CAMBRIDGE JOURNAL OF EDUCATION
2021, VOL. 51, NO. 2, 173–193
https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2020.1796927

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

'Our students do not get that equal chance': teachers' perspectives of meritocracy

Li-Ching Ho

Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA

ABSTRACT

This study explores how Singapore social studies, geography and history teachers make meaning of the concept of meritocracy and its role in the education system. The findings indicate the participants simultaneously adopted *and* challenged the meritocratic values and beliefs promoted by the Singapore state. The teachers strongly believed that the principle of meritocracy helped promote educational and social equality, but they were also deeply concerned about the limitations of meritocracy and the impact of structural and institutional inequalities on educational equality. Even though most participants were able to identify and critique structural inequities and explain how this could affect students' academic achievement, their awareness of the limitations of the meritocratic system did *not* undermine their belief in the system of meritocracy and they could not envisage alternative systems for determining educational access and equality.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 5 March 2020
Accepted 7 July 2020

KEYWORDS
Meritocracy; civic education; social studies; equality; teachers' beliefs

Introduction

Many studies have shown that the values and beliefs that teachers hold about education, such as the purpose of schooling and reasons for academic failure and success, greatly affect their pedagogical practices (e.g. Cotton, 2006; Davis, 1995). Teachers, therefore, need to understand how beliefs about class, race and culture intersect to affect instructional behaviour (Gay, 2010) and learn how to incorporate both individual and structural perspectives during their professional reflection process (Chubbuck, 2010). Although current literature attends to teachers' perspectives of various aspects of diversity such as race or ethnicity, relatively few research studies have directly explored teachers' beliefs and knowledge about one particular structural barrier – meritocracy.

The concept of meritocracy matters because of its ubiquity and widespread acceptance as conventional wisdom in many countries (Duru-Bellat & Tenret, 2012; Goldthorpe, 2003). Meritocratic discourses form part of a larger master narrative within educational systems in many different national contexts and these discourses can have a very real material impact on the lives of students and teachers. Concurrently, meritocratic discourses can help mask significant inequalities in terms of access to high-quality learning opportunities (Hostetler, Sengupta, & Hollett, 2018) and even serve as barriers to equality

CONTACT Li-Ching Ho Liching.ho@wisc.edu Department of Curriculum and Instruction,University of Wisconsin-Madison, 225 N. Mills Street, Madison, WI 53706, USA

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

of opportunity (Mijs, 2016). Teachers, consequently, need to be aware of how their beliefs about equality, individual achievement and meritocracy can help contribute to what Castro (2010) terms 'the myth of equality' (p. 207). A lack of understanding of structural barriers, for example, may result in teachers not being able to engage in meaningful discussions about race, class and cultural diversity because they may adopt deficit discourses that blame the individual students and/or their cultural or family backgrounds for poor academic performances, rather than focusing on how broader school and societal factors can negatively affect student achievement (Mills & Keddie, 2012). Teacher education programmes therefore, need to help teachers develop understandings of the concept of meritocracy that will help them critically examine the nature, causes and consequences of their attitudes and beliefs towards different groups of students.

This study seeks to address this gap in the literature by exploring how Singapore teachers make meaning of the concept of meritocracy and its role in the education system. The Singapore education system is particularly interesting because Singapore's political leaders have repeatedly positioned meritocracy as one of the two founding principles of the country (the other being multiracialism) (K.-J. Lee, 2011). In addition, the government has, in the past 50 years, explicitly and repeatedly articulated its belief in the principle of meritocracy and has used these principles as a basis for policymaking, particularly in education (Ho, 2012). Meritocracy is prominent in political and social discourse in Singapore and, most importantly, it is formally incorporated into both the national school system and the official school curriculum. In Singapore, the principle of meritocracy shapes the structure of high-stakes national examinations, determines which secondary school and academic track primary school students are assigned to, influences the distribution of state resources to public schools, and, most unusually, allocates different citizenship roles to young people (Ho, Alviar-Martin, Sim, & Yap, 2011). The principle of meritocracy has also been consistently reiterated within the formal curriculum.

The findings of this study indicate that the Singapore teachers' understandings of meritocracy were shaped by their political and social contexts, in particular, the externally mandated government policies implemented within a highly centralised education system. Notably, the majority of the teachers simultaneously *adopted* and *challenged* the meritocratic values and beliefs promoted by the Singapore state. Even though most participants were able to identify and critique structural inequities, and explain how this could affect students' academic achievement, their awareness of the limitations of the meritocratic system did *not* undermine their belief in the system of meritocracy nor could they envisage alternative systems for determining educational access and equality.

Meritocracy and education

Meritocracy, a term originally defined in M. Young's (1958) satirical book, has become ubiquitous in many modern democratic societies. Originally coined and used pejoratively, the concept has been transformed into a positive ideal by politicians in different national contexts.

One of the main arguments put forth by advocates of meritocracy is the notion of fairness. Meritocratic societies are perceived to be 'open and fair', while non-meritocratic ones are 'obscure and underhand' (Allen, 2011, p. 368). Advocates of

meritocracy contend that meritocratic principles allow for equality of access and opportunity, promote educational efficiency and performance, and are just and non-discriminatory (McNamee & Miller, 2004). As Allen (2011) notes: 'Justice, social cohesion, progress, fairness and transparency, these are the timeless ideas upon which meritocracy is presumed to rest' (p. 368). Most advocates of meritocracy also contend that unequal distribution of educational goods is justified provided that the process is procedurally fair and is based on merit criteria such as ability and motivation (Guiton & Oakes, 1995). Inequalities in educational results are thus morally defensible as long as individuals are accorded equal opportunity to obtain an education and if there are no barriers to access based on 'morally irrelevant' characteristics such as gender (Howe, 1994, p. 27).

In reality, however, the formula for merit coined by M. Young (1958), 'Intelligence + Effort', has frequently been used to construct and legitimise the hierarchy of different groups in society (Bourdieu, 1996; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Meyer, 1977; Warikoo & Fuhr, 2014). Elites, in addition, are frequently in a position to define, evaluate and use the notion of merit to further reinforce their status and sustain inequality. Importantly, the legitimisation of differences based on 'merit' limits discussions of alternative principles (e.g. need, equality and justice) that can be used to influence the distribution of resources. In fact, meritocratic principles, as Mijs (2016) pointed out, may 'pose a barrier rather than a route to equality of opportunity' (p. 14).

The concept of meritocracy can also be conceptualised in terms of greater struggle over the allocation of resources in society (Baez, 2006) because the types of criteria used to evaluate students' merit in order to determine the kinds of resources and rewards to be apportioned to them frequently include normative values and cultural assumptions (Walzer, 1983; Young, 2002), and ignore how economic, social and cultural factors affect students' academic performance (McNamee & Miller, 2004). In fact, empirical evidence suggests that education-based meritocratic policies have not weakened the association between socio-economic status (SES) and educational attainment. Instead, class differences in educational achievement have continued to exist in many countries. Some of these differences can be attributed to inequalities in access to educational choice; high SES Swedish children of average academic ability, for instance, are twice as likely to select academic courses compared to their working-class counterparts with the same academic ability (Goldthorpe, 2003).

