Chapter 9
Managing Diversity: The Singapore Experience

Jason Tan

Introduction

This chapter outlines the relationship between education and social cohesion in Singapore, an ethnically and culturally diverse country of some 4 million people at the southern tip of the Malay peninsula, and the only one with a Chinese-majority population in Southeast Asia. It begins by outlining the British colonial government's general inattention to educational provision throughout most of its 140-year-long rule. It was not until after the end of the Second World War that efforts were begun to provide some kind of coherence to the education system in preparation for eventual self-government. The chapter then continues with an examination of how the advent of self-government and political merger within Malaysia affected education policy, especially with regard to the fostering of social cohesion. Attention then falls on the period since the attainment of political independence in 1965. Various policy dilemmas and challenges with regard to language-in-education policy, ethnic disparities in educational attainment, and social class disparities in educational attainment are discussed.

Historical Background

British Colonial Rule, 1819–1959

Singapore first came under British control in 1819 as a result of a treaty signed between Sir Stamford Raffles, an official of the English East India Company, and the Malay hereditary ruler of Johor at the southern tip of the Malay peninsula. Over the course of the subsequent century, increasing numbers of immigrants from China and India arrived, changing the demographic profile from a Malay-dominant one to

National Institute of Education, Singapore

G. Wan (ed.), *The Education of Diverse Student Populations: A Global Perspective.*

a Chinese-dominant one with Malays forming the largest numerical ethnic minority group. Throughout much of the 19th century the British colonial authorities' involvement in educational provision was minimal. Apart from providing free education in the first few primary years in the Malay language to a small number of ethnic Malays, the authorities accepted no other responsibility for running schools. The task of establishing and funding schools was left almost entirely in the hands of Christian missionaries and wealthy merchants from various ethnic communities. A system of limited government grants was introduced for privately run English-medium schools, but none were forthcoming for Chinese- and Tamil-medium schools that catered to a limited number of children from the immigrant Chinese and Tamil communities.

In 1903 the Education Department began accepting administrative responsibility for a few English-medium schools, which became known as government schools. Educational enrollments in English-medium schools expanded during the first two decades of the 20th century. At the same time, enrollments in Chinese-medium schools rose as a result of local Chinese, who formed slightly over 75% of the population, being inspired by political and social reforms in mainland China. However, education remained far from universal.

The system in the first four decades of the 20th century was characterized by "the absence of a single, clearly enunciated, guiding policy" (Wilson, 1978, p. 29). No attempts were made to articulate a common set of goals towards which all schools ought to strive. There were a wide range of schools, varying in terms of management structure, government control and supervision, medium of instruction, curricula, and quality of teaching staff. The only schools where children of different backgrounds were enrolled were the English-medium schools, which catered only to a small minority of school-age children. These schools were favored by the colonial government in terms of funding and opened doors to clerical employment in the colonial civil service or in trading firms.

The overall effect of such a system was socially divisive, accentuating cultural, linguistic, and cultural differences as well as the gap between rich and poor. Higher education was available in the King Edward VII College of Medicine or the Raffles College, but was accessible only to a small minority who had successfully completed their secondary schooling in the few English-medium schools that existed. Malay- and Tamil-medium education did not progress much beyond the primary level and thus did not offer attractive prospects for economic advancement. Chinese-medium schools provided primary and secondary education but were heavily China-centric in their focus. At the same time, there was also no Chinese-medium higher education. Thus the political and economic gulf between ethnic Chinese who had been educated in Chinese-medium schools and those who had been educated in English-medium schools grew as well.

The first attempt to design educational policies that were related to clearly defined goals came in the form of the Ten Years Program, which was adopted in 1947. Two of the general principles underlying the policy were the need for education to foster the capacity for self-government and for education to inculcate civic loyalty and responsibility. The program also outlined plans to provide universal free

primary education through one of the following languages: English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil. In addition, all schools were to encourage intermingling of ethnic groups in all school activities. Furthermore, the same curriculum should be provided for all races. This policy was promulgated against the backdrop of increasing recognition by the colonial government that self-government was on the horizon.

The Ten Years Program was never faithfully implemented. The main obstacle was government financial stringency, which meant that there were never sufficient places in the four types of schools for complete freedom of choice to be exercised. The second factor was the grossly unequal economic opportunities open to graduates from different kinds of schools. Because English was the dominant language of government administration, higher education, and commerce, enrollments in English-medium schools expanded much more rapidly than those in Chinese-, Malay-, and Tamil-medium schools.

Third, relations between the colonial authorities and Chinese-medium schools, which had never been cordial, underwent further strains. The government enacted a School Registration Ordinance in 1950 empowering the authorities to search and close schools engaged in subversive activities, a move aimed at countering Communist influence after the rise of the Chinese Communist Party to power in 1949. In addition, the neighboring Federation of Malaya, also under British colonial rule, had launched a new education policy in 1952 that concentrated on English- and Malay-medium schooling to the exclusion of Chinese-medium schooling, a move that caused much concern among sections of the ethnic Chinese community in Singapore.

A further aggravating factor was the lack of Chinese-medium higher education in Singapore. There was only one university, the University of Malaya, which operated solely in the English language. Access to higher education was thus limited for graduates from Chinese-medium schools, a situation made worse by the difficulty in traveling to study in China after 1949. Despite colonial opposition, a group of local Chinese business leaders managed to raise funds to establish a Chinese-medium university that opened in 1956.

In a bid to find a long-term solution to the problems afflicting Chinese-medium education, a Legislative Assembly committee made recommendations in 1956 for improving Chinese-medium education. The All-Party Report recommended equal treatment for all the four language streams. The second recommendation dealt with the need to foster a Singapore-centered loyalty and a pan-ethnic Malayan identity in preparation for eventual political merger with the Malayan Federation. Third, opportunities should be provided for students in English-medium and non-English-medium schools to interact through extramural activities. Fourthly, civics should be a compulsory subject in all schools. Fifthly, English and Malay (which was about to be made the national language in a Malayan Federation on the brink of political independence) were mentioned as compulsory languages for all students as part of bilingual education in primary schools and trilingual education in secondary schools.

Most of the report's recommendations were included in the White Paper on Education Policy released a few months later in 1956. Steps were subsequently taken to implement some of these recommendations. First, a single Education

Ordinance was introduced along with common grant-in-aid regulations to govern schools. Second, the first government-run Chinese-medium schools were established in 1956. In addition, the Education Ministry attempted to devise common school syllabuses and textbooks. Fourthly, civics was introduced into all schools.

