Chapter 8
Equity and Meritocracy in Singapore

Jason Tan

Introduction

Notions of equality and fairness in education continue to bedevil Singapore's education system, as is the case in most other countries. Educational attainment in Singapore has often been viewed as a key means of upward social mobility, building social cohesion as well as talent development for economic ends. Questions such as how educational opportunities are distributed, as well as the reality of unequal educational outcomes, remain controversial and politically volatile. The four chapters in Section B have made clear the twin realities of inequalities in family support for schooling and unequal educational outcomes. This chapter interrogates such issues by considering the macro-level social context within which these realities may be better understood. In the process, it references the chapters on Singapore education, namely, the chapters that follow, as well as Chap. 7 in the previous section.

Over the course of almost six decades of uninterrupted rule by the People's Action Party (PAP), the idea of 'meritocracy', i.e. individual ability, talent, hard work and effort being the sole determinant of an individual's educational and career success, has manifested itself in the education system in various forms. The education system has the key task of identifying and rewarding 'merit' while sorting out students on the basis of this 'merit'. The highly competitive nature of schooling is coupled with the key notion of education as a key means for intergenerational social mobility. At the same time, the profoundly elitist mode of political governance in Singapore has manifested itself as well in the eugenically-based beliefs of the first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. Lee believed in the preponderance of genetic endowment in determining individual intelligence. His beliefs were reflected within major policy decisions with regard to the allocation of educational opportunities.

J. Tan (✉)
National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
e-mail: engthye.tan@nie.edu.sg

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Another important strand in the discussion of meritocracy in Singapore involves the evolution of meritocracy. Over the past two decades, the Ministry of Education has openly welcomed the active involvement of parents. In recent years, the role of parents' financial resources as well as parental strategising has become increasingly apparent in influencing students' educational success. This can be seen in the sprouting of various parental networks on social media websites as well as the phenomenal growth of the private tutoring industry. At the same time, there is growing evidence of an over-representation of students with highly educated parents in the most prestigious secondary schools (which Teng's Chap. 9, p. 127 has noted).

This commentary highlights these changes in parenting and schooling and elaborates on the term 'parentocracy' (Brown, 1990) that is introducedd in Teng's Chap. 9. It will ask whether the growing role of parental background and resources challenges the concept of fairness embodied within the concept of meritocracy. Recent Ministry of Education policies attempting to promote greater equity are likely to come up against the reality of the 'parentocracy'. The topic of inequalities in education has in recent years risen to the forefront in public policy debate, and this chapter will serve as the basis for further informed discussion on the nature of inequalities and how their effects might be best ameliorated.

The Wider Context of Schooling in Singapore

In order better to understand the current state of equity and meritocracy in Singapore, some historical perspective is instructive. First, when the current ruling PAP took office in 1959, it inherited a collection of disparate schooling systems operating through different language media and with different examination systems and teacher qualifications (Gopinathan, 1974). Just a few years before then, the Singapore Legislative Assembly had commissioned an All-Party Committee to study Chinese-medium education (Singapore Legislative Assembly, 1956a). The British colonial government at the time responded to the Committee report by issuing a White Paper on Education in 1956. The Paper identified three major problems: dealing with racial diversity, coping with the increase in the school-age population and developing a sense of common Malayan loyalty in schools (Singapore Legislative Assembly, 1956b).

The PAP reaffirmed its commitment to equal treatment of the four language streams (State of Singapore, 1959, p. 1). Its push for building a common national education system proceeded with vigour during the early- and mid-1960s. For example, common syllabuses and attainment standards were designed for all schools. Students in the four language streams underwent the same number of years of schooling and sat for common national terminal examinations (Gopinathan, 1974). A massive school building programme began in the 1960s, with primary schooling becoming universal and free by 1966. The Ministry of Education steadily assumed control over almost all schools with the exception of a few private schools, madrasahs and international schools. In 1983 another major step towards a unified

education system occurred when the government announced that from 1987 onwards the entire education system would operate almost entirely through the medium of English.