One of the negative characteristics of meritocracy is the focus on individual self-interest and advancement. Essentially, meritocracy legitimises social inequality (because by definition some people need to be at the bottom of the hierarchy) and promotes what Littler (2018) calls 'a socially corrosive ethic of competitive self-interest' (p. 3). Clycq et al. (2014), for example, have found that Flemish students, teachers and parents mostly associated academic achievement with individual effort and competence. The authors argued that this focus on individual achievement and mobility is problematic because it can have significant negative impact on relations within the larger community. Crucially, meritocratic ideology also has significant consequences for working-class children, and especially how these children connect educational success and failure to their own senses of individual self-worth and future prospects (Reay, 2020). As Reay noted, to the children in her study, 'test results were not simply about how well they were able to perform but went to the very heart of who they were and what they could become' (p. 3).

Given the ubiquity of meritocratic discourses with education and wider society as well as the numerous problems associated with these discourses, it is important for teachers to be able to evaluate critically how the concept of meritocracy has been incorporated into national master narratives within the curriculum (Hostetler et al., 2018), examine how merit is defined, recognise the contingent nature of merit, and acknowledge that merit is not fixed and absolute (Sen, 1999). This critical examination of master narratives associated with meritocracy is important because studies have shown that even though members of minority groups are disproportionately affected by non-meritocratic structural and systemic factors such as family wealth, parental education, social ties and political connections, the 'meritocracy myth' places the burden of success on these individuals (McNamee & Miller, 2004). Thus, there is a need to actively disrupt these problematic and insidious master narratives within the school curriculum in order to foster critical deliberations of the complex structural and institutional factors that influence success and access to resources within society.

The importance of teachers' beliefs

Teachers' beliefs significantly influence their professional and pedagogical decisions (Oakes, 2005; Pajares, 1992; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000). Racial and cultural beliefs, for example, have greatly impacted US teachers' classroom practices. According to Gay (2010) 'Racial, ethnic, and cultural attitudes and beliefs are always present, often problematic, and profoundly significant in shaping teaching conceptions and actions' (p. 144). In a similar vein, Xenofontos (2015) observed that Cypriot teachers held strong beliefs about the influence of immigrant students' home cultures on their ability to learn mathematics and tacitly sorted students into ability groups based on their ethnic backgrounds. Likewise, in Flanders, Clycq et al. (2014) found that some teachers attributed the students' lack of success to their problematic home and cultural environments and noted that deficit thinking about minority students' home cultures and languages dominated teachers' explanations of different levels of academic achievements.

Teachers' beliefs are also greatly shaped by their economic, political and social contexts (Baildon & Sim, 2009; Lasky, 2005). In her review of the literature on the impact of teacher beliefs and attitudes on students' achievement, Van Houtte (2011) highlighted how teachers' perceptions of students' backgrounds such as socio-economic status (SES) can influence their behaviour in the classroom. For instance, she noted that teachers had different expectations for students with higher SES and that these perceptions affected the kind of praise, feedback, questioning and curricular content teachers provided to different groups of students. Similarly, in Australia, researchers also found that student teachers' ethnic and socio-economic class positioning influenced the manner in which they engaged with students from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds (Santoro & Allard, 2005).

These teachers' negative perceptions about their students' ethnic and class backgrounds may be further reinforced by the pervasive belief that academic success is fundamentally a consequence of an individual's innate ability or personal character (e.g. effort and level of motivation). In other words, teachers who unproblematically accept an educational system premised on meritocracy may be led to conclude that a student's lack of academic success is a direct result of insufficient individual merit.

For instance, Davis (1995) observed that the US pre-service teachers participating in her study unconsciously accepted cultural deficit explanations for academic failure and were unable to recognise their own hegemonic beliefs about the mainstream values and behaviours necessary for academic success. Instead the pre-service teachers' explanations drew on the meritocratic discourses that they encountered in school. Similarly, in a longitudinal study involving 12 US master's level teacher candidates, Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) observed that even though the pre-service teachers were interested in social justice, they rarely critiqued the larger structures and arrangements of schooling such as academic tracking. This individualistic perspective is deeply problematic because it fails to take into account the structural barriers faced by the student and his or her family or community, as well as also how race, social class and track assignments are highly correlated. In fact, social dynamics and norms greatly affect the processes and the criteria used for the placement of students into different academic tracks and their access to high-quality education (Oakes, 1992).

Teacher education, therefore, needs to help prospective and current teachers challenge and interrogate their beliefs, perceptions and stereotypes of students (Van Houtte, 2011). In addition, teachers need to recognise how these beliefs affect their professional decision-making and interactions with their students. Teachers, furthermore, need to acquire a more nuanced understanding of how a student's experiences, both as an individual and as a member of a larger community, affect his or her learning. Teachers, too, need to be conscious of *both* individual and structural explanations for students' academic performances rather than focusing exclusively on the individual's values, culture or family background. As Chubbuck (2010) pointed out:

> Adding a structural orientation to the professional reflection or judgment process provides expanded and different interpretations that may help diminish the danger of a deficit view of students and open up a wider range of possible solutions for improving students' learning and life opportunities. (p. 200)

However, research findings indicate that this structural orientation is particularly lacking among teachers. Taken together, the research studies highlighted in this section indicate that there is not only a widespread belief among teachers about the importance of individual achievement – a key dimension of the concept of meritocracy – but there is also a significant lack of critical consciousness of institutional and structural barriers affecting educational equality (Davis, 1995; Mueller & O'Connor, 2007).

Context: meritocracy in Singapore

The Singapore state has a distinctive approach to meritocracy. Uniquely, meritocracy, together with multiracialism, serve as the two most important founding myths of Singapore (Lee, 2011). In fact, according to the official historical narrative promulgated by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), the principle of meritocracy provided the *raison d'être* for the formation of the independent Singapore state in 1965, for it allowed Singapore's leaders to draw a clear line of demarcation between the ostensibly unfair pro-Malay policies of the Malaysian government (of which Singapore was part) and the just and equitable meritocratic policies of the PAP (Rahim, 1999).

The principle of meritocracy also aligns neatly with the explicitly Confucian-inspired policies of Singapore's political leaders. The first Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew (1994), described the system thusly:

> We have been able to build up a civil service based on meritocracy, regardless of race, culture or religion. Meritocracy is accepted even by minorities, because Malay and Indian Singaporeans have been influenced by the British civil service tradition of recruitment by competitive examinations, a practice the British borrowed from the Chinese Imperial examination system. (n.p.)

As pointed out by Lee, the Singapore education system with its high-stakes national examinations and selection process for civil service positions and scholarships closely mirrors the ancient civil service examination system of China known as the *Keju*. Like its modern-day Singapore equivalent, students who performed well in the *Keju* in ancient China would be rewarded with prestigious positions, power and financial rewards (Suen & Yu, 2006).

