

Singapore's teaching workforce now older and more experienced

Studies show teaching experience is positively associated with gains in student achievement

Amelia Teng
Education Correspondent

The teaching workforce in Singapore is getting older, due in part to an ageing population and the scaling down of recruitment of new teachers in recent years.

In 2021, about a quarter of teachers were aged 34 and below. This is down from 55.4 per cent in 2005 and 46.4 per cent in 2012.

Conversely, the proportion of teachers aged 40 and above grew from 34.5 per cent in 2012 to 56 per cent in 2021.

In response to queries, the Ministry of Education (MOE) said it recruited a yearly average of about 650 teachers in the last five years from 2018 to 2022.

It used to recruit about 2,000 to 3,000 teachers yearly between 2004 and 2012 when it was building up its workforce to about 33,000 teachers.

The focus has since shifted to replacing teachers who have left the service and to meet specific subject needs, said the MOE.

It added that there are currently about 32,000 education officers in service, including educators in leadership positions like principals and vice-principals.

“The decrease in the proportion of younger teachers since 2005 is primarily due to smaller inflows of new teachers in recent years, alongside the maturing of the existing teaching workforce,” said the MOE spokesman.

Most new teachers join the service between the ages of 25 and 30, he said. Around half of them are

posted to primary schools, while the rest go to secondary schools and junior colleges.

Associate Professor Jason Tan from the National Institute of Education said that apart from age, the length of service of teachers is also another factor to look at.

It is clear that there has been a shift in the profile of teachers in the past decade, he said.

In 2011, the largest category of teachers – 32.3 per cent of them – had zero to four years of work experience.

In 2021, those in this category made up 11 per cent of the profession, and the largest section at 23.6 per cent was those who had 10 to 14 years of experience.

“With shrinking birth cohorts and mergers and closures of schools, there hasn’t been a need to hire as many teachers as before,” said Prof Tan, whose work is in policy, curriculum and leadership.

Citing findings from a 2016 report by the Learning Policy Institute in the United States, he said that teachers generally become more effective as they gain experience, although they improve at a lesser rate in their later years.

Results from 30 studies show that teaching experience is, on average, positively associated with student achievement gains throughout a teacher’s career, although there are variations, the report said.

As teachers gain experience, students are also more likely to do better on other measures of success beyond test scores, such as school attendance.

The same report also found that



Mr Benjamin Gan, a teacher at Gan Eng Seng Primary School, started an after-school engagement programme with his colleagues in 2022 to engage pupils via activities like go-karting and bowling. He is also behind a programme that supports disadvantaged pupils in adjusting to school life. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

He starts initiatives to engage pupils, tackle absenteeism

When he was a secondary school student, Mr Benjamin Gan had already imagined himself teaching a class.

“I was a quiet and reserved student, but I had teachers who took the trouble to get to know me better and gave me opportunities to grow,” said the 33-year-old, who now teaches English language in Gan Eng Seng Primary School.

He is the school’s Primary 5 and 6 year head.

He previously taught in a secondary school before moving in 2019 to the Ministry of Education (MOE) headquarters, where he worked on projects such as the Uplifting Pupils in Life and Inspiring Families Taskforce.

“I learnt a lot more about the challenges that disadvantaged students face coming to school,” said Mr Gan, who is one of this year’s six recipients of the Outstanding Youth in Education Award.

The national award is given by MOE to recognise young teachers for their achievements and passion. This year’s winners were

chosen out of 1,488 teachers from 241 schools.

Mr Gan opted to teach at a primary school after his stint at the HQ. “I wanted to help children at an earlier age – for example, by establishing better school-going routines before secondary school – and work with families who are still invested in their children’s lives,” he said.

“I was also interested in seeing how younger children learn,” added the father of a five-year-old son.

In 2022, he started an after-school engagement programme called Sandbox, together with colleagues from the physical education and aesthetics department at Gan Eng Seng Primary.

The aim, he said, is to engage pupils, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds, through activities like go-karting and bowling. Students from the SMU Sports Union were roped in to join the sessions regularly to befriend the pupils.

Mr Gan started another programme in 2022 to support disad-

A BENEFICIARY HIMSELF

I was a quiet and reserved student, but I had teachers who took the trouble to get to know me better and gave me opportunities to grow.



MR BENJAMIN GAN, one of six recipients of the Outstanding Youth in Education Award this year.

vantaged pupils in adjusting to school life, especially after they have been absent for a while.

“We realised that they can’t just plug straight into the busy school life,” he said.

The programme, known as Soar (Scaffolding Opportunities to Achieve Readiness), provides one-to-one academic support for these pupils, who also have a mentor – a teacher or school

counsellor – who checks in on them regularly and helps keep track of their attendance.

“We give each pupil an individualised physical calendar to monitor their own attendance and this gives them more ownership as they can see how many school days they miss out,” said Mr Gan.

“For some pupils, we tell them to come back to school for three hours, for a start, until they can manage a full day.”

While teaching is rewarding, it can be tiring, he said.

“The days are long, and teaching is a very people-centred profession; we have to constantly engage students, parents and other partners. It’s also an exercise in prioritisation – sometimes we can get stressed over certain elements or activities when they do not have any direct impact on our objectives.”

Mr Gan added: “I see many teachers who are deeply passionate about their work and I’m confident that more younger teachers will step up.”

Amelia Teng

more experienced teachers bring benefits to their colleagues and school, with novice teachers benefiting the most.

“Still, the report noted that variation in teacher effectiveness exists at every stage of the teaching career, said Prof Tan.

“In fact, what is more important is that teachers are carefully selected and well-prepared at their point

of entry into the profession, and are provided proper mentorship along the way.”

“Whether you’re younger or older, a veteran or a novice, I think all teachers need a supportive environment for professional development, especially when there are pressing issues to work on like changing ways of assessment, increasing needs in character and ci-

tizenship education and e-pedagogy,” said Prof Tan.

“Experience may help you to some degree, but it may also be more difficult for experienced teachers to change entrenched attitudes and beliefs.”

He added: “Newer teachers have less accumulated knowledge to draw on, but at the same time they may have less entrenched atti-

tudes, so in theory they may be more adaptable.”

In this vein, professional development has been one of MOE’s key priorities in recent years, he said, with a road map launched in 2020 to guide teachers in planning their own learning and development, among other initiatives.

ateng@sph.com.sg