

*Assessing the Impact of Meritocracy on the Singapore Education System:
Evaluating Outcomes, Averting Threats*

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Abstract

The Republic of Singapore is a small multiracial, multicultural and multi-religious island-nation made up of various ethnic communities. While the Malays are recognised as the country's indigenous group, they currently make up less than 14 per cent of the total population. The Chinese, being the dominant group, form 75 per cent of the citizenry while the Indians, at 8 per cent, are represented as another minority group. The rest of the population comprises various ethnicities categorised as "Others". Because of its diversity, the government has made clear its prerogative on developing the nation's social cohesion and identity through education. This is done by imposing a uniform curriculum for all types of institutions, using locally-oriented textbooks, and instilling in its students a sense of common purpose and direction. Over time, such enforcement of "uniformity" across all Singapore schools' curricula has led to the convergence towards an extreme belief in meritocracy; where students' abilities are mainly differentiated based on results attained in high-stakes examinations. Critics have highlighted several negative outcomes resulting from the absolute "buy-in" of meritocracy. For one, socio-emotional learning is made of secondary importance to academic teaching. As a result, the nation is at risk of developing students who may be "book smart" but lack the sensibility to understand, empathize and respect. Others point to the weakness of meritocracy in the way it fails to appropriately recognize the different "starting points" for every student's academic journey. This casts doubts on the chances of these pupils doing well in a completely meritocratic environment.

Keywords: Meritocracy, Multicultural, Literacy, Vernacular schools, Bilingual education, Uniform curriculum, Capability set

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1. Introduction

The Republic of Singapore is a small multiracial, multicultural and multi-religious island-nation made up of various ethnic communities. While the Malays are recognised as the country's indigenous group, they currently make up less than 14 per cent of the total population. The Chinese, being the dominant group, form 75 per cent of the citizenry while the Indians, at 8 per cent, are represented as another minority group. The rest of the population comprises various ethnicities categorised as "Others". Over the years, Singapore's education system has evolved and gained much recognition both locally as well as globally. Praises are showered as the nation-state's literacy rates rose from about 50 per cent in 1965 to more than 96 per cent by 2012 (Gopinathan, 2015, p. 90). This is accompanied by high levels of trust shown by stakeholders and parents (Mathews, 2017, p. 17). Similarly, Singapore students have consistently raised their performance at the international level, ranking high in global assessments like TIMSS, PISA, PIRLS and various International Olympiads. In addition, organisations such as the OECD have analysed and commended Singapore's education system. Guided by well-trained teachers and school leaders, Singapore's education system continues to enjoy high achievement rates.

1.1. Origins

As a former British colony, Singapore's modern-day education policy began with the founding of the Singapore Institution in 1823. The school was funded by the colonial masters to provide free education for the indigenous residents in their mother tongue. The move was to create a more structured and more easily managed society — rather than more noble ideals of social progress for the Malay inhabitants (Ong, 2008). At the time, the English language was not taught to the natives as the British believed that early training in the child's own language was an absolute necessity. In their eyes, the objective of the Malay-language based education was simply to make the indigenous inhabitants better fishermen and peasants.

The Chinese and Indians were however, largely left to their own devices when it came to establishing learning institutions of their own. As a result, these communities established schools that were privately funded. The Chinese, for instance, set up vernacular schools run by teachers recruited from China, using textbooks imported from their Mainland. Similar to the Malay and Indian institutions, these schools were initially limited to the primary level. English-medium schools on the other hand were typically established by Christian missionaries, additionally supported by the government and were opened to all children on a fee-paying basis.

Overall, of these publicly-funded institutions were free from government control until 1919, after which the British government implemented the Registration of School Ordinance. In these early days, the local Education system has been characterised as suffering from "benign neglect, ad hoc policy making and indifference to consequences" (ibid). This was until the Registration of School Ordinance came into effect in 1920 that it subsequently underwent a series of amendments and re-enacted as the 1957 Education Ordinance.

