

A Children's Day wish for schools: Smaller class sizes

There are many benefits to be had, from minimising the impact of Covid-19 to better mental health and the fostering of critical thinking skills

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Singapore schoolchildren have much to be thankful for despite the vicissitudes they have endured these past two pandemic-stricken years.

With home-based learning, they have not experienced the same degree of disruption to their learning as their foreign counterparts. Covid-19 clusters at schools have been relatively small and quickly brought under control by efficient school administrators. While not perfect, our education system has reacted swiftly and decisively to the challenges associated with the ongoing health crisis.

There is, however, one specific feature of our national education policy that has remained relatively unchanged despite occasional calls for reform. That is the average number of students assigned to each classroom.

Class sizes of up to 40 students have been the norm in Singapore's public schools for decades, during which many schools have been shut due to falling birth rates and, consequently, student enrolment numbers.

But why has there been so much circumspection towards reducing class sizes in our primary, secondary and post-secondary schools, even as the then Education Minister Ong Ye Kung declared in 2018 that "with good teachers, smaller class sizes help the students"?

The strategy pursued since then has been to give schools some flexibility to configure class sizes to cater to the needs of different groups of students, based on their learning needs and abilities, as well as the nature of the subject matter taught.

The Education Ministry may not have gone further to reduce the default size of classrooms in



A desirable teacher-to-student ratio would be one which gives the teacher a realistic chance to get to know his students as individuals, over the course of their classroom interactions, without members of the latter group having to compete for the teacher's attention, says the writer. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

schools for several reasons relating to how much it can or should spend on each student, whether every teacher can realise the benefits of smaller-group teaching automatically just by having fewer students in each classroom or possibly doubts over whether the extent of the benefits reaped is significant enough to justify this policy shift.

However, just as Covid-19 has forced us to rethink the national policies that govern the different facets of our social fabric, perhaps it is time to do the same and pursue further reforms for this particular issue as well.

The benefits of having fewer students in each classroom are very obvious, particularly in the light of the health-related concerns brought on by the pandemic, which does not seem to be going away any time soon.

Benefits of going smaller

1 GREATER PERSONAL SPACE FOR EACH STUDENT

Smaller class sizes will enhance social distancing efforts and, with

greater physical distance between students, possibly facilitate mask-free interaction among vaccinated individuals. Fewer classmates also means that there would be fewer affected students should one of them get diagnosed with the coronavirus.

2 PERSONALISED TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTIONS

With fewer students to corral, teachers can pay more attention to the particular learning needs of, or learning difficulties experienced by, their students. This could lead to superior pedagogical outcomes, especially for students who struggle with online learning channels or communicating with their masked instructors.

3 MORE ATTENTION TO MENTAL HEALTH

Teaching smaller classes gives teachers the opportunity to establish a stronger rapport with their students. This could also help in the early detection and alleviation of stress-related mental

health issues experienced by more vulnerable individuals.

More importantly, these benefits will clearly endure beyond the Covid-19 pandemic era as they will help transform our classrooms into conducive environments in which essential skills can be more readily acquired by our students.

The greater degree of classroom interactivity that is associated with smaller class sizes creates more opportunities for discussion, dialogue and debate.

These interactions lay the foundations for critical thinking and play a vital role in shaping positive attitudes towards lifelong learning.

Teachers are far more likely to succeed in encouraging their students to speak up in smaller class settings. This is beneficial to all schoolchildren, regardless of their specific learning abilities or difficulties.

The difficulties of maintaining student-teacher engagement in classrooms with many students is magnified when lessons are conducted online, where it is practically impossible to pay any

attention to the non-verbal cues of dozens of remotely located individuals framed within tiny windows on the teacher's computer screen.

Necessity, not luxury

One of the debates from the recent controversy surrounding the future of liberal arts education in Singapore is whether small class sizes are a justifiable "luxury" in tertiary education institutions.

I would argue that small class sizes are, in fact, a "necessity" for younger schoolgoers because they are at a more impressionable age, if we are serious about setting up a learning infrastructure that will benefit them further down their educational journeys.

Instead of being passive recipients of knowledge that is transmitted from their teachers, students in smaller classrooms are more likely to become active learners who pursue their learning interests further and with greater depth.

The benefits of smaller classrooms could extend beyond school hours as well. Better

learning outcomes in school settings will relieve pressure on those who may otherwise resort to remedial tuition to fill in the gaps left by over-stretched teachers.

And while there are many reasons why the prevalence of after-school tuition has increased exponentially over the years, I believe that its popularity has a lot to do with the pedagogical advantages associated with small-group teaching.

Many former teachers who have moved into this sector have publicly stated that they are better able to do their jobs when they focus their attention on smaller groups of students. Such views should not be ignored, especially if having smaller class sizes helps retain talented teachers within the education system.

As Singapore has no natural resources to develop other than its people, investing in the quality of the learning environment of our schoolchildren is undeniably a worthwhile goal, even if we may have divergent views on how to go about doing this.

Whatever grounds offered by policymakers for their decisions should take into account the relevant practical experiences of teachers and students in Singapore, rather than simply drawing from foreign countries with different socio-economic circumstances and cultural nuances.

If we agree that the goals of the Singapore education system go beyond the acquisition of substantive knowledge, as measured by standardised testing scores, and include development of soft skills, ethical values and other intangibles, then the way forward must be to lower the average teacher-to-student ratio across all our public educational institutions. A desirable teacher-to-student ratio would be one which gives the teacher a realistic chance to get to know his students as individuals, over the course of their classroom interactions, without members of the latter group having to compete for the teacher's attention.

If we are able to pour resources into developing new artificial intelligence technologies to correct the grammar mistakes of our students, then perhaps we should also consider pursuing a simpler, albeit less flashy, initiative that will have a direct and immediate impact on each and every child in every Singapore school – by giving classes of 25 or fewer schoolchildren a try.

Taking steps to shrink the size of each classroom further could yield both immediate and longer-term benefits to the well-being of Singapore's children and its future.

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