High cost of low trust in pre-school education

By Trisha Craig

If pre-school were an Olympic event, Finland would have a look on the gold. Its early childhood education system consistently ranks at the top of international charts. And when you walk into typical Finnish classrooms, as I did last week, it is easy to see why.

On the metrics that matter with these global comparisons, Finland excels. The student-teacher ratios are low, meaning each teacher has fewer pupils to attend to. Children are well taken care of, fostering warm, nurturing and intellectually engaging interactions. Pre-school teachers in Finland are well compensated and highly respected, which means that centres face less of the disruptive high turnover that often plagues child-care education systems where teaching is less socially valued.

Another aspect of Finnish pre-schools not easily measured but so much in evidence is the trust placed in them by the country’s citizens. Trust has been highlighted by observers such as Paul Goldberg, author of the influential work, Finnish Lessons, as key to the country’s educational success. Parents trust that the schools are doing a good job and that they are all of high quality. This defines the nature of the relationship between schools and parents. Finnish academics and teachers alike stress that pre-schools do not see parents and families as clients. Rather, they view early education as a fee-for-service transaction, parents are persons who work together to educate the young. This work begins early in the school year when teachers, parents and children come together to discuss the work ahead and fill out a detailed plan of instruction. Children are present for the discussions and their opinions count. What do they like about school? What do they dislike? Who are their friends? What are they good at? What do they need to improve? To help them articulate their ideas, the children colour a picture of an airplane with various strengths and talents, and use separate colours to represent different levels of proficiency.

For parents and teachers, detailed issues like the child’s language development, social skills, hygiene, independence, cooperative behaviour, and so on, are discussed in terms of whether the child is achieving the benchmarks to aim for and how these goals are going to be supported concretely at home and in school. Each child has an individual plan support the adults in their daily lives. The home-school continuum is seamless.

What lessons can Singapore draw from Finland on this? Beyond the more easily measured metrics, one issue is how to develop this form of parent-teacher partnership and mutual trust.

In some respects, there may be structural impediments to doing so. The high level of trust in the Finnish education system reflects similarly high levels of trust in the wider social system. Trust is an indication of what social scientists call social capital. Author and political theorist Francis Fukuyama has defined it as “informal norms that promote cooperation between individuals” or a kind of glue that holds societies together.

Social capital is an area where countries like Finland and Singapore diverge. One comparative measure is found in the Logatum Institute’s annual Prosperity Index. This is a composite index of economic and well-being factors, including social capital.

While Singapore ranks third in the world in economic performance (behind Switzerland and Norway and well ahead of Finland), it falls to 39th on the measure of social capital. In contrast, Norway and Denmark take the top two spots and Finland is fifth.

Although economic achievement is positively associated with the quality of early childhood education, there is an even stronger association between the latter and a country’s social capital score.

This is suggested by the Legatum data and the data on the quality of early childhood education around the world produced by the Lien Foundation’s 2012 Starting Well report.

To be sure, steps can be taken to improve social trust in the education system. For example, raising the requirements for teacher training to ensure teachers are well trained and professional is a step Singapore is taking that will boost parental trust.

But more can be done to promote parent-teacher dialogue and collaboration. Too often, young teachers are intimidated by parents and do not know how to talk to them. Parents often view pre-school teachers as babysitters, ignoring their training.

As educators of early childhood teachers, we need to do more to teach pre-school teachers to collaborate with the families of their pupils. We can train teachers in active-listening strategies, such as asking substantive questions and expressing empathy and genuine interest in what others are saying. They can be taught how to paraphrase discussions to foster a sense of shared understanding.

Senior teachers can mentor younger ones to improve skills to manage collaboration and relationships with parents.

Techniques like these have been shown to improve parent-teacher relationships. They should not be stand-alone training but infused throughout the curricula, supported by continuing professional development.

Trainers can prepare the request with an explanation of their learning goals. They could follow up training courses with informal feedback sessions to assess whether the learning outcomes achieved or suggest questions that parents can ask their children.

By educating our pre-school teachers to demonstrate their professionalism in collaboration with parents, we can begin to build the trust in the system. This way, parents can help teachers better perform the job they were trained to do.

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