By the end of World War II in 1945, the local population had begun to develop a sense of belonging and patriotism that resulted in the British government initiating

changes to the education policy. To appease the population's awakening national fervour, the British government then declared free primary education for all races.

According to Ho and Gopinathan (1999), Singapore's education system today has its roots prior to 1965 when the nation achieved its independence. In 1956 for example, the *All-Party Report on Chinese Education* commissioned by the British-ruled Singapore government had included a proposal for an "equal and adequate" education system to meet the needs of all major ethnic groups in the country (Zhao & Liu, 2010, p. 241). Similarly, when Singapore was granted internal self-government in 1959 and the People's Action Party (PAP) subsequently voted into power, a policy statement was issued echoing this line of belief. The new government made it clear that its prerogative was the attainment of social cohesion and the development of a national identity for its citizens through education. PAP leaders saw an overriding need in working against the colonial legacy of communalism and ethnic division. The leaders began by introducing a Five-Year Plan that emphasised equal treatment of the four language streams of education. Nevertheless, in wanting to simultaneously recognise the nation's historical foundations and meet the perceived demands of the economy, Malay was made the National Language while emphasis was given to the teaching of Science and Technical subjects in schools (Tan, 2010).

By the time Singapore attained complete independence from the British in 1965, the re-elected PAP government made more concrete its plans to shape the education system for the young nation. It introduced a tripartite system of academic, vocational and technical schools, to support the country's fledgling economy. With the population's diversity, the government also saw the need to inculcate patriotism and national identity among school-going Singaporeans in order to develop a peaceful and productive multiracial, multicultural and multilingual society. This was done by putting together a uniform curriculum for all types of schools, using locally-oriented textbooks, and instilling in schools a sense of common purpose and direction.

Ethnic division was further mitigated with the introduction of bilingual education in 1966. English was made the main medium of instruction while the pupil's mother tongue was declared a Second Language but made a compulsory examinable subject at both the primary and secondary levels.

Today, the Singapore education system has evolved and diversified to include specialised government-run institutions, such as the Singapore Sports School and School of the Arts.

2. Evolution of Meritocracy as an Ideology

Regardless of any incremental changes, the government has remained steadfast in its enforcement of "uniformity" across all Singapore schools' curricula. The rationale underpinning this approach is for academic success to essentially be based on a student's merit and performance regardless of his or her race, religion or socio-economic background. In this sense, the meritocratic model recognises and rewards talent primarily based on academic achievement. This was outlined by Dr Aline Wong, then Senior Minister of State for Education (2000) who clarified that "In the 1960s and 70s, a series of educational reforms was undertaken to unify the standards, and set up a common education system." It has been maintained however, that the

government has over the years, shown some flexibility in allowing for the curriculum to be reviewed “to allow for differentiation to meet the needs of students with different talents and abilities” (Hodge, 2007).

Nevertheless, the view towards academic meritocracy as a bedrock for gauging competencies has remained uncompromising. In his 2010 National Day speech, the country’s Prime Minister clarified that, “The Singapore spirit is not based on a common race, language or religion. It is based on deeper things that we share: shared values like multi-racialism, meritocracy, or respect for every talent; shared loyalty and commitment to Singapore; shared responsibility for each other and pride in what we have done together...” (<https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/prime-minister-lee-hsien-loongs-national-day-rally-2010-speech-english>).

This deep belief in the value of commonality and uniformity has ultimately led to a convergence on the importance of meritocracy. Epitomised into an all-consuming ideology, the meritocratic model rationalises the government’s commitment towards recognising, cultivating and rewarding talent based on academic merit. Essentially, regardless of any other abilities that they might possess, students’ abilities are differentiated based only on results attained in high-stakes examinations.