Despite official talk about equality among various language streams, educational opportunities for Malay- and Tamil-medium students remained extremely limited as these two streams still did not provide any post-primary education at all. In 1956 the Malay Education Council demanded the immediate establishment of Malay-medium secondary schools, a Malay-medium teacher training college, and a Malay-medium university. Lee Kuan Yew, then the leader of the opposition People's Action Party (PAP), stated his party's support for the council's demands for Malay-medium secondary schools.

Self-Government, 1959–1963

The first major change upon the attainment of self-government in 1959, with the PAP now in power, was the standardization of national examinations at both primary and secondary levels. The first Primary School Leaving Examination was made available in all four languages in 1960. Secondary students in all four language streams sat for the first common School Certificate Examinations in 1963. In yet another move to unify the education system and prepare for political merger with a newly independent Malaya, Malay was declared the national language. The PAP attempted to allay the fears of the ethnic Malay majority in Malaya over the political and economic consequences of merger with a Chinese-majority population in Singapore (the only such Southeast Asian country) by proposing Malay as a lingua franca between various ethnic groups. All non-Malay medium schools were ordered to teach the national language as a second or third language. These gestures were in keeping with the new constitution's explicit recognition of the Malays, who comprised about 14% of the population, as the indigenous people of Singapore. Other preferential policies included the offering of free secondary and tertiary education to ethnic Malay citizens or their offspring. Special bursaries and scholarships, free textbooks, and transport allowances were awarded to deserving Malay students. In addition, Malay-medium secondary and pre-university classes were begun by the government in 1960 and 1963, respectively.

Political Merger with Malaysia, 1963–1965

Further political developments after 1959 led to the political merger of Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo, and Sarawak to form Malaysia in 1963. Singapore

retained autonomy over education and did not implement the system of Malay enrollment and job quotas and special rights practiced in the rest of Malaysia, despite Singapore Malays now being part of an ethnically and politically dominant Malay community within Malaysia. The PAP rejected Singaporean Malay calls for it to institute preferential enrollment and job quotas for Malays similar to those in the rest of Malaysia (where these preferential policies were constitutionally enshrined), claiming instead that educational achievement was to be the main means through which Singapore Malays would close the long-standing socioeconomic gap separating them from other Singaporeans, especially the majority ethnic Chinese. This fundamental disagreement between the PAP and the federal Malaysian government on how to approach the problem of interethnic socioeconomic disparities led to a heightening of ethnic tensions, interethnic riots in 1964, and the eventual expulsion of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965.

Political Independence, 1965–

In the immediate wake of political independence, the PAP government (which has held a monopoly on political power from 1959 until this day) reiterated its commitment to a multiracial and multilingual society, and to equal treatment of all four language streams in education. Direct government involvement in the running and funding of schools, which had begun increasing since the mid-1950s, escalated, as did general enrollment figures. For example, enrollments in government-run schools formed 64.3% and 71.3% of total primary and secondary enrollments respectively in 1970, compared with 49% and 46.9% respectively in 1960 (Department of Statistics, 1983, pp. 232, 235). Because of the Education Act and Grant-in-Aid Regulations, both government-run and government-aided (mainly schools formerly run by religious and community-based bodies) schools had to implement identical curricula, with the sole exception of religious education in the latter. Such provisions further strengthened government attempts to impose standardization and coherence on the school system even as practically universal primary school attendance was attained in 1966.

Social cohesion took on an added urgency after 1965. In a speech to school principals in 1966, Lee Kuan Yew said that Singaporeans lacked the "in-built reflexes" of loyalty and patriotism (Lee, 1966, p. 3). He claimed the colonial authorities had never designed an education system to "produce a people capable of cohesive action" (Lee, 1966, p. 3). The Finns, Israelis, and Swiss had "managed to withstand much larger neighbors" because of "the tight nature of their social organization" (Lee, 1966, p. 4). From 1966 onward, all students were required to attend daily rituals that persist to this day, during which they would sing the national anthem while the national flag was being raised or lowered. They also had to recite a pledge of loyalty. Civics and history syllabuses were revised yet again.

Language-in-Education Policies

The PAP government continued its policy of supporting bilingualism in schools. The study of two languages, one of which was English, had already been made compulsory in all primary schools in 1960. This policy was now extended to secondary schools in 1966. The policy rationale for bilingualism now became more explicit. The English language was to be retained for its economic value, and as a major lingua franca, in contrast to earlier pronouncements stressing the importance of both English and Malay. Although Malay was retained as the national language, official enthusiasm for promoting its widespread use gradually faded. The last National Language Month was held in 1966. By the end of the 1970s the study of Malay as a national language by nonethnic Malays in secondary schools had all but ceased. There was less talk about trilingualism and the emphasis shifted instead to bilingualism, with heavy stress on English language competence. Consequently, enrollments in English-medium schools continued to surge, while enrollments in non-English-medium schools fell steadily. By 1970, 62.5% of primary school students were enrolled in English-medium schools, compared with 31.7%, 5.4%, and 0.3% in Chinese-, Malay-, and Tamil-medium schools respectively (Department of Statistics, 1983, p. 234).

Now that Singapore was no longer part of Malaysia, Singapore Malays had to adjust to minority status once more. The government reassured them of their continued special status in the constitution. However, it reiterated its previous stand that there would be no special privileges for them beyond the provision of free education and bursaries. Despite the retention of the Malay language in the national anthem, it was clear that Malay-medium education and the Malay language were no longer to be accorded the prominence they had enjoyed during the brief period between 1959 and 1965.

Amid growing problems such as a shortage of teachers and textbooks in Malay-medium schools, various Malay organizations urged the government to try to improve the situation. In 1970 the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union formally proposed a national system of education based on English as the main medium of instruction. Such a system would replace the existing practice of having four parallel language streams of education. The proposal met with a cold response from the government, which was then under pressure from sections of the ethnic Chinese community for allegedly neglecting Chinese-medium education. The government made no attempt in the 1960s and 1970s to impose universal English-medium education. Instead, it allowed the drift to English-medium schools to continue. It was not until 1983, when enrollment in English-medium schools approached 90% of total enrollment at both primary and secondary levels of schooling, that an official announcement was made that all schools would use the English language as the major medium of instruction from 1987 onward. This was yet another milestone in the standardization of the entire school system. English is now the language with the highest literacy rate among the general population and is also the predominant lingua franca among younger Singaporeans. It has now made inroads into many families, especially among higher-income Singaporeans. Furthermore, English,

especially in its indigenized colloquial form, has recently begun emerging as a language of unique Singaporean identity.

