

A very good morning to all of you. Thank you for coming to support your child or children in this yearly event.

This year's theme is on diversity, Celebrating diversity. My speech is not on diversity with regards to race or culture, but on talents and passions. Celebrating diversity in talents and passions.

As all of us know, every person is different and has different abilities and talents. Although society views and values talents differently, we should respect all individuals for who they are.

A person who is talented in sports should receive equal standing as someone who is talented in academics. Just because it is more difficult to make a living as a sportsman in Singapore doesn't mean we should look down on the talent. Talent is important. Without talent, it is harder to nurture. If we compare 2 athletes who spent the same hours of training in sprinting, the one who is talented will always outperform the other.

A much-touted theory suggests that practising any skill for 10,000 hours is sufficient to make you an expert. No innate talent? Not a problem. You just practice. Parents who believe this theory will send their child for sports training such as table tennis, swimming, fencing as young as 4 to 5 years old. Tiger Woods is probably the best example of this theory. He was introduced to golf before age 2 according to Wikipedia. But I am very sure there are many others who started early but did not make it to the top. So my conclusion is that Tiger Woods is talented in golf. In my opinion, an hour of training for him is like 5 hours of training for others. A person talented in a particular sport will take a shorter time to train to be a top sportsman.

I would like to stress that practice and hard work is very important besides having talent. It will bring a person to greater heights. John McEnroe, a former world no. 1 tennis player depended more on his talent than training to improve his strokes. He did not stay as No. 1 for long. On the other hand, Michael Jordan, a former top NBA basketball player, always tries to improve himself by learning from his mistakes. He is considered the greatest basketball player of all time.

Now let me talk about passion. How do I define passion?

When we are passionate about something, we want to spend time and effort on it. If you remember your courtship days, you may recall that you spend most of your awake time thinking about the person, finding out the interests and likes of the person, wanting to spend every minute with that person. That is passion. Well, you may call it infatuation. But I like to call it passion.

You can be very passionate about something but not good at it. I have met someone who is very passionate about music but could not play a piece without making a mistake. On the other hand, you can be talented in something but not passionate about it. The best success comes with being passionate about your talents.

This is what Sir Ken Robinson would term as being 'in the Element'. According to him, the point at which natural talent meets personal passion is called 'The Element'. In his book entitled, 'The Element', he gave many examples of people who are talented and passionate about what they are doing. He gave an example of a Singapore engineer who gave up his job to be a magician. When this magician is discovering tricks and honing his skills, he feels that he is in a timeless zone compared to his engineering job where every second seemed like an hour.

I was a systems analyst for 10 years. I was good in my IT work but I was not passionate about it. My passion is in education and I love children. So I started this school and it has been a fulfilling 12 years ever since.

Wendy wanted to be a teacher but her mother thought that she might be left on the shelf if she were to become one, (as her colleagues would be mostly female, her mother thought). So she studied Computer Science and that was how we met. I thank my mother-in-law for her foresight. If not I would not have met Wendy. And look at how things turn out in the end. She is now a teacher and fulfilling her passion. Initially she was not supportive of me giving up my well-paying job to start the school. Indeed the initial years were very rough. But now she realises that this is the most meaningful job she could ever do. She looks forward to seeing the children on Mondays. Sir Ken Robinson would say that Wendy has found her 'element'.

So, how does talent and passion tie in with the development of our children? To me, education is not about making our children do well in all the subjects available in school and getting a degree in the end. Nowadays, having a degree is no guarantee of continuous employment. In the TV programme 'IT Figures', the percentage of graduates who were laid off over the past 3 years is rising compared to other educational levels. More than 50% laid off last year were degree holders. The numbers were only 1/3 in 2010. In the opinion pages of the Straits Times last Monday which talked about underemployment, there was a 16% increase of degree holders who were underemployed in 2013 compared to the year before. The other school leavers had falling underemployment over the same period. This means that there are many graduates with degrees who cannot find jobs that match their skill sets. What's worse is that some degree holders have high expectations and might not want to get a job that requires lower qualifications. So they remain unemployed for some time.

In future, it might be more practical to equip our children with a basic skill set that they are passionate and talented in rather than getting a general degree. With more options for continuous education, they can upgrade their skills when they know what is required of them in their job. My son's strength is in sciences and his is very interested in forensic science. He hopes to join the police force specialising in criminal investigations. My daughter is strong in mathematics and interested in creative arts. She wants to be a teacher like her art club teacher. Both of them are not talented in sports or music.

What if your child doesn't seem to be talented or interested in anything? Don't worry. Focus on developing their work ethics and work attitude. If every worker is ethical in their work, we do not need so much supervision and rules to monitor everyone. The worker will complete a given task in an efficient and timely manner. If a person cannot make use of his talent in his work but he is ethical and has a good working attitude, I believe he will do well in his career. This is what I appreciate about my teachers. All of them are ethical and do not take the chance to chit-chat and do nothing. Hence, rest assured that your children are in good hands. We had a teacher who couldn't get used to the culture, fell very sick due to the stress and eventually resigned.

In conclusion, do not feel at a lost if you cannot discover your child's talent or passion. There are many routes to success and many ways that your child can lead a fulfilling life. Always be supportive in whatever your child is interested in and enjoy the journey with him/her. Thank you.