

Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Psalm 126:5

As urban dwellers, we may read Psalm 126:5 with some puzzlement. Why does a farmer sow with tears? And what's so joyful about reaping a harvest?

It was only after I was able to observe at close range how padi was planted and harvested in a small plot – like in ancient times, without the help of modern machinery - that I better understood this verse.

Sowing – the act of planting – is back-breaking work. A farmer starts work early in the morning and meticulously plants a small clump of seedlings – one at a time by hand, ensuring adequate spacing between the rows of newly planted seedlings. Often the farmer works well into the afternoon, braving the scorching sun.

Once sowing is done, the farmer has to continually tend to the seedlings. Each day revolves around monitoring water levels and soil conditions, weeding, maintaining the bunds and protecting the tender shoots from pests. There is no assurance that the seedlings will grow and produce the desired padi. It is no wonder that come harvest time, reaping is done with joyful singing.

Over the years, I have come to liken Psalm 126:5 to the work that parents and teachers do at home and in school. Let me distill three lessons from the verse.

Firstly, just as sowing is done individually, one seedling at a time, educating and nurturing a child must be done likewise. No two children - even siblings - are alike. So parents have to adapt their approaches to connect with their children and to teach them the values that will accompany them for life. The challenge for schools to individualize and customize education to each child is a major one, considering the number of students involved. While systems and processes must be put in place to increase efficiency of a school, nothing can replace a caring and respected teacher who as a significant adult model and mentor, continually builds a nurturing relationship with his or her students.

Secondly, like sowing and the follow up work till harvest time, nurturing and educating a child requires energy, effort and perseverance – and is not for the faint hearted or those averse to hard and sustained work. Parents and teachers must have the commitment and expertise to guide, affirm, admonish,

direct and build the child's confidence and moral fibre throughout his or her formative years.

Thirdly, just as the farmer sows in the present time for a harvest in the future, parents and teachers must view their work as an investment in the child's future. Our children and students are work-in-progress and the qualities and dispositions we hope to nurture and develop in them may take time and repeated effort before they become evident. From my experience as a father and an educator, I have found that some patience, much faith and a huge dose of humour and healthy optimism do go a long way.

To all fellow parents and teachers who have been diligently sowing – hopefully with not too many tears – let's keep at it for the days of reaping with songs of joy are in the offing.

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