One of the key planks in the PAP's governing ideology was a 'meritocratic' ethos in which rewards for individuals would be based on one's 'merit', i.e. educational achievement attained through individual ability, talent, hard work and effort (Gopinathan, 1991, p. 281). Individuals deemed to have exhibited sufficient 'merit' through obtaining outstanding results in the national pre-university terminal examinations were invited to apply for special high-prestige scholarships to join the ranks of the armed forces, police force and civil service. This system of 'meritocracy' was pronounced by the PAP as being fair and neutral and as being the most efficient way of harnessing talent within a small population (Lee, 1982). This policy of 'meritocracy' has since assumed the status of one of the state's founding pillars. Another key pillar was that of multiracialism, which claimed to provide equality of treatment for all citizens in an ethnically diverse newly independent nation. The state on its part pledged to ensure equal educational opportunities for every student to compete for success in a series of common national examinations at both primary and secondary levels within a unified and standardised education system. Thus, the schooling system held out the promise of intergenerational social mobility for students, provided they demonstrated sufficient individual 'merit' in these examinations.

After two decades of sustained efforts to unify and standardise schooling experiences for the entire school-age population, a new era of sorting and differentiation was ushered in with the publication in 1979 of the *Report on the Ministry of Education 1978* (widely referred to as the Goh Report, in reference to the then Education Minister Goh Keng Swee who was the chief author of the report). The Report lamented, among things, the high dropout rates at both primary and secondary levels. About 71% of the primary one enrolment each year eventually passed the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), with only 9% passing the General Certificate of Education 'Advanced' Level examination (the national pre-university terminal examination) (Ministry of Education, 1979, p. 3-1). Other major problems included low literacy levels and the lack of effective bilingualism among many school leavers. A major policy reform was advocated, that of streaming students into different tracks in order to ensure that learning experiences could be better tailored to variations in students' learning abilities. Primary students would henceforth be streamed at the end of primary three, while secondary students would be streamed on the basis of their Primary School Leaving Examination results. Interestingly enough, the report noted the relationship between students' home background and their academic achievement: 'Good schools have higher percentages of pupils from better home background, in terms of pupil's father occupation and educational level than the other schools….the differences in the percentages between the good schools and the poor schools are significant' (Ibid, p. 3–5). The report claimed too that '[a]mongst the factors that have been analysed, pupils' home backgrounds and the types of school (whether government or government-aided) are the only factors that are significantly different between the good and the poor schools. Most of the good schools are government-aided schools whose pupils are

mainly from better home background' (Ibid, p. 3–6). The claims about the impact of students' home background were an admission that even after two decades of state intervention to ensure comparability of such factors as physical infrastructure and teacher training across schools, the playing field was not yet levelled for students from differing socio-economic backgrounds. However, the report did not elaborate on how students' socio-economic backgrounds influenced their educational achievement.

Since the institutionalisation of streaming at both primary and secondary levels of schooling almost four decades ago, streaming has been a heated topic of debate both in and out of Parliament. In the early 1990s, various modifications were made to the streaming system. By the first decade of this century, concerns continued being voiced about streaming being a divisive element in terms of keeping students segregated in their various streams. Attempts were made to soften and blur these harsh boundaries at both primary and secondary levels. Efforts have been made to provide students from lower-prestige academic streams with greater opportunities for upward mobility to higher-prestige academic streams. In addition, subject-based banding has now been introduced in both primary and secondary schools. Nevertheless, the concept of differentiated tracks for different students, with different tracks leading to different terminal examinations, has remained essentially unchanged.

Besides the streaming and banding of students, other Ministry of Education policies since the 1980s have introduced greater diversity of programmes and choices for students (a point mentioned in Kwek, Miller and Manzon's Chap. 7 in the previous section). In the 1980s, the Gifted Education Programme was introduced at both primary and secondary levels, along with the Music Elective Programme and Art Elective Programme in a small number of secondary schools. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a few prestigious secondary schools were allowed to become independent schools, with the promise of greater operating autonomy, in order to promote greater flexibility and innovation within the wider education system (Tan, 1996). In the mid-1990s, some other secondary schools were granted 'autonomous school' status, in order to provide a high-quality education while charging lower fees than those in independent schools. As a result of a Ministry of Education report published in 2002 (Ministry of Education, 2002), top-end secondary schools and junior colleges began offering so-called integrated programmes that would allow students the chance to bypass the General Certificate of Education 'Ordinary' Level examination (normally taken at the end of 4 years of secondary education). At the same time, a number of specialised independent schools were established to cater for secondary- and junior college-age students with talent in the arts, sports and mathematics and science. A few specialised schools were also set up to cater for secondary-age students who had failed the PSLE at least twice, in order to provide them a chance at leaving school with vocationally appropriate qualifications.

