From straight Fs to university

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Now at university, I am careful not to kill my enthusiasm for learning by being overly-concerned with grades.

I READ with interest Nelson Quah’s letter, “ITE as a diploma route for late bloomers?” (June 7). The term “late bloomer” is of particular interest to me. I am myself a very late bloomer.

I enrolled at Ngee Ann Polytechnic as a full-time student at the age of 34 and then at the Singapore Management University (SMU) at the age of 38. Prior to all that, I was a straight-F student.

I am no psychologist, so I cannot offer a credible explanation as to why some people are late bloomers.

But I would like to share what I think might have caused me to be one.

When I was young, my parents told me I had to study hard or my future would be bleak. I was yelled at whenever I did badly for exams.

My teachers used to tell me that I would have to study hard if I wished to do well for my exams and go on to a good school. Their lessons were geared towards helping students to do well for tests and exams.

It did not seem to matter to them what I learnt in school. Only results mattered.

Because of the heavy emphasis on results, I could not appreciate what I was learning. I found no joy or motivation in learning and fared poorly in school.

All the berating I got from my parents and teachers only made me dread learning even more.

When I was about 28, most of my friends got married and I became increasingly lonely. I thought the best way to counter loneliness was to resort to reading. So I went to the National Library to read any book that appealed to me.

In the absence of an emphasis on results and coercion, I found reading a great pleasure and began to read more. Very soon, almost all my hours of leisure were spent on books.

I decided one day that I would capitalise on my newly-acquired love for reading by going back to school.

I started off by attending the Institute of Technical Education’s night classes.

The joy of learning gave me the motivation to clear all the hurdles I faced and eventually arrive at SMU.

Throughout my days in polytechnic and, now at university, I was careful not to kill my enthusiasm for learning by being overly-concerned with grades.

I always try to maintain a balance between what is practical and what gave me joy and satisfaction.

People may argue that we have to be practical in life. But being too practical has not done me much good.

I would like to suggest to parents that, instead of being too concerned with their children’s grades and/or getting into the schools of their choice, they should seek means and ways to help their children develop an interest in learning.

There is an intrinsic reward in learning itself, and parents should assist their children in discovering it.

One of the ways parents could do this is to not force their children pursue the adults’ own aspirations.

They should try and detect their children’s natural flair or inclinations, and see how they best can support it.

There is a risk in placing too much emphasis on results and that is that it may backfire.