



**HWA CHONG INSTITUTION (HIGH SCHOOL SECTION)**

**Category 2A Written Report**

---

Topic: Meritocracy in Singapore's Education System

Slant: History

Total Word Count (excluding appendixes, footnotes & references): 6,415 words

Student's (official) Name: Joshua Chua Yu Ning

Class: 3H1

Name of Teacher-Mentor: Ms Clarinda Choh Sok Kuang

Group ID: 2-22

**Declaration**

I declare that this assignment is my own work and does not involve plagiarism or collusion. The sources of other people's work have been appropriately referenced, failing which I am willing to accept the necessary disciplinary action(s) to be taken against me.

Student's Signature : Joshua Chua

Date of Submission: 6/8/19

## **Chapter 1: Introductory Chapter**

- 1.1 Background
  - 1.1.1 Why Meritocracy
  - 1.1.2 Attractiveness of Meritocracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century
  - 1.1.3 Conclusion
- 1.2 Rationale
- 1.3 Research Questions
- 1.4 Thesis Statement
- 1.5 Scope of Research / Delimitation(s)
- 1.6 Significance of Research / Usefulness
- 1.7 Limitations

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

- 2.1 Definition of Meritocracy
- 2.2 Inequality and its Significance in a Meritocracy
- 2.3 Policies and Programmes
- 2.4 Functionalism
  - 2.4.1 Dysfunction

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

## **Chapter 4: Results and Analysis (Only for Quantitative Study)**

- 4.1 Timeline of programmes and respective policies
  - 4.1.1 Functionalism and talent
- 4.2 Inequality as a dysfunction
  - 4.2.1 Policy combatting inequality

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Interpretation**

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

## **Bibliography**

## **1.1 Background**

### **1.1.1 Meritocracy's benefits and importance in the Education system**

Meritocracy is the practice which gives all potentially qualified and deserving individuals an equal and fair chance of achieving success based on their own merit, which is usually a mixture of effort and talent, both innate and cultivated (Tan, 2008). Meritocracy has also been seen as a system whereby everyone has the chance at success, but not necessarily guaranteeing it, as it seeks to find the best person rather than providing everyone with a “job” (Cavanaugh, 2002). This practice is especially applied in the education system, whereby students are provided with many opportunities to succeed, but not guaranteeing everyone a “top spot”. This is especially important, when education is believed to be an effective social leveler, providing everyone with opportunities, while acknowledging the different learning needs of a diverse group of students. Mr Ong Ye Kung has emphasized in a forum held on 28 March 2019 that education plays a pivotal role in uplifting students. Education provides students with the necessary skills and knowledge for their future in the workforce. Therefore, a meritocratic society would allow those in the lower socio-economic strata opportunities at succeeding in life, and breaking them out of the poverty cycle. Meritocracy is also regarded as a fair practice that rewards a person's hard work. Without meritocracy, the results of a person's hard work would not be recognized, and there will be little incentive to move out of their socio-economic

status. Addressing Cavanaugh's (2002) definition of meritocracy, he acknowledges that not everyone can excel in a top institution that focuses on academics. Therefore, it is important to note that the system caters to the different needs of the students, providing them with alternative routes to success.

### **1.1.2 Strengthening Meritocracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In Minister Ong Ye Kung's (2018) speech to Equal Ark Charity in 24 October 2018, he acknowledges that factors such as inequality may have affected the effectiveness of policies trying to strengthen meritocracy. In his speech, he emphasizes meritocracy's importance, and points out that policies tweaks would continue to be made to strengthen Singapore's meritocracy. Minister Ong believes that education system must move away from a narrow focus on past academic merit, to recognise and celebrate a broader range of skills, talents and strengths. It should translate into tangible changes in the way we hire people, admit students to tertiary institutions, and grant awards and scholarships, and accord respect to fellow Singaporeans. Such changes would be necessary, as Ng Chee Meng (2017) has mentioned that this would be necessary in a VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) world in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A shift away from an academic-centric education will allow for students to develop a wider range of skills, and rewarding a more students with other kinds of talents and interests.

### **1.1.3 Conclusion**

In conclusion, meritocracy remains relevant in ensuring that students are able to be fairly rewarded and given opportunities to succeed. To ensure Singapore's meritocracy stays strong, Mr Ong Ye Kung has emphasized that factors such as inequality, must not dampen the nation's effort to strengthen its Meritocracy. The

Ministers of Education have also mentioned that the nation must “double down on our efforts”, by constantly tweaking its policies to better reach its meritocratic ideals.

## **1.2 Rationale**

The rationale of this paper is to better understand meritocracy as a principle first. Understanding the principle of meritocracy will serve as a lens to analyse the policies implemented in the different education paradigms in Singapore. The paper will analyse the policies and determine how they have contributed to the nation’s effort to reach meritocratic ideals. The policies that are chosen will be arranged chronologically, thus showing an evolution of the policies in the landscape of the education system.

