

Assignment 3: Final Essay

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Topic: To what extent is Singapore's education system meritocratic?

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Singapore has a worldwide reputation for top notch education, but there are criticisms that it has created a wide chasm between the rich and the poor, "perpetuating a widening inequality of opportunities" (Forward Singapore, 2023). This essay will examine if this is a wrongful accusation or a justified one.

Meritocracy advocates for the equitable allocation of opportunities and rewards based on individual merit, a concept applicable to education through two key facets: equal opportunities and the fair distribution of outcomes. In the context of education, meritocracy focuses on the provision of equal opportunities, regardless of one's background or socioeconomic status. Ideally, every individual should enjoy access to the same educational resources, creating an environment where skills and abilities can flourish. The outcome of meritocracy should be the recognition and reward of hard work and excellence, often quantified by income.

When examining Singapore's educational landscape, it appears to support fair opportunities. However, the inequitable outcomes reveal that Singapore's education system is not meritocratic.

Providing Equal Education Access & Quality

To assess the meritocratic nature of Singapore's education system, social mobility serves as a crucial metric, reflecting the impact of socioeconomic backgrounds on income. The World Economic Forum (WEF) Social Mobility Report 2020 (World Economic Forum, 2020) ranks Singapore in 20th place, among 80 countries. This signifies a relatively high degree of social mobility compared to other nations. When we examine the education component of this report, Singapore fares remarkably well.

Under the education access pillar, Singapore secures the 8th position globally, affirming Singapore's commitment to provide equal access to education for all children. Notably, Singapore has less than 0.1% of adolescents and young adults who are out-of-school. This underscores Singapore's dedication to universal education and ensuring equal access to education. This reduces educational disparities as children in Singapore enjoy basic access to education.

The WEF report also highlights Singapore's excellence in the education quality and equity pillar, with only 2.7% of students falling below the minimum proficiency level. This indicates that students in Singapore not only have equal access to education, but also experience a relatively high standard of education. This implies that students, irrespective of background, have equal access to the knowledge necessary for personal and intellectual growth. Furthermore, disadvantaged students do not report a lack of educational materials, ensuring that underprivileged students possess ample resources to excel. These statistics underscore the ability of Singapore's education system to provide equitable education access and resources.

However, concerns arise regarding the sufficiency of educational materials for underprivileged students. Some disadvantaged students may not recognize the inadequacy of their resources compared to their higher-performing peers. For example, despite the common perception that private tuition improves one's academic result, some may believe that additional tuition is unnecessary. The 2018 Household Expenditure Survey (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2019) reveals that higher-income households in Singapore are more willing to spend more on private tuition. Particularly, the top quintile of households by resident household income spends 3.7 times as much on private tuition as compared to the bottom quintile. This indicates a large difference in spending on private tuition between households of varying socioeconomic statuses. Lower income families may assume that regular schooling is sufficient. Although there are no recent studies on the efficacy of private tuition in Singapore, the underinvestment in education is likely to have a negative impact on education quality.

One may also question the WEF methodology, notably its use of the standard age of 10 to assess academic proficiency. This choice becomes crucial as educational proficiency fluctuates significantly with age, potentially inadequately capturing the complexities of Singapore's education system. Teo You Yenn (Teo, 2021) further attributes intensifying socioeconomic inequality to factors like "early tracking of students; focus on academic results; segregation of students into different schools by academic performance; segregation of socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged students into different schools," all contributing to variations in educational quality. This may cause a larger fluctuation in educational performance, causing education proficiency to deviate even further from the WEF findings.

Education Stratification

A study by Ong Xiang Ling and Cheung Hoi Shan also exposes a stark disproportion of higher socioeconomic students in "elite" schools as compared to "neighborhood" schools (Ong & Cheung, 2016). While this is not a direct measure of success such as income, students from these schools are expected to have more favorable long-term outcomes. The expectation is that students from various social classes should have equal opportunities of getting into "elite" schools and have a fair distribution into different schools. However, this raises questions about the alignment of the education system with meritocracy.

Further insights from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) report in 2015 (OECD, 2016) reveal a concerning trend. As seen from Figure 1, low economic social and cultural status (ESCS) students in Singapore are 4 times more likely to perform below the minimum proficiency level (global bottom 10 percentile). This underscores how Singapore's education system may exacerbate income inequality, creating a cycle where students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to underperform academically, potentially leading to lower-income jobs in future. This misalignment contradicts the meritocratic ideal as success should be independent of family socioeconomic status.

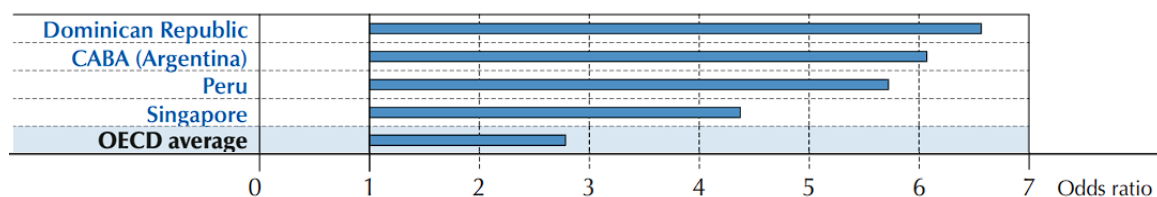


Figure 1: Likelihood of low performance among low ESCS students (OECD, 2016)

These criticisms question the veracity of equal opportunities within Singapore's education system. The meritocratic principles guiding the system seem compromised, as success becomes increasingly dependent on family background rather than individual merit. Moreover, the distribution of outcomes, measured by income, may not align with notions of fairness.

