

Perspectives of the Unseen: Educational Meritocracy and Student Mobility

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1. Context

a) Meritocracy in Singapore

Singapore, an island nation with a about 5.4 million people, classes itself as a meritocratic society with a system that provides equal access and equal opportunity to everyone (Lim, 2013; Moore, 2000; Tremewan, 1994). ‘Meritocracy’ is widely accepted in educational systems across the world (Saito, 2011). There are many debates surrounding meritocracy, including the proposed ideal benefit of meritocracy which is to provide equal opportunity for everyone regardless of background, wealth and place in society. It is based on the idea that everyone should have the same chance at success as everyone else who has the same level of intelligence, and who puts in equal effort. In general, meritocracy means rewarding an individual based on his or her merits. In the utilitarian perspective, meritocracy is a system which efficiently fits individuals into leadership positions to “maximize the average level of well-being in a society” (Lim, 2013, p. 3) through fierce competition. Those who have made significant contributions to the success of society and economy will receive the great rewards of meritocracy (Bellows, 2009; Krauze and Slomczynski, 1985) which include better educational qualifications and resources, social status, career ranks, better incomes, recognition and prestige (Lim, 2013; Jencks, 1988).

Meritocracy was formally introduced in 1966, just one year after Singapore gained independence. It started with a one-size-fit-all structure (Tremewan, 1994). Most of the schools were brought together under the newly established Ministry of Education for the purpose of integration and unification (Lim, 2002). About 20 years into this system, the government noticed that they were not able to accommodate to the different needs of the students. Dropout rates were high and literacy level was low. In a bid to solve this problem, the government introduced the streaming system under the ‘Education for All’ policy in 1980 (Lim, 2002). The Education Study Team in Singapore recommended this system to enable students to progress according to their proficiency and academic levels (Singapore Press Holdings, 1998).

b) Revamp of the Education System

In October 2012, the Deputy Prime Minister, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who is also the former education minister from 2003 – 2008, agreed that more studies can be done on the “fine-grain differentiation” at a young age, and how secondary schools can be made to be more diversified (The Straits Times, 2012). Following this, in November 2012, the Education Minister Heng Swee Keat made an announcement that the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) is undergoing a review. Since then, several changes within the education system have been made.

c) Policies vs. Reality

In spite of the new policies that have been put in place, the effect the system has had on the general society has been deeply ingrained. A large part of what is accepted as the “truth” has been socially construct through decades of policy implementation. The attempts to reverse these “truths”, while not futile, do face many challenges.

A simple Google search will show that many websites, forums and blogs, such as <http://sg.theasianparent.com> and <http://www.kiasuparents.com>, do an unofficial ranking of schools according to academic achievements. These sites are usually set up by parents and tuition agencies who wish to make use of Singaporean parents’

“kiasu-ness”. “Kiasu” is a Hokkien Chinese Dialect word which means “afraid of losing out”. The term “kiasu” is synonymous with Singaporeans, who are in general afraid to lose out to anything, and this can be seen in the parents’ attitude towards enrolling their children in schools, from pre-school to kindergarten all the way to tertiary levels. This competitive attitude has at times resulted in ugly situations, an outcome of an education system that has been criticised as “elitist”.

One such ugly situation showcasing the “elitist” attitude was reported in the local news article (Toh, 2012) “Are Singapore’s Parents ‘Renting’ Their Way to Popular Schools?” It was reported that affluent parents were renting private properties in areas near prestigious schools. This is to ensure their children’s placements in these schools. However, it is a phenomenon heavily criticised by many as the average Singaporeans do not have capacity and means to rent another flat or house.

In July 2012, a local Singapore newspaper published an article titled “They just want the best for their kids” (Koh, 2012). The article highlights the extreme lengths parents and family from the less advantaged group will go through to enrol their children in esteemed schools. However, in spite of the tremendous efforts put in by the lower income families, 60% of students in top primary schools live in private properties (Goh, 2012). Private properties are an indication of their high socio-economic status as more than 80% of Singaporeans live in public housing (Housing Development Board Singapore). A study on meritocracy and elite institutions admissions in Britain reports a similar phenomenon whereby while only 40% of the population in Britain is from the advantaged group, they make up 60% of the university’s population (Warikoo & Fuhr, 2013). Middle and lower class Singaporean parents believe that by entering these schools, their children will too have a chance of success, and be “upgraded” to a higher class (Koh, 2012). In an interview by the local paper, a certain Mr Goh commented that “it will take some time before the ingrained academic-oriented mind-sets of parents change” (Ng, 2012).