## **1.3 Research questions**

1. How is meritocracy applied in Singapore’s education system and how well has it been working thus far?
2. To what extent has the Singapore education system been consistent with the principles of meritocracy?
3. How has inequality shaped the perception of meritocracy in the education system?

## **1.4 Thesis Statement**

Singapore’s meritocracy has adhered to certain aspects of functionalism (Emile Durkheim, 1893) as it acknowledges the differences in interests and talents of students. Therefore, policies that fall under the principles have increased access of

resources, and evolved to expand McNamee and Miller Jr (2004) four ‘merits’ in order to give students the opportunity to excel.

## **1.5 Scope of Research/ Delimitations**

The paper will understand meritocracy as a principle, by exploring and setting a fixed definition for the paper. The understanding of meritocracy would provide a lens to analyse different policies. This paper will categorise the principles and their supporting policies in two ways: Firstly, principles that strengthen meritocracy through broadening the definition of ‘merit’. Secondly, principles and supporting policies that strengthen meritocracy through increasing of resources and opportunities for both the bottom and the top in the education system. Furthermore, the various aspects of functionalism would be used to explain why the education system is heading in whatever direction they are taking.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Category:**

The Direct School Admission Programme will be chosen as the policy for analysis. The Programme aims at broadening the definition of meritocracy, thus, making it a suitable policy for analysis as it falls under the first category.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Category:**

The principle “Lift the bottom, not cap the top”, that Mr Ong Ye Kung raised in a parliament speech on 11 July 2018, will be used. Also, the principle that “Every

School a Good School” and “Every Student an Engaged Learner” (2011), will be chosen for analysis. These three principles fall under the second category, which means that these are the policies that strengthen meritocracy by increasing the resources allocated to the students at the bottom. For students on the top, the Integrated Programme (IP) allows them to progress faster, and provides them with the resources to continue excelling.

## **1.6 Significance of Research/ Usefulness**

The paper will value-add by using principles and their supporting policies to show an evolution in the approach taken by the education system to reach meritocratic ideals.

## **1.7 Limitations**

Policies such as the Subject-Based Banding scheme will be useful in allowing the paper to explore the ways the Singapore Government has strengthened meritocracy. However, the Subject-Based Banding scheme that was announced in 2019 has no data or information that can support its effectiveness in strengthening Singapore’s Meritocracy as it has not been implemented. However, such policies like the Subject-Based Banding scheme can be used as an example that shows the direction the education system is taking in the future.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Definition of Meritocracy:**

Meritocracy is defined as a principle that rewards people based on 'merit'. McNamee and Miller Jr (2004) identify four types of "merit": talent, attitude, hard work, and moral character. If a student in a meritocracy has anyone of these four different types of 'merits', the system would reward them accordingly. Meritocracy is also defined as a principle that ensures efficiency by appropriately allocating resources to different groups of people. When these groups of people receive their share of the resources, Duru-Bellat and Tenret (2012) then argues that this makes people feel that their place in society is deserved.

### **2.2 Inequality and Its Significance in a Meritocracy:**

Although meritocracy helps make the playing field more even, there is a limit to the extent of help meritocracies can provide. Meritocracies might not be able to help much 'before the competition starts' (Tan, 2008). For example, the financial state of the family the person is born into can be a big factor in determining one's chance at success. Wealth inequality refers to the imbalance in the amount of wealth people have. Those in the upper socio-economic strata have a significant amount of wealth that can be used to invest in their children's education. On the other hand, families in the lower strata will struggle to have the financial means to invest in their children's education. Moore (2000) continues that people from the upper socio-economic strata have tangible educational advantages, because they can afford extra-curricular classes, to increase their chances at academic success.

Due to the ability to invest money in their children's education, students from the upper socio-economic strata tend to perform better academically. This results in many wealthy students conglomerating in 'elite' institutions due to their academic performances. Professor Teo You Yenn (2018) have pointed out research done by Cheung and Ong, which associated



wealth with a higher chance at academic success. The research found that 41% of students in Integrated Programme (IP) Schools belong to affluent families, whereas, the affluent only make up about 7% of the student population in Government Schools. This data reveals to us that there is some correlation between one's wealth and academic success. More importantly, it reveals to us that those succeeding in the system are those who have advantages at the start. This seems unfair, as those who do not have such advantages at the start, are not rewarded as much. In this case, such students are disadvantaged, as their family's financial background does not allow them to go for extra-curricular classes which would increase their chances at academic success.

