

The Controversy of Educational Meritocracy in Singapore: a Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Singapore has a world-class education system with consistent and improving performance with its outstanding education outcomes assessed by a number of assessment tools. The research question in the paper is "Why is the concept of meritocratic education controversial in Singapore?". The four key terms are "concept", "controversial", "Singapore" and "meritocratic education". To unpack the question mentioned above, this paper tries to explore why there is a gap between the ideal education system and the reality, and issues emerging from the Singapore's meritocratic educational system which intended to be inclusive, but resulted in exclusion, elitism, and inequality.

KEYWORDS

Educational meritocracy; Singapore; Education system

1 Introduction

Singapore is regarded as having a world-class education system with consistent and improving performance. Its outstanding education outcomes have been assessed by a number of assessment tools such as PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS. For example, when PISA tested 15-year-old students' science, reading and mathematics abilities in 2015, students in Singapore have topped in all three categories (Keskiner, 2015). Similarly, in a "Global Competence Ranking" which was conducted by OECD in 2018 to assess students' intercultural abilities, Singapore was also the top one (Jin & Ball, 2019). Moreover, Singaporeans have made up half of the perfect scorers in the IB programme (Jin & Ball, 2019). In fact, Singapore's success in its education outcomes is largely due to the principle in its high-performing education system, which is meritocracy. Meritocratic education has also been reputed for producing students who have topped the world rankings in standardised testings. However, in recent years, the strongly believed meritocracy has been challenged and criticized for its practice of grouping and segregating students in place. A report titled Equity in Education from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reveals the reality that the playing field is not what people tend to think so. Data in the report showed that in 2009, 41 percent of students from lower socio-economic background in Singapore were attending "disadvantaged schools" with limited resources, while the number went up to 46% in 2015 (Keskiner, 2015). Under these circumstances, the Ministry of Education in Singapore has decided to abolish the streaming system which is one of the main practices in the Singapore's meritocratic education, and it will take effect in 2024 (Jin & Ball, 2019). This revolution in Singapore's education system has provoked many educators and policy-makers thinking about why there is a mismatch between the intention and the practice of Singapore's meritocratic education system, and how it has become so controversial in this country. Therefore, the research question in the conference paper is "Why is the concept of meritocratic education controversial in Singapore?".

2 Literature review

In reviewing the literature, it can be found that with time passing by, the deficiency of the meritocratic ideals is starting to reveal themselves in significant ways. There are some critiques raised by some key thinkers in this field which may explain the controversy of Singapore's meritocratic education system. The first one can be called the socio-economic inequality critique. This critique reveals that this educational system unfairly privileges people from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Keskiner, 2015). Specifically speaking, students with higher socio-economic status are more likely to be rewarded by the system, which is not because these students have genuinely more merits than those with lower socio-economic status, but simply because their parents have the ability to provide them with conducive home environments and purchase tuition. Similarly, students who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds may find it difficult to make academic progress not because they are not hardworking or stupid in nature, but because they are systematically disadvantaged. In other words, a rich family is able to afford to invest in their children's talents and skills through tuition or private tutoring for extracurricular activities such as musical instruments or sports, while poorer

families cannot. As Education Minister Ong Ye Kung stated in a speech recently, there is a paradox of meritocracy, showing that the more it works, the more it seems like systemic unfairness (Brown & Tannock, 2009). While upper-middle class is growing within the system, people from the lower socio-economic backgrounds see their opportunities diminishing. When reviewing the literature, there are some data supporting this idea. Therefore, it can be seen that the meritocratic ideal, instead of rewarding true merits, is in fact rewarding socio-economic privilege.

The second critique we can call it the elitism critique. With the background of high population density and limited resources, academic competition in Singapore is incredibly intense. On one hand, from the perspective of students, the meritocracy in Singapore's streaming system has led to the lack of student diversity in secondary schools. This is due to the fact that primary school students are required to take the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) to enter into secondary schools (Buchmann, Claudia & Hyunjoon, 2009). The exam places students into one of the four streams which include special, express, normal academic and normal technical streams, and then pave the way for students' future outcomes (Buchmann, Claudia & Hyunjoon, 2009). Under these circumstances, students who enter into prestigious schools are put in an advantageous position with better future prospects. However, most of these reputable schools only cater to the Special and Express streams students and do not admit those from the lower streams. This move has been criticised as elitism, and it is described in the news media reports that those who end up in reputable tertiary institutions are "top" students from "good schools" (Gopinathan, 2007). The second aspect criticises elitism from the perspective of social segregation. In an interview, students from express stream mentioned that they rarely mix around with students from the normal stream since they do not want to be regarded as a loser like them (Sen, 2000). Likewise, a participant who came from the lowest stream said that although he admired and looked up those from the express stream for their discipline and resources in school, he did not ever consider making friends with them. Therefore, it can be seen that the elitism ultimately perpetuates class divides, and leads to social segregation later in adulthood.