The 1980s marked the beginning of what Tan (2010) refers to as the marketisation of education. Parents and students were increasingly being introduced to the virtues of terms such as 'diversity', 'choice' and 'competition'. Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said in 1992 that

> [a] good education system depends not only on resources, which the state will provide, but also on the following: students competing to do well in schools; schools competing against one another; good schools emerging to show other schools how they can improve. (Goh, 1992, p. 31)

In line with this emphasis on marketisation, league tables that ranked schools in terms of students' performance in national examinations and in terms of value-addedness were introduced for all secondary schools and junior colleges. Furthermore, the School Excellence Model, which was based on business world practice, was introduced as a means of quality assurance for all schools. In the wake of the introduction of these performance measures, evidence began emerging of some schools resorting to strategising (e.g. reducing enrolments in, or eliminating altogether, subjects that were supposedly difficult for students to do well in; phasing out co-curricular activities that failed to bring in sufficient medals in interschool competitions) in order to boost their tangible achievement outcomes (Tan, 2010). A further manifestation of the commodification of education was the introduction of terms from the world of business such as 'pleasing the customer', in Ministry of Education discourse in the late 1990s.

Even as the process of diversification co-existed with the marketisation of the educational landscape, the Education Ministry introduced the annual Direct School Admission (DSA) scheme for secondary schools in 2004 and for junior colleges in 2005. The scheme allows schools full discretion to conduct selection interviews and devise their individual selection criteria to offer admission to a certain percentage of their annual student intakes before students sit for the qualifying national examinations. The DSA scheme marked the broadening of the term 'merit' to encompass not only academic performance in national examinations but also non-academic endeavours.

The substantial changes in the educational landscape have not been without their share of critics, who allege, among other things, that they promote elitism. In reply to criticism that so-called neighbourhood schools (generally less prestigious schools) were inferior to independent schools, the then Education Minister claimed that

> it is a misconception that neighbourhood schools do not have good principals and teachers. In fact, very often so-called good schools do well because the children are very bright. They have tuition at home and all the support. And often it is the teachers in the neighbourhood schools who have to work harder, provide remedial lessons…to give the children that additional advantage. (Parliamentary Debates, 63, August 25, 1994, Col. 398)

There was an implicit official recognition (similar to that in the Goh Report of 1979) that students' socio-economic backgrounds play a part in academic achievement. Over the years, this connection has persisted till the present. For instance, Tan (1993) found an over-representation of students with university-educated parents and more prestigious housing types in a few independent schools. Similarly, the National University of Singapore sociologist Chua Beng Huat pointed out that students from public housing were under-represented and those from private housing were over-represented in independent schools (George, 1992). In 2011, former

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew presented statistical evidence that a far greater percentage of students in more prestigious secondary schools than their counterparts in less prestigious secondary schools had university-educated fathers (Chang, 2011). A few years prior to his revelation, Lee had informed Parliament that

> We are trying to reach a position where there is a level playing field for everybody which is going to take decades, if not centuries, and we may never get there. (Parliamentary Debates, 86, August 19, 2009, Col. 1173)

Although Lee was speaking with reference to the ethnic Malay minority in Singapore, his remarks acknowledged that decades of an ostensibly meritocratic system had co-existed with a less-than-level playing field for at least part of the populace. Lee had also claimed in 1992 that

> [i]f you pretend that…in fact (the Malays) can score as well as the Chinese in Mathematics, then you have created yourself an enormous myth which you will be stuck with. And there will such [sic] great disillusionment. (Richardson, 1992)

Lee's remarks are consistent with his well-entrenched elitist views about the predominance of genetic endowment in determining individual intelligence (Barr, 2000). These views have played a significant role in the elitist nature of political governance in Singapore (Quah, 2010). Since coming to power, Lee placed great urgency on the quest to identify talent through the education system. In 1966, he told school principals that the education system ought 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 the 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' is 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). The implementation of streaming and a stratified hierarchy of schools and academic programmes in primary and secondary schools may be viewed as a direct attempt to use the school system to create Lee's 'pyramidal structure' and to identify and nurture the future elite (Barr, 2014; Barr & Skrbis, 2008).