Therefore, factors, such as wealth inequality, that somewhat pre-determines the chances at success someone has, undermines the effectiveness of meritocracy. The system rewards the outcome and not the process. Therefore, if someone in the lower socio-economic strata works hard, he might find it harder to succeed due to the lack of financial backing despite his efforts. On the other hand, a wealthier person, who has the money to increase his chances at a better outcome, will find it easier to succeed in the system. This therefore might defeat the purpose of meritocracy in education, as it seems that other societal factors have undermined the principle.

### **2.3 Policies Programmes and Paradigm shifts:**

Policies do not define meritocracy, rather, they exist to help Singapore reach meritocratic ideals. Low (2014) emphasises that meritocracy is "not a system, but rather, a guiding principle". As such, the way we create policies and programmes will affect how badly factors such as inequality, affect the integrity of a meritocracy.

The Singapore education system seems to be undergoing a paradigm shift, from a sole focus on academic excellence to more holistic development of students. The previous Education Minister, Mr Ng Chee Meng (2017), has stated in the Committee of Supply Debate Speech that students in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century education system are encouraged to take part in applied

learning and outdoor education. Programmes such as the Direct School Admission Programme are an example of a programme that is geared to developing students in other aspects. This means that through holistic development, students have more opportunities to discover and develop their talents and interests. Finding their talents and interests will in turn, give the system a justifiable reason to reward these students, as McNamee and Miller Jr (2004) has mentioned that talent is one of the four main types of ‘merits’. This widens the definition of what merits are, thus allowing a more diverse set of students that can be rewarded.

### **Direct School Admission (DSA) Programme:**

The Direct School Admission Programme (DSA) was implemented in 2004, to provide students with interests in sports and the arts the opportunity to make use of these talents. According to the MOE website, the Direct School Admission (DSA) Exercise aims to promote holistic education by giving participating schools greater flexibility in selecting students while holding to the key principles of transparency and meritocracy. Furthermore, the DSA Programme fits in the definition of McNamee and Miller Jr’s (2004) definition of ‘merit’. Therefore, the DSA Programme provides students the opportunity to demonstrate a more diverse range of achievements and talents in seeking admission to secondary schools. Since the DSA Programme is aimed to strengthen meritocracy, it will be the programme that would be chosen for analysis. Also, the DSA programme strengthens meritocracy by expanding its definition of ‘merits’, therefore making it apt for analysis.

#### **Evolution of the DSA programme (\*Information extracted from MOE website):**

| <b>Principle:</b> | <b>Policy/Programme:</b>   | <b>Elaboration:</b>  | <b>Rationale:</b>   |
|-------------------|--|--|---|
| Meritocracy       | Independent and Autonomous schemes, introduced in 1987 and 1992 respectively | Admissions were largely based on merit but schools were given discretion to admit up to 10 percent and five percent of their | Provide schools with greater flexibility in student admission, allowing them to |

|             |  |   |   |
|-------------|--|---|---|
|             |  | respective intakes based on broader criteria, subject to conditions set by MOE.   | recognise a diverse range of academic and non-academic achievements and talents   |
| Meritocracy | Direct School Admission Programme introduced in 2004 | Success of Independent and Autonomous schemes leads to expansion to other schools through DSA Programme.  | Aimed at cultivating a flexible and broad-based education system in Singapore that looked beyond grades   |
| Meritocracy | Niche Programme Schools introduced in 2005           | Secondary schools with strong talent development programmes and good track records of achievements in their declared niches could qualify as Niche Programme Schools, subject to approval by MOE. | To encourage greater diversity in the secondary school education landscape by providing students with opportunities to develop various areas of excellence.   |
| Meritocracy | Revision of DSA scheme in 2014                       | Education Minister Heng Swee Keat pointed out that qualities like leadership would be assessed based on everyday interactions with students over a sustained period in schools.                   | The Programme takes into account personal character. This was in view of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's comment during the 2013 National Day Rally speech that the DSA criteria could be broadened to recognise students with special |

|             |   |  |   |
|-------------|---|--|---|
|             |   |  | qualities.  |
| Meritocracy | Expansion of enrolment capacity in 2017   | In 2017, it announced at its Committee of Supply debate that all secondary schools could admit up to 20 percent of their Secondary 1 intake through DSA from 2018 onwards. This would be an increase from the previous five percent cap for schools with niche programmes and 10 percent cap for AS, though not applicable to IS, which were already given a 20 percent cap.   | Allow for even greater flexibility for schools to select students with different talents and interests.   |
| Meritocracy | General academic ability tests no longer used as part of DSA selection criteria from 2018 onwards | In the past, schools conducted such tests to assess students' general reasoning and problem-solving skills in order to ensure that students would be able to cope with the schools' academic rigour while still developing their talents in niche areas.<br><br>Now, Schools may continue to select and admit students based on interviews, trials, auditions and tests specific to the niche area to focus on identifying students' areas of strengths and talents. | MOE scrapped these tests in view of criticism that DSA had deviated from its original intent of recognising students' achievements in areas beyond academic ability and instead, provided students with outstanding academic results the advantage in gaining early entry into their desired secondary schools. |