While the spread of the English language through the school system may be regarded as a unifying device in a multilingual population, the use of English as the major medium of instruction in schools privileges to some extent students from higher income, English-speaking families. Other language-in-education policies have been criticized as being socially divisive. For example, the Ministry of Education designated nine existing Chinese-medium secondary schools as Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools in 1979. These schools were intended to provide top-scoring primary school leavers with the opportunity to study both English and Mandarin Chinese to high levels of competence. Also, these schools would preserve the character of traditional Chinese-medium secondary schools and allay fears that the government was indifferent to Chinese language and culture amid declining enrollments in Chinese-medium schools and the closure of the Chinese-medium Nanyang University in 1980. Over the past quarter-century, the SAP scheme has been extended to a 10th secondary school and 15 formerly Chinese-medium primary schools. SAP schools have been provided with additional government funding and resources.

The establishment and continued existence of the SAP schools has been criticized periodically on several grounds (see for example, Lai, 2005; *Parliamentary Debates Singapore,* 1990, 1995, 1999, 2003). First, it is not fair to non-Chinese students who do not enjoy access to these better-resourced schools because they have to seek special permission from the Education Ministry in order to study the Chinese language in schools. Beginning in 1981, the Education Ministry mandated that students entering primary school had to study a second language associated with their putative ethnic group instead of enjoying a free choice of second language. This policy change has led to a marked decline in the number of students who cross ethnic boundaries to study a second language. Second, there also is concern that the students in these schools, many of whom are destined for top roles in politics, business, and the civil service, are not being provided opportunities to mingle with non-Chinese students, which would appear in direct opposition to the government's earlier policy of encouraging social cohesion in the school system. Equally contentious is the increasing promotion since the early 1980s of Mandarin as a key economic language. This move has come amid growing economic liberalization of mainland China and its emergence as a major international economic power. In other words, Mandarin Chinese is no longer touted solely as a language for cultural transmission, but is now promoted for its economic advantage in terms of work, trade, and investment in mainland China. Since non-Chinese students are not normally allowed to study Mandarin Chinese in schools, the promotion of the language thus raises questions of interethnic economic disparities (see for example, *Parliamentary Debates Singapore*, 1993). In early 1997 then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong attempted to allay the worries of the non-Chinese by stressing that English would remain the common working language in Singapore (Goh, 1997a).

Since the start of the 21st century, the SAP schools have been targeted as part of an Education Ministry plan to nurture a Chinese "cultural elite." This elite is

supposed to prove useful not only for the purposes of trade with mainland China, but also to form the basis for recruitment into journalism, the arts, education, and clan community leadership. The SAP schools have been urged to ensure that students socialize with their counterparts in non-SAP schools in response to public criticism over their ethnic exclusiveness. Up until 1994, the presence of the subject "Chinese as a first language," later replaced by the term "Higher Chinese," proved a distinguishing characteristic of SAP secondary schools vis-à-vis their non-SAP counterparts. However, little has been made of the fact that since 1994 a number of non-SAP secondary schools have been allowed to offer "Higher Chinese" as well. In addition, the selection criteria for students to study "Higher Chinese" have been progressively liberalized since the mid-1990s. The emergence of "Higher Chinese" in non-SAP schools may call into question the need for the SAP scheme to continue, especially when some SAP secondary schools have in fact a large proportion of students who study an easier form of Mandarin Chinese instead of the more demanding "Higher Chinese." It is also interesting to note that more than a quarter century after the inception of the SAP scheme, despite the existence of the subjects "Higher Malay" and "Higher Tamil" in non-SAP schools, no corresponding SAP schools have been established to promote the Malay or Tamil languages. This state of affairs may be linked to the fact that neither of these two languages enjoys the societal prestige or wider economic value of English or Mandarin Chinese. Government officials have, over the course of the past four decades, repeatedly touted English as the language of international business, science, and technology. In addition, since the late 1980s, they have claimed that a knowledge of Mandarin Chinese is vital to taking advantage of the recent rise of China as an economic power. The official rhetoric that Malay is vital for trade with Malaysia and Indonesia, and that Tamil is vital for trade with India, holds up less well compared to the more pressing arguments being made for English and Mandarin Chinese competence.

The SAP scheme may be seen as part of broader government policy over the past three decades to promote the status of Mandarin Chinese and to eliminate the use of other regional Chinese languages, and to ensure high standards of proficiency in Mandarin Chinese. In particular, the Ministry of Culture launched a Speak Mandarin campaign in 1979 targeted at replacing the use of regional Chinese languages among Singapore Chinese with Mandarin Chinese (which had hitherto been the native language of a tiny minority of Singapore Chinese) instead. The campaign, which has continued on an annual basis to the present, has led to an increase in the use of Mandarin Chinese among ethnic Chinese students. This phenomenon, along with the decline in the number of students who cross ethnic boundaries for the study of another school language and a concurrent decline in younger Singaporeans' multilingual ability, may deter mixed friendship networks from developing (see for example, Gupta, 1994; Kang, 2004; Lee et al., 2004). The Education Ministry has in the last few years taken piecemeal measures to address the problem of cross-ethnic compartmentalization in schools by encouraging schools to offer lessons in conversational Mandarin for students who are not studying Mandarin Chinese as a school subject and conversational Malay who are not studying Malay as a school subject.

Interethnic Disparities in Educational Attainment

Complicating the task of social cohesion has been the lingering of long-standing ethnic disparities in educational attainment, which in turn contribute to socioeconomic disparities across ethnic lines. Since the early 1980s government leaders have expressed public concern over this issue. Much of the concern has focused on the Malay minority. The results of the 1980s population census revealed that the Malays, who at that time constituted about 14% of the total population, had had the largest percentage increases over the previous decade in terms of persons with at least a secondary qualification.

However, the Malays were still grossly underrepresented in the professional/technical and administrative/managerial classes of the workforce, constituting 7.9% and 1.8% in these two categories, respectively (Khoo, 1981b, p. 66). In addition, there were only 679 Malay university graduates, making up 1.5% of the 44,002 university graduates in Singapore. Likewise, Malays made up only 5.7% of those with an upper secondary qualification (Khoo, 1981a, p. 15). These figures paled in comparison with those for the ethnic Chinese majority and ethnic Indian minority (then comprising about 6% of the Singapore population).