The logical intergenerational consequence of a stratified education system preparing students for unequal futures in the workforce has been the persistence of wider societal inequalities. The current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has observed that Singapore society is 'stratifying' and that 'while the children of successful people are doing better, the children of less successful people are doing less well' (Cai & Heng, 2011). Voicing similar concerns, National University of Singapore professor Irene Ng (2015, p. 39) feels that '[i]ntergenerational mobility is at most moderate in Singapore, but will be increasingly challenging given Singapore's education system which has several characteristics that tend to reinforce intergenerational immobility'.

On its part, over the past few decades, the government has instituted a number of policy initiatives in a bid to level the playing field in education. A major instance of this is its financial support for ethnic-based self-help groups such as the Council for

the Development of Singapore Malay/Muslim Community (Yayasan Mendaki), Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA) and the CDAC Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC). Among the major prongs of these organisations is the provision of low-cost tutoring in order to boost academic achievement. Another prong is the running of parental workshops in order to better educate parents on how to provide a home environment that is supportive of academic achievement. A second major example is the Education Endowment Scheme (more commonly known as Edusave), which was instituted in 1993. The scheme provides every child between the ages of 6 and 16 in mainstream schools, special education schools and madrasahs with a common annual financial subsidy from the government. The money is to be used for educational purposes. In addition, every school is awarded annual per capita Edusave grants. Furthermore, students who perform well qualify for Edusave scholarships and merit bursaries, achievement, good leadership and service awards, character awards and good progress awards (see Tan & Gopinathan, 1999; Ministry of Education, 2014). The Education Ministry, besides its long-standing financial assistance schemes for students, and its Learning Support Programme for literacy and numeracy in the first 2 years of primary schooling, has also instituted student care centres in primary schools, with a special focus on targeting students from disadvantaged families who have inadequate parental supervision at home (Ministry of Education, 2009). Lim (2012, p. 44) has highlighted these student care centres as an example of the PAP's attempts to 'recover the egalitarian strand in the government's meritocratic ideology'. Another key focus in recent years is the attention on improving preschool education and special needs education (see, for instance, Hong, 2018). Poon has discussed in his Chap. 10 in this section the subsidies and assistance, such as the Focused Language Assistance in Reading (FLAiR) rendered to preschool children from families with lower income levels.

The Relationship Between Parenting and Schooling

Another trend that has affected the notion of meritocracy in Singapore has been the increase in parental involvement in schooling. The international literature is full of evidence on the value of positive parental input in their children's schooling. For instance, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) proposed a continuum ranging from parents' involvement with schools at one end to parental engagement with children's learning, at the other. 'Parental involvement with the school' describes situations where school staff predominate in the partnerships with parents. Parents may be involved in activities but are passive recipients of school-initiated and controlled activities. The school controls the relationships and the information flow. Examples of this include parents being invited to tour the school or school-initiated parent-teacher meeting nights. Further along the continuum, 'parental involvement with schooling' describes an interchange of information between parents and schooling that can take place either in school or in the home. There is shared parents-school agency in relation to supporting children's learning. An example of this may be

parental assistance in the home with school-assigned homework. At the other end of the continuum is 'parental engagement with children's learning'. This phase involves the greatest exercise of parental agency, in which parents exercise great influence over the choice of action and involvement. Examples of this kind of agency (which are mentioned in Teng's Chap. 9) include parents providing learning opportunities for their children (e.g. extra tutoring) or other forms of learning (such as dance or music lessons). Parental aspirations and interest in learning are key characteristics of this end of the continuum.