The Singapore education system is decidedly stratified with high levels of tracking, vocational orientation and standardisation (Bol & Van de Werfhorst, 2013). This stratification is especially marked at the secondary level (ages 13–19). Based on their performance in the national Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE), 12–13-year-old secondary students are sorted into academic and vocational tracks that have distinct curricula and different exit examinations. The Ministry of Education places the least academically able students, approximately 12.7% of the 2018 cohort, in the four-year vocational Normal Technical (NT) track (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2019). After completing the exit GCE NT-level examinations, most students continue their vocational training for another two or three years at the Institutes of Technical Education (ITE) in order to obtain certificates in areas such as nursing, electrical technology, fashion apparel production or hospitality operations. The students who are allocated to the academic track are further sorted into the elite Integrated Programme (IP) (approximately the top 10–15% of the cohort) and into the mainstream academic track. The curricula programme and subjects offered in the IP track differ significantly from the ones offered in the mainstream academic track because the Ministry of Education allows teachers in the 17 IP schools to design their own curriculum to meet the needs of their students.

In general, official state rhetoric has consistently emphasised the egalitarian benefits of meritocracy such as equality of opportunity and the absence of formal barriers of access (Lim, 2014). Political leaders have also claimed that meritocracy contributes to greater social mobility, justice, social consensus and cohesion. For example, Singapore's former Permanent Representative to the United Nations argued that meritocracy had redistributive benefits as it helped ensure that the 'fruits and opportunities of development were shared between all classes, from the top to the bottom' (Mahbubani, 2008, n.p.). In 1997, the state enshrined the principle of meritocracy in one of the six National Education messages that form the basis of all citizenship education programmes in Singapore. This National Education message is constantly reiterated in official documents and reads: 'We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility. We provide opportunities for all, according to their ability and effort' (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 5). Somewhat paradoxically, in spite of the importance placed on social cohesion by the state, this official definition of meritocracy legitimises and supports *differentiated* outcomes that

arise as a result of motivational and ability differences. Political leaders in Singapore, in addition, have frequently used the principle of meritocracy to justify differentiated educational outcomes and the uneven allocation of resources to different groups of students. A former Minister of Education, for example, argued that Singapore needed to maximise the efficient allocation of resources and invest in the 'brightest' citizens because they are 'talented creators, inventors and problem solvers' (Ng, 2008, n.p.).

The humanities subjects of social studies, history and geography are required courses in Singapore schools, and they play a significant role in promoting the national ideal of meritocracy. In particular, the various iterations of the social studies curricula, developed by the Ministry of Education, have consistently provided strong justifications for the principle of meritocracy and also for the system of tracking students into different schools and programmes. For example, the 2008 version of the national Secondary Three Social Studies textbook published by the Singapore Ministry of Education explicitly articulated this perspective: 'Meritocracy means a system that rewards hard work and talent' (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 37). Notably, this concept of meritocracy as well as the social status and hierarchy associated with it appears to have been internalised by Singapore students from different academic and vocational tracks. In a qualitative study involving 62 students, researchers found that students from the least prestigious vocational track felt that they were not as competent as their peers in the academic tracks and had less civic agency and power to make a difference in their schools and society (Ho et al., 2011).

More recently, in response to public disaffection about increasing income inequality in Singapore, the national political discourse has shifted away from a strictly procedural conception of meritocracy towards 'compassionate meritocracy'. The former prime minister, Goh Chok Tong (2013), advocated for a compassionate version of meritocracy in his speech to the alumni of one of the oldest and most prestigious secondary schools in Singapore:

> By recognizing and rewarding individuals according to their performance and achievement, meritocracy also differentiates and strings out individuals. While unequal outcomes are problematic within each generation, when perpetuated across generations, they lead to inequity. (n.p.)

This concept of compassionate meritocracy clearly reflected the Singapore government's recognition that a formally procedural and narrow definition of meritocracy had resulted in greater levels of social inequality that was becoming increasingly politically unpalatable. However, rather than questioning the premise of the principle, addressing issues such as bias in evaluating merit or adopting what Walton, Spencer, and Erman (2013) call 'affirmative meritocracy' policies, the Singapore government has chosen to implement redistributive policies in order to mitigate social inequalities. Both the former and current prime ministers, for example, suggested a two-pronged approach to address these problems. They called for opportunities to be equalised for less privileged students through the provision of financial support, bursaries and grants. More controversially, they also called for a sense of *noblesse oblige* on the part of the elite who were presumably beneficiaries of the meritocratic system. The prime ministers urged these privileged members of society to recognise that they had a responsibility to help their less fortunate counterparts (Goh, 2013; Lee, 2013).

Research methods

The study's data were obtained from a larger two-year project examining Singapore teachers' perceptions of diversity and multicultural education. The present study addresses these research questions: What are social studies teachers' perspectives of meritocracy? Do the teachers regard meritocracy as a desirable principle of justice? Data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews and a survey questionnaire that covered various topics relating to diversity, equality and multicultural education. For this study's purpose, I focused on the written survey and interview responses to questions relating to meritocracy and educational equality.

The study was made up of a purposive sample of participants, with subject area or discipline serving as the primary criterion of selection (Merriam, 2002). In Singapore, 'humanities' is an umbrella term for a disciplinary area similar to 'social studies' in the United States, and includes subjects such as geography, history and social studies (citizenship education). Humanities teachers play the most important role in teaching about meritocracy because the concept is extensively addressed within the curricula, especially in the required subject of social studies.

At the start of the study, I identified experienced teachers who held leadership positions such as heads of department within the field of humanities education. Using a snowball sampling strategy, other teachers were identified based on recommendations from the initial group of teachers. From the original sample of 35 humanities teachers, five participants were unable to complete the items and survey questions of interest because of the lack of time, thus resulting in the final sample of 30 teachers.

Of the 30 teachers, 12 were male and 18 were female. Twenty of the participants identified as Chinese-Singaporean, seven as Indian-Singaporean, two as Malay-Singaporean, and one as a Singaporean of Arab descent. Ethnic Chinese teachers formed the bulk of the study participants because the Singapore population consists of 74.3% ethnic Chinese people. Other ethnic groups found in Singapore include ethnic Malays (13.3%), ethnic Indians (9.1%) and a mixture of Eurasians and other minority ethnic groups (Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2015). Nineteen teachers worked in mainstream or regular government schools and six teachers worked in elite government schools. Five of the participants were temporarily assigned to other departments in the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education. Eleven teachers had less than five years of teaching experience, while 19 had more than five years of experience. Seven participants held leadership positions as department heads in their schools (see Appendix 1 for a list of participants identified by their pseudonyms).

