

Title: Families and post-secondary aspirations: Insights from multi-ethnic Singapore

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Abstract

In 1995, Singaporean students were placed first in mathematics in the Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS). Their high achieving reputation was further cemented during the 1999 TIMSS Repeat Study when they not only retained their top ranking in mathematics but also moved up to second position for Science, outperforming students from countries like United States, England and even Japan in the process.

Given such achievements, it is not surprising that researchers both from Singapore and abroad often concentrate on identifying “success” factors in Singapore schools in the hope of replicating these “ingredients”. There is no doubt that the Singapore educational system has introduced numerous initiatives¹ that have undoubtedly contributed to teaching and learning. As a lecturer in Singapore’s sole teacher training institute, I am myself in the midst of implementing such innovations and I would be glad to discuss some of these in the paper. However, what appears more interesting to me as an education sociologist is that there is another side to the story - that despite all that the educational system has done, not all students in this multi-ethnic country² perform as well in school and distinct ethnic/racial variations in educational outcomes exist.

The issue of racial/ethnic variation in school outcomes is something that all societies wrestle with but its existence in Singapore is fascinating to explore because of it occurs within a educational system that has done so much to ensure meritocracy. I will argue in my paper that contrary to status attainment literature or cultural argument where either socio-economic background or ethnic reasons is emphasized, the relationship between the family and school is a complex one; as individuals negotiate these institutions, educational outcomes of students are shaped. Findings from my qualitative study of 60 Chinese, Malay and Indian female secondary students at the threshold of graduating suggest that within the family context, neither

¹ This would include the Thinking School Learning Nation and IT Masterplan that was initiated in 1997. In the paper, I would be able to discuss these educational initiatives in greater detail.

² Singapore is a multi-ethnic country of 3.3 million comprising 77% Chinese, 14% Malay and 7% Indian and 2% from other racial/ethnic groups.

socioeconomic status nor ethnicity alone accounts for respondents' aspirations. Rather, what is crucial is what I have conceptualized as *family's combined resources*. This would include ethnicity and cultural conceptions of education, parental income, education and occupation, educational level of extended family members, language used at home, and home educational environment. In the paper, I will give examples of how *different dimensions* of these combined resources can either work in tandem or compensate for the lack of another. Even within a context of a meritocratic educational system like Singapore's, parents of students from different racial/ethnic group are strategically exercising their differential social capital to negotiate the system and hence influence educational outcomes.

Although this research is based on fieldwork in Singapore, the model proposed and issues raised have implications for how schools and educators deal with parents from different racial/ethnic groups and structuring their school programs in general in order to ensure that students from different racial/ethnic groups are able to equalize their educational outcomes.