A major watershed event in parent-school relationships was the inauguration in December 1998 of Community and Parents in Support of Schools (COMPASS) as an advisory body tasked with strengthening and promoting school-home-community collaboration. The COMPASS members include Education Ministry officials, representatives from various school-based parent support groups, the ethnic-based self-help groups and members of the business community and media (Ministry of Education, 2015). The council is co-chaired by two senior members of the ruling PAP. According to its website, COMPASS aims to

> *Provide feedback on MOE [Ministry of Education] policies and initiatives from parental perspectives; actively reach out and encourage parents to partner schools to deliver student-centric values-driven education; and promote school-home partnerships to achieve student centric values-driven education by leading and organising parent outreach events, forums and discussions.* (Ministry of Education, 2015)

The COMPASS website further claims that parents and grandparents are to

> *Support schools in their efforts to educate the child; take ultimate responsibility for the upbringing of their children/grandchildren and set good examples for them to follow; instil a sense of responsibility in their children/grandchildren, helping them to become good citizens; show care and concern for their children/grandchildren by being interested in what they do.* (Ibid)

After the formation of COMPASS, the presence of parent support groups in schools became universal. Another big step in the direction of encouraging parental involvement in schools was the institution of parental volunteering as a criterion within the annual nationwide primary school admission exercise.

Other factors have been at work leading to increasing parental involvement with their children's schooling experiences. One of them has been rising family incomes. For instance, the 2010 Population Census revealed an average annual 3.2% increase in household incomes from work. In addition, the proportion of households earning at least $6000 per month increased from 27% in 2000 to 43% in 2010. Furthermore, the proportion of dual-income married couples rose from 41% in 2000 to 47% in 2010 (Wong, 2011, pp. 9, 11, 13). A possible contributory factor to rising incomes has been improving levels of educational attainment in the general population. Half of the resident population above the age of 25 had at least post-secondary qualifications in 2013 compared with 32% in 2003. The corresponding figures for university graduates for the 2 years were 27% and 16%, respectively, while those for diploma and professional qualifications were 14% and 9.3%, respectively (Wong, 2014a, p. 9).

Rising family incomes and parental educational levels have contributed to rising parental aspirations on the part of a growing segment of parents of school-age children. These aspirations are being fuelled in part by continuing empirical evidence on the relationship between educational attainment and salaries. Yeo, Toh, Thangavelu and Wong (2007) found that in 2004, a worker's earnings were increased by 13.7% per extra year of schooling, with higher rates of return for tertiary education. Similarly, Low, Ouliaris, Robinson, and Wong (2004) found a relatively high premium on higher education, along with evidence that the wages of more highly educated workers increased faster than those of their less educated counterparts, as work experience increased.

Khong (2004) claims that 'the involvement of parents in schooling is a relatively new phenomenon' and cites earlier academic research from the mid-1990s showing parents' preference for assigning teachers the bulk of the responsibility for their children's schooling. However,

> the highly-competitive system and a cultural acceptance of education as the key social 'equaliser' has created a complex situation where parents today generally have high expectations of children's academic achievement and are willing to invest heavily in maximising children's educational opportunities. (Khong, 2000)

These parents' proactive attitudes have, if anything, official support from the Ministry of Education's COMPASS advisory body. On a more positive note, the former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has recently highlighted 'a warm, supportive family' and a 'conducive, stable and secure environment' as key factors underpinning students' academic success (Goh, 2015). However, in a more strongly worded statement, the former Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing has acknowledged that intense competition and the aspiration 'for our children to achieve is even more intense than ever' (Tai, 2014).

Anecdotal evidence suggests a rise in proactive parenting. The advent of social media has led to the emergence of sites for parents to widen their social networks in order to find out more information and strategise their children's educational success. There are now numerous parental online networks that provide a host of information ranging from informal school rankings (even after the Ministry of Education officially discontinued the practice) to tips for selecting private tutors, comments on the effectiveness of teachers in various schools, the relative difficulty of examination questions and information on how to succeed in school admission exercises. Anecdotal evidence would also appear to indicate a growing 'complaint culture', in which a growing number of parents exercise their right as 'customers' to provide input about 'unsatisfactory customer service' from their children's schools, whether it be inappropriate amounts of homework, incompetent teaching, the quality of food in the school canteen, the need for extra lessons after school hours or the choice of destinations for overseas study trips. These complaints have moved beyond their traditional sites in the mainstream press to encompass emails to school authorities or to the Education Ministry, as well as on social media sites.