The individual interviews were mainly conducted by the research assistant for the project and they lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The recorded interviews were conducted in English because it is the primary medium of instruction in Singapore. The interview protocol included open-ended questions and one elicitation task. Elicitation techniques usually generate rich data especially when participants' knowledge is largely tacit, and when the topic is sensitive and potentially contentious (Barton, 2015). For this study, we compared the participants' responses to the photograph depicting socio-economic inequality in the Singaporean milieu. The image depicted a poor elderly man in Singapore collecting used cardboard boxes for sale – a situation that was at odds with the general affluence of Singaporeans. In the second elicitation task, the participants

were asked to respond to a survey questionnaire that contained an extract from the Secondary Three Social Studies textbook. The extract featured the Singapore government's definition of meritocracy and it described how meritocratic principles influenced government policy. The participants read the extract and answered a question on whether meritocracy was an effective way of equalising opportunities for students from different backgrounds (see Appendix 2).

The data analysis, shaped largely by the constant comparative method, was data-driven and inductive (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Raw data such as interview transcripts, questionnaire responses and researcher notes were classified and coded at the initial stage of analysis in order to understand the ways in which the texts described predominating perspectives, as well as incidents, comments and questions that expressed unusual or contradictory views (Creswell, 2008). Using the constant comparative method (Miles & Huberman, 1994), I compared particular incidents and insights from the interviews and questionnaire responses with other incidents from the same data set. If a similarity was detected, I assigned tentative codes to text segments and also noted interesting commonalities, patterns and contradictions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I then systematically reviewed other interview transcripts to identify conceptual similarities and other similarly coded texts. Subsequently, I refined the codes to minimise inconsistency and redundancy and then characterised the patterns that unified each group.

Findings

In this section, I examine Singapore secondary social studies teachers' perspectives of meritocracy and highlight the three main findings from the study. The participants offered perspectives that both supported and diverged from the official government position. The first finding focuses on teachers' perspectives of the benefits of meritocracy. The teachers who were largely beneficiaries of policies associated with meritocracy strongly believed that the principle of meritocracy helped promote educational and social equality. They also felt that meritocracy and its attendant system of rewards could be a powerful source of motivation for students. In contrast, the second finding highlights how the participants were very conscious of systemic and structural inequalities affecting educational opportunities for their less privileged students. They were also deeply concerned about the limitations of meritocracy and the impact of structural and institutional inequalities on educational equality. The third finding indicates that even though the participants recognised that the meritocratic Singapore policies were deeply flawed, they still could not envisage an alternative to meritocracy.

Finding 1: the benefits of meritocracy

The majority of the participants (25 of 30) used the language of fairness to describe the advantages of meritocracy. Echoing the arguments put forth by political leaders in Singapore, the teachers argued that what meritocracy resulted in was a just system because it provided equal opportunities for everyone and did not arbitrarily exclude any group. For example, the former Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam (2002) pointed out that tracking and curricular differentiation premised on meritocracy was important because it provided 'equal access based on merit', served as a social leveller and functioned

as a tool for social mobility. Similarly, Derrick, a senior teacher from an elite boys' school, described the equal opportunities provided by the meritocratic system: 'Students, no matter what background they come from, have equal opportunities to succeed in life, with hard work and determination.'

Notably, numerous participants from minority ethnic groups also argued that minorities benefited from this meritocratic system. Komala, Banita and Keva's statements were very similar to then Deputy Prime Minister Lee's (1997) claim that the system of meritocracy 'guarantees fair and full opportunities for all (and) multi-racial and multi-religious harmony' (n.p.). Komala, an experienced Sikh teacher, suggested that this system gave them equal opportunities to compete with other groups and stated that without such a system, members of minority groups like her would face significant discrimination. She argued that a meritocratic system afforded her more avenues for advancement:

> If there was no meritocracy, what are the odds of this person ever realizing I'm good? . . . To me, meritocracy actually gives me a chance to move forward . . . and is very important for the government to make sure to be fair to all races.

Likewise, Banita and Keva, both young female Indian teachers, felt that the system was fair to all groups. Both teachers were strong supporters of meritocracy because according to Keva, this showed that 'the state does not favor one group over another'. Similarly, Banita noted that 'with hard work and the opportunity to showcase your talent, every student can succeed regardless of race and religion.'

The majority of the participants agreed with the Singapore state's perspective that this system helped mitigate the impact of entrenched asymmetries in wealth, social status and political power because it increased the social mobility of ethnic minorities and underprivileged segments of Singapore society. As the former Deputy Prime Minister Tharman (2002) asserted in his speech: 'Everyone with the determination and ability can benefit' (n.p.). Similarly, Steve, a young Chinese teacher, enthusiastically supported the idea of meritocracy because he felt that it promoted social mobility. He noted that students 'are allowed to go beyond what their parents have left out (and) students are aware of the opportunities that they have because of meritocracy. This, in essence, is the beauty of the Singapore system.' In spite of being very critical of the concept, Brandon, another young Chinese teacher, also acknowledged that meritocratic system gave people the opportunity 'to move up the socio-economic ladder'.

Two teachers, Safiya and Heidi, offered a slightly different rationale for meritocracy compared to the other participants. Both focused on the allocative aspect of meritocracy and described how it was a fairer system because it allowed for greater procedural transparency. Heidi, a young female Chinese teacher with four years of teaching experience, explained the advantages of the lack of ambiguity in how resources and opportunities were allocated:

> Meritocracy is a necessary foundation for equalizing opportunities for students because it is currently the most transparent way of allocating scarce resources and opportunities. The transparency of the decision-making process – based on effort and ability instead of privileges or connections – ensures that people are able to accept and live with the consequences of the decisions made on this principle.

Safiya, a female teacher of Arab descent, shared similar views: 'I think meritocracy as an institution is a necessary system in justifying the transparent allocation of resources.'

Lastly, several of the participants highlighted the motivational aspect of meritocracy described in the Secondary Three social studies textbook published in 2008 that defined meritocracy as: 'Reward for work and Work for reward … When people are rewarded based on their abilities and hard work, they are encouraged to do well' (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 37). Ten teachers supported meritocracy because they felt that it was a way to motivate and reward individuals for their effort. Alex's response, for instance, closely echoed the official perspective portrayed in the textbook: 'The fundamental principle of meritocracy is reward for work and work for reward.' These teachers' responses focused more on the transactional aspect of meritocracy and they espoused a view that validated the allocation of more resources to people who worked hard. For instance, Banita, a female Indian teacher, provided robust support for the principle of meritocracy, arguing that the system helped give recognition and rewards to hardworking individuals: 'Meritocracy is an effective way of equalizing opportunities for all as it is based on the principle that you will be recognised for your hard work and rewarded accordingly.' Similarly, Penny, an experienced curriculum officer from the Ministry of Education, explained the reward system thusly: 'It allows students opportunities to be rewarded if they do well for the examinations. The rewards come in the form of placement in higher learning institutions.' Likewise, Linda, a Chinese department head, also agreed that meritocracy was fair as people from different socio-economic backgrounds would have 'a level playing field to compete for scholarships based on their talents'. Interestingly, Heidi alluded to how this system helped give individuals more agency and control over their lives. She wrote: 'Sufficient agency is placed in the hands of the people as their effort and individual ability is taken into account and they feel that they can make a difference and change their lot in life.' In sum, the participants felt that students who worked hard could expect rewards such as scholarships and access to better educational opportunities.

