

The system of education in singapore

[Parts of the World](#), [Asia](#)



Singapore prides itself on having one of the best education systems in the world and has the impressive Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) rankings to show for (Goh, 2017). Despite doing better than their international peers, not all Singaporean children are doing equally well (OECD, 2016). More specifically, rich students tend to do better academically than their poorer counterparts (OECD, 2016). Perhaps rich students are smarter than poor students but a disparity in academic results is normal – so the question is, why should we care? More than differing intellectual abilities, I propose the reasons rich children fare better academically than poor children are due to how high-income parents are more willing and able to invest in their children's education whereas low-income parents are less able to provide as conducive a home environment for their children's learning.

The Singapore government has always looked to education, the “ great social leveller” (Mokhtar, 2018) as a solution to the hard-pressed challenge of social mobility. However, improving upward social mobility for the poor will not be easy when income differences perpetuate an educational gap between the rich and the poor children. Social mobility is determined by levels of income and educational attainment and higher educational attainment is associated with higher income earnings (Davie, 2016). As poor children fare worse academically than rich children and earn relatively less income in the future, their chances of moving up the social ladder are reduced. As such, in the context of Singapore, I propose that the phenomenon of rich children doing better academically than poor children is one mechanism through which income inequality reduces upward social

mobility for poor children. The following paragraphs discuss the two reasons rich children tend to do better academically than poor children, focusing on pre-university education. First, rich children tend to fare better academically than poor children because rich parents are more willing and able to invest in extra academic help for their children.

Although Singaporean children are receiving one of the best public education in the world, many parents still enrol their children in tuition classes at the pre-school, primary and secondary levels (Teng, 2016). Parents have good reason to believe that tuition classes help their children gain a competitive edge by helping them do better in their education (Baharudin, 2016) and partly also because parents fear that their children might lose out if they do not receive extra academic help like the rest of the peers (Gee, 2012). The result of this “ educational arms race” is a blooming tuition industry in Singapore, where parents spend between a few hundreds to few thousands of dollars monthly (Teng, 2016). For instance, the median amounts spent on tuition by parents with monthly household incomes of more than \$6000 are more than double the amounts spent by parents with monthly household incomes of less than \$3000 at the pre-school, primary and secondary levels (Teng, 2016).

Research indicates that parents with higher incomes are more willing to invest higher amounts for their children’s tuition classes because of rising disposable incomes (Yang, 2016) whereas tuition classes are a luxury that low-income families cannot afford and low-income children have to rely on the subsidized tuition programmes run by the four ethnic self-help groups

instead (Yang, 2016). Tuition cannot be overlooked as a contributing factor towards a child's academic success (Teng, 2016), which is why rich families who invest more in extra academic help produce rich children who tend to do better academically than poor children. Next, poor children tend to fare worse academically than rich children because poor parents do not provide a conducive learning environment for their children. Low-income parents are often guilty of not providing enough parental support, an important element of such a conducive learning environment, in their children's educational journey. For instance, low-income parents do not send their children to attend pre-school regularly despite substantial governmental subsidies (Ng, 2015).

Early childhood education is especially important because it builds a strong foundation for the children's future learning and positively correlated with future academic grades (King, 2014). Hence, poor children who missed out on acquiring "basic numeracy and literacy skills" may find themselves playing catch up when they enter primary school, falling further behind in their academic progression and achieving lower grades. Another case in point, low-income parents tend to have lower educational expectations of their children, and in turn results in the poor children having lower educational aspirations which translate into the lower confidence of doing well academically (Ong & Cheung, 2016). Given that academic confidence is positively correlated with academic results (Mega, Ronconi, & Beni, 2014), poor children with lower academic confidence tend to fare worse academically than the rich children with higher parental expectations and academic self-confidence. The Pisa results which showed a higher tendency

for the rich students to achieve better results than their poorer counterparts are by no means a coincidence.

The educational achievement gap between the rich and the poor students is perpetuated by an income gap and seeks to reduce the upward social mobility of the poor students. Understanding the relation between the income gap and the educational gap is of utmost importance as it allows us to rethink the role of education as a social leveler. For instance, greater monetary investment in private tuition by rich parents and the lack of adequate parental support by poor parents are both factors outside of the public school system. As such, educational policies have to be formulated and enacted taking into account the dominance of parentocracy on the children's educational outcomes, before education can be an effective channel for improving social mobility. For example, more help and support, such as the KidStart program[footnoteRef: 1], can be given to low-income families to ensure that their children have an equal head start before the formal schooling period. [1: The KidStart program is a pilot initiative introduced by the Early Childhood Development Agency, which aims to provide upstream support and create a conducive environment to give low-income and vulnerable children a good start in life.]

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