“More realistic time frame needed for maths paper” (Rosalind Lim Kwang Suan, ST Forum, 17/10, pH8)

I REFER to the letter by Mrs Charis Mun, 'Two marks for invalid question not way to go' (ST, Oct 13).

I agree the major problem faced by most pupils sitting for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) mathematics paper is insufficient time. The current time frame of two hours and 15 minutes is unrealistic.

The teaching of mathematics in Singapore has evolved over the years. Our pupils are challenged to think right from Primary 1. More challenging problems, as well as those of a non-routine, heuristic nature, are introduced into the curriculum. This is evident not only in textbooks and workbooks, but also in questions in tests and examinations, including PSLE mathematics.

Primary 6 pupils are expected to tackle a much more difficult mathematics paper than 10 years ago. However, they are still given the same time to complete the paper.

The PSLE mathematics paper comprises one written paper in the following format:Pupils are to answer 50 questions, an average of 2.7 minutes per question, without the help of a calculator. Although the multiple choice and short answer questions are more straightforward and assess basic concepts and skills, pupils are expected to show their method of solution (that is, working steps) clearly in the structured/long answer questions. Some of these questions are not only challenging, but also require tedious calculations in which time is of the essence.

Primary 6 pupils are not only challenged to think, but also challenged to think fast, with precision and accuracy, as there will be little or no time to check the paper for errors at the end of the exam - provided they can complete the paper.

Perhaps we should look at the objective of PSLE mathematics. If the purpose of the exam is to assess pupils' attainment in mathematics at the end of their primary education, then it is only right that they be given a realistic and appropriate time frame to complete the paper. Also, the questions should be set within their ability to solve them.

As a former teacher and tutor, I have come across many capable pupils who are good at mathematics but cannot perform well because of over-challenging questions and an unrealistic time frame.

I agree wholeheartedly with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's view in his 2004 National Day Rally speech regarding the teaching of Chinese - that we should 'arouse an abiding interest' in it and that if you make pupils 'fed up with it, you have failed. If they hate it, you've wasted your time'. The same applies to mathematics, in fact, all subjects.

Mathematics is an engaging subject which is not only linked to all other curriculum areas, but also broadens and enriches a child's experience and provides opportunities for problem solving, original thinking and the making of a lively mind.

We want pupils to enjoy mathematics and have confidence in it. We want them to beam with satisfaction at the end of the PSLE mathematics exam, knowing they have done

their best. Instead, we may see their crestfallen and dejected faces, wondering if their months of hard work have gone to waste.

The Ministry of Education has restructured the teaching of Chinese and its examination format. Can it also look into making changes to the PSLE mathematics paper?

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