Finding 2: the limitations of meritocracy

A significant proportion of the participants (18 of 30) tempered their support of the Singapore state's implementation of meritocratic education policies by highlighting numerous flaws in the system. Notably, the participants directly challenged the claim made by the then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (2003), who said:

> Singapore is an egalitarian society. Advancement is by merit. It is not unusual for the son of a washerwoman or a labourer to become a professional, a businessman, or a Member of Parliament. We have no rigid class barriers. (n.p.)

The most common issue highlighted by the participants was the 'lack of a level playing field' and more than half the participants felt that the existing system was flawed because of the different socio-economic backgrounds of students. For instance, Brandon observed: 'The biggest mistake is assuming that meritocracy will automatically equalise the playing field.' According to these participants, less privileged groups of students had limited access to some of the advantages enjoyed by

students from more wealthy backgrounds such as private tuition and other forms of social capital.

Numerous participants, including Lea, Jameerah, Chang Ming and Wei Min, raised the issue of 'different starting points'. Jameerah, a female Indian department head, highlighted this difference:

> [Meritocracy] presupposes that all students have the same starting point and we know that this is not true. Children, whose parents who are better able to provide opportunities and resources for them, will definitely be at an advantage when compared to children whose parents are struggling to get by.

According to Chang Ming, there was a small but significant group of students 'who start way behind due to their socio-economic background . . . . Right now the odds are stacked steeply against them.' Similarly, Wei Min argued that this system was not fair because it 'favor(s) those who tend to have more resources in the first place'.

The teachers' responses also clearly reflected their belief that the Singapore system was not equitable. Relatively few students, from the 'lower class', Kwok Wai pointed out, obtained government scholarships. Lea, in addition, explained that this system was not fair because of its elitist nature:

> Individuals without similar opportunities will definitely find it hard to attain their best because of this unfair starting point. So at the end of the day, I feel that meritocracy is sort of elitist in a sense as only a portion of the society will truly benefit.

Wen Qian, a young female Chinese teacher from a non-elite school, was particularly pessimistic about the possibility of ensuring educational equality:

> With experience from working with students coming from different family backgrounds and SES, I think that their opportunity to succeed can never be equalised. Students coming from a more-well-to-do family would have more economic capital for extra help (tuition, assessment, etc.) compared to students from a family with lower SES.

Similarly, Larry, a teacher from a non-elite or 'neighborhood school', was very clear about the lack of opportunities available to his students: 'Meritocracy only works if everyone really has an equal chance, but our students do not get that equal chance.' Notably, Lea highlighted one of the consequences of this resource gap for her less privileged students. She argued that it was a challenge for her students to grasp the concept of meritocracy because they were disadvantaged by the system:

> Meritocracy, it's quite tough to teach [my students] that because they don't see it, they can't relate to it . . . and it's always those from other schools who gets this kind of recognition and they can win awards and get gold [awards] for all these things . . . . I struggle to explain to them what is meritocracy.

To Lea and the other teachers, therefore, one of the most significant flaws of the meritocratic system adopted by the Singapore state was its inability to ensure that students from different socio-economic backgrounds had equal opportunities to succeed.

Finding 3: inability to change the meritocratic system

Interestingly, the majority of the participants (17 of 30) felt that the state had to be actively involved in levelling the playing field by redistributing educational resources to disadvantaged groups. In parallel with the shift in national public discourse about increasing inequality in society and the need for modifications to the current system of academic tracking based on national examinations (e.g. Ho, 2012), the majority of the teachers also clearly recognised the limitations of implementing formally meritocratic and procedurally fair educational policies that did not take into consideration different economic and social barriers faced by students. As a result, the teachers also explicitly pushed back against much of the official discourse on meritocracy and advocated for the implementation of compensatory measures such as providing more educational opportunities and assistance for less privileged students. For instance, Safiya argued that students had very diverse needs and therefore, in order to allow everyone 'to compete on an equal footing', it was necessary to have 'different forms of help, at different stages, and to differing extents'. More specifically, Chandran, a very experienced male Indian teacher, suggested that the government had to implement programmes such as introducing subsidies for pre-school education and providing more support for poorer students in primary and secondary schools.

Notably, the teachers framed their arguments about levelling the playing field in terms of fairness. Tung Mei argued that it was important to ensure that less privileged students should 'first be given a leg-up to have the same starting point as others'. This was because she felt that it was not fair for these students to work harder because of their less advantageous socio-economic backgrounds:

> It isn't fair for one to work harder due to his less conducive/advantageous background in order to receive the same rewards as one who has to work less hard. In this case, meritocracy isn't effective as the work put in is not equivalent to the reward received, hence, that in itself is inequality.

Penny, in contrast, was concerned about rewarding other forms of talent. She felt that the non-academically inclined students with different talents would not be rewarded and appreciated in an education system that placed great emphasis on standardised examinations. Similarly, three other teachers (Wei Ling, Heidi and Tung Mei) argued that meritocracy should be redefined. These participants raised concerns over the criteria used to evaluate merit in the Singapore system and they highlighted the subjectivity of the process of determining merit in individuals. Meritocracy in the Singapore system, Tung Mei argued, 'only equalise[s] opportunities in areas that are deemed important by decision makers in society and not for everyone'. Similarly, Heidi insisted that it was important for the government to 'broaden the definition of meritocracy' in order to redress 'systemic imbalances'. Penny and Wei Ling, in addition, explained that the focus on standardised examinations prioritised particular forms of 'intelligence' and 'talent'. Wei Ling asked several critical questions in her interview: 'Who determines what counts as merit? What is the process in determining merit?' Explaining further, she argued that the subjective nature of merit evaluation could result in decisions that favoured particular groups who benefited from the existing system: 'People who rise to position through

"meritocracy" often do not appreciate other forms of talent and hence will perpetuate their idea of meritocracy and selection process in organisation or promotion.'

Remarkably, even though the majority of the participants recognised that there were disadvantages to the existing system premised on meritocratic principles, the teachers' resistance to the use of the concept of meritocracy within the education was limited because none of them could imagine any other transformative alternatives to the current system. This perspective closely parallels the claims made by Singapore's political leaders about not interrogating the fundamental premise of meritocracy as a governing principle for Singapore society. For instance, Prime Minister Lee (2013) argued that what was needed were strategies to 'make meritocracy work better for Singapore' (n.p.) To him, there were no other plausible alternatives to the current system and he unambiguously stated that 'meritocracy *has* to remain the most fundamental organising principle in our society' (n.p., italics added).

Several participants, for example, could not conceive of any other equitable alternative to the existing system based on a formal conception of educational equality. Alex and Michelle, two very experienced teachers, felt strongly that there was no other feasible alternative to meritocracy, and both objected to the idea of affirmative action as a replacement for the existing system. Alex stated in no uncertain terms: 'I'm a firm believer in meritocracy primarily because I feel that there's no system that's perfect … if not meritocracy, what?' Similarly, Michelle posed this question in her interview response: 'I wonder too about the possible alternatives. What would take the place of meritocracy? Affirmative action?' Likewise, both Komala and Kwok Wai acknowledged that while the system was not perfect, they felt that there was no other possible alternative. 'Having meritocracy,' Kwok Wai concluded, 'is still better than not having meritocracy.' These responses strongly suggest that the teachers remained fundamentally locked into the existing system with its emphasis on meritocratic values.