Other forms of parental strategising include the annual rush to enrol as parent volunteers in more prestigious primary schools or as volunteers in the People's

Association, a government-funded grassroots organisation, in order to secure priority during the primary school admission exercise (Lee, 2014b). Some schools have scrapped the parent volunteer priority scheme, claiming that they are overwhelmed each year by parental requests to become volunteers (Lee, 2014a).

Yet another form of parental strategising can be seen in the growth and evolution of the private tutoring industry (mentioned in Teng's Chap. 9, p. 139–140) in direct response to Education Ministry policy changes. This industry, which was estimated in a recent press article to be worth more than S$1,000,000,000 annually (Tan, 2014), has moved beyond the provision of academic tutoring in school subjects to providing parents with tutoring (so as to enhance their ability to help their children with their homework) (Heng, 2015). Tutoring has also evolved to the stage where some tutors promise parents to help with securing their children admission during secondary schools' DSA exercises. Not only are tutors now offering sports tutoring (Wong, 2014b), they are also helping students prepare for tests, auditions and interviews (Teng, 2014).

The rise of such proactive parental behaviour may be due to the fact that not all parents are convinced by the Education Ministry's recent 'every school is a good school' rhetoric (Heng, 2012) or by the ruling party's claim that university degrees do not represent the only way to success (Yong, 2014). Well-entrenched perceptions of different streams in primary and secondary schools leading to unequal educational outcomes (especially when these outcomes have implications for access to higher education, career opportunities and differing income levels) will prove difficult to uproot. The fact that these parents perceive (correctly or otherwise) different schools to have different rates of success in national examinations, as well as conceptions about the prestige of various options in the diversified education landscape, fuels the annual scramble to have their children enrolled in more prestigious schools or streams (a phenomenon that has been acknowledged by Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong in their National Day Rally speeches of 1996 and 2013, respectively) (National Archives of Singapore, 2017). The admittedly generous amount of government subsidies for vocational education (Law, 2015) has not resulted in vocational education moving up the prestige hierarchy for many students and parents. Ironically, greater diversity of the educational landscape may have accentuated the need to keep abreast of the various options available, especially at the post-primary level. It has also highlighted the importance of social networks of information as well as private tutoring in order that children perform well not only academically but also in the DSA exercise.

Implications

This commentary has outlined key ways in which the Singapore education landscape has evolved over the past five decades. Two decades of standardisation have given way since the 1980s to increasing diversity and choice along with a growing marketisation and commodification of education. The school system has also

maintained its elitist nature even as it claims to provide equal opportunities for all students. At the same time, the Ministry of Education has openly institutionalised the importance of parent-school partnerships in the form of the COMPASS advisory council. More and more parents are adopting what Goodall and Montgomery term 'parental engagement with children's learning' instead of mere 'parental involvement with the school'. This is manifested, for example, in a growing reliance on private tutoring not only to secure success in academic results but also in admission to preferred secondary schools. Parents are also more vocal about their rights as 'customers' and are more engaged in networking so as to find out more about the changes in educational policies and the implications of these changes for their strategising for their children's educational success.

In many ways, Singapore appears to be exhibiting what Brown (1990) has termed 'parentocracy'. In his paper, Brown discussed what he felt was a shift from the first wave, where educational provision was governed by the 'feudal dogma of social predestination', to the second wave, the 'ideology of meritocracy' (where the provision of education was organised on the basis of individual merit and achievement), and then onto the third wave, that of 'parentocracy' (where the education a student receives conforms to the wealth and wishes of parents rather than the student's individual ability and effort). Fifty years after political independence, it would appear that Singapore too is showing signs of the emergence of 'parentocracy'. This 'parentocracy' has yet to totally displace meritocracy (Teng's Chap. 9 indicates that some parents still have faith in the promises of the meritocratic education system). Rather, it appears that the two ideologies appear to be co-existing rather uneasily. In other words, the ideals espoused in one of the Singapore state's founding pillars, 'meritocracy', would appear to be somewhat under threat from the emergence of 'parentocracy'. There are no empirical data to determine the exact balance between the two ideologies. However, it is obvious that there has been a persistent link over the past few decades between students' socio-economic background and their academic achievement. It is also evident that more parents are no longer content to let the schools do all the work of educating their children. The growing reliance on private tutoring appears to indicate parental anxiety about whether their children will succeed academically without additional out-of-school assistance. In a sense, too, the state's endorsement of tutoring run by ethnic-based self-help groups, as well as by various community centres, would seem to lend credence to this point of view.

