

Guiding the Young to Make the Right Choices

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Introduction

As Singapore enters its fortieth year of independence as a nation state, the question of education becomes one of the issues of paramount importance. Traditionally a society which placed a high value on academic learning and examinations, with an increasing affluence, cosmopolitan outlook and a liberal policy of attracting foreign talents, the changing needs brought about by the bewildering, dramatic economic global developments has also confronted the Singapore educational system with serious challenges ahead.

Hitherto, the emphasis had been on scientific technology with its focus on engineering and the major hard sciences such as medicine and physics, which provided the engines of growth responsible for Singapore's spectacular economic success since 1965. However, with increased globalization, many new discoveries in technology were brought about, such as the exciting prospects of life sciences in the field of medicine, as well as fundamental seismic shifts in the world economy. With the emphasis on the production of higher quality goods at ever competitive prices, the concentration on the established educational formula is no longer tenable. In keeping abreast with economic changes in the world, Singapore is now increasingly providing more diverse educational choices to students. This is in the hope that Singapore would not be marginalized but be able to find a respectable place in the world's economic playing field.

Increasingly, to this end there seems to be gradually grafted on the educational system an ever wider range of different types of

courses – technological, commercial and humanistic courses available at the tertiary level. Fortunately, Singapore as a nation is able to capitalize on its greatest asset – its well educated, skilled, and highly competitive people, in shaping itself as an educational and training hub at the regional level, and then possibly at the international level in the near future.

As such, with the vast variety of choices – from laser disc production to the manufacture of ceramic tiles – courses



being now offered in the Polytechnics and other tertiary institutes, the education landscape seems to be opening new and exciting vistas. It is thus essential if not vital that young students are informed of the routes in the educational system that they may have to take in the new millennium.

The Argument

Putting it in a nutshell, the problem is made more complex because of the philosophy behind the manner in which a choice can be selected. Professional educationalists seem to be divided into two schools of thought on the how the right choice for the student can be achieved. On one hand the authorities should not interfere, but respect the young individual's right to a complete freedom of choice. Provided the subject is of an orthodox academic pedigree, the teacher or parent should respect the decision of the young mind in deciding the issue. The second school of thought involves the role of teachers acting as mentors, to guide and point the right way forward. Being too young, the mind of a student may not be ready to make the crucial decision yet with the correct amount of sense. Therefore, teachers have a responsibility in guiding their young charges in making their choices sensible



ones in accordance with their personalities, academic aptitudes and interests.

Choices, choices and more choices!

Right from the basic level, Singaporean children are faced with a Hobson choice – their parents generally choose for them the kindergarten school, followed next by entry to a primary school and six years of basic education. This followed by another crossroads of choosing a suitable secondary school that will educate and prepare the child for the Cambridge GCE “O” Levels examinations at the required age of 16.

With a qualification in “O” Levels, the next logical step would be a choice offered by three branches of tertiary education – to pursue another two years of academic study in a local junior college, in pursuit of the GCE “A” Levels, and hence to the university, or to pursue a three year polytechnic diploma with more work related skills being taught.

For those not so academically inclined, a third option – that of pursuing a technical education, with an emphasis on hands-on practical skills, at any of the Institutes of Technical Education (ITEs), is also available. Again, excellence in performance is accessed. An ITE graduate can choose to either utilize his or her professional qualifications to join the workforce, or upgrade himself or herself academically through entry into any of the polytechnics.

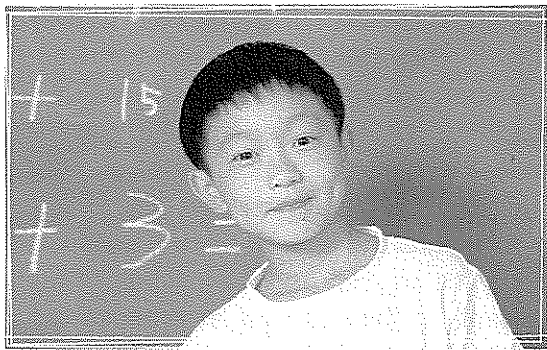
With increased opportunities and possibilities of university course admission through the traditional academic route of the GCE “A” Levels, or through the more flexible polytechnic diplomas, which employ the academic module system, competition for entry into any of the three state universities has become very intense.

Over the years of independence, Singapore has augmented ever more available options to its educational system. Today, a fourth option – that of pursuing an overseas

degree, is increasingly widespread and better known. With the onset of the Internet, online degree courses are also available for consideration. Online degree courses, however, to date, has not proven popular with the younger generation, and are more suitable for mature adults in mid-careers, who wish to upgrade themselves.

