

# GEP, as I knew it, is gone. What lies ahead?

The programme had its drawbacks but also made a difference. Let's harness what we learnt from it.



If the revamp of the Gifted Education Programme is done well, the programme's benefits can be multiplied across schools, expanding opportunities and allowing more children to realise their potential in various domains. This would be a boon for Singapore, which relies primarily on human capital for economic progress, says the writer. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG



**Terence Ho**

As a former Gifted Education Programme (GEP) student, I had mixed feelings about Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's announcement at the National Day Rally that the GEP would be revamped from a centralised programme in nine schools to one that benefits high-ability pupils across all primary schools.

On the one hand, I appreciate the rationale for this policy move: it would foster greater inclusivity, spreading the benefits of a gifted education to many more pupils.

On the other hand, I share with a number of my former classmates a sense of loss at the impending closure of a programme that gave us so much. While there are good reasons for decentralisation, we should recognise that the programme made a difference. For the new

approach to succeed, it will be necessary to equip all schools with the resources and know-how to support high-ability children.

So, what benefits and challenges will the new system bring?

## **GREATER INCLUSIVITY AND POROSITY**

The revamp of the GEP is congruent with other reforms to the education system to broaden opportunities and avoid locking children into preset pathways early in life.

Streaming of pupils may have helped improve the efficiency of instruction, but it also had the inadvertent effect of pigeonholing them according to academic ability. There was stigma attached to being in the "normal stream"; some lost confidence in their abilities as a result.

The GEP, too, risked breeding elitism among those who were selected for it, and envy among those who were not. There were also fewer opportunities for interaction among those from different streams.

Streaming in primary school

was discontinued in 2008 in favour of "subject-based banding". The latter allows curricula to be matched to children's interest and ability in particular subjects, without the attendant drawbacks of streaming. From 2024, full subject-based banding has been implemented in secondary schools.

Concurrently, a more inclusive approach has been taken for the intellectually gifted. Since 2004, gifted education in secondary schools has been decentralised, allowing each school to design its own programme. Today, high-ability students can choose from a range of options including integrated programmes, the International Baccalaureate, and the specialised curricula of the NUS High School of Maths and Science, Arts School and Sports School.

Pedagogical tools initially developed for the GEP, such as project work, have been adopted more widely across schools. A logical extension of this is to broaden gifted education beyond the nine primary schools that currently host the programme.

Similar to subject-based

banding, children can now be identified for higher-ability programmes if they show aptitude in particular subject areas, without having to excel in all subjects. The greater porosity of the new programmes will also benefit those who take longer to develop and manifest their abilities, as there will be multiple entry points between Primary 4 and 6. A further advantage is that pupils who join these programmes need not uproot themselves from their existing schools and circles of friends.

The GEP revamp has parallels with the replacement of Yale-NUS College by NUS College, which will extend the benefits of a liberal arts education to a much larger group of students in the National University of Singapore. Like Yale-NUS College, the GEP admits a very small number of pupils. There is a strong case to cast the net wider, so that the pedagogy developed can benefit many more.

## **REDUCING COMPETITION AND STRESS**

The GEP selection process has inadvertently become a

high-stakes test for some pupils who come under parental or self-imposed pressure to qualify. This runs contrary to the Ministry of Education's aim of moving away from a fixation on examinations and cultivating a love for learning.

Enrichment classes aimed at helping children qualify for the GEP have sprung up, adding to the stress and competition. Replacing the GEP screening test with a more holistic assessment to identify high-ability pupils – one that includes teacher observation and feedback – would reduce opportunities to game the system and blunt the motivation for "hothousing" young children.

Besides, the disappointment of those who are not selected for the GEP should be weighed against the benefit to the few who make it through. In fact, admittance to the programme hardly defines one's future prospects. Among those in my cohort who were not selected for the GEP, many have gone on to attain success in both academic and non-academic domains, sometimes surpassing the achievements of their GEP peers. The outsized focus on

qualification for GEP may be at odds with the cultivation of a growth mindset, which is far more important for success in life.

## **WHAT MIGHT BE LOST AND HOW THIS CAN BE MITIGATED**

This is not to say the GEP is without value. Among my GEP classmates and friends are those who found understanding and acceptance among kindred spirits in the programme. Parents of GEP students have cited the benefits, both pedagogical and social, that the programme has brought to their neurodivergent children. Over the years, the programme has enabled a number of children from less privileged backgrounds to grow into their strengths, raise their ambition and be stretched by their gifted peers.

When the secondary GEP was under review in 2004, I organised a lunch for the then Minister for Education to speak with former GEP students. The students, who came from different cohorts, all spoke about how the GEP programme had positively impacted them.

Whether the GEP has bred elitism is probably for the wider society to judge; my own sense is that the majority of GEP students are well-adjusted and do not harbour elitist attitudes that would make it difficult for them to fit into society.

The question is whether the decentralised system will cater just as well to the needs of the intellectually gifted. The expertise to help such children to flourish, which today has been honed in nine schools, will need replicating across many more schools. Otherwise, some of the precocious children, particularly the neurodivergent and those with less parental support, will not benefit to the same extent.

The experience gained over 40 years of gifted education will have to be disseminated to a larger cadre of teachers distributed across the education system, so they are equipped with the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the intellectually gifted.

What may help is the pooling of specialised resources across schools, given the plan for selected pupils – who could gain from being stretched further – to have the option of attending after-school modules at designated schools nearby. This will allow them to explore their interests in greater depth, and bring them in contact with peers who share similar interests and aptitude.

If the revamp is done well, the benefits of the GEP can be multiplied across schools, expanding opportunities and allowing more pupils to realise their potential in various domains. This would be a boon for Singapore, which relies primarily on human capital for economic progress.

Forty years from the inception of the GEP, we should acknowledge both the programme's contributions and its drawbacks, while harnessing what has been learnt to help schools design better and more inclusive programmes.

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