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Need to evaluate Finnish education in its context

FROM KWAN JIN YAO

We are familiar with the criticisms of Singapore's educational system that it is too stressful and too competitive, and that an emphasis on rote learning and regurgitation for national examinations is unhealthy.

In his letter "S'pore should aspire to Finnish, Swiss education systems" (Sept 15), the writer points also to the ubiquity of tuition.

His solution for Singapore to aspire to the Finnish or Swiss system, though, stops short of the details.

“Broad, superficial contrasts, without considering the countries' characteristics and specifics of their educational system, will not enrich the discourse.”

There appears to be an obsession with the Finnish in public discussions. In last year's Our Singapore Conversation sessions, "let Singapore be like Finland" was a common reply when participants were asked about improvements to Singapore's educational system.

However, the "whats" and "hows" were missing: What approaches can Singapore adopt from Finland and the implications for educators? How can we compare the strengths and weaknesses of the systems? Are we concerned with primary and secondary

schools or universities?

While I loathe the overuse of "trade-offs" as a trope, the point on context is important.

It is convenient to cite Finland as an inspiration without understanding how pedagogies work or how parts of its educational system may or may not be useful in Singapore. Specificity matters.

Some have called for teachers here to obtain a master's degree, like their Finnish counterparts, even though they have performed well without it.

According to this year's Teaching and Learning International Survey, the large principal- and teacher-to-pupil ratios seem to be bigger concerns.

Some have egged Singapore to emulate the egalitarianism of Finland's elementary schools, but forget the sparse geographical distribution of cities in the latter, therefore allowing for greater diversity within its schools.

Some hold Finland as the gold standard, yet overlook its fall in the Programme for International Student Assessment in 2012, and that the country's polytechnics and universities are undergoing reform for its economy and competitiveness.

This is not unlike Singapore, with its Applied Study in Polytechnics and ITE Review.

We should not shun the Finnish case study, but we should use it more deliberately and fairly.

Broad, superficial contrasts, without considering the countries' characteristics and specifics of their educational system, will not enrich the discourse.

And even while we look abroad for inspiration, let us look to Singapore for action and implementation.

Seniors' attitude critical for success at work

FROM SURESH N SHAH

I share the writer's views in the letter "Age does not dictate job competence" (Sept 16). If I may add, attitude is critical for seniors to succeed in a job.

My experience on a recent project is that Singapore industry values rich experience, as seniors can start work from Day 1.

The concern, though, is about their attitude at work. Instead of problem-solving, many may interfere with young managers: "Why do you do it like that? You should do it like this (my way, all these years)."

I call it a "success trap" mindset and the fear is young managers may

leave as a result.

Seniors should know the world is changing fast and there are many ways of doing things.

They should keep abreast of the latest developments, whether in information technology, management practices or technical processes.

I talked to seniors in the said project and found that they had not heard of SAP software.

I do not expect them to be experts, but they should at least know there is software such as SAP and PeopleSoft.

Many of them think they are computer literate because they can use the Internet and email. Coaching clinics can help them.

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