2.1. Positive Outcomes

After more than 50 years since its inception, the proponents of the meritocratic approach have now, in their possession, a ‘showcase’ of successes that they can boast of. While differences in academic performance between ethnic groups remain, statistics have shown that the gap has narrowed considerably. Data reported in the McKinsey report shows that the performance of pupils in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) has improved for all ethnic groups, with Malay and Indian pupils showing the most marked improvement while Chinese students continued to perform consistently above the national average (Gopinathan, 2015, p. 14). In a speech presented in 2011, then Minister for Education Ng Eng Hen noted that in 1980, only a quarter of those aged 25-39 years had completed secondary school education and above. This jumped fourfold to 96% by 2010. Each succeeding generation, he said, has done better than their parents. Furthermore, 44% of those aged 25-39 years today have university education. What is impressive, he noted given the big attrition rates in the 1970s, is the ability of the current education system to both retain and enable students to complete a minimum 10 years of education, with a majority obtaining five O-levels. Also to note is the fact that significant numbers go on to post-secondary education. Over 75% of the cohort then proceeded to enrol in the next level of their studies. These significant figures signal that families recognise the value of credentials, and that further education and training in Singapore are showing benefits (Ng, 2011).

2.2. Conceptual Misalignments

With the passing of time unfortunately, the flaws of such meritocratic ideals are beginning to reveal themselves in significant ways. Critics have argued that while Singaporean students are achieving ever-higher grades in national examinations, “book smarts” have little relevance in the real world where a sense of equity and justice; underscored by the ability to understand, empathise and respect; are just as

necessary. While components of socio-emotional learning such as Character and Citizenship Education, Critical Thinking Skills and Pastoral Care already exist in the Singapore curriculum, these non-examinable subjects are, however unintentionally, regarded to be of lesser importance in classroom studies. The general perception among educators, and subsequently their pupils, is that these socio-emotional learning lessons are either “time-wasters” or government-initiated propaganda.

Over time, the prominence given to meritocratic ideals, reinforced by the inherent downplay of socio-emotional education, have lulled students into a “false consciousness” where issues such as the exclusion and marginalisation of minority groups are seen as a natural state of affairs. As clarified by Jost (1995), false consciousness pertains to “the holding of false beliefs... which thereby contribute to the disadvantaged position [of a group]” (p. 397).

To counter this phenomenon, proponents such as Ward and Mullender (1991) insist for a greater push to be made to empower all learners towards “a commitment to challenging and combating injustice and oppression,” hence moving closer towards creating a progressive yet conciliatory community (p. 22). This is seen to be an increasingly necessary approach in the current Singaporean society, where terms such as “Chinese privilege” and “majority rules” are euphemisms often expressed by the disgruntled minority. Chua (1995), for example, has written extensively on what he terms the “communitarian” approach adopted by the Chinese-dominated Singapore government. Communitarianism is based on what is perceived to be the “shared value” that is embraced by all racial and cultural groups, and is considered to be the cultural essence of Asian societies. He insists however, that “in reality, the communitarian ideology is indubitably anti-liberal as collective interests are placed above individual ones” (p. 29). Others have added the situation may even be worst as, “collective interests” in the Singapore context typically translates to beliefs that advocate the needs of the dominant group over that of minority welfare. Minority ethnic groups with weak political representation, such as the Malays become vulnerable to the whims of these “collective interests”. In most cases, it ends up with the community sacrificing their needs in deference to “the greater good” (Juhari, 2011). The concept of Shared Values formulated in 1988 by the country’s leaders illustrates this. Championed as values for Singaporeans to live by, the messages underpinning each value are extolled to have rooted from ‘Asian’ beliefs. Critics however, highlight that such values are in fact appropriated from ‘selected’ Confucian ethics that idealised economic processes. These beliefs in turn, serve to perpetuate ruling-class interests by securing compliance from the populace. (Chong, 2002, p. 402)

Responding to such criticisms, the government insists that demands for such “intensive” types of socio-emotional education cannot be met as the approach will not reconcile with the maintenance of the nation’s “shared values”. Unfortunately, to the most extreme hardliner, the current pedagogy is one that forcefully emphasises benefits that favour the dominant ethnic group while marginalising the minority communities.

2.3. Unintended Outcomes

Proponents of the meritocratic model have given their assurance that quality education will be made available for students of all levels of academic aptitude. Nevertheless, placement of students into the different learning tracks itself has become an issue of controversy.