To conclude, the three main findings showed that Singapore teachers were capable of moving beyond individualistic explanations for disparities in students' academic performances. The responses from the Singapore teachers also suggested that they had the ability to interrogate and challenge how policies and institutional practices could promote inequities in the distribution of educational resources, opportunities and outcomes. However, none of the participants could envisage an alternative system to meritocracy.

Discussion

Within the Singapore context, the state has explicitly and overtly used the principle of meritocracy as a way of affirming educational inequality and sorting students into different school types, ability groups and educational tracks. The principle of meritocracy has been a central and explicit part of the Singapore state's governing philosophy for decades and this principle has been regularly endorsed by government leaders, enshrined as a national value and incorporated into national textbooks and curriculum. As a result, Singapore teachers are constantly surrounded and impacted by education policies premised on meritocratic principles. For example, the Singapore government has consistently used the language of meritocracy to justify and formalise differences in access to civic education for students in different academic tracks (Ho, 2012). This discourse in other countries, in contrast, is framed differently and is significantly less overt and state-

dominated. While there are similar disparities in access to high-quality civic education in the US context, for example, the principle of meritocracy is rarely used to account for these differences (e.g. Kahne & Middaugh, 2008).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the findings stand in sharp contrast to other studies, such as the ones conducted by Clycq et al. (2014) in Flanders, Mills and Keddie (2012) in Australia, and Davis (1995), Mueller and O'Connor (2007) and Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) in the US. Unlike the teachers in Davis (1995) and Clycq et al.'s (2014) study, the Singapore teachers in this study did not accept cultural deficit explanations for the lower academic performances of their less privileged students but chose, instead, to focus on structural factors. They argued that other important non-merit factors, such as students' access to cultural capital and other social advantages, significantly affected educational equality (McNamee & Miller, 2004).

A third of the participants challenged the ways in which the Singapore state prioritised certain types of merit over others. Wei Ling's questions about the criteria used for evaluation reflected the teachers' concerns: 'Who determines what counts as merit? What is the process in determining merit?' The teachers, in addition, resisted the role of the standardised national examinations to differentiate the educational and socio-economic opportunities afforded to students. Although these teachers' opinions were in the minority, their perceptions nonetheless represent potential opportunities that teacher educators can build upon as they encourage student-teachers to ponder and question their assumptions about meritocracy, the conceptualisation of equality in educational policy, and the roles of schools in impeding social transformation (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009).

Notably, the participants' understandings of educational equality and meritocracy did not appear to be linked to their racial backgrounds. Their comments closely mirrored the state's argument that meritocratic policies give all citizens an equal opportunity to achieve their best 'regardless of race, religion and socio-economic background' (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 37). These findings contradict the data from studies conducted in the US and Australia that showed that white middle-class students, in particular, resisted considering the impact of structural inequality and challenging the existing social order. In their study, Mueller and O'Connor (2007), for example, argued that the narratives adopted by their participants were framed by an ethnocentric moral logic. In contrast, the findings from the study indicated that teachers from minority racial groups were equally approving of the Singapore state's meritocratic system. Komala, Banita and Keva's comments about the system being 'fair to all races' by ensuring that 'every student can succeed regardless of race and religion' were typical of the sentiments expressed by most of the participants. Overall, 85% of the Chinese participants and 60% of the minority participants demonstrated an ability to be reflexive about structural inequality even though they themselves may have been beneficiaries of the system.

The teachers' perspectives of meritocracy, including their understandings of the affordances and constraints of the concept as well as their inability to extend their resistance by conceptualising alterative systems, appeared to be greatly mediated by the national official discourse about the meritocratic system. The concept of mediated agency is particularly relevant here because it offers a useful way of analysing how government-initiated school policy mandates serve as a mediating system that affects the ways

teachers think or act (Lasky, 2005). Wertsch, Tulviste, and Hagstrom (1993) argued that human agency involves mediational means which are shaped and constrained by cultural, historical and institutional contexts. 'Mediational means,' they write, 'are embedded in a sociocultural milieu and are reproduced across generations in the form of collective practices' (p. 344). Understanding how these mediational means reflect and shape sociocultural contexts, therefore, can help explain how and why policy mandates are accepted, rejected or adapted by teachers (Lasky, 2005; Wertsch & Rupert, 1993).

The concept of mediated agency can thus potentially explain why the participants' responses were remarkably similar to the statements articulated by Singapore's political leaders that were made in response to societal concerns about declining social mobility. These political leaders called for a new version of meritocracy – 'compassionate meritocracy' – defined as providing alternative pathways and resources to mitigate the inequality arising from meritocratic policies (Goh, 2013; Lee, 2013). In a similar vein, teachers' conventional thinking about the concept of meritocracy and their call for changes to the flawed system of meritocracy within the educational sector (e.g. the definition of merit and the need for greater resources to be allocated to less privileged students) closely reflected these significant developments in their sociocultural contexts. Apart from political rhetoric, the teachers' understandings were also greatly impacted by their own professional experiences within the school and classroom context, including their interactions with their diverse students.

The teachers' responses largely reflected their acceptance of these state-dominated discourses although a significant proportion of them explicitly asserted that the system resulted in the reproduction and legitimation of the interests of elites through schooling (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Unlike the participants in Warikoo and Fuhr's (2014) UK study, the Singapore teachers clearly recognised the limitations of implementing formally meritocratic and procedurally fair policies, and they were willing to amend or change how these meritocratic education policies were defined and implemented. The teachers argued that procedural fairness for academic track placement was insufficient and wanted to examine whether students in different classes had equal access to resources that helped promote or limit their future opportunities (Guiton & Oakes, 1995). The teachers also recognised the contingent nature of merit and commented on how merit criteria and evaluation was based on normative values and cultural assumptions (Walzer, 1983; Young, 2002).

However, the teachers' criticisms of the Singapore state's meritocratic educational policies were mostly restricted to what they perceived as the lack of a level playing field, largely because none of the participants could articulate alternatives to this meritocratic system and it was clear that their perspectives were mediated by state-sponsored discourses and policies that unambiguously supported the principle of meritocracy. The findings, therefore, reflect Baez's (2006) assertion that most discussions about equality and meritocracy are frequently limited to the same paradigm: 'Nearly all people seem to believe in merit as the only possible alternative to a hereditary system even if they disagree with others about what constitutes it' (p. 999). Even as the teachers in the study challenged the state's definition of meritocracy and questioned how the policies have been implemented, their underlying belief in the legitimacy and moral superiority of the meritocratic social order remained unshaken. As Alex succinctly pointed out: 'If not meritocracy, what?' To them, social stratification and the differentiated allocation of

resources based on some criteria of merit were both natural and just. In sum, these findings speak to the importance of teacher educators making the lens of meritocracy and other structural factors more visible by offering sustained opportunities for their students to critically examine different conceptions of educational equality in order to develop a stronger understanding of social justice.