2. Research Focus and Questions

The first phase of the research focuses on participants’ perspectives of their experiences and journey in school, correlate them with their life course circumstances now. The aim of this phase is to comprehend participants’ understanding of their past experiences and how it has shaped their current opportunities. It studies the interpretation of their current opportunities and how that has shaped their interpretation of their past experiences. Participants were asked for their perspectives on their schooling experiences, their perception of opportunities related to schooling, the opportunity outcome based on “advice” from educators and their family background. Participants were also asked to look forward and give their opinions of their life chances and their aspirations for their children’s future. Additionally, the participants were asked if any of their family members, friends, acquaintances and/or educators will be interested to partake in the study.

The second phase of the study focuses on using the data from the first phase and developing different learning approaches for children between the ages of 4 and 7 from underprivileged households. The curriculum and methods of teaching are revised every quarter year, moving from traditional teacher-centered approach to alternative approaches such as cooperative learning and self-evaluation. The students

are observed for changes in their behavior and the success or failure of the approaches. The aim of this phase is to find out how different students react in different environments, and if changes in learning environment have any effect on the students' learning outcomes.

The objective of this study is to examine and understand some of the present day effects of Singapore's 50 years of Lee Kuan Yew's meritocratic educational system via the perspectives of students who were streamed. It also hopes that the findings will shed light and provide answers to the following question:

After about 50 years of a "meritocratic" system, why does the government find the need to declare that "every school is a good school"? If every school is indeed as good as the other – what are the outcomes of students who come into the schools at different starting points and are there possible alternatives to maximise well-being of the economy, society, as well as, the students?

3. Findings and Discussion

a) Is Every School a Good School?

Schools have a standard curriculum for all students across all levels up to primary 4 (10 years old). However, primary schools which demonstrate strong performance in school based and co-curricular activities are given additional grants to provide a more holistic education for the students through niche programmes and additional skill building activities on top of the normal academic curriculum (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2005). This has given certain schools an advantage over others as they churn out students with excellent academic and co-curricular activities record (Kiasuparents, 2009) making these schools highly sought after. However, priority placing is given to students who have relatives in the school (Ministry of Education, 2014) which often means that after the first few phases, there rarely is a place for other students who do not have any affiliations to the school. Many of the parents who are non-alumni choose to volunteer their time to the school in a bid to gain admission for their child.

Researcher: What role do you think social class (wealth), and background of yourself and your parents (family) have played in your educational opportunities and current outcome?

Interviewee: I managed to enter into a prestigious primary school because my parents volunteered. It definitely made an impact. My primary school has better quality teachers and better facilities.

(Interview with a 28 years old graduate from Express Stream who succeeded into entering into a reputable junior college and subsequently the prestigious National University of Singapore.)

In a move to increase the diversity in these highly reputable and popular schools, the Ministry of Education has announced that they will ensure that there are at least 40 places left for Phase 2C onwards (Today, 2013).

Aside from the primary one admissions exercise, the streaming exercise for 12 years old primary school students, also known as Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), has drawn much criticism. One of the point of concerns is that it is causing the lack of student diversity in secondary schools (Chew & Davie, 2012) as it places students into one of the four streams (Special, Express, Normal Academic and Normal

Technical) and into a particular secondary school. The stream of the students, and the ranking and reputation of the school pave the way for future outcomes.

Admission to reputable schools puts students in an advantageous position with better future prospects. Most of the prestigious schools do not admit students from the lower streams and cater solely to the Special and Express streams students. Some critics like Lim (2013) have labelled these moves as socio-political and elitist. News media reports in Singapore have described how it is “well-known” amongst the locals that those who end up in prestigious tertiary institutions are “top” students from “good schools” (higher ranked schools). A majority of these prestigious schools only take in the high ability students from the top stream, and even within this pool, they may only accept a student based on academic excellence or excellence in co-curricular activities such as sports or performing arts.