In August 1981 then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew urged Malay community leaders and educationists in the government service to give top priority to upgrading the educational level and training of the large number of Malays who did not possess any secondary school qualification. This effort was part of the national drive to improve educational levels so as to keep pace with the recently launched economic restructuring program, which involved moving away from labor-intensive industries to highly skilled ones. As a result of discussions between Malay Members of Parliament (MPs) and Malay community leaders, the Council on Education for Muslim Children (or Mendaki for short) was formed in October 1981.

In his opening address at the inaugural Mendaki Congress in May 1982, Lee observed that "it is in the interests of all [Singaporeans] to have Malay Singaporeans better educated and better qualified and to increase their contribution to Singapore's development" (Lee, 1982, p. 6). This statement was a clear acknowledgement of the fact that the Malays' educational and socioeconomic problems posed a threat to national integration and political stability. In addition, Lee promised government assistance for Mendaki. Lee also stressed the importance of the Malays helping themselves when he said that "a government-run scheme cannot achieve a quarter of the results of this voluntary, spontaneous effort by Malays/Muslims to help themselves" (Lee, 1982, p. 9).

Over the past two decades Mendaki's efforts to improve Malay/Muslim (this term is sometimes used in recognition of the fact that the vast majority of Malays are Muslim, and the majority of Singapore Muslims claim Malay ethnicity) educational achievement have been concentrated in three main areas: (1) running tuition classes from primary to pre-university levels with a focus on preparing students in key subjects such as English, mathematics, and science for major national examinations in a highly competitive education system; (2) providing scholarships, bursaries, and study loans to students with outstanding public examination

results and to those undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate studies; and (3) promoting Islamic social values that Malay leaders feel will promote family support for educational success. By the early 1990s, another group, the Association of Muslim Professionals, had appeared, one of its objectives being to boost Malay educational attainment. More recently, there has been growing emphasis by both these groups on the need to provide skills retraining programs for less educated members of the workforce.

The active government support of ethnically based groups in tackling the Malays' educational problems was extended to other ethnic communities in the early 1990s. By the late 1980s there was growing evidence that many ethnic Indian students were faring badly in their studies. Various ethnic Indian community leaders called for the establishment of an organization for Indian students along the lines of Mendaki. In response, the government, along with community leaders, established the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA) in 1991 to tackle Indian educational problems.

In July 1991 the then Prime Minister Goh urged the setting up of a "Chinese Mendaki." His suggestion received new impetus when the PAP failed to capture as many votes as it had expected in the 1991 general elections. The PAP saw the electoral outcome as an expression of discontent by poorer Chinese who felt neglected by the government focus on helping the Malays. Accordingly, the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC) was established the following year. In October 1992 the Eurasian Association launched an endowment fund to finance education and welfare programs for the minority Eurasian community. The government pledged financial support for the SINDA, CDAC, and the Eurasian Association, and also allowed working adults to make monthly financial pledges to these organizations.

These government moves to establish more ethnically based self-help groups have raised questions about their compatibility with officially espoused multiracial ideals. Besides fears about the heightening of ethnic differences, worries have been expressed in various quarters that the smaller organizations will simply be unable to compete with the CDAC, with its substantially larger financial resource base. Also, empirical research studies conducted by Mendaki, the SINDA, and the CDAC have shown that many of the problems facing educational underachievers are often closely related to their economically disadvantaged status. Research conducted by the government's chief statistician has demonstrated that intraethnic class differences have assumed greater significance as interethnic income differences have begun to narrow. It has therefore been argued that since the problems facing underachievers cut across ethnic lines, a more effective strategy might be to have a national body, instead of ethnically based ones, to coordinate efforts to help educational underachievers (Rahim, 1994).

The various criticisms leveled at the use of ethnically based groups have so far failed to make any inroads in official policy. The government response has been threefold (see for example, Goh, 1994). First, promoting these groups is not incompatible with multiracialism as long as the groups reaffirm their commitment to multiracialism and avoid competing against each other. To this end, the various

organizations have launched several joint projects and pooled their resources on occasion. Second, a national body would not be sensitive enough to the special needs of each community. Last, and most important of all, community self-help is more effective because it draws on and mobilizes deep-seated ethnic, linguistic, and cultural loyalties. The government claims that civil servants can never have the same degree of personal commitment as community leaders who are driven by a sense of mission.

The latest available data show the persistence of ethnic disparities in educational attainment. For example, ethnic Chinese (comprising 76.8% of the Singapore population) are heavily overrepresented in local universities and polytechnics, forming 92.4% and 84% of the respective full-time undergraduate and postgraduate enrollments in 2000. Ethnic Malays (2.7% and 10%, respectively) and Indians (4.3% and 5.2%, respectively) are correspondingly underrepresented in relation to their percentages in the national population (13.9% and 7.9%, respectively; Leow, 2001a, pp. 33–36). At the secondary level, the percentage of Malay students who passed at least five subjects in the national General Certificate of Education "Ordinary" Level examinations in 2005 was 62.8, far below the national average of 80.7% (Ministry of Education, 2006, Chart B2). Similarly, Malay students performed far below the national mean in mathematics in the national Primary School Leaving Examination that year (Ministry of Education, 2006, Chart A4). A disproportionately large percentage of Malay and Indian students are streamed into the slower-paced streams at both primary and secondary levels. In other words, the educational gap is already present at the lower levels of schooling and perpetuates itself at the higher levels.

These statistics are compounded by figures that show relatively high ethnic Malay rates for divorce, teenage pregnancy, family dysfunction, and drug addiction (see for example, Zakir, 2006), along with continuing Malay and Indian complaints about discrimination in the job market, especially during times of economic recession (see for example, *Parliamentary Debates Singapore, 70*, 17 March 1999, Cols, 1006–1008). In this latter regard, the government has only recently begun to consider drawing up guidelines to minimize discrimination in job advertisements ("Guidelines," 2006). These resentments, along with deeply rooted local stereotypes of Malays as being fun-loving and lazy (see for example, Li, 1989), have at times been highlighted by politicians in Malaysia and Indonesia as evidence that the Singapore government has not been treating the Malay minority as well as it might. Ethnic Malay politicians in Singapore have had to respond by claiming that Malay Singaporeans have improved their socioeconomic mobility through the government's espoused ideals of equal opportunity for all through a system based on individual merit (see for example, "Habibie," 1999; "Malay Singaporeans," 2000).