**‘Every School a Good School’, ‘Every Student an Engaged Learner and ‘Lift the bottom, not cap the top’:**

**‘Every School a Good School’:**

During Mr Heng Swee Keat tenure as the Education Minister from 2011 to 2015, he popularised the term ‘Every School a Good School’. Mr Heng defines a good school as one that is able to nurture leaders, enable teachers to be Caring Educators and fosters Supportive Partnerships with parents and the community. Mr Heng has emphasised in a Keynote Address in 2012, that every school is good in their own way. To do this, Mr Heng has allocated funds and resources to schools, to help schools develop niches and developing a new way of recognising schools.

**\*Information extracted from MOE website**

| Principle:                   | Policy/ Programme:  | Elaboration:  | Rationale:  |
|------------------------------|---|---|---|
| ‘Every School a Good School’ | Abolishing School Banding by Absolute Academic Results (2012) | Abolishing the banding of schools through absolute academic result. Instead, schools are now given areas which they specialise in, making them ‘Good Schools’ in their respective fields. | Removes the perception that certain schools are superior to others, and the idea that schools can be measured by a ‘single yardstick’. The definition of ‘merits’ for schools are now broader. This in turn, recognises that its students are special and have their own set of talents and skills. |
| ‘Every School a              | Revised School  | Replaces the Masterplan of  | This allows for more schools  |

|                              |                                  |  |  |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Good School'                 | excellence award<br>(2012)       | <p>Awards (MoA) with a new way of recognising schools and their best practices.</p> <p>The stacking effect has been reduced with the removal of the highest tiered award, the School Excellence Award (SEA), and the lowest tiered Achievement Awards (AA), and Sustained Achievement Awards (SAA).</p> <p>MOE will instead recognise Best Practices in the key attributes that contribute to a good school.</p> | <p>to be eligible for the awards, and fit the definition of a 'Good School'. In order to obtain this, the new framework sharpens the schools' focus to putting the development of the students at the core of their work.</p> <p>This helps develop the students' interests, making the schools work harder to create a healthy, competitive environment that a meritocratic system needs.</p> |
| 'Every School a Good School' | Needs-Based Resourcing<br>(2012) | <p>In the past, schools are allocated budgets and teachers in proportion to their student enrolment.</p> <p>Now, more resources are allocated to help low progress students, and schools with low enrolment.</p>   | <p>It provides students with the resources to compete fairly.</p> <p>The policy aims at equalising opportunities and resources, so that students are not held back by resource deprivation.</p>  |
| 'Every School a Good School' | Niche Schools (2012)             | <p>Today, 191 or about half of all schools have a niche area. Going forward, MOE</p>   | <p>This provides the resources for schools to develop the students, and acknowledges</p>   |

|  |  |  |                                     |
|--|--|--|-------------------------------------|
|  |  | <p>will further expand this.</p> <p>The policy aimed to have every school to have a recognised niche. MOE made an important investment, and over the span of 5 years, MOE committed a total of \$55 million to enable every school to build its own niche.</p> | <p>the strengths of the school.</p> |
|--|--|--|-------------------------------------|

‘Every Student an Engaged Learner’, ‘Lift the bottom, not cap the top’ and the

Integrated Programme:

Added onto the policy of ‘Every School a Good School’, Mr Heng also introduced the principle of ‘Every Student an Engaged Learner’. The supporting policies of this principle aim at uplifting students, paying attention to their development, and providing them with academic help. Mr Ong Ye Kung has also highlighted a similar principle at the 11 July 2018 parliament motion ‘Education for the future’. This principle is ‘Lift the bottom, not cap the top’. Both principles have similar supporting policies that aim at uplifting the bottom.

On the other hand, an important aspect of the principle that Mr Ong raised, is the part of not capping the top. Therefore, the paper will explore ways the education system has allowed students at the top the freedom to continue excelling.

