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The class divide

Singapore's highly stratified education system is contributing to a socio-economic divide that starts from early childhood and is in danger of persisting across generations. The system needs to stop rewarding parentocracy, experts say.

BY **SUNITA SUE LENG**

When Jane (not her real name) was in Kindergarten 1, her father passed away suddenly from an illness. Her mother struggled to cope and Jane managed to make it to preschool only once a month. She began to forget her alphabet and was withdrawn. Fortunately, Circle of Care, a non-profit programme that helps pre-schoolers from disadvantaged families, jumped in. Jane received learning support while her mother got parenting and transitional support, such as grief counselling and financial assistance. When Jane was due to enter primary school, Circle of Care helped with the transition. Today, Jane is a well-socialised, vocal and confident Primary 1 student and will continue to receive assistance until Primary 3.

Circle of Care is an initiative spearheaded by the Lien Foundation and Care Corner Singapore, a charity. Social workers in this preschool-based model bring together families, preschools, educational therapists and healthcare professionals to support at-risk children in their key developmental years. "Inequality has its roots early in life," says Lee Poh Wah, CEO of the Lien Foundation.

"Our education system is no longer the great social equaliser like it was in the last century. Rather, it tends to exacerbate the disparities in socio-economic status." Education in Singapore has long pivoted on the principles of meritocracy and equality of opportunity. The narrative is that upward mobility is achievable through hard work within the formal education system. For the



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most part, that has happened and, today, Singapore produces students who regularly win prizes in international maths and science competitions and top global benchmarks such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

However, this has come at a cost. Four decades of the early streaming of children through high-stakes exams has spawned a shadow tutoring industry worth more than \$1 billion, as well as so-called parentocracy, where children gain success more from their parents' wealth and social capital than their own merit. More worryingly, experts warn that inequality is starting earlier than ever in childhood and is in danger of persisting across generations.

Many children from low-income families "fall behind almost immediately as they enter the first year of mandatory schooling", writes Teo You Yenn in a new ground-breaking book *This is What Inequality Looks Like*. The sociology professor from Nanyang Technological University notes that they are less advanced than children from wealthier families, who typically get more parental attention and enrichment activities. Very quickly, many low-income students either barely pass or completely fail English and Mathematics. They are then identified as having

problems and pulled out for extra coaching. It is not easy to catch up, however, since the more advanced students continue to move forward at a fast pace.

By Primary 3, many of them are banded into lower-performing classes and, by Primary 5 and 6, many do so poorly that they have to switch to "Foundation" level for some or all their subjects. They become demoralised and may stop going to school regularly, Teo adds. In contrast, students from higher-income families tend to benefit from private coaching outside school as well as their parents' cultural capital, which can expose them to drama lessons, golf or the right social connections. These advantages enhance their chances of getting into the best schools and universities and give them the credentials that employers place higher value on.

Tuition has morphed from helping weaker students catch up into an education arms race, where students are taught ahead of the curriculum so that they have a competitive edge. The Household Expenditure Survey by the Department of Statistics released in 2014 found that families spent \$1.1 billion a year on tuition. That is almost double the amount spent a decade ago and a third more than what was spent just five

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years ago. Tuition is also starting earlier, with nearly 40% of parents of preschool children enrolling them in tuition classes.

“Parentocracy has become very intense in Singapore, especially in the last two decades,” says Jason Tan, associate professor at the National Institute of Education (NIE). This takes the form of parents actively helping their children with school work, leveraging their social networks to find the best opportunities for their children and spending money to engage tutors, coaches or enrichment classes for them. “The playing field has become more skewed towards parents with resources,” he adds.

This can be seen in the Direct School Admission exercise for secondary schools. Introduced in 2004 by the Ministry of Education to broaden admission criteria beyond exam scores to talents in arts or sports, the DSA has become an avenue that rewards families who have the equity and time to invest in sports coaching, dance or music lessons, as well as competitions at home and abroad. “There are even workshops and guidebooks for both parents and children on how to ace the DSA,” notes Tan. In its attempt to level the playing field for the DSA, MOE recently introduced measures such as encouraging schools to identify students with potential rather than reward students with track records of achievement.

Intergenerational consequences of streaming

In the Singapore school system, sorting pupils according to academic ability starts early. One test at age nine creams the highest scorers off into a Gifted Education Programme, offered in a select handful of schools where classes are half the size of those elsewhere in the system. These schools have in turn been called “elite” schools.

Then, at Primary 6, the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) streams 12-year-olds into different tracks — Integrated Programme, Express, Normal Academic, Normal Technical — based on a limited measure of academic capability at single points in time.

“While there are merits of having streaming, it is also important to remember the intergenerational consequences of streaming,” says Tan. One outcome has been a lack of diversity in the socio-economic composition of the student body in top schools. “Data increasingly points to a disproportionate number of students from affluent backgrounds in elite primary and secondary schools,” the Singapore Children’s Society, a welfare organisation, said in a 2016 study.

Citing government figures, it noted that more than half the students in elite secondary schools had fathers who were university graduates, compared with about a tenth of students in other secondary schools. At the primary school level, about 60% of students in elite schools live in private housing, compared with the national average of 20% for all primary schools.

Conversely, there is a clustering of low-income and disadvantaged students on the bottom rungs of the educational ladder. In a 2014 working paper, NIE pointed out that the 15% to 20% lowest academic scorers typically come from four- or three-room HDB flats and rarely use English as a medium of communication with family members. In addition, their parents are usually not fluent in English. Also, compared with the demographic makeup in the Express and Normal Academic streams, the Malays and children from low-income families are disproportionately represented in the Normal Technical stream, it said.