Interviewee: Let's say you are from Broadrick (a lower status neighbourhood school) and I see someone from Raffles (the top elite school in Singapore), they will be like... their nose up in the air so high.

(Interview with a 28 year graduate from Express stream)

Students who are streamed into the lower streams are often considered “not good enough” and thus have to be segregated into lower status “neighbourhood schools” with other students who are similar to them (Lim, 2013; Ng, 2004, 2009). They are likely to end up in vocational or technical institutions or worse still, discontinue their studies (Koh, 2012).

Researcher: Okay now that you have left school right, tell me more about what happened after? Like experiences in trying to find a job. You are currently still trying to find a new job right? And you are sending out job applications and so on. So what are your experiences?

Interviewee: I can say it's really hard. After N.S. I got a job then basically just freelance part time and then I realise that *nak cari susah gila, susah gila* (it's really really difficult! Crazy difficult!). Even though I have an ITE cert but my ITE cert is not in demand. So *kerja* (work), and then I got my current job.

Researcher: How?

Interviewee: I just sent application and then they interviewed me and I got the job.

Researcher: Does your current job have anything to do with your ITE cert?

Interviewee: No. So *dah dapat kerja* (I got a job) and then currently right now I want to find a new job. I just find that education is important. Because before that I try to find a job but my resume is like shit actually. Education is really important.

(Interview conducted with a 27 year old graduate from the Normal Technical Stream)

Both streaming and subject based banding have been criticized for “grouping” and “labelling” students, and limiting their learning capacity (Abadzi, 1984, 1985; Callahan, 2005; Gamoran, 1992; Horn et. al, 2006; Lucas, 2001; Mickelson, 2003; Ng, 2004; Ono, 2001; Worthy, 2010). There are possible negative impacts such as isolation of students who are not able to perform academically well. These students may be labelled as “slower” than the rest and viewed as “failures” without taking into consideration other debilitating factors such as environment and background.

Interviewee: ... we were streamed according to how well we did by our marks. Express, Normal Acad (Academic) and Technical and mainly there was a... how do you call it... ah grouping. So like Express don't mix with Normal Tech but we can mix with Academic. And Technical you can't speak to them at all like you know... way below you. Hahaha. You speak to them you are like... loser!

(Interview with a 28 year old graduate from the Express Stream)

Mr. Pushparani Nadarajah, the vice-principal of a low ranking school in Singapore, responded to the discussions of making every school a good school at the with, "How many of our leaders and top officers who say that every school is a good school put their children in ordinary schools near their home? (Only) until they actually do so are parents going to buy (it)," (Ang, 21st November 2013). Mr. Nadarajah made an important observation of the current status quo situation in Singapore, and his concerns are valid. While the government is trying to sell the idea that all schools are the same and are equally "good", the actions of some government officials suggest otherwise.

b) Meritocracy and Educational Capital

Though various themes have emerged from the data collected, there is a strong relationship between the meritocratic educational system and financial inequality, and how the cycle "repeats" itself. An interview with the aunt of 3 underprivileged children shed some light on the lack of awareness of underprivileged parents. The participant, Mia (names have been changed to protect identity), 22, mentioned that her sister, 29, has never brought her children to library, neither does she know that reading to and with her children is important for their literacy and cognitive development.

Interviewee: I think even if she (interviewee's sister) goes to the library, she wouldn't know what to look for and how to navigate around the library. So she just uses the Ipad and they learn from there. She really doesn't know.

(22 year old interviewee who graduated from the Normal Technical Stream and comes from an underprivileged background)

Prior to this statement, Mia mentioned how she herself was not able to read until she reached the age of 8. By then, she was already in Primary 2, the second year of compulsory education. Looking back retrospectively, she stated that her lack of English literacy skills affected her other subjects such as Maths and Science. Mia, who was then streamed into the Normal Technical stream, understood that with five children, her parents did not have the financial capacity to send her for enrichment classes.