**\*Information extracted from MOE website**

| Principle:                         | Policy/Programmes  | Elaboration:  | Rationale:  |
|------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| 'Every Student an Engaged Learner' | MOE kindergartens (2013)   | MOE has piloted 5 kindergarten schools in 2013. Now, there are 18 MOE kindergarten schools.   | A good pre-school education will help start bridging the gap at a young age.  |
| 'Every Student an Engaged Learner' | Learning Support Programme (LSP) for English and Learning Support for Mathematics (LSM) (2006) | The Learning Support Programme (LSP) for English language and Learning Support for Mathematics (LSM) are learning support programmes that aim to uplift the students' ability in those particular subjects. | MOE aims to identify those who need help early, so that the child does not fall so far behind and become discouraged. This would provide weaker students with the help to get at least grasp the subject better, so that he/she can cope with academics better.                       |
| 'Every Student an Engaged Learner' | Financial Assistance Scheme improved for low-income students                                   | The government has continually tweaked the financial assistance scheme to allow more students to be eligible for the programme.   | Policies such as this aim to close the gap caused by inequality. Although there is a limit to how much this policy can help, it can still provide students with the monetary resources to participate in school activities, and not miss out on opportunities provided by the system. |
| 'Lift Bottom, Not Cap the Top'     | 'Uplifting Pupils in Life and Inspiring  | The taskforce aims to:<br>1. strengthen after-  | Aimed at uplifting the students at the bottom, so   |



|                    |   |   |   |
|--------------------|---|---|---|
|                    | <p>Families Task force”<br/>UPLIFT (2018)</p> | <p>school care and support for students</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Build students’ mental and emotional resilience</li> <li>3. Strengthen parental engagement and support</li> <li>4. Implement practical solutions to absenteeism</li> <li>5. Enhance collaboration between schools and the community</li> <li>6. Strengthen coordination across these initiatives</li> </ol> | <p>that they would be able to compete effectively despite their financial background.</p>   |
| <p>Meritocracy</p> | <p>Integrated Programme(IP)</p>               | <p>The IP provides a six-year Secondary and Junior College (JC) education for academically-strong students who can benefit from a broader learning experience.</p>  | <p>The Integrated Programme provides students who excel academically to move faster. They focus on holistic development so as to stretch them further. This can be interpreted as a programme</p> |

|  |  |  |   |
|--|--|--|---|
|  |  | The IP also aims to stretch students' potential in non-academic aspects that are beyond the academic curriculum. | that supports the 'Lift the Bottom, Not Cap the Top' principle. By not capping the top, the education system allows such students to excel and compete in a meritocratic system, by developing more 'merits' through a more rigorous programme. |
|--|--|--|---|

## 2.4 Functionalism

Functionalism or structural-functionalism was a theory that states that every individual plays a unique socio-economic role in society. Emile Durkheim helped develop this theory, and he made the analogy of society to an organic body, that every part has its own purpose. For example, an engineer will be unable carry out the duties of a doctor, and similarly, the doctor will be unable to carry out the duties of an engineer. Therefore, each individual contributes his unique set of abilities to towards the greater collective good of society. Furthermore, in Emile-Durkheim's theory, he also postulated that the stability of society can only be ensured if there are institutions and social factors that balance each other out. In Singapore, institutions or policies have sought to balance out the inequalities that are a problematic social factor that influences the individual, in order to create a stable society. According to the same theory, if institutions are not in place to uplift the disadvantaged, society would fall apart due to inequality.

In a way, Emile Durkheim's theory of functionalism is very much related to the concept of meritocracy. Both concepts acknowledge the uniqueness of the individual,

but meritocracy seeks to reward them for this uniqueness. Furthermore, it seeks to reward those who deserve it, and presents equal opportunities to for all to work hard in order to attain this reward. The concept of meritocracy creates the institutions, policies and programmes that seek to provide the social balance that is required to maintain the social equilibrium that Durkheim (1893) proposed.

However, K. Davis and R. Moore have an interpretation of functionalism that would contradict the goals of meritocracy. They make 3 main assertions:

1. Social stratification (uneven distribution of material rewards and of prestige) is functionally necessary and is therefore a universal and permanent feature of society;
2. Stratification is functionally necessary because every society needs a mechanism inducing people to occupy positions which are socially important and require training; material rewards and prestige act as stimuli towards the occupation of such positions;
3. The existence of the above mechanism ensures that "the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons"

This interpretation of structural functionalism would not be ideal for Singapore, as it would compromise the government's goal of ensuring social mobility. Therefore, the discussion and analysis chapter will show how Singapore's meritocracy follows the structural functionalist belief of: 'every person having a unique role', but preventing this social encrusting by evolving the concept of talent to help students achieve social mobility.

#### **2.4.1 Dysfunction**

Robert K. Merton's book: *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949), points out the manifest function, the latent function and the dysfunction. In this paper, we will focus

on the dysfunction in order to better understand the relationship between inequality and meritocracy. Manifest functions are defined as conscious and deliberate actions taken to produce positive outcomes, whilst latent functions are neither deliberate, nor conscious, but they nonetheless produce good outcomes. For example, you can forge new friendships in a leadership camp, when the main objective is to develop your leadership abilities. However, the thing about latent functions is that they often go unnoticed or uncredited, that is unless they produce negative outcomes. Merton classified harmful latent functions as dysfunctions because they cause disorder and conflict within society.

