

SINGAPORE'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

# Growing worry of social immobility

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MINISTER Mentor Lee Kuan Yew observed recently that more than half the students at top schools like Raffles Institution had fathers who were university-educated. In contrast, among the four neighbourhood schools he had obtained data on, the highest percentage was only 13.1 per cent, at Chai Chee Secondary.

Top schools had more “frills” and better teachers, he said, though he emphasised that neighbourhood school teachers were “equally competent”. Earlier, MM Lee had acknowledged that admission to primary school was based on parents’ social class, not merit.

Mr Lee’s observations resonate with what my co-researchers and I have found in studies we have done using the National Youth Survey in 2002 and 2005. In one study, we correlated young people’s earnings with their parents’ earnings. We standardised our statistical method and data with an American data set widely used for studies on “intergenerational mobility”, or the extent to which children’s economic status depends on their parents’. If the children of rich parents grow up to be rich, while the children of poor parents stay poor, then intergenerational mobility is low.

We found that Singapore’s intergenerational mobility was similar to that of the United States, which is low compared with other developed countries.

Though there has been a significant jump in the earnings and educational status of later generations relative to earlier ones in Singapore, low intergenerational mobility implies that those whose parents were at the bottom tend to also remain at the bottom, while those whose parents were at the top tend to stay there.

Recent research on intergenerational mobility has found that the type of education system has an impact on mobility.

Countries with private and varied edu-

cation systems tend to have low mobility, while countries with public and universal education systems tend to have high mobility. Also, low mobility is related to expensive tertiary education, and high mobility to low-cost tertiary education.

Though conducted in the West, these studies have implications for Singapore, since our education system has moved from a universal system with a standardised curriculum to one where there are differentially priced schools offering varied curricula. Subsidies for tertiary education are also gradually decreasing.

In another study, Dr Ho Kong Weng, Dr Ho Kong Chong and I examined various factors influencing the participation of 14- to 19-year-olds in social groups. We found that parents’ education was the most significant factor determining active participation and leadership in formal groups – such as in sports, the arts and uniformed groups – even after controlling for other factors such as ethnicity, gender, age and family environment.

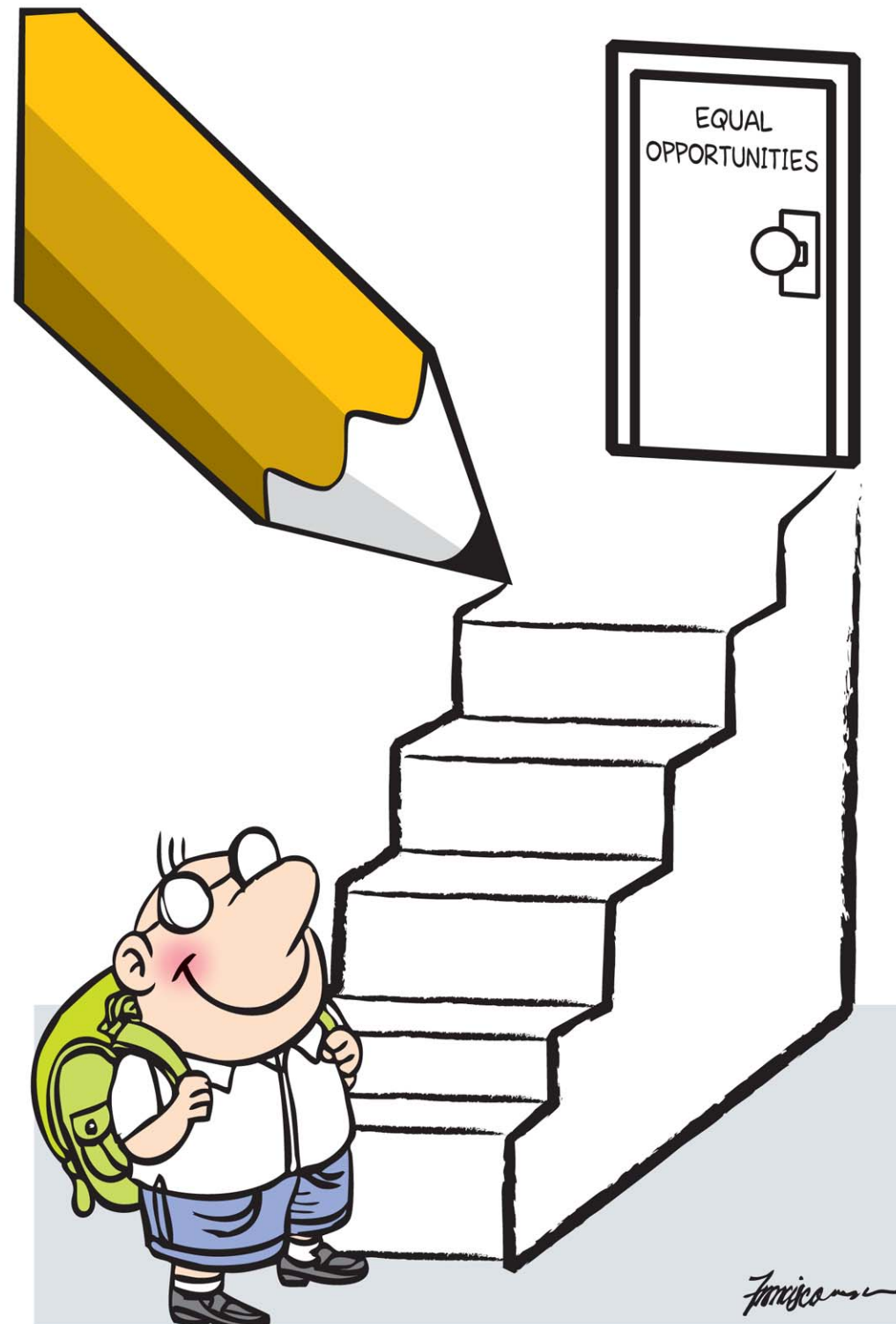
The explanations for our findings are as follows:

First, entry into the more prestigious primary schools is not based on merit, but on factors such as the location of the family home and parents’ connections to the school. Second, education in Singapore is differentiated and increasingly so.

Education is a channel through which parents invest in the human capital of their children. Parents’ efforts to ensure academic success through such means as gaining entry into better – and in many cases, more expensive – schools, extra tuition, and social groups that enhance status, also depend on the family’s income.

Social immobility, coupled with worsening income inequality, poses a disconcerting challenge. Our leaders are keenly aware of the challenge, and have put in place several measures to overcome it.

Various educational innovations for the less academically inclined include the Institute of Technical Education and alternative schools for students who fail their Primary School Leaving Examination –



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for example, NorthLight School and Assumption Pathlight School. These innovative education alternatives have become brand names themselves.

Still, the system remains differentiated, putting students of different academic calibre into different tracks in different kinds of schools where their social lives do not mix. When translated into earnings, the greater the wage premium placed on the qualifications of the “skilled” versus the “technical”, the further behind the earnings of the lower-skilled will trail.

These tensions are difficult knots to disentangle. Singapore’s small and vulnerable economy necessitates a competitive education system to produce a competitive workforce. We need an education system that stimulates and challenges the top students, which a standardised system will not provide. Unfortunately, such a system also has detrimental effects on mobility.

At the current stage of Singapore’s development, we have reached economic maturity and we have become increasingly concerned about inequality. Our findings that Singapore’s educational system may be perpetuating social immobility suggest that tackling the inequality problem head on requires some rethinking of educational policy, as well as economic policy.

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