In reality, the majority of young Singaporeans try their best to obtain qualifications the traditional way – through enrolment into the local schools, and later, tertiary institutes. Apart from a reputation of par excellence in the local educational system, many families, with their middle class or lower income backgrounds, find that this may be the only option feasible financially. The total cost of an overseas degree course, inclusive of airfare, tuition fees, lodging, clothing, food and other miscellaneous costs, may well require at least a few hundred thousand dollars – a colossal sum of money which many in the working class can ill afford.

However, there is now a revision of the educational system. Where before, the educational pathway is perceived as that of a straight forward, one way route, now it moves toward a wide array of branch-outs for the young individual. The view that is gaining strength is that the traditional choice is not universally for every one. That human beings are diverse in their intellectual development, as well as their physical endowments is a sensitive issue which is appropriate to address now. Not only are people possessed of different talents, their development do not always proceed on a predictable path. Take the example of the great scientist Albert Einstein. His development was such that perhaps, in truth, no other educational system throughout the world in his time might accept him but nevertheless, this did not stop him from reaching his full potential in utilizing his talents. Similarly, we need more diverse ways in which a human being's aptitudes can be assessed. This is precisely, what the educational system in Singapore is striving towards.



A well trained mentor

Having a well trained mentor is vital in guiding and charting a student's progress. A mentor is someone who is well trained in understanding the child's aptitude and capabilities, in the whole context of his learning experience from his studies to other aspects of his life. To this end, the role of the mentor could be filled by the anxious parent, or more realistically, the classroom teacher.

What are the necessary pre-requisites of a mentor? Although possessing the highest scholastic achievement could be an advantage, an understanding of the student should be the criteria for the selection of mentor. Indeed personal academic success could be a distinct disadvantage as the mentor may not have any inkling of the pitfalls or difficulties that an average student might face. The Emotional Quotient, or EQ, rather than the Intelligence Quotient, IQ, is more important here, than anything else.

For example, when a student has difficulties with Mathematics, the mentor, without doubt, must be sufficiently equipped to explain and teach the concepts. However, if the student does not understand at the first try and is overwhelmed by the wealth of information, then the mentor should be in a position to impart his wisdom using mind maps or other alternate learning tools. In reality, classroom teachers (who also double up as mentors), use any available physical infrastructure for teaching and improvise whenever necessary.

Physical teaching materials, however, are of secondary importance in the process of

learning and mentoring. The character and virtues of the teacher and mentor himself are paramount. Without doubt, most teachers will definitely agree that patience is a necessary ingredient in excellent teaching. A teacher must take time to study and understand the character, aptitudes, strengths as well as weaknesses of their students in their charge, in order to be a suitable mentor. This has the same logic as a detective investigating a murder case or a general planning a military campaign.

As a first step, it is necessary for the mentor to establish a close rapport between himself and the student. This is vital, as each side then becomes aware of the student's true academic progress. The mentor then employs his experience in helping the student in overcoming obstacles along the way, but without interfering with the learning process. If a student is unable to express his problem and aspirations, that could lead to defiance, a loss of interest in learning, and ultimately resulting in the derailing of goals to be achieved.

In cultures where honest or frank dialogues between teachers and students are lacking, the student is often not given a chance to exert his own views. This is so in Asian society and culture. As a consequence, students often differ to elders in making their decisions as to the choice of their educational paths. Too often, it is the student himself who must pay the price and shoulder the responsibility of making the wrong decision in determining his own educational path at the earlier stages.


Conclusion

The best thing to do, of course, is for the school-going individual, the student, to make his own choice, and of his own free will. Yet, it must be recognized that the student must not make his own choice at too early a stage, where he may well be totally unprepared. The standard factor used to determine responsible decision making, is in the individual's maturity.

We often set standards for maturity using age. In Singapore, the traditional stint of obligatory national service for males is used as a measuring scale and the traditional celebration of coming of age in the modern context. However, such a viewpoint is inaccurate. Great men in history, such as Abraham Lincoln, Genghis Khan, Toyotomi Hideoyoshi or the Kang Hsi Emperor, had mature demeanors even during their teens. Thus the co-relation between age and maturity is a disputable and moot point.

All too often, parents and mentors are generally worried that their young charges will make the wrong choices. Therefore, they perceive themselves as shouldering the responsibility of choice, taking the vital decision for their young charge without the slightest consideration or opinion of the student who, incidentally, will be most affected by such a momentous decision in future and for the rest of his life.

Such a practice is, in a sense, wrong. Each individual is unique and has his own aspirations and dreams. Each individual has a right to choose. It is the duty of the mentor not to attempt to influence his young charge's freedom of choice, yet still train and equip the student to point of being capable of making his own sensible decision. To this end, the mentor's role is to act as an advisor and a source of necessary information in helping the young student decide his own educational path in the future.

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