

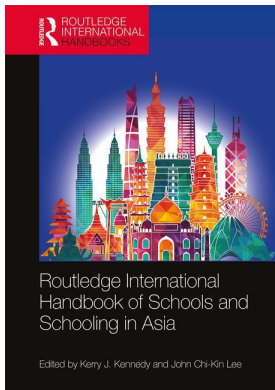
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Kerry J. Kennedy, John Chi-Kin Lee

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Jason Tan

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3

NOTIONS OF EQUALITY AND FAIRNESS IN EDUCATION

The case of meritocracy in Singapore

Jason Tan

Introduction

Notions of equality and fairness in education continue to bedevil education systems around the world. Educational attainment has often been viewed by many societies as a key means of upward social mobility as well as talent development for economic ends. Vital questions, such as how educational opportunities are distributed, as well as the reality of unequal educational outcomes, remain controversial and politically volatile. This chapter interrogates such issues through an examination of the case of Singapore. Over the course of more than five 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 determinants of an individual's educational and career success, has manifested itself in the education system in various forms. The highly competitive nature of schooling is coupled with the key notion of education as a central conduit 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 and played a considerable role in entrenching his beliefs within major policy decisions with regard to the allocation of educational opportunities.

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 strategizing has become increasingly apparent in influencing students' educational success. This can be seen in the growth of various parental networking websites. At the same time, there is growing evidence of an over-representation of students with highly educated parents in the most prestigious secondary schools.

This chapter highlights these changes in parenting and schooling and introduces the term 'parentocracy' (Brown, 1990) (existing alongside 'meritocracy') in the Singapore context. It will ask whether the growing role of parental background and resources challenges the concept of fairness embodied within the concept of meritocracy. It will also raise key implications for parents of school-age children, as well as for wider educational inequalities.

The wider context: schooling in Singapore

Before any meaningful discussion of the relationship between parenting and schooling can take place, it is necessary first to delineate the key parameters at work in Singapore's schooling system. First of all, when the current ruling PAP assumed political power 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 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).

In 1959, the PAP reaffirmed its commitment to equal treatment of the four language streams (State of Singapore, 1959, p. 1). The push for building a common national education system proceeded with vigour during the early- and mid-1960s. For instance, 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 proceeded in the 1960s, with primary schooling becoming universal and free by 1966. 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.

A key point to note is that the PAP adopted 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 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 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 new nation. The state on its part pledged to ensure equal educational opportunities for all to compete for success in a series of common national examinations at both primary and secondary levels within a unified and standardized 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 state effort to unify and standardize schooling experiences for the entire school-age population, a new era of 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 other things, the high dropout rates at both primary and secondary levels. About 71 percent of the Primary one enrolment each year eventually passed the Primary School Leaving Examination, with only 9 percent passing the General Certificate of Education 'Advanced' Level Examination (Ministry of Education, 1979, p. 1, section 3). 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 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" (Ministry of Education, 1979, 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)

In other words, 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 level for students from differing socio-economic backgrounds. The report steered clear, however, of elaborating on how students' socio-economic backgrounds influenced their educational achievement.

Since the institutionalization of streaming at both primary and secondary levels of schooling more than three 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 encourage greater interaction between primary students enrolled in the Gifted Education Programme and their other schoolmates, while students from lower-prestige academic streams have been provided greater opportunities for upward mobility to higher-prestige academic streams. Nevertheless, the concept of differentiated tracks for different students has remained essentially unchanged.

Besides streaming of students, other Ministry of Education policies since the 1980s have introduced greater diversity of programmes and choices for students. 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. By the late 1980s, a few 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 instituted so-called 'integrated programmes' that would allow students the chance to bypass the General Certificate of Education 'Ordinary' Level examination. At the same time, a number of specialized 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 schools were also set up to cater for secondary-age students who had failed the Primary School Leaving Examination 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 marketization of education. In other words, 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 marketization, 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 strategizing (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 inter-school 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 all of these reforms since the 1980s began the process of diversification alongside the marketization of the education 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 education 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)