For example, upon their entry into the secondary level, students are streamed into the various learning tracks depending on their Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) results. In line with the meritocratic approach, posting is based on academic achievement with the different curricula emphases designed to match each student's learning needs, abilities and interests. For instance, highest scoring students who form the top 10% of their secondary cohort are channelled into the Special stream and are provided with enhanced learning modules that allow for more flexibility and a less structured study programme. These students are enrolled into the Integrated Program which exempts them from taking the 'O' level examinations at the end of their 4-year course of study. They will however be automatically promoted to their next level of study. In this way, these high achieving pupils will be able to live up to their potential having been immersed in learning experiences which are broader in nature yet without the need to be tied to studies which focus only towards passing their final examinations. The long-term expectation is for these students to advance their studies beyond that of the basic tertiary credentials. Of the remainder in the secondary level cohort, 50% will qualify for a place in the Express track. This may lead first to junior college or the polytechnics and for some who excel, to university studies. The remaining 40% are considered lower achieving students in the cohort. Of these, half are expected to undertake the Normal (Academic) track which normally leads to a polytechnic diploma while the rest will fall into the Normal (Technical) stream which, upon completion, enables them to attain a skills-based qualification derived from the Institutes of Technical Education ("The Downsides to Singapore's education system: streaming, stress and suicides," 2017)

According to statistics published by Singapore's MOE, the government's recurrent expenditure per secondary school student rose from SGD 5,614 in the 2002/03 academic year to SGD 13,931 in the 2016/17 academic year (Education Digest, 2017). An argument has thus be made that at the basic level, the government has shown commitment to an increasing yet equal allocation of resources endowed to all local students. In short, no government learning institutions have been deprived of the resources required for effective teaching and learning. Critics however argue that regardless of this, inequality and marginalisation still occur at Singapore schools because of the value-added resources made privy to those at the higher-end learning tracks. It was pointed out that schools catering to top-tier students also receive additional funding by way of per capita grants and scholarships so as to be able to participate in specialised programs (MOE, 2018). For instance, one of its top secondary schools, Anglo-Chinese School (Independent), has been able to offer various enrichment programmes designed to "stretch and develop its high ability learners". These include yearly enrichment camps to provide such students with out-of-classroom learning activities as well as an annual symposium where students role-play politicians and diplomats in a United Nations or Singapore Parliamentary setting. (Anglo-Chinese School (Independent), 2018). In addition, it was reported that. "The gap between Singapore's top-end neighbourhood schools has over the decades

widened partly as a result of factors like bigger and better facilities built with alumni funds” (Davie, 2014). The implication is that such institutions are further advantaged by being recipients of additional funding endowed by their already well-established Old Students Associations.

Research has shown that students with vast access to economic and social capital are more likely to optimise the opportunities provided for them. Such elements, for instance, can be found in the kind of exposure and interactions made available via the enrichment activities organised for the IP students but not for the rest in the secondary level cohort. In addition, students from less privileged family backgrounds will also miss out on the perks of having cultural capital. They often have no one to advise them on the steps to take as most of their older relations tend not to go as far in the education ladder. As such, these students have to rely on themselves to look for sources of information and motivation. Failing to access these, they inevitably stumble more along the way resulting in greater stress faced in their studies. The lack of information due to the limited cultural capital they have makes them vulnerable to succumbing to less desirable paths which they would have strived to avoid had they fully understood the impacts these would have on their future. Marginalisation occurs when these learners are not provided with the same level of access to the various forms of capital thus resulting in their loss of prospects for a higher level of education (Zhang, 2014).

