maybe things like 'Wow, our neighbour's son is a doctor'. If children are smart enough, they will be able to pick up such cues even when parents don't mean it that way. So when we ask our children what they want to be, we must also ask them WHY – so we know where they get the idea from. Their dreams may change, as they grow up and are exposed to different experiences in the world. Please don't be disappointed when their dreams are not something which you hope for.

It may not be a bad thing when our children do not have big dreams. Wendy and I would not have worked so hard if we knew that we chose to be preschool teachers. She applied to do dentistry and I applied for medicine and we both ended up in Computer Science. We worked very hard during our school days and she beat me in PSLE by scoring 4 A-stars, I only had 2. However, I beat her in the 'O' levels. She scored 4 A2s and 3 A1s. I scored 1 A2 and 7 A1s. I was also better than her for 'A' levels but in the end, she beat me again in University because I was busy going after her. Well, it was definitely worth the sacrifice.

As long as our children have a dream, our duty as parents is to help them keep the dream alive and work towards it. My parents didn't expect me to be anything other than being a filial son and not mix with bad company. Yes, they used to say that if I didn't study hard, I would end up "toh poon soh", meaning, clear rubbish. Actually there is nothing wrong with being a garbage collector. If not for them, I don't think Singapore can be a "clean" city. Without construction workers, will we have nice houses to stay in? Yet, when it comes to building living quarters for them, people complain to the government about building such quarters too close to their homes. Well maybe they are worried about security. But there are people who also petition against the construction of a nursing home in the vicinity of their homes. I felt very angry and disappointed at these people. It makes me wonder, "Won't these people grow old one day? How will they feel if the younger generation rejects them then?" If you read the kind of complaints they raised, you will be amazed that such people actually exist! We are more educated, but have we also become more snobbish?

The thing I am trying to highlight is that, being better educated should make us more sensitive to the needs of the people around us and to enable us to integrate better in society. If our focus is only on academics and in the end we lose sight of our values, we will eventually end up with many social problems.

Besides asking what our children want to be when they grow up, we should also ask them: What kind of person do you want to be? Helpful or Selfish? Respect or look down on others? Forgiving or blaming? Courteous or Rude? You see, it doesn't matter what occupation we are holding, because beneath all occupations is our being, who we are as a person.

We should not just succeed in what we do, but also in who we are. Whatever jobs our children hold, as long as they are obedient children, responsible spouses, involved parents, employees with the correct attitudes, they will be able to contribute to society in their own capacities. When we had our supermarket role play earlier this term, we assigned different roles to each child, such as cashier, packer, promoter, shoppers etc. Some children were understandably tired after performing their role for a while and wanted to switch roles with others. But I noticed a particular boy who behaved differently from the rest. He hardly stopped performing his role as a packer, conscientiously bringing the goods from the store and displaying them on the shelves for the shoppers. He was diligent, hardworking and responsible. These are the positive character traits in work attitude we wish to inculcate in our children.

All the pursuits and stresses in life are so that we can end up with some occupation that can give us a comfortable life. We all hope that our children do not have to suffer when they grow up. So we give them the best in life, a headstart, get into good schools etc. but I wish to remind everyone that it should not be done at the expense of our children's childhood. I really don't see the point of being ahead of the curriculum, since our school system does not allow students to skip levels. So why not just let our children enjoy some free time if they are able to keep up with school work and maybe interest them in other areas such as the arts and sports? For those who cannot keep up, we can support them by breaking the tasks into smaller portions or providing tuition. But if tuition doesn't really help, we should just allow our children to take the longer path. Try not to show too much of our disappointment in front of them. Instead, give them lots of encouragement and affirmation. Failure in school does not equate to failure in life. Steve Jobs and Bill Gates are both school drop-outs.

Now let's see if our education system facilitates the pursuit of our children's dreams. Our education system is world class not because it produces students who ace international competitions. In my opinion, it is world class because it provides many paths to success. I don't think it is a stressful system. It is stressful only when the children don't meet the parents' expectations. My children don't feel stressed by school work because Wendy and I accept whatever results they can achieve. We are more concerned about their character, whether they are rude to teachers or friends, whether they have tried their best and if they have, whether they are happy with their results. If you don't believe me, you can ask my children Marcus and Marie whether they feel any stress in school. They are both here today to help out. And no, I did not tell them how to answer if they were to be approached by parents today.

Do we feel ashamed when our children can't study? That they are not the academic type? Is it because we are Asians and face value is very important to us? We need to change how we look at other people whose children cannot study. When we don't look down on them, we can start to accept our children as they are. It is perfectly fine to be in foundation classes in Primary school. It is perfectly fine to be in ITE. They used to say that ITE means "It's the end." But according to Wednesday's straits times, it stands for IT's Excellent." They have fully equipped salons to train hairdressers as well as kitchens to train chefs and these students can eventually be their own bosses by setting up hair salons or restaurants. Whether our children are in GEP, Integrated Programme, express, normal or special stream, to me, it only means that the students take different routes to success. It is the endpoint that matters. Let our children enjoy the journey of studying, whether the journey takes 15 years or 20 years.

It doesn't matter what kind of education system we have, but as parents, we have to make sure that our children grow up with the correct value system. It is our responsibility to pass on the correct values by role modelling. It should not be outsourced to the schools or anyone else. We can work in partnership with teachers but the main responsibility for inculcating values lie with parents.

I apologise for not being able to elaborate on my points due to time constraint. I hope to do more via workshops or emails.

In conclusion, it is not about what we do for a living that matters, it is about who we are as a person that will define the kind of society we all live in.

Thank you.