

International News

Working as an educational psychologist in an international school in Singapore during a pandemic

Nicola Cann

Singapore is a multicultural hub for Asia, with a continuously changing population and a high proportion of expats. It is a vibrant city where traditional Asian culture meets cosmopolitan future-focused metropolis. The city-state prides itself on high academic achievement, with students going on to attend universities around the world.

With relatively low numbers of serious cases, Singapore has felt like a safe place to be for many during the past eighteen months. However, the indirect impacts have been, and continue to be felt. The Singaporean Government was quick to implement contact tracing, temperature screening and social distancing rules, which have kept the spread of Covid largely under control. Some groups have however fared less well, for example the migrant workers whose plight made international headlines and highlighted huge disparities in quality of life between certain sectors of Singaporean society. Because travel around Asia had previously been so quick and easy, many people based in Singapore would work internationally and travel regularly for work or to visit relatives overseas. Now that international travel is so restricted, many families have been separated from each other for over a year. This has added an additional layer of complexity for people who are already grappling with other aspects of Covid such as school closures, job insecurities, and strict social distancing measures.

For schools the pressure to maintain high academic results has been great, but students are struggling to achieve expectations, and the impact on mental health has been noticeable. Services are struggling to meet the increasingly complex mental health needs of children and young people.

As an educational psychologist working

in an international school my role has changed significantly in the past 18 months. The counselling team I manage has become overloaded, and there has been a huge increase in the number of our students with diagnosed mental health needs. I now spend a large proportion of my time liaising with external psychologists, therapists, and psychiatrists, to ensure we are taking a joined-up approach to meeting students' needs.

Another shift has been the significant increase in the amount of parent work I am now doing. With Singapore experiencing two periods of home-based learning so far, parents have become much more directly involved in their children's learning, and as such have required additional support in managing this. Increased liaison between home and school, particularly for students with additional needs, has become a priority.

The impact is being felt by our teachers too. Aside from managing the continuously changing social distancing rules, the current lifestyle is a far cry from the one they signed up for whereby they could spend the school holidays jetting around Asia or travelling home with relative ease. The fee-paying element adds another layer of complexity, with international schools feeling they must deliver on promised and paid-for services to families.

But it's not all doom and gloom. By necessity schools are beginning to recognise the need for a more flexible approach to meeting students' needs. In my own school this has led to the prioritisation of alternative academic pathways which are more personalised to individual students. More broadly, mental health is becoming more prominent as an issue, so there is a hope that schools will start to place a greater emphasis on student wellbeing.

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