

Reflective Report

I have always thought of Singapore as a country that prioritises equality. Her pledge contains the line “to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality”, a line I once uttered every weekday at flag-raising ceremonies. I took these words at face value, believing that it applied in many different aspects, especially so in education. I mix around with others of different income levels, study the same subjects as others, and have the same hobbies as others; thus, I am equal to others. But is that really true? My reflective report seeks to put forth my perspective growing up in Singapore from a low-income family, illuminating the blurred lines of inequality due to meritocracy, and thus answering this question: “Should ordinary Singaporeans be concerned with social equality?”.

To start off, I will briefly introduce my family. I live with a family of six, which constitutes both my parents, my older brother, my older sister and a recent addition, my dog Facai. My parents never got higher education: my mother’s education stopped after primary school, and my father’s stopped after secondary school. All throughout my life, my father has been a self-employed taxi driver, while my mother worked at various blue-collar jobs to make ends meet. My family lives a frugal lifestyle, controlling our daily expenses tightly as our income is not enough to purchase whatever we want, only enough for whatever we need. This frugal mindset was never explicitly taught in my family; it was just something inherent, given that we are all cognisant of our financial situation. When I was in

primary school, I vividly recall not asking for tuition or piano lessons despite wanting them, because I knew my family could not afford them. As young as I was, I still had to think about the “cost” I was incurring, ignorant about how other more affluent families do not have the same worries. I had thought that all other children had the same troubles since we were studying at the same school, and ostensibly had the same opportunity to excel as them. Inequality was not a topic we would openly discuss, after all.

I had always been taught by my parents to work hard in my studies so as to not end up like them. They had frequently chastised me on the importance of education, since they had been deprived of the opportunity to pursue higher education due to their family and societal circumstances at the time. With this idea that Singapore is based on meritocracy, where people are rewarded based on merit, my parents were conscious that as long as their children worked hard, there was an opportunity for them to succeed — or, at the very least, work a more comfortable job than they do. In other words, meritocracy promoted social mobility for those at the lowest rungs of the ladder, and thus encouraged equality.

But how “equal” is this equality this meritocracy promotes? While meritocracy was introduced as a way to promote equality, it in fact blurs the lines of inequality since it masks the contrast between those with wealth and those without, meanwhile parading the concept of equal opportunities for all on the

surface. However, how “equal” is this equality this meritocracy promotes? Of course, I am not saying that meritocracy is bad. I would not deny the fact that I am a product of meritocracy. I am currently pursuing a course that I want in one of the world’s top universities, an opportunity not open to most globally. Yet, is it not frightening that without this module’s teachings, I would not have begun to think about the nuanced differences in equality between me and my friends?

Sure, I am appreciative of the opportunities I have been given because of meritocracy. However, it also hides the disproportionate amount of resources others have compared to what I have. Since I was a child, I have studied in the same schools as those from more affluent backgrounds. Yet, it is because of such opportunities to mix around that there is this false sense of everyone being on the same level playing field. I never questioned the privilege of those who had the opportunities to go for enrichment classes. I just blamed it on the fact that my family was poorer, and that I just needed to work harder to *earn* the same opportunity that others had. There was always this nagging feeling at the back of my mind that this difference in privilege was not a concerning inequality since I was given a chance to succeed, a chance those less fortunate lack. For those who had tuition that my family cannot afford, I had seemingly caught up, evidenced by the fact that I have grasped the opportunity to study at a prestigious university, under a prestigious programme known as the University Scholars Programme (USP).

Yet, have I really caught up? I'd come to university satisfied with myself, having gotten the rewards for my merits from the hard work I had put in. I'd thought I had surmounted this chasm between me and those more affluent. However, such feelings were short-lived as I still see the nuanced inequality of opportunity I had seen before, seemingly omnipresent. A university friend of mine recounted his story of getting an internship at a well-known tech company because his uncle put in a good word for him as he had worked at the company before. Though obviously happy for his internship opportunity, it felt like *déjà vu* to me. Here, once again, was an experience I cannot replicate due to the imbalance in family situations. The constant recommendations for exchange programmes from the school itself, or the passing question on which exchange programme I would be choosing when the time comes, serve as a ceaseless reminder that even after catching up in terms of studies, there will still be opportunities restricted behind a nearly insurmountable paywall. Even the current programme I am in, the USP, has a barrier of entry to enter, given their 2-year mandatory stay policy. Although financial aid is available, the aid does not fully cover the hostel charges. The cost of the programme itself makes me think about whether there had been any potential students that rejected the offer due to the lack of financial ability.