This may be applicable in the paper's analysis of meritocracy in the education system. We have established that meritocracy is not cause of the inequalities that we observe in the system. Instead, the discussion chapter will argue that these inequalities are a dysfunction of the competitive environment that a meritocracy encourages.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology:**

The use of an evolutionary perspective of meritocracy will be used to better understand how meritocracy is being applied in Singapore. A detailed timeline from the table in the literature review will be used to show how the evolution of programmes and their respective policies have helped Singapore reach meritocratic ideals.

McNamee and Miller Jr's (2004) four merits will be used as the broad definition of rewardable 'talents'. Emile Durkheim's (1893) theory on functionalism would then be used to understand why the system is expanding the definition of talent beyond the tight academic realm. Next, the paper will show a connection between functionalism and the policy and programmes that are aimed at helping Singapore reach meritocratic ideals.

The paper will also look at how Singapore has addressed the issue of wealth inequality in the education system. In this paper, Robert K. Merton's dysfunction (1949) refers to the unintentionally created problems that arise from the use of meritocracy, and thus affecting its effectiveness to give equal opportunities to every student. Therefore, we would analyse specific policies that aimed to solve this 'dysfunctions' in order to reach meritocratic ideals.

## **Chapter 4 Discussion and Analysis**

### **4.1 Functionalism in the Education System**

In this section, the paper will discuss the connection between Emile Durkheim's theory of functionalism with the policies and programmes. Meritocracy in Singapore

is 'works' with Emile Durkheim's definition of functionalism, and makes of new policy and programmes to encourage social mobility. This section will focus on how the broadening of the definition of talent beyond the academic realm, adheres to the theory of functionalism, and thus makes the system more meritocratic. Emile Durkheim's *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895) compares society to a living organism, and that each individual contributes to the progress of the entire organism. Emile Durkheim's *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) said that each individual has a particular role that is unique to the individual. An engineer is unable to carry out the duties of a doctor, and vice versa. Although a doctor or an engineer might not be able to carry out the duties of the other, this does not cause them to be valued less. Singapore's meritocracy falls in line with this aspect of functionalism, as it acknowledges the differing strengths of the individual, and encourages them to specialise in these talents or areas of interests. Also, meritocracy takes it a step further, by rewarding them for their abilities and a strengthened meritocracy ensures that they are not handicapped by their inability to excel in certain areas.

In Singapore's education system, there are institutions and policies that aims at acknowledging these unique talents and abilities in order ensure that there will be an effective, functional society. The DSA programme is an example of policies which aims at identifying the talents of different students, and incentivises them by rewarding them with a place in the school of their choice. This is similar to how the functionalist theory works, as the DSA programme acknowledges that everyone has their own talents and interests, and that a lack in the ability to excel in a certain area will not drastically affect the opportunities a student has. For example, a student who lacks academic finesse, but excels in sports can still have the opportunities to develop himself in the school of his or her choice. For example, schools such as Singapore

Sports School, the School of the Arts and School of Science and Technology, were established in 2004, 2008 and 2010 respectively. These schools are examples of specialised schools, where students are able to enrol in through the DSA programme. In these niche schools, the students are able to have the opportunities to develop their talents and interests. Moreover, their talents would be recognised and thus, rewarded. The Institute of Technical Education (1992) and the various polytechnics such as Nanyang Polytechnic and Singapore Polytechnic are examples of how institutions recognise that different people require a different learning environment to hone a set of skills that may not necessarily be related to academics. The Institute of Technical Education (ITE) provides various courses, which span from courses related to the Food and Beverage (F & B) Industry, Mechanics, Engineering, Finance, Aviation and many more courses. Since ITE is an institution that caters to students about to enter the workforce, the theory of functionalism is more evident in these institutions which provide higher education. These institutions provide courses that are specialised in nature, and prepare each student to serve in their own unique capacity, thus adheres to the theory of functionalism.

#### **4.1.1 Implications of functionalism in a meritocratic system**

Although functionalism can be seen working hand in hand with meritocracy to create a fairer education system that appreciates diversity, we would have to acknowledge that there are unintended outcomes that come from the institutions in the system. In the Literature Review, we have defined these as dysfunctions (Robert K. Merton, 1949), and these dysfunctions will affect the social stability that Durkheim (1893) pointed out. In Davis and Moore's articles, they have hypothesised that in a

functionalist society, there are certain jobs that are more 'valued' than others. Firstly, although everyone has their own role in society, Davis and Moore points out that some are unfortunately more 'functionally unique' and therefore more irreplaceable. Similarly, we can see that in Singapore, it is a trend to place a value on certain schools. Although the idea of streaming is practical, as it allows each student to learn at their own pace according to their ability, this will give rise to the problem of 'elitism', which this paper will define as a dysfunction. The different valuations of schools give rise to the conglomeration of wealthy students who perform well (Teo You Yenn, 2018) in 'elite' institutions. Therefore, referring back to Durkheim's theory, policies and programmes have been implemented to change this trend. The Needs-based Resourcing and Niche School Programmes have funnelled resources to schools which would have previously been 'undervalued'. Such programmes aim to prevent the problem of resource deficits to prevent students from joining such schools. Furthermore, through programmes such as the Niche School Programme, schools will be known for their strengths in certain areas, and will have the resources to develop the talents and interests of students. However, much still has to be done in order to change the people's perception of the value of schools.