In spite of various challenges that she went through, Mia managed to score really well in her Normal Technical examinations. However, due to the stream that she was in, she was still channelled to an Institute of Technical Education. With her determination to help her parents, Mia received a perfect GPA and landed a place in a local polytechnic where she was in the Director's list for the whole 3 academic years and graduated with accolades. However, Mia feels that she severely lacks in many areas of general knowledge. Looking back to her secondary school years, she realised that she was not given the opportunity to understand history, geography and other humanities subjects. This has caused her not to have skills in certain areas such as

critical thinking and analysis. Recently scouted due to her excellent expertise in design, Mia conceded that without determination and motivation to “break the cycle of poverty”, she would have ended up like her siblings or her peers.

When probed further, Mia explained that many of her peers had “bad attitude” and did not find the need to “excel” in their studies. Her peers usually had other problems, family and financial being the most pertinent ones. While Mia might be a success story of meritocracy, her last statement gives an overall view of the reality for many students in the lower stream. Mia is an exception. This interview has given a better understanding of the lives of the underprivileged children and the lack of opportunities to engage in educational development. In a meritocratic educational system where all children start compulsory education at the age of 7, it then brings to question the fair chances of underprivileged children “competing in the race” when their starting line is further behind.

c) Meritocracy, Eugenics and Social Class Replication

In his book, *Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going* (Lee, 2011), the late Lee Kuan Yew, first prime minister of Singapore said:

There are many sons of doctors who have married doctors. Those who married spouses who are not as bright are tearing their hair out because their children can't make it. I have lived long enough to see all this play out. So when the graduate man does not want to marry a graduate woman, I tell him he's a fool, stupid. You marry a non-graduate, you're going to have problems, some children bright, some not bright. You'll be tearing your hair out. you can't miss. It's like two dice. One is Jack, Queen, King, Ace, other also Jack, Queen, King, Ace. You throw a Jack, Queen, King, Ace against dice two, three, four, five, six, what do you get? You can't get high pairs, let alone a full flush. (Lee, 2011)

The late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew is an English educated Chinese man - in a country where the spoken languages of the masses were Malay and Chinese (Mandarin and dialects). Policies and measures introduced during this period and the period following the nation's independence ensure that an individual's social position was determined by his or her grasp of the English language (Tremewan, 1994). English was then the language of the upper class Chinese and Indians. The replication of the Chinese/Malay/Tamil-speaking industrial working class, formation of an English-speaking capitalist class, and eventually, the introduction of a “meritocratic” education system that was in favour of the English language, created class divisions, wealth gap and division that are continuously growing (Tremewan, 1994).

The government managed to bring most schools under state control (Tremewan, 1994), while schools that still insist on a religious or racial base curriculum, such as madrasahs, are cut off or receive minimal funding and support from government. The exception being the Special Assisted Plan (SAP) schools which catered to the Chinese which are still funded under the Ministry of Education.

Critics of the Special Assisted Plan (SAP) schools have warned of ethnic and social segregation. Students from SAP schools might not be able to connect with those from other races. Even within their own racial group, they will not be able to connect with those who are considered non-elites (Lim, 2013). This segregation has already been

reported in local news articles such as Top schools' students tend to have friends like themselves: Poll (Yong & Zaccheus, 2012) and PSLE the cause of lacking student diversity (Davie & Chew, 2012).

Good schools have better facilities, better teachers, better teaching methodologies etc. and most importantly, good schools have proven track records of academic achievements and carry with it a reputable name (Kiasuparents, 2009; Ng, 2009). These give students from these schools an unfair advantage, leaving behind their peers who didn't meet the standards required. In a survey done by a local Singapore newspaper, it has been discovered that most students from highly reputable schools are inclined to have friends similar to themselves i.e. they are most likely to be of the same race, from the same academic stream and similar socio-economic background (Yong and Zaccheus, 2012). This then brings us to this question: "Is the meritocratic education system a system based on eugenics' beliefs?"

In a related observation, students' in advantaged positions observed positive post-secondary school behaviours such as involvement in various activities such as politics, and the positions they hold in organizations indicate that they have higher self-esteem and confidence due to the skills and knowledge they gained through additional activities and the environment in the school (Jerrim et al. 2012). These contribute to their success later in life (Jerrim et al., 2012).