Such stratification has eroded equity in



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education. This has shown up in Singapore’s relatively poor score for academic resilience, defined by PISA as the capacity of disadvantaged students to achieve higher levels of performance than would be predicted by their family background. While 15-year-old students in Singapore on average outperform those in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the gap between the top and bottom scorers is wider and the dependence on parents’ socio-economic status higher.

It has also reduced mobility. “We have had four decades now of unequal educational outcomes,” says Tan. This leads to different access to post-secondary education and, in turn, has consequences for future socio-economic status, career opportunities and income levels.

Parents who were streamed into the Normal or Technical tracks are differentially prepared to help their kids at school, which affects intergenerational mobility, he adds.

Beyond that, the sorting and labelling of young people can become a self-fulfilling prophecy that shapes learning behaviours, attitudes and mental well-being, experts warn. In the view of sociologist Teo, most children from low-income backgrounds who are labelled slow or behind in the early years of primary school are no less capable of learning in neuro-typical ways than other children. They simply have not had as much exposure to school materials, have less preschool education, limited reading materials at home, no enrichment classes or parents who do not speak the type of English required in schools, she says.

The Singapore Children’s Society study also found that students from elite secondary schools perceived themselves to have a higher social status than those from non-elite secondary schools. More recently, a survey by OnePeople.sg, the national body promoting harmony, and Channel News-Asia found that 76% of people in higher classes felt proud to be Singaporean, versus 50% of those in lower classes. “This is the gap that really matters to me, that the rich

feel connected to Singapore and the poor don’t,” Dr Janil Puthuchery, chairman of OnePeople.sg and senior minister of state for Transport and Communications and Information, says in a Channel NewsAsia documentary based on the survey. “This class gap is really an inclusion gap.”

Levelling up

Over the years, there have been calls to do away with frequent and rigorous testing, particularly the high-stakes PSLE, and for less banding and stigmatising of students. “The testing is never ending,” laments Aileen Kang, mother of two girls, aged 10 and 13. “Even if they take away national exams, schools have bite-sized assessments and kids spend so much time preparing for tests.” A growing number, including the Lien Foundation, are also campaigning for more inclusivity in schools to take account of children with different learning abilities and special needs.

For its part, the Education Ministry has introduced changes to move away from the overemphasis on grades and narrow definitions of academic achievement. School rankings are no longer publicised nor are top scorers in each PSLE cohort celebrated. In September last year, MOE announced it would reduce the number of school-based assessments in primary and secondary schools. It would also use more qualitative indicators in students’ report books to discourage peer comparisons and reduce the focus on marks.

These moves are unlikely to temper many Singaporean parents’ fixation with grades and private tuition, though. “You can’t stop tuition. It is very hard to dislodge attitudes because parents have become used to the idea that not all educational pathways lead to similar outcomes,” says NIE’s Tan. Years of conditioning mean many people believe academic success is the optimal avenue for upward mobility.

In the preschool sector, the government has stepped in to uplift quality as well as increase accessibility and afforda-

bility, spurred in part by the Lien Foundation’s efforts. The Foundation piloted a “Mission: I’m Possible” programme to help children with mild special needs in 25 preschools. The government has since scaled it up to some 400 preschools. It has also set up state-backed MOE kindergartens, where fees are a fraction of those in private preschools. In five years, the MOE aims to have 50 kindergartens from 15 currently, catering to about a fifth of the preschool population. Annual spending on preschools, which was \$360 million in 2012, is set to more than quadruple to \$1.7 billion by 2022. Yet, there are gaps, which non-profits such as Circle of Care are helping to fill. Circle of Care began in two preschools in 2013 and today serves 10 preschools and two primary schools.

Literacy and numeracy skills have improved by at least 75% and parents have become more involved with their children’s education. The aim is to reach 30 preschools and serve 1,800 children from low-income families by 2023 — a fivefold increase from this year. Still, Lee reckons that “Circle of Care could just be scratching the tip of the inequality iceberg”.

Stop rewarding precocity

Even as welfare groups and private foundations work to bridge gaps in educational equity, experts say change has to come from the top. “When we look at international research on inequality, we know that public policy is absolutely crucial for mitigating it,” writes NTU’s Teo. In her view, children are being punished for not having enough exposure outside of mass education.

Instead, we are rewarding precocity and cultural capital, qualities that are acquired outside of school. In the process, we stand to lose valuable potential of talents and strengths. “Our education system has to stop insisting on precocity and instead give children more time to learn and develop their varied strengths at a reasonable pace. This would benefit everyone — students, teachers, parents across class lines,” says Teo.

With time freed up by the removal of exams, Lee from the Lien Foundation hopes that schools will seize the opportunity to devote more attention to those with learning needs as well as emphasise skills such as the socio-emotional development of children. He also advocates that the support team within schools be strengthened to include professionals such as social workers, educational therapists and even psychologists who can work hand in hand with teachers, allied educators and the family. “We can also devote the best teachers for preschools and primary schools to low-income neighbourhoods, and incentivise outstanding schools and the best teachers to handle a higher proportion of disadvantaged children,” he adds.

In a sense, the much-lauded Singapore education system is a victim of its own success, with an entrenched psyche that seems hard to change. Yet, it is possible to do well without the stress, intense competitiveness and out-of-pocket costs that Singaporeans endure. In Finland, where the education system is ranked among the best in the world, there are no league tables and no exams until the age of 16. Children are not sorted into sets and there is no private tuition industry. Once a meritocratic channel for moving scores of Singaporeans up the socio-economic ladder, the national education system may be helping to transmit privilege across generations, which has ramifications not just for disadvantaged children such as Jane but also for overall social cohesiveness. ■

Sunita Sue Leng was an associate editor with *The Edge Singapore*

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