## **4.2 Inequality as a dysfunction**

In this section, the paper will discuss how the inequalities in society have caused the public to perceive that meritocracy perpetuates them, when it does not. In chapter 4.2.1, the paper has discussed how Moore and Davis' interpretation of functionalism is different than different from a functional, meritocratic Singapore. However, this does not mean that there would not be any form of social stratification in the system.



As shown in the literature review, inequality is still a problem preventing Singapore from reaching meritocratic ideals. The inequality shown in the system was not created by meritocracy, but instead, stems from the larger societal factors. Wealth inequality, as shown in the literature review, holds Singapore back from reaching meritocratic ideals. It would be unfair to attribute the inequalities, the learning gaps that we see in education, to meritocracy. However, the system does create the perception that it is perpetuating such inequalities rather than addressing it. The policy of streaming was criticised by many, as it has been seen as a policy that benefits those who are able to afford the extracurricular help needed to get in a good school. As discussed in section 4.1.1, certain schools are more 'valued' than others, and thus creating a difference in the schools. However, this streaming based on academic ability was meant to ensure that students are able to learn at their own pace based on their ability to grasp a particular subject. Unfortunately, this created a dysfunction, whereby the wealthy students are conglomerating in top schools, whereas disadvantaged students tend to end up in neighbourhood schools. Although this is a dysfunction, the inequalities in society creates the perception that meritocracy perpetuates these inequalities.

Instead of blaming these problems on meritocracy, the paper agrees with the suggestions presented by the Singaporean Government that we would have to look to strengthening meritocracy to solve this problem. In chapter 2.2, the paper points out how the system fails to recognise the process, and tends to favour the outcome. This would result in students who lack the resources, often finding themselves lagging behind in the system. As discussed in the literature review, Professor Teo You Yenn's book explored the ways in which social factors such as wealth has helped with the education process of a student, leading to a better educational outcome. Similarly, the absence of wealth negatively affects the process, thus leading to a lower chance of

attaining a good educational outcome. Therefore, Teo points out that whilst looking at the experience of low-income students, one must keep the larger social realities in check. Without doing so, the system will perpetuate the growing inequalities existing in the system. The larger social realities, such as the growing income divide were explored in Minister Janil Puthuchery's documentary called 'Regardless of Class'. Such large scale social realities can be defined as the social facts that Durkheim (1893) pointed out. These social facts, unless resolved or addressed, will create the dysfunctions (Merton, 1949) that will upset the social balance. In order to resolve or address these dysfunctions, government intervention, and policies must be introduced to address the dysfunctions, and hopefully change the perception that meritocracy actively perpetuates inequality.

#### **4.2.1 Policy solving dysfunctions**

Large scale social factors such as inequality, has not only shaped the perception of meritocracy, but also inspired new policies and institutions to be created in order to create a fairer system. Durkheim's theory of functionalism (1893) stated that when there is a social imbalance, institutions and policies are required to maintain the stability of society. In the literature review, we have established that maintaining the stability of society meant ensuring that the inequalities in the system are kept in check. This paper acknowledges that policies and institutions, in the context of the education system, cannot do much to change the large scale social factors such as wealth inequalities. However, these policies and institutions have been made to deal with the dysfunctions that these large scale social factors create, in order to provide a system that is as fair as possible. In Minister Ong Ye Kung's recent speech on 27 July

2019, he points out that stronger effort must be made to remove affordability as an impediment for students from lower-income families. In his speech (2019), Ong Ye Kung raised the latest “Uplifting Pupils in Life and Inspiring Families Task force” (UPLIFT) initiative. The UPLIFT initiative provides \$800 per annum for eligible students. As of June 15 2019, Ong Ye Kung says that 15,399 students have gotten the scholarship. Furthermore, the school fees for independent schools such as Raffles Institution have been cut for low-income families. Such ‘elite’ institutions are seen as places where only the wealthy can afford to get their children there. However, Ong Ye Kung pointed out that the financial aid provided to students has increased. Now, children from households with a per capita income of between \$691 and \$1,000 now pay \$25 - same as that charged by government schools. Those from families with a per capita income of \$1,001 to \$1,725 pay \$37.50. This is a substantial subsidy, considering that schools such as Raffles Institution charge \$335 a month. These kinds of policies prevent large scale inequalities from affecting an able individual’s choice in the kind of school he wants to go to.