Another main criticism of the meritocracy-based education system is the way it takes its toll on the achievement levels of students from the minority groups in the country. This is especially so for students from the minority Malay community, a group over-represented at the lower end of the income spectrum. The fallacy of meritocracy, in the context of Singapore’s education system, lies in the fact that it fails to recognise the variability of “starting points” for every child’s academic journey and how these will differ due to the individual’s circumstances in life. While the previous issue of high dropout rates for Malay students at the primary level have been resolved with the introduction of the Compulsory Education Legislation, statistics from the Ministry of Education nevertheless indicate that the would-be dropouts are merely ‘pushed up’ to occupy the lower rungs of the secondary school cohort (Ministry of Education Statistics Digest, 2017). As such, at the end of their secondary school education, Malay students continue to experience higher levels of underachievement. For instance, results of the ‘O’ level examinations reflect that Malay students generally fared lower than the other ethnic groups in the core subjects of English, Science and Mathematics. The gap for Mathematics, in fact, widened to more than twenty percentage points in 2016 (ibid).

This is despite studies which revealed Malays to be as conscious to the fact that educational attainment is the best medium for upward social mobility. A 2016 IPS survey on Parents and Education for instance indicate that compared to those from the other ethnic groups in the country, Malay parents scored the highest levels of stress on issues relating to them not being able to help their child with his or her studies because the syllabus is too challenging for them. This subsequently increases their fear that their child will lose out in the education system in the long run (Mathews, 2017).

2.4. Assistance, Resources & Shortcomings

Acknowledging the mounting criticism of the meritocratic model, the Singapore government has undertaken measures to reduce what is seen to be a growing aspirational divide reflecting the widening socio-economic differences in the country. The call is for a change in educational approach where equality of opportunity should now be tempered with genuine measures to create greater equity of outcome. Amartya Sen uses the term ‘capability set’ when denoting an individual’s alternative combinations of ‘functionings’ required to achieve his or her life’s objectives (2000, p. 75). On this basis, fairness in outcomes can be achieved by supplementing the limited ‘capability sets’ of those who are less privileged. In the case of marginalised students in Singapore, this is done by enhancing the options available to pupils who face limited choices in how they want to live their lives. In this regard, Singapore’s MOE has put in place several initiatives in an attempt to increase the capability sets of these marginalised students. Several of these can be found in the following examples. Unfortunately, these programmes tend to also develop their own set of shortcomings.

2.4.1. Financial assistance

Students from less well-off families are identified and enrolled in the many financial assistance schemes made available to them. These range from daily issued school allowances to the yearly disbursement of education grants to deserving pupils. The Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund for example was started in 2000 as a community project initiated by The Straits Times, the country’s newspaper publication to provide pocket money to children from low-income families to help them through school. The children can use the money for school-related expenses such as buying a meal during recess, paying for transport or using it to meet other schooling needs. The financial help is expected to ease the burden of the many parents who are already struggling to feed their families on their meagre incomes. The Fund currently supports more than 10,000 children and youth a year by providing them with monthly school pocket money (“School Pocket Money Fund,” n.d.).

Similarly, all Singaporean students in government and government-aided learning institutions are eligible for the Edusave Merit Bursary if they are within the top 25% of their cohort in terms of academic performance, have demonstrated good conduct, and whose gross monthly household income does not exceed SGD 6,900 (or per capita income does not exceed SGD 1,725). The values of these yearly bursaries range from \$200 for students in Primary 1 to 3, to \$500 for those studying in the Institutes of Technical Education or specialised schools/Polytechnics (“Edusave Merit Bursary,” n.d.).

Nevertheless, while such forms of financial assistance have provided invaluable assistance to these less well-off pupils, they only function as temporary ‘band aids’ in providing solutions to the diversity of issues that they face in their lives. Critics are arguing for a more holistic approach where there can be integration and consolidation of services among community organizations serving to alleviate the plight of these individuals. An example has been made of how community programmes are often seen to work in silos or have become oblivious to the ways of how one another operates in providing help to the families in need. Specifically, while the family unit accepts the best possible assistance rendered by the various relevant agencies, the aid

that they receive tends not to complement or synergise. For example, the school delinquent is counselled and made to undergo behaviour management programmes but little is done to ensure that the family be made more supportive of the child's education and rehabilitation. Thus even if financial assistance is made available to the family, without proper guidance and supervision, the needed emotional support for the student may be lacking. In the end, there can be no win-win situation as the financial intervention lacks the holistic approach (Juhari, 2016).

