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The author scored 185 for his PSLE but later did well in SMU.

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Growing up, I was an average student who attended a neighbourhood primary school. I did what was needed: I attended class, did my homework (resorting to copying my friends' at times) and spent my free time after school playing football with friends at the void deck.

As an average student, I wasn't exactly surprised when I got my Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) results: My PSLE aggregate score was 185.

Yet I was disappointed and sad as my twin brother had scored 208 for his PSLE. This meant that he would be able to complete his secondary school education in four years in the Express stream while I had to take a year longer via the Normal stream.

My brother and I are best friends. We were in the same class throughout primary school and being football fans, we played together every day after school.

But my result meant that we would be apart in secondary school. To make things worse, it was demoralising to be asked why I fared so poorly compared to my brother in my PSLE and to see my peers who had scored above 230 choosing prestigious secondary schools.

I ended up going to a neighbourhood secondary school near my home. In class, I found it hard to concentrate on my studies as my classmates were not interested in studying at all. There were instances when only eight students out of 35 turned up for class.

It was quite a different world for my brother in the Express stream, whose classmates were more serious and frequently studied together.

One particular incident in Secondary 1 remain etched in my memory.

In the midst of a science class, my classmates were, as usual, occupied with their phones, talking to each other, doing everything but listening to the teacher.

At one point, almost everyone in class turned their tables to face the back of the classroom and started doing the "Kallang Wave".

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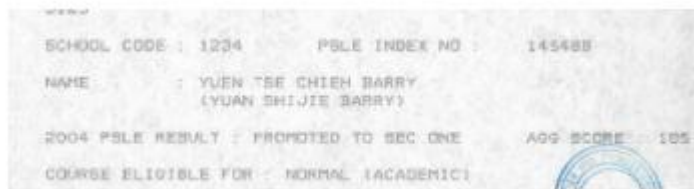
Only two classmates and I insisted that it was rude and disruptive and decided not to join in, despite the immense peer pressure to do so.

“Barry, come on, what are you doing? Everyone is turning back, can you don’t be such a smart alec?” they taunted me.

Our teacher was so upset, he left the classroom in tears. I ran out to try to comfort him but he walked off.

That was the last we saw him in our class as he applied to teach another group of students. I felt sad as he was a very good teacher.

The episode was a wake-up call and a turning point for me. I told myself that I had to study hard so that I could be promoted to the Express stream in Sec 3.



The author's PSLE result slip.

So I worked doubly hard, often waking up at 4am to study.

My efforts paid off as I eventually ranked within the top five of my cohort and earned the right to join my brother’s Express class in Sec 3. From there, I knew that the journey ahead will only get tougher.

Initially, I struggled to catch up with my classmates in the Express stream. I had to put in double the effort just to understand what the teacher was saying in class.

With the help of my twin who was always willing to take a step back and help me before moving on to the next topic, I was slowly able to catch up with the classes.

And after two years of perseverance, my hard work paid off and I did well enough for my O Levels to enter a junior college and afterwards, Singapore Management University (SMU) to study business.

In SMU, I noticed that the majority of my peers were from prestigious secondary schools. I asked around and could not find anyone with a lower PSLE score than me. Many were surprised when they found out I nearly failed my PSLE and had to overcome considerable odds to make it to university.

I was initially quite intimidated, but I told myself to just try my best and by the end of the first year, I realised that I was performing better than them.

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That gave me confidence and the belief that as long as I put in the hard work, I could do as well as, if not better than, the students who came from top schools in Singapore.

Despite probably having the lowest PSLE scores in my batch, with determination and hard work, I ended up as one of the better-performing students.

I was fortunate to receive scholarships and graduated with top honours (Summa Cum Laude).

One year into my first job as a management associate, I got a message on LinkedIn from the chief executive of a listed firm asking if I was keen to work for him.

He said that he liked my niche experience despite being relatively new to the workforce. I jumped at the chance to work there as a business analyst in the CEO's office.

Today, I head the insight and analytics team at another global multinational company. I have big dreams and hope to earn a master's degree and launch my own business in the future.

My experiences show one thing: Don't let setbacks deter you from your goals. Rise above those challenges and you will emerge even stronger.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Barry Yuen is the lead of insights and analytics at a global multinational company. He graduated from Singapore Management University with top honours (Summa Cum Laude) in business management, majoring in finance and strategy.