Conclusion

This study showed how the larger political and sociocultural contexts mediated Singapore teachers' thinking about the master narrative of meritocracy and the structural factors that affected student learning. This finding supports the conclusions of studies conducted in different countries such as Canada and China that show how teachers' professional identities are shaped by school and political contexts (Gao, 2008; Lasky, 2005). However, a significant proportion of the Singapore teachers seemed to be engaged in a more critical evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of meritocracy. Nearly three-quarters of the participants recognised the existence of structural and systemic inequities and framed their understanding of meritocracy in compensatory and redistributive terms. These teachers also directly challenged official rhetoric about the inherently just and equitable nature of the Singapore state's system of meritocracy. Nevertheless, all of the participants were not able to move beyond the dominant paradigm and conceptualise an alternative to the existing system based on meritocracy.

Teacher education needs to be able to help all teachers confront the assumptions that they hold about the role of individuals and meritocracy, as well as systemic and structural inequalities. Teacher education programmes should provide opportunities for preservice teachers to challenge and question their assumptions and help them avoid explaining low academic performance in terms of cultural or home deficiencies (Davis, 1995). Educators, too, need to understand how the prevailing power structures operate in ways that are disadvantageous to less privileged students. In addition, educators should re-examine how the dominant ways of thinking about merit focus primarily on individuals rather than on institutional arrangements or constructs. This study, consequently, reinforces the importance of teacher education in helping teachers acquire deeper and more nuanced understandings of factors that affect student achievement. Finally, this study also suggests that teacher educators need to go beyond helping teachers identify structural barriers to learning and, instead, help them conceptualise alternatives to a system that has hitherto been largely unexamined and questioned.

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge and thank my colleagues and the study's participants.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Li-Ching Ho http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6124-4805

References

Allen, A. (2011). Michael Young's *The Rise* of the *Meritocracy*: A philosophical critique. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *59*(4), 367–382.
Baez, B. (2006). Merit and difference. *Teachers College Record*, *108*(6), 996–1016.
Baildon, M. C., & Sim, J. B. Y. (2009). Notions of criticality: Singaporean teachers' perspectives of critical thinking in social studies. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *39*(4), 407–422.
Barton, K. C. (2015). Elicitation techniques: Getting people to talk about things they don't usually talk about. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, *43*(2), 179–205.
Bol, T., & Van de Werfhorst, H. G. (2013). The measurement of tracking, vocational orientation, and standardization of educational systems: A comparative approach. *Gini Discussion Paper 81*. http://www.gini-research.org/system/uploads/532/original/81.pdf?380554366
Bourdieu, P. (1996). *The state nobility: Elite schools in the field of power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture*. Trans. R. Nice. London/Beverly Hills: Sage.
Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
Castro, A. J. (2010). Themes in the research on preservice teachers' views of cultural diversity: Implications for researching millennial preservice teachers. *Educational Researcher*, *39*(3), 198–210.
Chubbuck, S. M. (2010). Individual and structural orientations in socially just teaching: Conceptualization, implementation, and collaborative effort. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *61*(3), 197–210.
Clycq, N., Ward Nouwen, M. A., & Vandenbroucke, A. (2014). Meritocracy, deficit thinking and the invisibility of the system: Discourses on educational success and failure. *British Educational Research Journal*, *40*(5), 796–819.
Cochran-Smith, M., Shakman, K., Jong, C., Terrell, D., Barnatt, J., & McQuillan, P. (2009). Good and just teaching: The case for social justice in teacher education. *American Journal of Education*, *115*(3), 347–377.
Cotton, D. R. E. (2006). Implementing curriculum guidance on environmental education: The importance of teachers' beliefs. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *38*(1), 67–83.
Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
Davis, K. A. (1995). Multicultural classrooms and cultural communities of teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *11*(6), 553–563.
Duru-Bellat, M., & Tenret, E. (2012). Who's for meritocracy? Individual and contextual variations in the faith. *Comparative Education Review*, *56*(2), 223–247.
Gao, X. (2008). Teachers' professional vulnerability and cultural tradition: A Chinese paradox. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *24*(1), 154–165.
Gay, G. (2010). Acting on beliefs in teacher education for cultural diversity. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *61*(1–2), 143–152.
Goh, C. T. (2013). *Acceptance speech by Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong at Raffles Homecoming 2013 Gryphon Awards Dinner on Saturday, 27 July 2013 at 8.45 pm at the Raffles Institution Albert Hong Hall*. Retrieved from https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/20130727_0001.pdf
Goldthorpe, J. (2003). The myth of education-based meritocracy. *New Economy*, *10*(4), 234–239.
Guiton, G., & Oakes, J. (1995). Opportunity to learn and conceptions of educational equality. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *17*(3), 323–336.

Ho, L. C., Alviar-Martin, T., Sim, J. B.-Y., & Yap, P. S. (2011). Civic disparities: Exploring students' perceptions of citizenship within Singapore's academic tracks. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, *39*(2), 203–237.
Ho, L.-C. (2012). Sorting citizens: Differentiated citizenship education in Singapore. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *44*(3), 403–428.
Hostetler, A., Sengupta, P., & Hollett, T. (2018). Unsilencing critical conversations in social studies teacher education using agent-based modelling. *Cognition and Instruction*, *36*(2), 139–170.
Howe, K. R. (1994). Standards, assessment, and equality of educational opportunity. *Eduucational Researcher*, *23*(8), 27–33.
Kahne, J., & Middaugh, E. (2008). *Democracy for some: The civic opportunity gap in high school* [CIRCLE Working Paper 59]. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED503646.pdf
Lasky, S. (2005). A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *21*(8), 899–916.
Lee, H. L. (1997). *Speech by BG (NS) Lee Hsien Loong, Deputy Prime Minister, at the launch of National Education at Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS) TV theatre on Friday 17 May 1997 at 9.30 am*. Retrieved from https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/77e6b874-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad
Lee, H. L. (2003, Jun 3). Speech by Deputy Prime Minister Mr Lee Hsien Loong at the Pre-University Seminar. https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/2003060302.htm
Lee, H. L. (2013). *Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day rally speech 2013*. Retrieved from https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/prime-minister-lee-hsien-loongs-national-day-rally-2013-english
Lee, K. Y. (1994). *Speech by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew at the inauguration of the International Confucianism Association at Beijing on 5 October 1994*. Retrieved from https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/743163cd-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad
Lee, K.-J. (2011). The semiotics of Singapore's founding myths of multiracialism and meritocracy. *The American Sociologist*, *42*(2/3), 261–275.
Lim, L. (2014). Critical thinking and the anti-liberal state: The politics of pedagogic recontextualization in Singapore. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *35*(5), 692–704.
Littler, J. (2018). *Against meritocracy: Culture, power, and myths of mobility*. Abingdon/New York: Routledge.
Mahbubani, K. (2008). *Wising up to seven pillars of wisdom*. Retrieved from http://app.mfa.gov.sg/pr/read_content.asp?View,10795
McNamee, S. J., & Miller, R. K. (2004). *The meritocracy myth*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Qualitative and case study applications in educational research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
Meyer, J. W. (1977). The effects of education as an institution. *American Journal of Sociology*, *83*(1), 55–77.
Mijs, J. J. B. (2016). The unfulfillable promise of meritocracy: Three lessons and their implications for justice in education. *Social Justice Research*, *29*(1), 14–34.
Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed. ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Mills, C., & Keddie, A. (2012). 'Fixing' student deficit in contexts of diversity: Another cautionary tale for pre-service teacher education. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, *7*(1), 9–19.
Mueller, J., & O'Connor, C. (2007). Telling and retelling about self and 'others': How pre-service teachers (re)interpret privilege and disadvantage in one college classroom. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *23*(6), 840–856.
Ng, E. H. (2008). *Speech by Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defence, at the opening ceremony of the 10th Asia-Pacific conference on giftedness*. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2008/07/14/speech-by-dr-ngeng-hen-at-the-4.php