Interviewee: Maybe they shouldn't differentiate like better one is here... as in the bad one and the good one.

Researcher: Do you feel that it actually groups people into... when they grow older at work, do you think it actually group people into more *atas* (elite) people and so on?

Interviewee: Yes. Because they will think wah... this one Normal Tech. Maybe don't want to mix around with them, something like that, because "I'm Express"... ya. So once they out from school right, maybe somehow will affect them lah.

Researcher: So it's the mind-set. So this mind-set... do you think it (can be seen in) a lot (of) Singaporeans?

Interviewee: Ya actually yes.

Researcher: So and it started from school?

Interviewee: Ya.

(Interview conducted with a 29 year old graduate from the Normal Academic Stream)

As highlighted by the participant above, academic grouping in Singapore leads to future segregation in adulthood. The participant's views are not unique. Another participant who was from the Express stream mentioned that the "Express students do not mix around with those from the Normal Stream" for fear of being branded a loser, whereas a participant who was from the lowest stream, the Normal Technical stream, mentioned that while he looked up and admired the students from the Express stream for their discipline in school, he did not consider making friends with them.

d) Meritocracy and Deficit Thinking

A majority of the participants in the research group mentioned "self-responsibility" when asked about lack of achievements with regards to outcomes. The demographics

of the participants are mostly lower middle income to low income households. None of the participants cited the system, their circumstances or their peers as a contributing factor to their lack of achievement. There is a strong sense of personal responsibility and pride, and the refusal to seek external help is in line with the recent research findings on low income Malay households in Singapore (Brassard, 2015; Mathews, 2015). It also highlights the value of “self-reliance” that the Singapore government has emphasised since independence. Singapore is non-welfare country and there are various self-help organisations in line with the ideals of “meritocracy”. Most of the autonomous or independent self-help organisations are set up and segregated according to racial and/or religious groups (Tremewan, 1994) while the government has a few in place such as the Family Service Centre, and the most recent one being the Social Service Office (MSF, 2014).

Meritocracy focuses on individualistic features such as effort, merit and competence without taking into account social factors such as environment and culture. An educational system based on the ideals of meritocracy favours students whose micro environment matches well with the system (Bourdieu, 1990). The system itself is controlled by the dominant group who determines what is valuable and what is not, discarding any that they feel is not in line with their beliefs and agenda (Ratner, 2000; Valencia & Black, 2002; Applebaum, 2005). Their views are accepted as standard and impartial (Luke, 2005).

This has resulted in “deficit thinking” whereby the system holds the individual responsible for his own outcome and that the system is not to be blamed (Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005). Social and ethnic inequalities are justified through the principle of meritocracy (Augoushnos et al, 2005; Fassetiwarren, 2007; Hirtt et. al. 2007). In schools, teachers are expected to curtail the effects of socio-ethnic inequalities, while focusing on the individuals’ fundamental characteristics.

Deficit thinking has then led to systemic bias whereby any individuals or groups whose environment, beliefs, circumstances and values are not aligned with the system are viewed as “abnormal”. One of the resulting consequence of this is cultural and ethnic bias which influences actions and performances of those in the minority groups, leading to “internalized racism” or “internalized discrimination”. Some members of the group legitimize these representations to some extent and act upon them as they believe that this is “who they are”.

Researcher: So you say you looked up to the express students. Why didn't you be like them? I mean you saw them. They were in the same school as you. Why didn't you be like them since you looked up to them? Or follow their lead. Yeah that's more like it. Follow their lead.

Interviewee: Because I think I can't be like them because they are like too smart for me. So during that time I just be me lah and enjoy. Peer pressure... peer pressure ah. I mean the gangs I hang out with. I don't usually hang out with express students. Yah.

(Interview with a 27 year old graduate from the Normal Technical Stream)

Various evidence from current literature has supported this theory. Many low income households also tend to have at least a member of the household who is of working age but unemployed and/or have been or are incarcerated (Brassard, 2015; Mathews, 2015). Many of the youths and children in the household have also been reported to

have behavioural problems, both at home and in school. A majority of the participants from the lower stream and/or who were from neighbourhood schools (lower ranked, non-elite schools) revealed that their immediate peers in school had behavioural problems too, and while none of their peers was the “head”, everyone acted in the same negative manner.