The system also recognises the need for students to have a good start in life. In Teo’s book (2018), she notes how the wealthy are able to provide them with pre-school education. Teo notes how children from a wealthier family are able read at a level higher than their peers, whilst children from families of a lower socio economic status (SES) are left behind. In order to ensure that children from low SES families are not left behind early on in life, the education system is actively involved in the child’s early education. Since 2013, there have been 18 MOE kindergartens set up across the country. An early education helps ensure that there would not be a big learning gap at a young age.

Such initiatives show that the system is making efforts in preventing external factors from adversely affecting the fairness of the system. Furthermore, introducing such policies help address the dysfunction that social inequalities create. These are the ways in which the system has tried to become more meritocratic, and as a result, provide a fairer system in which every student has a shot at success.

## **Chapter 5 Conclusion:**

In the face of an increasing income divide in society, the education system must ensure that it does not compromise its goal of creating a system that presents equal opportunities for all. The functionalist application meritocracy has been consistent with the theory of functionalism, and the principles of meritocracy. In the past, the system did not recognise the various talents of every student, but the evolution of policy and programmes and changed this, by defining talents beyond the tight academic realm. However, in the face of the dysfunctions created by these large scale inequalities, the policies and programmes evolve to maintain the social stability necessary in Durkheim's theory (1893). However, much still has to be done in order to fully address the gaps present in the system, and the public must not lose faith in meritocracy, as strengthening it is still the fairest system at this point (Ong Ye Kung, 2019).

## Bibliography

1. Amelia Teng (2016). Straits Times. Study: Kids from affluent families more likely in IP, GEP schools. Retrieved from [straitstimes.com/singapore/education/study-kids-from-affluent-families-more-likely-in-ip-gep-schools](http://straitstimes.com/singapore/education/study-kids-from-affluent-families-more-likely-in-ip-gep-schools)
2. Hean, G. (1978). EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE TODAY. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 257-263. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.sg/stable/27908351>
3. Moore, R. (2000). Multiracialism and Meritocracy: Singapore's Approach to Race and Inequality. *Review of Social Economy*, 58(3), 339-360. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.sg/stable/29770069>
4. Jacob, J. (1981). Theories of Social and Educational Inequality: From Dichotomy to Typology. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 2(1), 71-89. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.sg/stable/1392660>
5. Tan, K. (2008). Meritocracy and Elitism in a Global City: Ideological Shifts in Singapore. *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale De Science Politique*, 29(1), 7-27. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.sg/stable/20445123>
6. Brendon Yip Zhen Yuan (2019). Understanding the four critiques of Singapore's meritocracy. Retrieved from <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/understanding-four-critiques-singapores-meritocracy>
7. Duru-Bellat, M., & Tenret, E. (2012). Who's for Meritocracy? Individual and Contextual Variations in the Faith. *Comparative Education Review*, 56(2), 223-247. doi:10.1086/661290
8. Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus 2014
9. Heng Swee Keat (2012). Keynote Address by Mr Heng Swee Keat, Minister for Education, at the Ministry of Education Work Plan Seminar. Retrieved from <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/speeches/keynote-address-by-mr-heng-swee-keat--minister-for-education--at-the-ministry-of-education-work-plan-seminar--on-wednesday--12-september-2012--at-920-am-at-ngee-ann-polytechnic-convention-centre>
10. Ong Ye Kung (2018). Minister for Education, Mr Ong Ye Kung's response at the 11 July 2018 Parliamentary motion 'Education for Our Future'. Retrieved from <https://www.moe.gov.sg/docs/default-source/document/media/speech/2018/min-speech.pdf>

11. Press Release by Ministry of Education (2013). Retrieved from <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/press-releases/moe-s-first-five-pilot-kindergartens-in-primary-schools-and-the-community>
12. Lianne Chia (2018). Channel News Asia. MOE-led task force to strengthen support for students from disadvantaged families Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/moe-taskforce-students-disadvantaged-families-indranee-10872262>
13. WESOŁOWSKI, W. (1962). Some Notes on the Functional Theory of Stratification. The Polish Sociological Bulletin, (5/6), 28-38. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.sg/stable/44817019>
14. Ong Ye Kung (2019). Meritocracy still key principle for recognising individuals in Singapore, says Ong Ye Kung. Retrieved from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/meritocracy-still-key-principle-for-recognising-individuals-in-singapore-says-ong-ye-kung>
15. Teo You Yenn (2018) This is What Inequality looks like.