Oakes, J. (1992). Can tracking research inform practice? Technical, normative, and political considerations. *Educational Researcher*, *21*(4), 12–21.
Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality* (2nd ed.). New Haven/London: Yale University Press.
Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research*, *62*(3), 307–332.
Rahim, L. Z. (1999). Singapore-Malaysia relations: Deep-seated tensions and self-fulfilling prophecies. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *29*(1), 38–55.
Reay, D. (2020). The perils and penalties of meritocracy: Sanctioning inequalities and legitimating prejudice. *The Political Quarterly*, *91*(2), 405–412.
Santoro, N., & Allard, A. (2005). (Re)Examining identities: Working with diversity in the pre-service teaching experience. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *21*(7), 863–873.
Sen, A. (1999). Merit and justice. In K. Arrow, S. Bowles, & S. Durlauf (Eds.), *Meritocracy and economic inequality* (pp. 5–16). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Singapore Ministry of Education. (2007). *Report of the Committee on National Education*. Singapore: Ministry of Education.
Singapore Ministry of Education. (2008). *Upper secondary social studies 3*. Singapore: EPB Pan Pacific.
Singapore Ministry of Education. (2019). Education Statistics Digest 2019. https://www.moe.gov.sg/docs/default-source/document/publications/education-statistics-digest/esd_2019.pdf
Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry. (2015). General Household Survey 2015. https://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/ghs/ghs2015
Stuart, C., & Thurlow, D. (2000). Making it their own: preservice teachers' experiences, beliefs, and classroom practices. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *51*(2), 113–121.
Suen, H. K., & Yu, L. (2006). Chronic consequences of high-stakes testing? Lessons from the Chinese civil service exam. *Comparative Education Review*, *50*(1), 46–65.
Tharman, S. (2002). *Speech by Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry & Education Tharman Shanmugaratnam at the Parliamentary Debate on Junior College/Upper secondary education on 27 November 2002*. http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2002/sp05122002.htm (accessed 19 October 2011).
Van Houtte, M. (2011). So where's the teacher in school effects research? The impact of teachers' beliefs, culture, and behavior on equity and excellence in education. In K. Van den Branden, P. Van Avermaet, & M. Van Houtte (Eds.), *Equity and excellence in education: Towards maximal learning opportunities for all students* (pp. 75–96). New York/Abingdon: Routledge.
Walton, G. M., Spencer, S. J., & Erman, S. (2013). Affirmative meritocracy. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, *7*(1), 1–35.
Walzer, M. (1983). *Spheres of justice. A defense of pluralism and equality*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
Warikoo, N. K., & Fuhr, C. (2014). Legitimating status: Perceptions of meritocracy and inequality among undergraduates at an elite British university. *British Educational Research Journal*, *40*(4), 699–717.
Wertsch, J. V., & Rupert, L. J. (1993). The authority of cultural tools in a sociocultural approach to mediated agency. *Cognition and Instruction*, *11*(3–4), 227–239.
Wertsch, J. V., Tulviste, P., & Hagstrom, F. (1993). A sociocultural approach to agency. In E. A. Forman, N. Minick, & C. A. Stone (Eds.), *Contexts for learning: Sociocultural dynamics in children's development* (pp. 336–356). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
Xenofontos, C. (2015). Immigrant pupils in elementary classrooms of Cyprus: How teachers view them as learners of mathematics. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *45*(4), 475–488.
Young, I. M. (2002). *Inclusion and democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Young, M. (1958). *The rise of the meritocracy, 1870–2033*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Profile of research participants identified by their pseudonyms

Name	Ethnicity	Gender	Type of school/affiliation	Teaching experience (years)
Brandon	Chinese	M	Elite government	7
Chang Ming	Chinese	M	Elite government	18
Derrick	Chinese	M	Elite government	16
Linda	Chinese	F	Elite government	24
Safiya	Arab	F	Elite government	8
Tung Mei	Chinese	F	Elite government	11
Ben	Indian	M	Mainstream government	3
Banita	Indian	F	Mainstream government	23
Fatimah	Malay	F	Mainstream government	3
Heidi	Chinese	F	Mainstream government	4
Jameerah	Indian	F	Mainstream government	16
Ken	Chinese	M	Mainstream government	3
Keva	Indian	F	Mainstream government	4
Kiat Hui	Chinese	F	Mainstream government	27
Komala	Sikh	F	Mainstream government	20
Kwok Wai	Chinese	M	Mainstream government	13
Lea	Malay	F	Mainstream government	3
Nancy	Chinese	F	Mainstream government	13
Paula	Chinese	F	Mainstream government	3
Shandy	Chinese	F	Mainstream government	32
Steve	Chinese	M	Mainstream government	3
Wei Min	Chinese	M	Mainstream government	3
Wen Qian	Chinese	F	Mainstream government	3
Wei Sheng	Chinese	M	Mainstream government	10
Larry	Chinese	M	Mainstream government	5
Alex	Indian	M	External assignment	29
Chandran	Indian	M	External assignment	34
Michelle	Chinese	F	External assignment	13
Penny	Chinese	F	External assignment	9
Wei Ling	Chinese	F	External assignment	10

Appendix 2

Qualitative survey question

Extract 1: Meritocracy

Meritocracy is a key part of the principle 'Reward for work and Work for reward'. Meritocracy means a system that rewards hard work and talent. When people are rewarded based on their abilities and hard work, they are encouraged to do well. For example, students who perform exceptionally well in their studies and co-curricular activities are rewarded. The Edusave Scholarship and Merit Bursary schemes reward the top 10% and 25% of students in schools and the Institutes of Technical Education. Meritocracy helps to give everybody in society an equal opportunity to achieve their best and be rewarded for their performance, regardless of race, religion and socio-economic background (p. 37).

Singapore Ministry of Education (2007). *Upper secondary social studies 3. Singapore: EPB Pan Pacific.*

In your opinion, is meritocracy an effective way of equalising opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds? Please explain your answer.