Yet again, 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. For example, Tan (1993) found an over-representation of students with university-educated parents and more prestigious housing types in a few independent schools. At about the same time, 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). More recently, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had 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 this 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)

Though Lee was speaking with reference to the ethnic Malay minority in Singapore, his remarks were an acknowledgement that decades of a meritocratic system had co-existed with a less-than-level playing field for at least part of the populace. Lee's remarks echoed his earlier remarks in 1992 when he claimed 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)

All of Lee's remarks are consistent with his well-entrenched elitist views about the pre-dominance 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 has 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" 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). 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 create Lee's 'pyramidal structure' and to identify and nurture the future elite (Barr, 2014; Barr & Skrbis, 2008).

The logical consequence of a stratified education system 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). Meanwhile, National University of Singapore professor Irene Ng (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 up the playing field in education. A major example of this can be seen in its endorsement and financial support for ethnic-based self-help groups, such as Yayasan Mendaki (Council for the Development of Singapore Malay/Muslim Community), SINDA (Singapore Indian Development Association) and the CDAC (Chinese Development Assistance Council). Among the major prongs of these organizations is the provision of low-cost tutoring

in order to boost academic achievement. Another prong is the running of parental workshops in order better to 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 mainstream 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, 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."

Parenting and schooling

Another trend that has impacted the notion of meritocracy in Singapore has been the increase in parental involvement in schooling. The international literature is replete with 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 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.

Within the Singapore context, a major watershed event in parent-school relationships was the inauguration in December 1998 of COMPASS (Community and Parents in Support of Schools) 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 organizing 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.

(Ministry of Education, 2015)

In the wake of the formation of COMPASS, the presence of parent support groups in schools became universal, rather than an optional feature. 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 percent increase in household incomes from work. In addition, the proportion of households earning at least \$6,000 increased from 27 percent in 2000 to 43 percent in 2010. Furthermore, the proportion of dual-income married couples rose from 41 percent in 2000 to 47 percent 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 percent in 2003. The corresponding figures for university graduates for the two years were 27 percent and 16 percent respectively, while those for diploma and professional qualifications were 14 and 9.3 percent respectively (Wong, 2014, p. 9).

These trends taken together 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 value of higher education towards higher earnings in the workforce. Yeo, Toh, Thangavelu and Wong (2007) found that in 2004, a worker's earnings were increased by 13.7 percent per extra year of schooling, with higher rates of returns for tertiary education. Likewise, 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 "equalizer" has created a complex situation where parents today generally have high expectations of children's academic achievement and are willing to invest heavily in maximizing children's educational opportunities.

(Khong, 2000)

In a sense, 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).

Khong's doctoral research is instructive in terms of indicating general trends in the attitudes of a segment of parents with high aspirations for their children's education. It revolved around a group of 90 largely upper middle income families whose daughters were enrolled in a prestigious secondary school. 64.7 percent of mothers and 69 percent of fathers hoped that their daughters would complete university, while another 25.6 percent and 24.6 percent of mothers and fathers respectively hoped their daughters would complete post-graduate studies (Khong, 2004, p. 51).

Her research uncovered two dominant modes of parenting by mothers (Khong, 2004, p. 51). The first group of proactive parents possessed "high levels of cultural capital emphasizing the importance and value of education," which led them to engage in "the dynamic and competitive processes of children's schooling and learning." These mothers monitored and strategized appropriate action within the home environment in order to focus their daughters' efforts on learning. They exhibited a high level of participation and personal involvement in learning and school processes. For example, they regularly updated themselves about the education system's numerous policy changes, not only through the school, but also through their own informal support networks of friends, relatives, neighbours and other parents. Furthermore, they did not hesitate to read books or attend relevant talks and seminars, thus building up both social and cultural capital. In addition, they were involved in school programmes and parent support groups while checking regularly with private tutors on their daughters' progress. These mothers accepted the inevitability of sacrificing, deferring or adjusting their own career aspirations. There was also conscious effort to stay attuned to their daughters' specific needs, strengths and weaknesses at different stages of development (Khong, 2004, pp. 115–116).