The Malay MPs attempted to address the problem of Malay educational achievement in 1987 by pleading with the Education Ministry to impose a 30% limit on the percentage of Malay students enrolled in each primary school. They claimed that controlling Malay enrollments would encourage Malay students to speak to each other in English instead of in Malay, thus improving their academic results in English and in other important school subjects. This enrollment cap was put in place soon after but was quietly abandoned in the 1990s after it proved impossible

to enforce in practice due to the complexities of residential patterns and school admission policies. As a result, and also because of the SAP scheme, there are primary and secondary schools with a disproportionately low number of ethnic Malay students. These schools tend to be the more prestigious schools that produce above-average academic results. Correspondingly, there are other schools where ethnic Malay students are proportionally overrepresented, and which tend to be much lower down the prestige hierarchy as well as the academic performance league tables. All of this throws a spanner in the works for attempts to address the concern voiced by then-Prime Minister Goh: that schools ought to serve as a "common space" for students from different racial and religious backgrounds to interact with one another (Goh, 2002). There is anecdotal evidence as well of ethnic compartmentalization in various extra-curricular activities, including sports. For example, basketball has been stereotyped as a typically Chinese sport, while soccer has been stereotyped as a typically Malay sport (see for example, Lai, 2005). There is also evidence that four decades of common socialization in an ostensibly common national school system have still not managed to eradicate racial prejudice among school students (see for example, Lee et al., 2004).

A major challenge for the government in the coming decade will be the vexing question of how best to reduce these stubbornly persistent disparities. The controversial nature of the whole question of ethnic disparities has been illustrated in the issue of full-time *madrasahs* (privately run Islamic religious schools). After a period of declining enrollments in the 1960s and 1970s, the small number of *madrasahs* began enjoying increasing enrollments in the late 1980s. Even though the actual percentage of Malay/Muslim children enrolled in these schools (3.5%) is actually relatively low, government concern has been voiced over the possibility that students enrolled in these schools "would not be able to integrate successfully into Singapore's social and economic system, or learn to cooperate and compete as part of the Singapore team, or think critically, or be discerning about ideas and people" (Koh, 1997). This led to heated debates in the late 1990s over the existence of the *madrasahs*. Besides the question of whether schools should encourage and perpetuate ethnic segregation, there is also the question of the apparently unequal treatment of SAP schools, on the one hand, and *madrasahs* on the other. The latter receive only nominal government funding. The controversy also has touched on the right of Muslim parents to choose a more religious educational alternative for their children.

The passing of legislation in the year 2000 providing for 6 years of compulsory schooling in government-run and government-aided schools from the year 2003 onward served only to fuel the controversy. The government agreed to allow the *madrasahs* to continue enrolling students subject to their students' meeting government-imposed targets for their students' performance in national primary-level examinations in the year 2008, but imposed curbs on their enrollment figures. Early in the year 2002, several parents of Muslim girls enrolled in government-run schools chose to have their daughters wear *tudungs* (Islamic head-veils) during school hours, in defiance of official regulations prohibiting the use of such attire among students (but interestingly enough, not among Muslim teachers; at the

same time, Sikh students are allowed to wear turbans and religious bangles) as an expression of their religious faith. These parents had been unable to enroll their daughters in one of the six *madrasahs* because of an insufficient number of vacancies in these schools.

The controversy attracted the attention of politicians in Malaysia, who attacked the Singapore government's stand on the issue. It provided yet another point of contention between the two governments, which have engaged in less-than-cordial public exchanges periodically since the mid-1990s over various issues such as the renegotiation of agreements surrounding the purchase and supply of water. Another issue that continues to rankle both governments is the divergence in official policies regarding how best to address the continuing socioeconomic disparities between the ethnic Malays on the one hand and the non-Malays on the other hand (see for example, Li, 2006; Reme, 2006). The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent discovery of an Islamic terrorist cell in Singapore, have served only to exacerbate religious sensitivities that had already been heightened in the course of the discussion over the future of the *madrasahs*.

Socioeconomic Disparities in Educational Attainment

A further complicating factor in the discussion about disparities in educational attainment concerns the role played by social class. Official PAP ideology speaks of Singapore as a meritocratic society, in which socioeconomic advancement is independent of one's home background and is instead dependent on one's ability and effort (Chua, 1996). However, this ideology sits uneasily at times alongside a deeply entrenched elitist conception of how Singapore society ought to be structured. Lee Kuan Yew articulated this clearly in 1966 when he spoke of the need for the education system to produce a "pyramidal structure" consisting of three strata: "top leaders," "good executives," and a "well-disciplined and highly civic-conscious broad mass." The "top leaders" are the "elite" who are needed to "lead and give the people the inspiration and drive to make [society] succeed." The "middle strata" of "good executives" are to help the elite "carry out [their] ideas, thinking and planning," while the "broad mass" are to be "imbued not only with self but also social discipline, so that they can respect their community and do not spit all over the place" (Lee, 1966, pp. 10, 12–13).

Furthermore, the predominant belief of the top government leadership is that success in the education system is dependent on intelligence, which is in turn largely genetically determined. Thus, for example, Lee spoke in 1983 of the threat posed to Singapore's future if well-educated women failed to marry and reproduce themselves adequately as compared to their less-educated counterparts (Lee, 1983). There was a brief and unsuccessful attempt in 1984 to entice married female university graduates to have more children by providing priority in school admission for their third or subsequent offspring. Despite the failure of this policy, the Education Ministry released data several times in the 1980s and 1990s claiming to

demonstrate that the children of mothers who are university graduates outperform the children of mothers who are not university graduates. As Chua (1995, p. 63) points out, " 'meritocratic' inequality is unapologetically accepted as a consequence of nature."

The introduction of streaming in both primary and secondary schools since the early 1980s has serious implications for social stratification. For example, secondary school students are channeled into one of four streams upon entry to secondary school. Students in the Normal (Technical) stream, who have obtained the lowest scores in the Primary School Leaving Examination, follow a highly watered-down curriculum compared to students in the other three streams. These students form about 15% of each secondary school cohort. Not only do they study fewer subjects, the content of each subject is considerably pared down. For example, they are merely expected to develop oral proficiency in the "mother tongue" languages, while their peers in the other three streams are expected to develop written skills as well. Despite recent attempts to encourage upward interstream mobility, mobility between this stream and other streams remains limited and becomes increasingly difficult as students progress through secondary school. Whatever the merits of streaming based on academic achievement, it is worth pondering whether the children of these students will in years to come be disadvantaged in the academic competition against the children of better-educated parents.