What is even more disenfranchising for minorities facing systemic bias, is the view they have of others in the same racial group as them who did not manage to break out of the cycle. This is highlighted in the following interview with one of the participants, who is also Malay and was himself from one of the lower streams.

Researcher: Do you think being a Malay has affected you in any way in school especially? In terms of your opportunity?

Interviewee: Okay. Actually... sorry to say this eh. But I don't like Malays. Haha.

Researcher: Why do you not like Malays?

Interviewee: Why I don't like Malay? Just (that) Malays like to pick on others. They like to pick on others while they themselves are lazy. Haha. Ya. So like...

Researcher: Do you think society has this perception that a lot of Malays are actually lazy?

Interviewee: Not all. Ya.

Researcher: So a number of them *lah*?

Interviewee: A number of them

(Interview with a 29 year old graduate from the Normal Technical Stream)

Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong justified the growing wealth gap, social class divisions and inadequate rewards as necessary means to an end – the end being a successful economy. He argued that they serve as incentives to motivate people to give their best in terms of contribution to the economy. Those who are not well paid should not be resentful of those who earn more, after all high wages are the “big prizes in the free market” (Kang, 2005, p. 3). Singaporeans have come to accept this as being a part of life in Singapore.

e) Towards Equity

The second phase of this study gave birth to a non-profit organisation, Literacy Initiative For Equity (LIFE) SG, which is spearheaded by this researcher. LIFE reaches out to pockets of society that established organisations may have missed out and focuses on underprivileged pre-school and early primary school children. Through extensive networking and intensive groundwork, this researcher and her team have learnt more about the needs of these families. It is discovered that most of their children of all ages have lower literacy levels than expected as compared to their peers of the age group.

LIFE introduces different approaches to learning (Figure 2). While the programme started on a traditional teacher-centered approach for the purpose of having a control set of data, the students were introduced to various approaches such as active learning, cooperative learning and self-evaluation. The dynamic and holistic programme includes a variety of activities such as speech and drama, arts and design, sport activities, teambuilding activities, and excursions. The aim of these activities is to ensure that the children have a positive attitude towards education, and help them learn ways to channel negative emotions and energy in a healthy and fun manner.

The activities have been carefully thought out to complement whatever they may have learned in kindergarten. The belief is that by focusing on the children's essential needs and engaging these needs through healthy and fun activities, it would further develop their cognitive abilities and social skills. Students are observed, and results are recorded (Figure 1). This phase hopes to find ways to help children who are usually left behind, to achieve a fair chance at success, believe in their abilities, and have confidence to take on the world. LIFE has a strong desire to transform not only the lives of the children and the parents, but the mind set of society towards poverty and those experiencing it.

Level	Approach & Activities	Observed Results
1	<p>Traditional Teacher centred approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ students sit and write, listen to stories, memorise alphabets ➤ 75% "low-key" activities – sit and study, not learn ➤ "high-key" activities (e.g. Martial Arts or Art and Design) only once in a month 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ High Absentee and Dropout rate ➤ Behavioural problems ➤ Not engaged and motivated except during high key activities
2	<p>Incorporation of Kinaesthetic Activities and Active Learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Move towards student centred approach ➤ High key activities embedded across all the lessons ➤ Students are taught through “play” and hands on activities ➤ Group work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students more motivated and engaged ➤ Higher attention rate ➤ Less behavioural problems ➤ Higher attendance rate
3	<p>Introduction of “Dynamic & Phenomenal” Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Kinesthetic activities still embedded ➤ Some aspects cooperative learning introduced ➤ Values and social emotional skills are embedded into lessons ➤ Given responsibilities and roles ➤ Phenomenal education - students do not learn through subjects, they learn through a topic where different skills and subjects are incorporated within the particular topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Attendance stabilised - Students look forward to coming to class ➤ Parents formed a community ➤ Improved behaviour - better able to understand the consequences of their action ➤ Increased motivation and engagement – no longer hiding ➤ Displayed initiative, e.g. leading in performances and training other students ➤ Students displayed care and concerns for others, e.g. helping other students, motivating other students, helping teachers, etc.
4	<p>Introduce Self-evaluation and Cooperative Learning (upcoming)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students to assess their own learning and behaviour ➤ Full aspects of cooperative learning ➤ Ongoing assessment and improvement 	(Upcoming)