2.4.2. Assistance from Non-Government Organisations (NGOs)

Through its promotion of the 'Many Helping Hands' approach, the government adopts a strategy where it empowers NGOs by supporting efforts fronted by ethnic-based self-help groups or social-welfare organisations. For instance, it provided assistance to Yayasan MENDAKI, a Malay Self-Help Group when it pioneered the establishment of the MENDAKI Tuition Scheme (MTS). Initiated in 1982, the nationwide programme aims to provide quality tuition at affordable rates so as to help students from the Malay community attain better results in their school and national examinations. To date, about 200,000 Malay students have benefited from the quality and affordable tuition. With highly qualified tutors, students are engaged in a positive and enriching environment during lessons. MTS is aligned to the Ministry Of Education's curriculum and provides additional developmental activities. Weekend classes are conducted in more than 50 schools around the island ("Mendaki Tuition Scheme", n.d.).

"The Many Helping Hands" approach has been lauded for providing NGOs with the 'space' and opportunity to use their creativity in implementing their initiatives. However, there has also been criticism in the way assistance from the government is only rendered at the "sidelines". In short, political appointment holders are free of blame should there be flaws or failure with any of these programmes. The "Many Helping Hands" approach thus protects and relieves political leaders from taking on the full commitment and responsibility of welfare provision, seen to be the burden of any nationally-elected representative.

2.4.3. Direct School Admission (DSA) programme

Introduced in 2004, the DSA programme is an admission exercise that allows participating secondary schools to select some Primary Six students for admission into their institutions at the Secondary One level before the release of the PSLE results. These selections are aimed at recognising and admitting students into secondary schools based on talents in areas such as sports and arts instead of general academic ability ("Direct School Admission Programme," n.d.). According to Indranee Rajah, Second Minister for Education, "The programme's primary objective was to ensure that students who are less well-resourced, less well-advantaged, still have the opportunity to apply, and to make it an available platform for them" (Mokhtar, 2018). Some examples of talents which selected secondary schools keep a look out for include performance arts such as ballet as well as for sports such as rugby, hockey, swimming and soccer.

Unfortunately, this initiative at most only advantages a small subset of best qualified low-income students. Affluent parents, in fact have been "gaming" the system by

sending their children to preparatory schools to give them an edge in a bid to secure a place in top schools. Such practices led Denise Phua, Member of Parliament for Jalan Besar Group Representation Constituency, to call it an “open secret” that DSA has benefited children from wealthier households (ibid).

3. Conclusion

To conclude, while the image of Singapore’s education system is rosy in the eyes of the international community, it is not without its problems. Issues of exclusion and marginalisation must continually be addressed and resolved before they trigger social discontent. Appropriate counter-measures are needed to balance educational excellence with equity. This calls for a change in educational approach in which meritocracy; which calls for equality of opportunity; is continuously tempered with genuine measures to create fairness of outcomes for all students.

Appendices

- Many Helping Hands – An approach where the Singapore Government works closely with and through community organisations to provide help to the needy.
- Social Capital – Refers to the value of social networks that serves to bond groups of similar people or to bridge groups of diverse people, using norms of reciprocity as a benchmark.
- Education Ordinance – A set of legal provisions relating to the registration of schools, conduct of managers and teachers, as well as for the roles and responsibilities of school management committees.
- Compulsory Education Legislation - An Act of Parliament which makes mandatory a period of education for all citizens of that country.
- Cultural Capital – A set of social assets possessed by an individual such as education and intellect which functions to promote his or her social mobility so as to achieve a higher social status in society.
- TIMSS – The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) is a series of international assessments of the mathematics and science knowledge of students around the world.
- PISA – The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a triennial international survey that aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students.
- PIRLS – The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an international study of reading achievement of fourth graders.
- International Olympiads – The International Olympiads are a group of worldwide annual competitions of various learning disciplines.
- OECD – The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) aims to promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.

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