

The tuition industry is part of a system that undermines our commitment to a meritocratic society, which assumes a level educational playing field where all students are given an equal chance to succeed, say the writers.
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China cracking down on private tuition: A lesson for S'pore?

It's an industry worth over a billion dollars here. It costs parents plenty, but what of the impact on equality in education and stress on children?

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For *The Straits Times*

Shock. Dismay. Indignation. If you're an investor, these might have been your emotions when you learnt of the recent announcement by the Chinese government that institutions offering school curriculum tuition would be required to operate on a not-for-profit basis and that foreign investment in the sector would be banned.

Needless to say, global investors in China's red-hot US\$100 billion (S\$135 billion) private tutoring and online education sector were left reeling by last month's announcement. However, if you're like us, the parents of a Singaporean child, your reaction may have been very different. For

us, the announcement suggested that the \$1.4 billion Singapore tuition industry could also be changed.

Given that China's private tuition sector is more than one hundred times larger than Singapore's, the Chinese government's move signals the depth of its commitment to rein in an industry blamed for impoverishing parents, stressing children, and contributing to the nation's plunging birth rate.

The intervention is not just limited to the stock market, either. State teachers found to engage in private tutoring will be fired and have their licences revoked. Clearly, the country's highest leaders see fundamental issues of equality and social cohesion at play. President Xi Jinping made this clear last month when he announced that the state, not private enterprise, should be responsible for the education of the nation's children.

A MERITOCRATIC SOCIETY

Here in Singapore, we face many of the same issues. While sending children to tuition may be the norm, it's not an opportunity available to all.

Children of parents unable to afford the cost may be left behind, scoring poorly on tests, and, even worse, coming to internalise the idea that they're not as bright as their classmates whose parents can afford to send them to tuition.

It also further differentiates the education available across schools, as teachers at schools where most students can depend on private tuition are able to assign more challenging work, finish the required subjects faster and set aside more time for revision.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) shows many things, including the world-leading

performance of Singapore's young people on tests of reading, mathematics and science. But it also shows that the gap between socio-economically advantaged students in Singapore and their less advantaged classmates is not only significantly higher than the OECD average, but also has risen since 2009.

Thus, the tuition industry is part of a system that undermines our commitment to a meritocratic society, which assumes a level educational playing field where all students are given an equal chance to succeed.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES

Much like China, Singapore is facing the same demographic challenge of a low and declining birth rate. One factor may be the growing cost of private tuition. Numbers from Singapore Statistics' Household Expenditure Survey show a more than 20 per cent rise in average monthly expenditures on educational services between 1993 and 2018, despite a drop in the number of school-age children.

They also confirm that expenditures differ markedly according to income: households in the top quintile spent more than four times as much on tuition as those in the bottom quintile.

Lowering the financial burden of having children and reducing some of the stress associated with their education would align with national objectives of making it easier for all Singaporeans to have more children. It would also better enable Singapore to address its own demographic challenges through organic growth rather than through immigration.

REDEFINING SUCCESS

But most importantly, placing limits on the tuition industry and

reorienting its activities away from the school curriculum could help create an environment where children can play, read books for fun, engage their creativity and learn healthy habits of physical activity with benefits for a lifetime. Maybe they'd even spend time watching the clouds drift by or watching bugs in the grass.

These are not activities normally associated with a Singaporean childhood. Everyone knows stories or has personal examples of how stressful the current educational environment can be.

A child of parents we know began suffering from insomnia at the age of nine as she grew increasingly anxious about the PSLE. Despite years of tuition in Chinese, English and maths, her test results were not enough to win admission to the schools she and her parents aspired to. She was crushed, and now at the age of 13, suffers from low self-esteem and is increasingly withdrawn. Not all of this is the fault of the tuition industry. But it certainly didn't help.

Clearly, there are other, better ways for young people to learn, grow, and succeed. While Singapore may rank near the top of the Pisa tables, other countries where private tuition is unheard of, like Estonia, Canada, Finland, or Ireland, score only marginally lower.

At the same time, there is a growing body of evidence that standardised tests like Pisa do little to measure real-world intelligence.

Even in Singapore, success is possible without tuition. In terms of social mobility, one of the most successful people we interviewed for our book *Hard At Work: Life In Singapore* was a young entrepreneur who attributed his success to having been thrown into the working world at the age of 14.

At the time we interviewed him, he had founded four successful businesses, was studying part-time for a master's degree, and was looking forward to retiring at the age of 45. Tuition doesn't necessarily create successful people. It creates successful test-takers.

At the same time, however, the story of our successful entrepreneur underlines deeply how the tuition industry is embedded in economy and society: franchised tuition schools make up the core of his business. Describing the opening of his first school, he recalled how parents were lined up down the corridor waiting to register. Now, he says, his friends joke that he changes cars like other people change their shirt.

Clearly, for our entrepreneur as an individual, the demand for private tuition represents a money-making opportunity that's simply too good to pass up. Yet as a society, we must ask ourselves if there are other values more important than simply making money.

MOVING FORWARD

The Singapore Government has already taken important first steps to reshape the nation's education system.

At the primary school level, it has reduced the reliance on testing.

At the university level, the Ministry of Education's initiatives to promote interdisciplinary education and lifelong learning reflect an awareness that our future economy will need creative and adaptable problem-solvers, not test-takers.

But it could do more. One easy initiative would be to shift the start of the school day later.

A large body of research confirms the advantages of a later start. Starting school later would not only help our young people be healthier and perform better, but also reduce the need parents feel to keep their children occupied after school hours.

At the same time, the move could serve as an interim step providing businesses time to pivot from tuition to enrichment and other activities. Doing so could allow us to achieve important social goals while avoiding unnecessary economic hardship.

Whether as individuals, as families, or as a nation, the Covid-19 crisis has given us a unique opportunity to pause, to reflect, and even to remake important elements of our lives and our society.

The time is right to reflect on the role of the tuition industry and its role in creating Singaporeans and Singapore able to face an uncertain future with confidence.

Real change is possible. China can do it. And we can, too.

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