

Commentary

# Commentary: How can Singapore keep up with the unique needs of prodigies?

Singapore's approach to nurturing exceptional young minds has been in the spotlight following news of a 13-year-old Singaporean prodigy graduating from an Australian university. NUS lecturer Jonathan Sim highlights the challenges in fostering brilliance while ensuring holistic development.



File photo of a boy climbing a ladder to choose books at a library. (Photo: iStock/Patamaporn Umnahanant)

**Jonathan Sim**

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SINGAPORE: The recent news of a 13-year-old Singaporean prodigy graduating from an Australian university has sparked discussion about Singapore's approach to nurturing exceptional young talents, especially after it was revealed that the boy had been previously rejected by a local university because of his young age.

Some have called for an increased flexibility to allow such **young people** to skip levels in Singapore - parents of intellectually advanced children often cite concerns that their children are disengaged and bored at school.

The fear is real - keeping these students at the same level as their peers could potentially squander their potential and impede their growth.

Yet, on the flip side, accelerating their **academic journey** could potentially jeopardise their social and emotional development, which could negatively impact their ability to connect and work well with their peers in their adulthood.

Nonetheless, this debate brings to light the need for more effective strategies to meaningfully engage students with diverse abilities and learning paces.

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## THE REAL ISSUE: THE NEED FOR MORE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

In Singapore, undergraduate applicants at local autonomous universities must be at least 18 years old at the start of their matriculation year, or have completed at least 12 years of formal education beginning with Primary 1 or equivalent.

Applicants who do not meet the age requirement may be assessed on a case-by-case basis, the Ministry of Education told TODAY earlier this month. Since 2000, "fewer than 10" students have skipped grades, it added.

I have been an educator at the National University of Singapore for seven years. Right at the beginning of my teaching career, I quickly recognised a dilemma: If I focused my teaching to engage the faster learners, the other students would struggle to keep up.

If I didn't, the faster ones may not get the **intellectual stimulation** they desire. I discovered that what looked like a reluctance to learn was actually rooted in boredom as they felt they were not meaningfully engaged in class.

I have experimented with various approaches to try and maximise the potential of gifted students, and I have found two strategies that significantly benefited my students.

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## ENCOURAGING PEER TEACHING BY CHANGING INCENTIVES

The first strategy is to encourage fast learners to engage in peer teaching with their classmates in group discussions and projects. For this to succeed, we need to have the right kinds of incentives.

My students shared with me that when individual grades are predominantly based on a final product like a report or presentation, they would be inclined to focus on their own performance. Under such performative pressures, students cannot help but worry about being a burden to their group mates, and so they will be less inclined to help or even seek help as that could impact the group's overall performance.

From my students' feedback, I found that we can reshape incentives and shift the dynamics towards greater collaboration by placing a larger proportion of the grades on how much students help or seek help from each other, or from how cohesively they work with each other in a group. In such an environment, I found that students would actively seek out their peers, and help one another regardless of their abilities or struggles.

A striking transformation occurs when fast learners engage in peer teaching. First, they face the intellectual challenge of translating their knowledge into understandable concepts for their peers, a process that fosters higher-order thinking and is often more intellectually stimulating and rewarding than traditional assessments. Second, this interaction builds empathy and appreciation for the diverse strengths and talents in their peers.

When conditions are favourable for peer learning, the experience students gain is invaluable. I have repeatedly witnessed groups with very diverse abilities and learning paces develop mutual respect for each other's unique strengths and talents. And students are able to learn effective collaboration skills essential for the workforce - skills that might remain undeveloped if we solely focus on an accelerated academic journey.

Another tangible outcome from such peer-to-peer engagement is the close bonds that are often formed both inside and outside the classroom.

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## EMPOWERING ENGAGEMENT THROUGH CO-CREATION

Beyond the classroom, we can engage fast learners as co-creators in their educational journey. We can tap into their unique perspective as students and involve them in designing learning activities, games, and even assignments.

This approach is not often explored outside of higher education, and I have discovered that we can empower our students to be effective co-creators.

I have personally mentored and taught both university and secondary school students with fundamental concepts in education, lessons in human behaviour, and ideas in game design. They learn empathy while trying to identify and problem-solve the various learning difficulties their peers encounter, and they learn to work better with their peers and teachers - once again, these are meaningful opportunities that would not have been available for their growth if we focus solely on accelerating their academic journey.

Through such co-creative collaborations, my students have created exciting learning games and activities, many of which I now use in my own classes. These students feel a great sense of achievement knowing that they have contributed in a significant way.

Not only do these co-creative interactions enrich my students, but they have also profoundly impacted my growth and shaped me as an educator.

I learnt that what may be meaningful to me may not always appear meaningful to them - their sharing helps me to bridge my world with theirs, so that I am better able to relate with them and engage them in a way that they feel is truly meaningful to their learning experience.

This highlights the immense potential in our students and the transformative impact of keeping them engaged by tapping on their talents and insights in a meaningful way, regardless of age, background or ability.

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The path forward in education is not rigid adherence to traditional methods. Instead, it lies in an adaptable, inclusive approach that recognises and nurtures each student's unique abilities.

By fostering a more collaborative environment, and by encouraging meaningful student engagement, we can forge a more dynamic, responsive educational experience that is enriching for all.

The potential of our students is boundless. By tapping into it, we can evolve and grow to become better and more engaging educators, ready to face the challenges of a diverse learning landscape.

*Jonathan Sim is Associate Fellow of the NUS Teaching Academy and Lecturer with the Department of Philosophy at National University of Singapore.*

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