Is Singapore truly meritocratic? What does meritocracy entail? In this presentation, the focus will be solely towards Singapore’s educational system and the result it yields.

**Definition of Meritocracy**

Meritocracy emphasizes the fair distribution of opportunities and rewards based on individual merit. It consists of 2 components: equal opportunities and equitable distribution of outcomes. Meritocracy focuses on the provision of equal opportunities to all individuals, irrespective of their background, or socioeconomic status. In the context of education, it implies that every individual should have access to the same educational resources, and equal opportunity to develop their skills and abilities. A truly meritocratic system should ensure that those who work hard and excel are recognized and rewarded, often quantified by income.

**WEF Social Mobility Report**

To assess the degree of meritocracy in Singapore, we can use social mobility as a measure to assess the influence of socioeconomic backgrounds on income. The World Economic Forum Social Mobility Report in 2020 serves as a valuable resource in this context. Singapore ranks 20th among 80 countries, indicating a relatively high degree of social mobility compared to other nations. When we examine the education component of this report, Singapore fares remarkably well in both the Education Access Pillar and the Education Quality and Equity Pillar.

**Education Pillars**

Under the education access pillar, Singapore scored 8th in the world with a score of 84, affirming that Singapore’s education system provides equal access to all children. Notably, Singapore has a very low percentage of adolescents and young adults who are out-of-school. This highlights Singapore’s dedication to keeping children in school and ensuring equal access to education, with only a few exceptions. This reduces educational disparities as children in Singapore enjoy basic access to education.

Singapore also excelled in the education quality and equity pillar, where less than 3% of students fall 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 when compared to other countries. 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 equal education access and resources.

**Issues with WEF Report (Education)**

However, there are criticisms regarding the WEF report. For instance, the study shows that underprivileged students in Singapore do not report a lack of educational material. This metric can be subjective, as disadvantaged students may not always recognize the insufficiency of their resources compare to their higher performing peers. For example, some may believe that additional tuition is unnecessary, even though the average household spends about $88.40 per month on it. Lower income families may be less willing to make such investments, assuming regular schooling is adequate.

Another concern in the report pertains to the vague definition of adolescents and young adults who are out-of-school. This lack of clarity can obscure the true picture of Singapore’s educational landscape, especially considering its multi-path education system. The report may inadvertently exclude students beyond the age of 12, which is when education paths begin to diverge with the Primary School Leaving Exam (PSLE).

Moreover, the report uses a standard age of 10 to assess children’s academic proficiency, even though this proficiency can fluctuate significantly as students age, especially in Singapore’s complex education system, which features multiple paths determined by national exams from the age of 12. This complexity makes it challenging to determine if Singaporean students' educational proficiency can be considered truly equal as they age.

**WEF: Fair Wage Distribution**

While we have largely focused on meritocracy's aspect of equal opportunity in education, the WEF report also sheds light on outcome-based metrics. Singapore scores poorly in the Fair Wage Distribution Pillar, ranking 51st out of 80 countries with a score of 45. This is particularly evident in the ratios of labour income share. The ratio of the bottom 40% to top 10% labour income share is 48.0 and the ratio of the bottom 50% to top 50% labour income share is 25.7. This indicates a significant income inequality despite the commendable education system. The disparity raises questions about the effectiveness of Singapore's meritocratic principles in practice, as a core outcome of meritocracy should be social mobility leading to fair incomes and wages.

**WEF SMI vs Gini**

It is also important to consider Singapore’s income inequality in comparison with other countries. A country with a higher Social Mobility Index (SMI) should ideally exhibit a lower Gini coefficient, representing a more equitable distribution of wealth. However, Singapore, while having a competitive SMI score of 75, stands out for its disproportionately high Gini coefficient. This makes it an outlier when compared to countries like the UK, Australia, and New Zealand. The high Gini coefficient signals a concentration of wealth in the hands of the rich, implying that economic advantages may not be distributed purely based on merit.

**PISA Results**

A paper published by Teo Yeo Yenn in 2022, titled "Education Inequality and Development," delves into inequality within Singapore's education system. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) conducts the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) to evaluate education systems globally. While Singapore excelled in PISA's core subjects in 2015, it also ranked among the top five countries where low economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS) students have a high likelihood of performing in the global bottom 10 percentile. This underscores how Singapore's education system exacerbates income inequality, creating a cycle where students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to underperform academically, potentially leading to lower-income jobs in the future. This misalignment contradicts the meritocratic ideal, as success becomes highly dependent on family socioeconomic status.

**Reasons for Education Inequality by Teo Yeo Yenn**

Teo Yeo Yenn identifies specific factors contributing to the intensification of socioeconomic inequality within Singapore's education system. These include the reasons shown on screen. These factors are often rooted in Singapore's system of national exams and its multi-path education structure, making it challenging to ascertain and compare educational equality among students.

**Elite Schools**

Teo Yeo Yenn's paper also cites a study revealing that students in "elite" schools are disproportionately from higher socioeconomic status households compared to those in "neighbourhood" schools. This disparity implies that Singapore's education system may favour students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, as they are more likely to enter these elite schools. While this is not a direct measure of success such as income, students from these schools are expected to have more favourable long-term outcomes, diverging from the meritocratic principles.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Singapore's education policies may, on the surface, appear to support meritocracy by providing equal opportunities to students. However, the actual outcomes contradict this ideal. In the short term, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are channelled into "better" schools, setting the stage for long-term effects such as income inequality and unfair wages. These issues, in turn, exacerbate social immobility and undermine the principles of meritocracy.