Wage Distribution

The WEF (World Economic Forum, 2020) reports that Singapore ranks 51st of 80 countries in the fair wage distribution pillar, with a highly unequal labor income share. The disparity between the income share of the top 50% to bottom 50% (25.7), which ranks Singapore at 49th, signals significant income inequality despite the commendable education system. The consistency raises questions about the practical effectiveness of Singapore's meritocratic principles, as a core outcome of meritocracy should be social mobility leading to fair incomes and wages.

It is also important to consider Singapore's income inequality in comparison with other countries. Despite Singapore having a competitive Social Mobility Index (SMI) score of 75, its disproportionately high Gini coefficient distinguishes it from countries with similar SMI like the UK, Australia, and New Zealand (See Figure 2). A higher SMI is conventionally associated with a lower Gini coefficient, indicating a more equitable distribution of wealth. However, Singapore's divergence from this pattern suggests a concentration of wealth in the hands of the rich. In a truly meritocratic society, opportunities, and rewards, including income, should be equitably distributed, and this statistical anomaly implies that economic advantages may not be solely based on merit.

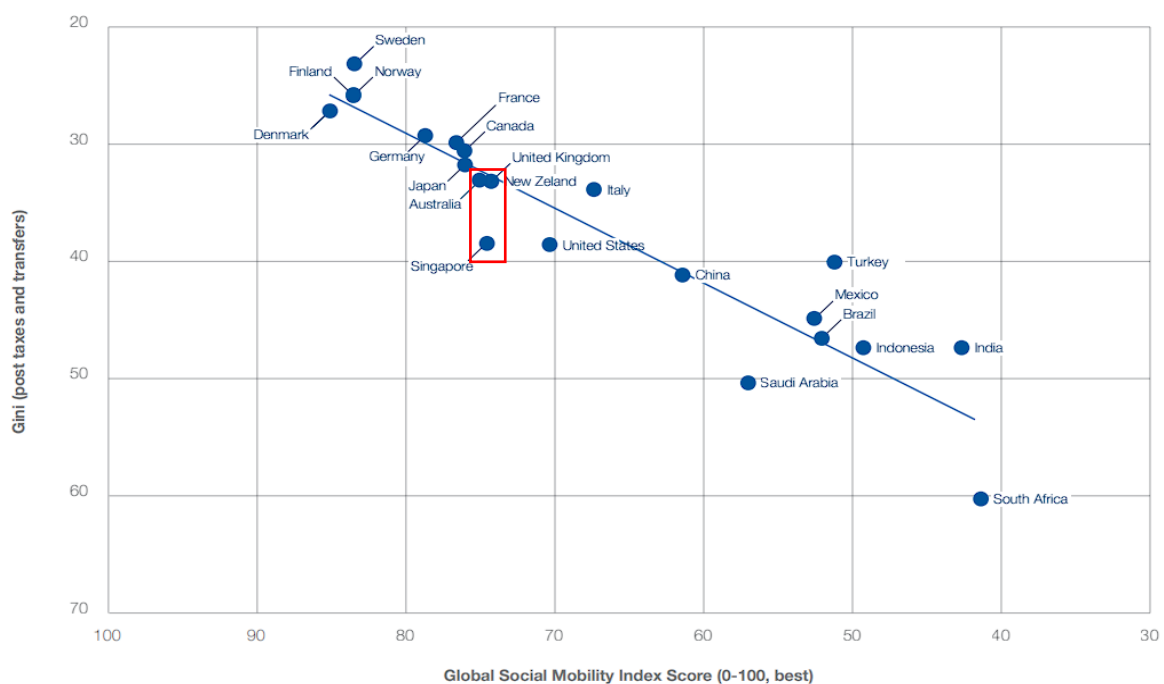


Figure 2: Graph of Gini against Global SMI for G20 Countries (World Economic Forum, 2020)

Other Contributing Factors

While some argue that Singapore's education support for lower income families mitigates unequal opportunities, the outcomes demonstrate a largely unequal distribution of success, be

it measured by income or educational opportunities. This disparity, emphasized by the jarring segregation between students of different socioeconomic statuses highlighted in Teo Yeo Yenn's recent study, questions the efficacy of government efforts to combat inequality, suggesting that the root cause may outweigh the impact of education support.

One limitation of this essay is the indirect representation of rewards through wages, as it does not consider lower effort in the workplace, leading to lower performance, and hence, justly lower wages. However, other short-term evidence such as the disproportionately high ratio of high socioeconomic status students in "elite" schools and the increased likelihood of low performance by low ESCS students support the notion that rewards may not be distributed equitably, but are heavily dependent on socioeconomic status of students' households.

Although the lack of income inequality and social mobility can be attributed to the effort of students rather than the education system, the expectation is that efforts would be evenly distributed among the large student population in Singapore. Despite this, the glaringly unequal distribution of results as indicated by income inequality and early segregation of students into "elite" schools, contradicts the meritocratic ideal. In addition, unequal efforts could be due to unfairness in the education system which favors higher socioeconomic status students. Students from lower social classes would tend to perform worse, resulting in a lower morale and motivation, and hence less effort.

In conclusion, Singapore's state-controlled education policies may seemingly support meritocracy by offering equal opportunities. However, the actual outcomes challenge this ideal. In the short term, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds increase their education quality through private tuition. This inevitably channels them into "elite" schools, setting the stage for long-term effects such as income inequality and unfair wages for the lower class. These issues exacerbate social immobility and undermine the meritocratic principles. While Singapore has taken notable strides in providing equal access to education and resources, the results indicate that they are insufficient. Perhaps, amidst the competitive nature of Singapore's education system, a cultural shift away from an excessive focus on academics and a restructuring of the education system to reduce segregation is needed. This would allow students to be assessed more holistically and might enhance the meritocracy of the system. However, achieving this without limiting the potential of higher-performing students poses a considerable challenge.

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