What are the implications of the trends that have been outlined in this commentary? Firstly, not all parents are equally placed to take advantage of opportunities for 'parental involvement with the school', much less 'parental engagement with learning'. Despite the existence of various state policy initiatives such as Edusave and the Education Ministry's Financial Assistance Scheme, as well as efforts by ethnic-based self-help groups, it is increasingly clear that the playing field is far from level for all students. Parents with different levels of financial, social and cultural capital are differentially placed in terms of helping their children with educational success. These parent-based inequalities have been highlighted in Chaps. 10, 11 and 12 of this volume. For instance, the diversity of educational options mentioned in Chap. 7 has increased the need for all parents to be equally

well-informed of these options and the related implications for their children's educational success in order that they are able to make informed decisions. Besides, less-privileged parents will still lack access to the financial and social capital that are necessary in order to make the same sorts of strategic decisions and moves that better-off parents are currently engaging in. This is especially true of the migrant mothers highlighted in Chap. 10, whose lack of financial, social and cultural capital is compounded by their relative social isolation as new immigrants. The kind of community support mentioned in the chapter needs to be expanded to include not just private tutoring but, more importantly, knowledge of the educational landscape and help with navigating it. Similarly, such support would also be crucial to help facilitate the sort of collaborative efforts between the school and family environments to support young children with special needs from low-income backgrounds that Poon discusses in his Chap. 10.

A second implication is that the unequal educational outcomes that have been engendered over almost four decades of streaming at both primary and secondary levels may have implications for intergenerational mobility. Those parents who were streamed into lower-prestige tracks as students find themselves unequally placed, vis-à-vis their counterparts who were streamed into higher-prestige tracks as students, to play more proactive roles in assisting their children with their educational success. It is perhaps only natural that the latter group of parents would want to preserve and reproduce their social privilege in their children as well. This particular possibility is worrying at a time when even the ruling PAP has acknowledged the possible effect of social and educational inequalities on intergenerational mobility and wider social cohesion.

The commentary has raised a number of questions for educators and policymakers. Even as Singapore students enjoy superior outcomes in international comparative tests of educational achievement, making the Singapore school system the envy of many others in the world, there are real issues of equity to be grappled with. The existence of intervention programmes such as those mentioned in Chaps. 11 and 12 suggests that the task of levelling the playing field for all students will prove arduous for the foreseeable future. The Singapore government has acknowledged that schools are a key arena for addressing the issue of wider social inequalities (Hong, 2018). However, its efforts over the past few decades to provide greater educational opportunities for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds have yet to result in a sustained reduction in educational inequalities. For one thing, there are long-standing issues of weak parental involvement and relatively modest parental aspirations, along with low English language proficiency, and a lack of competitive strategising for students' educational success within the context of an emerging parentocracy. Existing official programmes offering financial assistance and supplementary learning programmes only offer partial remedies. Teo (2018) argues that a few key features of the education system, such as the difficulty of the curriculum, early sorting and labelling of students and the high-stakes nature of national examinations, have fuelled the growth of parental involvement and an increasing reliance on private tutoring services. Consequently, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds find it progressively difficult to compete on an equal

footing with the more privileged peers, thus undermining the ideal of meritocracy. At the same time, Teo calls for greater attention to be paid to the ways in which low-wage work has direct implications for the quality of child care in low-income families. Since it is practically impossible to curb privileged parents' aspirations or their attempts at educational strategising, the only long-term solution to the problem of increasing educational equity appears to be Herculean: official or community efforts to overcome the handicaps associated with low socio-economic status and social marginalisation, coupled with Ministry of Education attempts to address structural, curricular and assessment issues that exacerbate educational inequalities.

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