

Watching an old family video recently, I was transported back to my childhood, reminding me of my old self. I was sitting quietly, clinging to my mother, while other kids around me were busy shouting and running around. A decade later, I realized how much I have changed. When I was little, I was a source of laughter and teasing because of my squinted eyes. I felt that everywhere I went, people stared at me. Consequently, it was excruciating for me to socialize and make friends. Wherever I went, I always tried to hide and hope people will not notice me. While conversing with others, I always looked down, hoping they would not see my eyes. Although I had an operation to improve the squint when I was ten, I still felt inferior to others I met. The turning point came when I got admitted to MATRI, a boarding school in a remote area in Perlis, Malaysia, which changed my personality dramatically.

Honestly, I felt miserable when my father enrolled me there. I hated going to a new place where I have to meet new people. I would rather stay at home, safe in my own shell. But, as the saying goes- “a ship is safe in its harbor, but that is not what it’s built for”. Because of my insecurity, initially, I had a terrible time. I spent the first few months crying each night, thinking about home. But this is when I found one of my strengths - perseverance. I always looked at my friends and told myself, “If they can do it, why can’t I?” Although I felt like crying each time I called home, I tried hard to hide it from my family. One of the most important things that helped me adapt was the supportive atmosphere of the school. Everybody there was eager to help me come out of the cocoon I had built around myself. On my first night, seeing that I was lonely, one of the seniors came to me and tried hard to start a conversation. This continued with efforts of friends who ate together with me, woke me up each morning and helped me overcome every difficulty I encountered. From this, I learnt the importance of understanding and living as part of a community. After a while, it dawned on me the impact of having true friends. Time went by painfully at first, but gradually, the sorrow I felt receded. The feelings that made me distant and aloof gradually changed into a sense of belonging and warmth.

A significant lesson I learned is that hardship is not a barrier to success. In fact, it can be a catalyst, a stepping stone to success. Since MATRI is in a remote area, it was not as well-endowed as many schools in Malaysia. I had to adapt myself to live with little comfort. In my early years in the school, we had to live with no tap water during the day time because of low water pressure, eat together using a large tray (five students per tray), and, occasionally, when all the glasses were used-up, drink with our hands. Actually, these challenges made us feel thankful for what we usually take for granted at home. We took turns to serve food in the dining hall for other students and washed large pots used to cook our food. Since the school does not have many cleaners, we gathered every week to clean the whole school. These tasks not only taught us how to clean but also instilled a sense of responsibility, camaraderie and togetherness. Even extra-curricular activities lacked proper facilities. Ironically, MATRI almost always win first place in marching, public speaking, science projects, volleyball and hockey at state level competitions, and was even successful at several national level competitions. What was the secret to our success? The gusto to do the best, despite shortcomings, as well as cooperation and support of the whole school, inspired us all to excel and reached beyond what we imagined were possible.

Leadership is another skill that was honed in MATRI. Unlike other schools, students' affairs in enforcement of rules and the organization of programs in MATRI are implemented and organized by students. The teachers only gave instructions and advice when students encounter problems. When I was in the first form, I was quite amazed by this. I observed that most of the time, it was the students in upper forms that spoke in front and gave advice to us. They were the ones who made sure we followed the rules, inquired if we faced problems, and organized activities for us. Consequently, we became very close to them. When I became a senior, my friends and I were the ones who took their place. This was when we learned that living is not only about caring for ourselves, it is also about caring for others. When we were in this position, we realized that the responsibility was not as easy as it looked. We had to hold meetings at night to plan, and discuss problems and actions we should take. In my fifth form, I was given an even greater responsibility to stay in the same dormitory with students in the lower forms. This experience immensely developed my leadership and problem solving skills. More importantly, it taught me how to understand people and deal with their problems. My leadership skills were also developed through planning and organizing programs. I was frequently given the task of being the secretary to write proposals, paperwork, letters and running to and fro the office to get the program's clearance.

That was how I was transformed from a boy who felt inferior to everybody to someone who welcomes new experiences to grow and reach out to others. After five years in MATRI, it is time to leave the place that taught me to look beyond physical short-comings to reach for the sky. Bless the world for all the imperfections that make us stronger and better humans.