Moreover, the practice of streaming students into various tracks at the primary and secondary levels within the context of a highly competitive, high-stakes education system has contributed to prejudice on the part of students in faster-paced streams, and teachers as well, toward students in slower-paced streams (Kang, 2004; Tan & Ho, 2001). This sort of stratification sits somewhat at odds with the government's claim that

> [e]veryone has a contribution to make to Singapore. It is not only those who score a dozen A's, or those who make a lot of money who are important and an asset to the country…. Each one of us has a place in society, a contribution to make and a useful role to play…. As a society, we must widen our definition of success to go beyond the academic and the economic. (Government of Singapore, 1999, p. 11)

The instituting of the independent schools scheme in 1988 has serious implications for class-based inequalities as well. These eight prestigious secondary schools have been allowed greater operating autonomy than other government-run and government-aided schools in terms of matters such as teacher salaries, student enrollment policies, and curriculum. Evidence had already emerged by the 1990s that students from wealthier family backgrounds were over-represented in these schools (Tan, 1993). Amid public criticism over the allegedly elitist nature of these schools, the government has tried to dispel the notion that nonindependent schools are inferior to independent schools (*Parliamentary Debates Singapore*, 1994). At the same time, though, it intends to develop the independent schools into "outstanding institutions, to give the most promising and able students an education matching their promise" (*Parliamentary Debates Singapore*, 1992). Furthermore, growing interschool competition since the early 1990s in the form of annual school performance league tables (Tan, 1998) has led to increased selectiveness by top schools, and

other schools aspiring to maintain or improve their prestige, as they strive to maximize the number of students who are "assets" and reduce the number who are "liabilities."

Although the Singapore school system is ostensibly meritocratic, an individual student's family background rises to the forefront right at the beginning of the journey through the school system. All of the factors that accord a student priority for admission to a primary school are family-linked, for example, having siblings who are attending the same school, proximity of one's residence to the school, parents' religious affiliation, having parents who are alumni, and having parents who work in the school. Despite government attempts to reassure the public that all primary schools are of good quality, and despite relatively generous government financial subsidies and infrastructure provision for all mainstream schools, the fact remains that some schools enjoy better reputations and are perennially oversubscribed. The secondary school admission system involves a greater reliance on individual merit in national examinations at the end of primary schooling. However, the competitive nature of school admission means that the most prestigious schools enroll the top examination performers, while those at the bottom of the prestige hierarchy end up with the academically weakest students. The most prestigious schools are exempted from offering classes for students in the weakest academic stream, which further adds to the stratification and segregation of students of differing academic abilities (and by implication ethnicity and social class backgrounds) across different schools of varying prestige. A newly introduced modification to the secondary school admission procedures allows individual schools to select students they feel are talented in the arts or sports, thus furthering the divide since the prestigious schools are in the best competitive position to lure these talented students.

Several observers have pointed to the growing prominence of social stratification on the government's policy agenda, especially in the wake of the 1991 general elections (see for example, Rodan, 1997). Whereas the issue of income stratification was largely taboo in public discussions up until 1991, there has been growing acknowledgement on the part of the government since then of the potential impact of income disparities on social cohesion, especially as Singapore is further affected by economic globalization. For example, then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong acknowledged in the mid-1990s that not all Singaporeans stand to benefit equally from the global economy. He also pointed out that highly educated Singaporeans are in a more advantageous position compared with unskilled workers, and that there is a great likelihood of widening income inequalities and class stratification (Goh, 1997b). Goh drew an explicit link between income inequalities and the need to maintain social cohesion. However, Goh thought that "we cannot narrow the [income] gap by preventing those who can fly from flying…. Nor can we teach everyone to fly, because most simply do not have the aptitude or ability" (Goh, 1996a). Instead, he suggested a greater emphasis on worker training so as to ensure that unskilled and semiskilled workers would not lose their jobs as a result of multinational corporations moving their labor-intensive operations to countries with abundant and relatively inexpensive labor costs. Social cohesion, Goh pointed out, "is not just a political objective. It actually makes good business sense. Social

harmony motivates people to work hard" (Goh, 1996b). A few schemes such as the Skills Development Fund, which offers workers financial subsidies for training courses, have since been launched in a bid to mitigate the effects of restructuring on less-educated workers.

National Education: Binding Everyone Together?

Over the past five decades, the Education Ministry has attempted several civic and moral education programs in a bid to promote civic and moral values and social cohesion. For example, between 1984 and 1989, Religious Knowledge was made a compulsory subject for all upper secondary students amid fears of a moral crisis among young people. Six options were offered: Bible Knowledge, Buddhist Studies, Confucian Ethics, Hindu Studies, Islamic Religious Knowledge, and Sikh Studies. Students were segregated on the basis of their choices. The government had originally intended to offer a World Religions option but abandoned its plans, claiming that it was too difficult to formulate such a syllabus (Tan, 1997). The mandating of Religious Knowledge was a marked departure from the government's usual stance of prohibiting any discussion of religion in the secular school system. Government-aided schools with religious affiliations had been permitted to hold religious lessons or services provided they were conducted after official school hours.

One of the main reasons Religious Knowledge was made an optional subject in 1990, after having been compulsory for the previous 6 years, was due to its role in contributing to religious revivalism and evangelistic activities among Buddhists and Christians. The zeal with which these activities were conducted drew criticism from adherents of other religious faiths. In place of Religious Knowledge, a new compulsory civic and moral education program was designed for all secondary school students. Its main objectives were to foster cultural and religious appreciation; to promote community spirit; to affirm family life; to nurture interpersonal relationships; and to develop a commitment to nation building.

A few years later, the quest for something to bind young Singaporeans together continued unabated. At a Teachers' Day rally in September 1996, then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong lamented the lack of knowledge of Singapore's recent history among younger Singaporeans, as reflected in the results of a street poll conducted by a local newspaper. The Ministry of Education also had conducted a surprise quiz on Singapore's history among 2,500 students in schools, polytechnics and universities. The results proved equally disappointing.