The second group of parents, who engaged in "passive parenting," exhibited a more detached parenting style, due mainly to their decision to work full-time outside the home. These mothers were less knowledgeable about their daughters' activities and school concerns, preferring instead to delegate more responsibility to other adults like school teachers or private tutors, relatives, friends and domestic helpers (Khong, 2004, p. 121).

Khong's research appears to have covered all points of Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) spectrum that was mentioned earlier. Beyond the confines of Khong's findings, which were obtained in the late 1990s, it would appear on the basis of anecdotal evidence that there are no signs of proactive parenting diminishing in its strength. If anything, the advent within the last decade of social media has meant growing ease with which parents can widen their social networks in order to find out more information and strategize their children's educational success accordingly. 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, or ‘constructive feedback’ as some parents might think of them, have moved beyond their traditional sites in the mainstream press to encompass emails to school authorities or to the Education Ministry, as well as postings on social media sites.

This parental strategizing can be seen at work in other forms too. One of them is 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 organization, 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 strategizing can be seen in the morphing of the private tutoring industry in direct response to changes in Education Ministry policies. This industry, which was estimated in a recent press article to be worth more than \$1 billion 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 help with securing their children admission during secondary schools’ DSA exercises. Not only are tutors now offering sports tutoring (Wong, 2014), they are also helping students prepare for tests, auditions and interviews (Teng, 2014).

One might well ask the question why a certain segment of parents see the need for such ‘kiasu parent’ behaviour (Khong, 2004, p. 8). Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that not all parents are convinced by the Education Ministry’s recent ‘every school a good school’ rhetoric (Heng, 2012) or by the equally recent 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 income levels) will prove difficult to dislodge. The fact that these parents perceive (correctly or otherwise) different schools to have different rates of success in national examinations fuels the annual scramble to have their children enrolled in more prestigious schools or streams. On a related note, 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, the greater diversity of the educational landscape has done little to dampen the ‘kiasu parent’ behaviour. If anything, it has sharpened 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 chapter has outlined key ways the Singapore education landscape has evolved over the past five decades. Two decades of standardization have given way since the 1980s to increasing diversity and choice along with a growing marketization 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 institutionalized 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 instance 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 education policies and the implications of these changes for their strategizing 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 organized on the basis of individual merit and achievement), and then on to 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). At the time that Brown put forward his pivotal and thoughtful ideas, he made direct reference to the socio-historical development of British education and noted similar trends in the United States, Australia and New Zealand. Fifty years after political independence, it would seem that Singapore too is showing signs of the emergence of ‘parentocracy.’ This ‘parentocracy’ has yet to totally displace ‘meritocracy.’ 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.’ At this stage, there are no empirical data to determine the exact balance between the two ideologies. It is, however, obvious that there has been a consistent 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. In fact, the growing reliance on private tutoring might seem to indicate a growing lack of faith that 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 chapter? First among them is that 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.

One also has to bear in mind the possibility that the unequal educational outcomes that have been engendered over more than three 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. At the same time, 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 deleterious impact of social and educational inequalities on intergenerational mobility and wider social cohesion.

Another implication of the changed landscapes for schools and parenting is that of the growing parental voice in how schools are run. The earlier years where schools could rely on an almost total consensus with parents with regard to the running of school programmes and activities appear to have been replaced with a more contentious age, where increasingly vocal parents demand their views be heard on a host of issues. The Ministry of Education, along with

school leaders and teachers, can expect to have to engage much more in active dialogue with parents amid a bid to negotiate a wider consensus about the content and nature of education to be offered in schools. The discussion over ‘parentocracy’ is also taking place alongside ongoing controversy over the elitist nature of the education system and whether this elitism needs tempering with a greater dose of egalitarianism.

The chapter has raised a number of preliminary questions of great pertinence – such as the link between education and intergenerational mobility – to educators, parents and policymakers alike. These questions revolve around key anchors in the national compact. They call upon all of these groups, as well as the wider society, to have a collective conversation about the current direction in which these trends in schooling and parenting are heading, the desirability of these trends, as well as what action is then needed.

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