3 Methodology

To better answer the research question, I have done a systematic literature review of constructing 15 articles to explore more reasons behind the controversy of educational meritocracy, and there are two theoretical frameworks adopted in this research. The first one is Coleman's social capital theory. This theory goes against the concept of a meritocracy due to the fact that social capital theory essentially believes that social relationships are resources that can lead to the accumulation and development of human capital. To further explain, if you have a social network populated by very important people, you are likely to have access to more social capital than if you have a social network populated by less important ones. In other words, people with access to higher levels of social capital tend to have an advantage, compared with those who do not. From Coleman's view, as long as the advantages persist, individuals will engage in social relationships, interactions, and networks. This perception stems from the rational choice theory in which human behaviours can be explained through rationality, and the rational actions are considered in particular social settings which account for not only the actions of individuals, but also the development of the society. In relation to education, Coleman also explored the relationship between social capital and education. In addition, access to social networks has also been found to have positive relations with children's academic attainment and aspirations (McLanahan & Sanderfur, 1994).

The other theoretical framework is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. Generally speaking, the Zone of Proximal Development refers to the distance between what a learner can do without others' help and what he or she can achieve with guidance from more knowledgeable others (Shabani et al., 2010). The idea of ZPD also goes against meritocratic education in terms of grouping students based on their abilities. Vygotsky believed that both high achieving students and low achieving students can learn from each other (Smagorinsky, 2018). And a mixed ability group and collaborative learning are beneficial to students. In contrast, in meritocratic education, students are differentiated and grouped according to their abilities, and thus limiting their learning. Firstly, the relationship between the teacher and the student is essential to learning. Secondly, culture and society can affect the beliefs and attitudes of a student towards learning and education. Apart from that, students can gain great benefit in programs which are led by fellow students since they can grow towards their potential level of development through the use of the social interactions. In relating the theoretical framework to education, ZPD requires that learning goals and curriculum outlines are supposed to be designed with social interaction between students and tasks. In terms of classroom instruction, ZPD is associated with the idea of scaffolding, emphasizing that students can achieve their learning potential with the guidance from those who are more knowledgeable in this field such as teachers or other students (Shabani et al., 2010). In doing the research, the method of data selection is a systematic search for peer-reviewed articles related to the topic. The database I have used include Education Research Complete and ERIC.

4 Results and discussion

In analysing the 15 articles, three themes have emerged which include the narrow definition of merit and reward, socio-economic inequality and the streaming system. The presentation of the analysed themes can be seen in the appendix at the end of the conference paper.

The first theme is the narrow definition of merit and reward. Based on the articles, there has been an over-reliance on academic credentials as a proxy for merit (HO, 2012). According to the articles, the ability to pass examinations is one of a range of valuable skills that need to be rewarded, but it should not be the only definition of merit. Therefore, the system needs to recognise a wider range of skills, such as piano playing, painting, and to be sensitive to a wider range of talents. Apart from that, individual merit is difficult to define and isolate from the myriad factors existing from the point of birth, which makes it hard to conceptualise individual merit and identify the exact forms of the fundamental basis of selection in the meritocratic system.