Goh claimed that the gap in knowledge was the direct result of a deliberate official policy not to teach school students about the recent political past and the events leading up to political independence. However, he felt that this ignorance was undesirable among the younger people who had not personally lived through these events. He claimed too that these events, constituting "our shared past," ought to "bind all our communities together, not divide us.… We should understand why they took place so that we will never let them happen again" (Goh, 1997c, p. 425).

Goh highlighted the possibility that the young people would not appreciate how potentially fragile interethnic relations could prove to be, especially in times of economic recession. Not having lived through poverty and deprivation meant that young people might take peace and prosperity for granted.

Calling on all school principals to throw their support behind this urgent initiative, which he termed National Education (NE), Goh pointed out that NE needed to become a crucial part of the education curriculum in all schools. Emphasizing the importance of nation building in existing subjects such as social studies, civic and moral education, and history would be insufficient. More important was the fact that NE was meant to develop "instincts" in every child, such as a "shared sense of nationhood [and] understanding of how our past is relevant to our present and future." NE was to make students appreciative of how Singapore's peace and stability existed amid numerous conflicts elsewhere around the world. This meant that what took place outside the classroom, such as school rituals and examples set by teachers, would prove vital in the success of NE. Goh announced the establishment of an NE Committee to involve various ministries, including the Education Ministry, in this effort.

Goh's remarks came on the heels of the increasing concern on the part of senior government officials over how to satisfy the consumerist demands and material aspirations of the growing middle class. Since the mid-1980s, access to higher education has widened tremendously. By the year 2000, more than 60% of each age cohort was enrolled in local universities and polytechnics. This massive expansion of a better educated citizenry was also a cause for official concern. For example, in 1996 former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew commented that

> thirty years of continuous growth and increasing stability and prosperity have produced a different generation in an English-educated middle class. They are very different from their parents. The present generation below 35 has grown up used to high economic growth year after year, and take their security and success for granted. And because they believe all is well, they are less willing to make sacrifices for the benefit of the others in society. They are more concerned about their individual and family's welfare and success, not their community or society's well being (Lee, 1996, p. 30).

Likewise, in 1995 Goh had claimed that

> [g]iving [students] academic knowledge alone is not enough to make them understand what makes or breaks Singapore…. Japanese children are taught to cope with earthquakes, while Dutch youngsters learn about the vulnerability of their polders, or low-lying areas. In the same way, Singapore children must be taught to live with a small land area, limited territorial sea and air space, the high cost of owning a car and dependence on imported water and oil. Otherwise, years of continuous growth may lull them into believing that the good life is their divine right …. [Students] must be taught survival skills and be imbued with the confidence that however formidable the challenges and competition, we have the will, skill and solutions to vanquish them. ("Teach students," 1995)

The NE initiative was officially launched in May 1997 by then-Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Lee claimed that countries such as the United States and Japan, with longer national histories, still found it necessary to have schools transmit key national instincts to students. Singapore, being barely one generation old, therefore needed a similar undertaking in the form of NE.

NE aimed at developing national cohesion in students through

- Fostering Singaporean identity, pride, and self-respect
- Teaching about Singapore's nation-building successes against the odds
- Understanding Singapore's unique developmental challenges, constraints, and vulnerabilities
- Instilling core values, such as meritocracy and multiracialism, as well as the will to prevail, in order to ensure Singapore's continued success (Lee, 1997)

Lee called on every teacher and principal to pass on six key NE messages:

- Singapore is our homeland. this is where we belong
- We must preserve racial and religious harmony
- We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility
- No one owes Singapore a living
- We must ourselves defend Singapore
- We have confidence in our future (Ministry of Education, 1997a)

Several major means were suggested for incorporating NE in all schools. First, every subject in the formal curriculum would be used. Certain subjects, such as social studies, civic and moral education, history and geography were mentioned as being particularly useful in this regard. Social studies at the primary level would be started earlier, at primary one instead of at primary four. It would also be introduced as a new mandatory subject for all upper secondary students in order to cover issues regarding Singapore's success and future developmental challenges. The upper secondary history syllabus would be extended from 1963, where its coverage had hitherto ended, to include the immediate postindependence years up until 1971.

Second, various elements of the informal curriculum were recommended. All schools were called upon to remember a few major events each year:

- Total Defence Day, to commemorate Singapore's surrender under British colonial rule to the Japanese in 1942
- Racial Harmony Day, to remember the outbreak of interethnic riots in 1964
- International Friendship Day, to bring across the importance of maintaining cordial relations with neighboring countries
- National Day, to commemorate political independence in 1965

In addition, students would visit key national institutions and public facilities in order to feel proud and confident about how Singapore had overcome its developmental constraints. A further means of promoting social cohesion and civic responsibility would be through a mandatory 6 hours of community service each year. An NE branch was established in the Ministry of Education headquarters to spearhead this initiative.

One can read in the importance accorded to NE a pressing concern among the top political leadership about how, on the one hand, to satisfy the growing desires among an increasingly affluent and materialistic population for car ownership and bigger housing amid rising costs of both commodities, and on the other, to maintain civic awareness and responsibility. A related concern is that the population might translate its dissatisfaction with unfulfilled material aspirations into dissatisfaction with the

ruling party. There also is concern that social cohesion might suffer, should the economy falter and fail to sustain the high growth rates of the past few decades.

In the late 1990s, Goh introduced the terms "cosmopolitans" and "heartlanders" to illustrate the class divide between the well-educated, privileged, globally mobile elite on the one hand and the working-class majority, on the other (*Parliamentary Debates Singapore*, 1999). A PAP Member of Parliament expressed his fervent hope that Singaporeans would not "allow our system of education [to] create a bipolar society of cosmopolitans and heartlanders that will be destructive for nation-building" (*Parliamentary Debates Singapore*, 1999).

This tension between social inequalities and social cohesion permeates the underlying framework of NE. Different emphases are planned for students in various levels of schooling. For example, students in technical institutes are to

> understand that they would be helping themselves, their families and Singapore by working hard, continually upgrading themselves and helping to ensure a stable social order. They must feel that every citizen has a valued place in Singapore (Ministry of Education, 1997b, p. 3).

Polytechnic students, who are higher up the social prestige ladder, are to be convinced that "the country's continued survival and prosperity will depend on the quality of their efforts, and that there is opportunity for all based on ability and effort." Junior college students, about four-fifths of whom are bound for university, must have the sense that "they can shape their own future" and must appreciate "the demands and complexities of leadership" as future national leaders (Ministry of Education, 1997b, p. 3). One sees in these differing messages clear and unmistakable vestiges of the stratified view of society espoused by Lee Kuan Yew more than 30 years earlier. Lee also had lamented the tendency among many Singaporeans to be more concerned with individual survival rather than national survival, a theme that both he and Goh later repeated within the setting of a much more materially prosperous society.