I do not blame my parents; it is not as if they did not want the best for my siblings and me. It has not been easy for them either. They had always worked hard to provide for our basic needs and necessities, and even certain wants if they could afford to do so. However, they are hindered by their education level. The simple struggle of only speaking Chinese in this modernly english-centric environment. The simple lack of financial literacy. The simple fact that they have a hard time using the Internet to find resources to request for financial aid. There are not many resources for those not used to technology to learn the basics to be a better agent in society. It is even getting increasingly more difficult for them to find Chinese-speaking government employees when they have enquiries.

Even though the government has introduced SkillsFuture, a national movement providing resources for Singaporeans to develop more skills, it is simply not enough, especially for those already so far behind. My mother has been diligently using her SkillsFuture credits to learn English, as she knows that the skill would open up room for more career paths and provide more ease in communicating with others. However, language mastery takes years, and she is hardly ever in environments where English is necessary for communication. Though her English did improve, it is still nowhere good enough to make a big change to her employment opportunities. I personally still have a hard time even recounting what I learnt in school to my parents, as everything is taught in English.

It is not that my parents do not want the best for their children; it is that they do not have the ability to provide the guidance other parents can. Just like how there is a disconnect between my parents and me due to language barriers, there is a disconnect between my parents' wants and their ability to provide. The point of putting forth my perspective is not to bash those fortunate enough to have the appropriate guidance. It is to be aware of the inequalities fogged by meritocracy. One should not only be conscious of the benefits meritocracy brings, but also its disadvantages, so that room for improvement can be better defined.

Although there are many others like me who made it to university despite the odds against them, it is important to further elaborate on another half of the equation – those that put in effort, but are not as lucky. While I have succeeded due to meritocracy, what about those that fail to meet the criteria set by educational institutions? Discounting those that do not put in any effort at all, what about those that put in tons of hard work, yet are still unable to achieve the results they so hope to get? Their blood, sweat and tears should not mean any less as compared to those of any other hardworking student. Yet, in a society that prioritises results, they lose out. They lose out because their starting line in this race is so far behind, that if they do not catch up, they are left far behind in the dust. Sure, having tuition or parental guidance does not guarantee success, but

they would certainly help. However, those less fortunate do not have such ease of access.

Any bad results gotten by those less fortunate cannot be simply dashed by the classical option of going overseas to get their education, the cost would be simply too much. The bad results they had gotten would instead be pushed as evidence that they did not work hard enough, thus getting the bad results they “deserve” under this meritocratic system. There may be some that argue that there are other options for those less fortunate, but at what cost? For those that did badly for PSLE, have limited choices as to which secondary schools to go to. Nearly half of low-income students attend the same “disadvantaged schools”, shown by a report done by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.¹ The report went further to say that poorer students face a “double disadvantage”, as the schools they attend may not have the “best of resources”, whether in teacher quality or financial resources.²

If these students were to take N-Levels then O-Levels, they are already spending an extra year as compared to their contemporaries. Given that they may not have the best of resources in the schools that they are at, compounded by their own financial inability, the odds are very stacked against them doing well.

¹ Teng, A. (2018, October 23). *Nearly half of low-income students in Singapore attend the same schools: OECD Report*. The Straits Times. Retrieved May 6, 2022, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/nearly-half-of-low-income-students-in-singapore-attend-the-same-schools-oecd>

² Ibid.

The amount of time they have to spend to resolve their previous bad results accumulates, leaving them far behind compared to those of the same age.

Meritocracy claims to promote equal opportunity by rewarding merit. Yet, children of affluent families seem to have more opportunities to succeed compared to their less affluent counterparts, leading to a contradiction. It seems that some cannot be rewarded under meritocracy not because they lack merit, but because they lack the resources and opportunity to even develop that merit. The system perpetuates a vicious cycle: someone who starts out lacking in resources is likely to end up in a disadvantaged school, which causes them to have even fewer resources.

Should ordinary Singaporeans be concerned with social equality? Of course we should. To speak of the practical reasons for people to care, if there is better social equality, then you would have better peace and stability, as there would be less tension among the different social classes, there will not be this notion of one being disadvantaged as compared to another. Standing as one people and one nation, where such social segregation is not present, would allow for those less affluent to possibly tap into their potential, leading to better use of their abilities, forwarding progress as a nation.

References:

Teng, A. (2018, October 23). *Nearly half of low-income students in Singapore attend the same schools: OECD Report*. The Straits Times. Retrieved May 6, 2022, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/nearly-half-of-low-income-students-in-singapore-attend-the-same-schools-oecd>