Figure 1

4. Conclusion: Changing the Narrative

Studies reveal that the egalitarian idea of “equality of opportunity” behind the theory of meritocracy remains an ideal rather than the normal practice (Goldthorpe, 2003; Lim, 2013). Equality does not translate to equity. Social class, cultural and educational capital, family background etc. may give some students an advantage over others but the extent of actual social mobility is questionable. Students from advantaged backgrounds have better access to educational and cultural resources which give them a head start (Berliner, 2013; Lim, 2013). This puts them ahead of the “race” even before it begins, therefore, displacing the classless idea of meritocracy (Berliner, 2013; Feinstein, 2002, 2003, 2004; Feinstein, Duckworth & Sabates, 2008; Lim, 2013). Thus, it seems that the notion of meritocracy has been used to mask a system of “reproduction” (Young, 1958). Social class and hierarchy are replicated, and inequality is maintained through the justifications and supposed success stories of “meritocracy” (Warikoo & Fuhr, 2013; Young, 1958).

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, Singapore is the world’s sixth most expensive city and has the highest number of millionaires per capita than any other country in the world. However, behind the rich and glamorous infrastructure lies an unfortunate truth that will put this high Gross Domestic Output (GDP) nation to shame. Singapore also has one of the biggest wealth gaps amongst developed nations.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development refuses to establish a national poverty line and unlike many western nations, Singapore does not have a welfare system, citing reasons such as “tailoring... depending on their needs and circumstances” (MSF, 2011). Although poverty is not something one can blatantly see in Singapore, it is estimated that 26% of Singaporeans are considered to be living under the poverty line. Efforts by the government have proven to have minimal impact due to globalisation and the high influx of foreign labour which has caused income to stagnate. Aside from that, the general society in Singapore has accepted meritocracy as a way of life, and a mind-set change would take a long time to come into effect.

Researcher: What do you think society thinks success and failure is?

Interviewee: I think they perceive success as someone having a degree. Right now... Last time it was Diploma. Now it’s Degree. And failure is like ITE. But I know the Ministry of Education is doing something to change that ITE perspective but it’s not really helping at all. Haha.

Researcher: Is it... Do you think it’s because of the years of...

Interviewee: Brainwashing. Ya.

(Interview with a 28 years old graduate from the Express Stream who entered Institute of Technical Education)

Nominated Member of Parliament, Laurence Lien, mentioned in an interview with BBC (2014) that Singapore's national identity is part of the reason why Singapore is resistant to social changes.

"This society has been founded on the basis of meritocracy... if you have been successful, it's because of your own efforts, if you're not, it's your fault," he said.

"But we need to change that narrative because people have got different opportunities and different conditions that could impede their ability to move out of that poverty trap."

The government has announced changes, policies and reviews to help more Singaporeans in need such as the Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme (MSF, 2014) and review of high stakes testing and streaming. However, provision of welfare assistance is not readily accepted by society as it is seen as destabilizing the work ethos Singapore prides itself for, which may in turn affect the economic success the nation has managed to garner in a short period of time (BBC, 2014).

"It's an abiding fear of becoming enervated by a poor work ethos where welfare becomes a crutch." (Eugene Tan in an interview with BBC, 2014)

The changes will take time as proper consideration and in depth research needs to be done due to the complication of balancing the economic needs of Singapore, the humanitarian needs and rights of every person, and the mind-set change that is required from the general society. Research studies have shown the harm inequality has on youth and society such as school and housing segregation; racial segregation; social mobility; imprisonment rates; drug use; and mental illness (Berliner, 2013) thus, it is imperative for the government to implement more inclusive and compassionate policies to ensure that Singapore remains harmonious and socially cohesive.

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