This task of holding on to citizens' sense of loyalty and commitment will come under increasingly severe strain as globalization and its impact mean that Singaporeans are exposed via overseas travel, the Internet, and news and print media to social and political alternatives outside of Singapore. Increasing wealth also means that individuals are able to send their children to be educated outside of Singapore, after which work opportunities beckon. Furthermore, the government itself has been calling upon Singaporeans to work outside of Singapore in order to further broaden the country's external economic competitive advantage. It also has been government practice for four decades now to sponsor top-performing students in the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level examinations for undergraduate studies in prestigious universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and Stanford. It is perhaps ironic, if somewhat unsurprising, that the well-educated elite – in other words, the very individuals who have been accorded generous support and funding in their schooling in the hope that they will take on the mantle of national leadership – are the most globally mobile and who are best placed to take advantage of economic opportunities around the world, to the point of contemplating emigration. This policy dilemma was exemplified in the late 1990s when

parliamentarians debated the merits of publicly naming and shaming individuals who had been sponsored for their undergraduate and/or postgraduate studies in elite foreign universities, only to repay the government the cost of their studies upon completion of their studies instead of returning to Singapore to work for the government (*Parliamentary Debates Singapore*, 1998). A few years later there were echoes of the "cosmopolitans-heartlanders" issue in the wake of Goh Chok Tong's National Day rally speech about two categories of individuals, the "stayers" (Singaporeans who were "rooted to Singapore") and the "quitters" ("fair weather Singaporeans who would run away whenever the country runs into stormy weather") (*Parliamentary Debates Singapore*, 2002).

Entangled with the question of class-based disparities is that of ethnic inequalities. Data from the population census in the year 2000 indicated that the ethnic Malay and Indian minorities formed a disproportionately large percentage of the lower income strata and a correspondingly small percentage of the higher income strata vis-à-vis the majority ethnic Chinese (Leow, 2001b). These disparities compound the inequalities in educational attainment mentioned earlier in this chapter. There is sufficient cause for concern that these class and ethnic disparities will not narrow as the effects of economic globalization make further inroads into Singapore society.

The various tensions and dilemmas that have been discussed in this section have serious implications for efforts to impart the key messages of NE in all students. In a sense, the Singapore government has never pretended that ethnoreligious tensions have been swept away as a result of various educational policy initiatives (including civic and moral education) and other economic and social policies. In fact, certain government pronouncements may have served unintentionally to make the task of forging social cohesion more problematic. For example, the question of ethnic Malay representation in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has continued to remain controversial ever since the establishment of the SAF in 1967. Government leaders have openly stated that Malays are not recruited into certain military units in case their religious affinities come into conflict with their duty to defend Singapore (Hussin, 2002). In addition, Lee Kuan Yew has stated publicly that Singapore needs to maintain current ethnic ratios in its population in order to ensure continued economic success (see for example, "Entry of Hongkongers won't upset racial mix," 1989).

These ethnic-based controversies have been complicated in the last two decades by the influx of new immigrants from countries such as the People's Republic of China and India. The latest official data indicate that out of a total population of 4.35 million in 2005, about 440,500 (10.1%) were permanent residents, while 797,900 (18.3%) were holders of student, dependent, or work visas (Department of Statistics, 2006, p. 3). Those among the new immigrants who are highly educated have been the direct beneficiaries of government policies to import "foreign talent" (Goh, 1997d) and at times have had to cope with resentment among some Singaporeans over perceived competition for jobs. NE will have to grapple with the task of socializing the children of these immigrants. Even in the schools arena, there is worry among some parents, teachers and local students about the added competitive element that talented foreign students are perceived to represent (see for example, Quek, 2005; Singh, 2005). Another parallel concern is how to ensure that the children of Singaporeans

who return to work and live in Singapore after having spent some time working outside the country will be able to readjust to schooling in Singapore.

Concluding Thoughts

This chapter has traced the relationship between education and social cohesion in Singapore from the British colonial period to the present. Besides highlighting several key policies it has raised areas of concern as well. The Singapore government continues to be ambitious and interventionist in its efforts to promote social cohesion and manage social diversity. Despite the often purposeful and zealous manner in which policies are pronounced, this chapter has demonstrated that it is by no means the case that policy implementation and outcomes are unproblematic and uncontroversial. The problems involved in managing a culturally diverse and now increasingly class-stratified population will not prove amenable to quick-fix solutions and dictates by bureaucratic fiat. Although the ruling party claims to be aware of the potential impact of ethnic and social stratification on social cohesion, it shows no signs of bowing to pressure on such issues as independent schools and greater interschool competition. This is part of its urging of Singaporeans not to allow "our children to be softened" by the alleged denigration of academic excellence and the promotion of a "soft approach to life" by "liberals in the West" (Goh, 1992, pp. 32–33). It continues to insist that the education system is fair and based on individual merit. Also, it claims that it is only right to nurture the more able students as the whole country will ultimately benefit (*Parliamentary Debates Singapore, 59*, 16 January 1992, Col. 365). According to its logic, equality of opportunity is what counts, not equality of outcomes (Goh, 1997b).

A recurring concern for the foreseeable future will be whether the dramatic upward social mobility that has been experienced by an entire generation will be repeated as the current privileged classes and elites attempt to consolidate their own positions (Rodan, 1997). An example of this concern emerged when the Minister of State for Defense denied in 2003 that a hitherto secret system, under which national servicemen with influential parents received a special classification upon enlistment, had ever been intended to ensure preferential treatment for them during their tenure in the armed forces (*Parliamentary Debates Singapore*, 2003). Language-in-education policies, and other policies that have a bearing upon individuals' life chances and social mobility, will remain contentious. A balance will have to be sought between entrenched views about the role of genetic endowment vis-à-vis environmental nurturing in students' overall development. If policymakers strongly believe, for example, that ethnic differences in educational attainment or aptitude are largely genetically determined, then this belief will in turn have serious implications for how policymakers view the limits to potential of different groups of individuals. The challenges and dilemmas mentioned in this chapter show no signs of diminishing in the early years of the 21st century and will continue to test the ingenuity and resolve of the government.

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