The second theme focuses on the dubious streaming systems. The position of students in different learning steps has become a problem to the controversy. The positioning of students in this meritocratic approach is based mostly on their individual learning needs, abilities and interest. For example, students who end up in the top 10% in scores are given special treatments and more advanced learning modules which allow them to have more flexibility in what they want to learn rather than a fixed program (Koh, 2014). This will contribute to students which have more potential and give them a chance to focus in other activities and learning experience without them having to worry about final examinations. Singapore's MOE published statistics regarding the government's repeated payment per secondary was increased from SGD 5,614 in 2002/2003 to SGD 13,931 in 2016/17. Due to this a debate was made on the primal level about the government showing dedication to providing resources to all local students. To conclude, the government has given all efforts to make sure no educational system was lacking in resources for teaching. Although experts debate regardless of the statistics since availability and inequality still occur in the schools of Singapore as students with more talents more resources. Moreover, it was also revealed that schools with more academically gifted talents receive more funds in the name of scholarships and per capita to take part in certain programs (Lim, 2016). Therefore, bigger funds and more facilities have contributed to further increase the gap between Singapore's top-end neighbourhood schools. For instance, one of its top secondary schools, Anglo-Chinese School, has been able to offer various enrichment programmes designed to "stretch and develop its high ability learners" (Lim & Tan, 2020). These include yearly enrichment camps to provide such students with out-of-classroom learning activities as well as an annual symposium where students roleplay politicians and diplomats in a United Nations or Singapore Parliamentary setting. In addition, it was reported that the gap between Singapore's top-end neighbourhood schools has over the decades widened partly as a result of factors like bigger and better facilities built with alumni funds. There have been suggestions that the successful student associations of these universities have allowed them to gain better funding and increased their financial advantage. Research shows that students with access to abundant economic resources utilize their time and opportunities better. Enrichment activities for IP students in secondary level education is a perfect example to illustrate the point (Tan & Konza, 2006). Students from economically weak family backgrounds will also miss out on the benefits of having cultural capital. They miss out on valuable advice as they do not have an older relative that has completed their higher education. Thus, they have to learn and understand the functioning system on their own. They will face more stress in their studies when they do not have access to these resources and will stumble along the way. The information gap due to the limited cultural capital makes them vulnerable to succumbing to less desirable paths.

The third theme is about the inequality within Singapore's meritocratic education system with the sub-theme of class repetition. These 15 articles discussed inequality of educational meritocracy from two perspectives. At school level, the standard of a good school is questioned, that is, whether every school is a good school. In Singapore, good schools have access to better facilities, better teachers, better teaching methodologies and so on (Lauder, et al, 2006). Most importantly, good schools have better records of students' academic achievements and carry with them a reputable name. The error of meritocracy when you think about Singapore's education system is because it overlooks the different origin points for an individual child's academic journey and how these points may affect each of them differently due to their conditions in life (Anderson, 2015).

The sub-theme in the 15 articles is class repetition which indicates that there is a strong relationship between the meritocratic education system and social status and how the cycle repeats itself. This has actually been discussed in the previous literature review and it is strongly associated with the idea of inequality. By coding the data, it can be seen that parents in Singapore are renting their way to popular Schools (Anderson, 2015). It was reported that rich parents were renting private properties in areas near prestigious schools in order to ensure their children's placements in these schools. However, it is a phenomenon heavily criticized by many people since the average Singaporeans do not have the ability and means to rent another flat or house. Apart from that, priority placing is also given to those who have relatives in the school. This is also unequal because after the first few stages, there may rarely be any place for other students who do not have any affiliations to the school. However, this inequality leads a social class replication.

Relating to the research question which is “why is the concept of meritocratic education controversial in Singapore?”, the findings have answered this question from three different perspectives which are the concept of a meritocracy in education, the inequality in Singapore’s meritocratic education system, and the inefficiency of the streaming system. To summarise, based on the findings, it is difficult to define individual merit and isolate it from the myriad factors existing from the point of birth. Therefore, the messy conceptualization of merit and reward makes the fundamental basis of meritocratic system invalid and controversial. Secondly, the inequality in the educational meritocracy privileges a small part of people from the upper class, which does harm to both the school and the individual students (Wiederkehr et al, 2015).

5 Conclusion

As it is clarified before, people who grow up in Singapore has been instilled with the idea that the country’s main principle of governance is meritocracy. The country regards itself as a meritocratic society with a system that provides equal opportunity and equal access to everyone. One area that meritocracy is practiced lies in Singapore’s education system. However, after many researchers praised the ideal education system which has made Singapore topped in the worldwide academic testings and competitions, there appears some valid criticism of meritocracy, with the government announcing reforms of educational policies. This indicates that meritocratic education somehow does not work well in Singapore, and sufficient research needs to be done to provide these reforms with theoretical support and valid rationale. Currently, Singapore’s education system is going through a series of reforms. Although the Education Minister in Singapore still holds the belief that meritocratic education is the best model for Singapore, the system has to evolve to tackle new challenges and move away from a narrow focus on academic merits. Because of the complexity of balancing the economic needs as well as the humanitarian needs of each Singaporean, changes will take time with in-depth research and proper consideration to be done. Therefore, by systematically constructing literature and conducting research, this paper may offer some inspiration to response to the controversial phenomenon.

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