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<th>Singapore social studies teachers’ perspectives of socioeconomic inequality, distributive justice, and meritocracy</th>
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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Li-Ching Ho and Enrique Nino Leviste</td>
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**Paper Title**  Singapore Social Studies Teachers’ Perspectives of Socioeconomic Inequality, Distributive Justice, and Meritocracy

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Singapore Social Studies Teachers’ Perspectives of Socioeconomic Inequality, Distributive Justice, and Meritocracy

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Objectives
This study aims to explore how teachers navigate and negotiate the tension between upholding egalitarian ideals of social justice while concurrently enforcing and promoting the principle of meritocracy in schools. Teachers consistently confront the tension between providing compensatory education for children from disadvantaged social backgrounds (in order to level the playing field), and goal of meritocracy (Roemer, 1998). Specifically, it seeks to identify and understand how 12 secondary social studies teachers in Singapore construct a narrative of distributive justice and socioeconomic inequality for different groups of students. In doing so, it attempts to address the following questions:

1) What are social studies teachers’ perspectives of socioeconomic inequality in Singapore? What do teachers think are the causes of socioeconomic inequality?
2) What are the teachers’ understandings of meritocracy?

Framework
This paper uses Howe’s (1994) three conceptions of equality of educational opportunity—formal, compensatory, and democratic—to illustrate how complex and diverse the teachers’ perspectives are. The first conception is defined as “the absence of barriers to access based on ‘morally irrelevant’ characteristics such as race or gender” (Howe, 1994, p. 27). Similar to proponents of meritocratic principles, supporters contend that inequalities in educational results are morally justifiable “as long as individuals are afforded equal opportunity to obtain an education” (p. 27).

The compensatory perspective includes not only the “absence of formal barriers to access based on morally irrelevant characteristics … (but also) requires mitigating the various ways individuals can be disadvantaged” (p. 28). This is because even when de jure political barriers are removed, minority groups may still face psychological and social constraints that affect their educational opportunities. Consequently, ostensibly meritocratic policies that emphasize the absence of formal barriers to access are not necessarily equitable as the type of criteria used to evaluate students’ merit includes normative values and cultural assumptions (Walzer, 1983; Young, 2002).

The democratic conception of equality of educational opportunity, on the other hand, not only requires the absence of formal barriers to access based on “morally irrelevant characteristics,” and compensatory measures to mitigate the disadvantages experienced by individuals, but also challenges the purpose or standards of education. Drawing on Gutmann’s (1987) work, Howe (1994) argues that the fundamental aim of democratic schooling is to foster “democratic character” and effective political participation in democratic processes up to a “democratic threshold.” In other words, this democratic conception of equality of educational opportunity requires equalizing certain education outcomes to a level deemed necessary for full democratic political participation.

Methodology
This qualitative study relied on 60 to 90-minute semi-structured individual interviews and a survey questionnaire to collect data. The researchers purposely selected social studies teachers because they are delegated the main responsibility of teaching different social and citizenship issues in Singapore schools (Merriam, 2002). Six teachers from mainstream or regular government schools and six teachers from elite government schools constituted the
sample. Six teachers were male and seven were female. Of the 12, eight identified as ethnic Chinese, two as Indian, one as Malay, and two as of Arab and Dutch descent respectively. Two of the teachers had less than five years of teaching experience, while 10 had more than five years of experience. Of the 10, two were department heads, and one held the position of national education coordinator (see Appendix I).

The interview protocol included questions and one elicitation task focusing on the teaching of diversity and multicultural education approaches. Elicitation techniques usually generate rich data especially when participants’ knowledge is largely tacit, and when the topic is sensitive and potentially contentious (Barton, n.d.). For this study, we compared the participants’ responses to a photograph depicting socio-economic inequality in Singapore society. The survey questionnaire contained an extract on the Singapore government’s definition of meritocracy from the Secondary Three Social Studies textbook and how meritocratic principles govern policy (see Appendix II). Participants read the extract and answered a question on whether meritocracy was an effective way of equalizing educational opportunities for students from different backgrounds.

This study’s analysis, shaped largely by the constant comparative method, was data-driven and inductive (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Raw data (i.e. interview transcripts, researcher notes) were jointly classified and coded with the use of the qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO 9. During multiple readings of the text, codes were refined and modified to minimize inconsistency and redundancy. Interesting patterns and apparent contradictions were likewise examined.

Results or findings
The first major finding was that all 12 teachers shared similar understandings of the extent of socioeconomic inequality in Singapore. They suggested that socioeconomic disparities are prevalent and deeply entrenched in spite of official assertions to the contrary and the lack of discussion about these issues in the official social studies curriculum. Five of the 12 participants picked socioeconomic status as one of the images that represented their personal understanding of diversity, while seven spoke at length on socioeconomic inequality in Singapore. Komala, an Indian social studies teacher and national education coordinator from a mainstream school, conveyed a sentiment that typified a general observation: “I see… different socioeconomic status(es) in Singapore…Some of us (are) really struggling to survive (while others) have fancy cars.” The participants also identified different markers of socioeconomic inequality in Singapore. Notably, several participants associated the socioeconomic status of students with different types of schools. Interestingly, the teachers shared a (largely tacit) understanding of how students from different economic backgrounds were indirectly sorted into different schools. For instance, Chang Ming, a male Chinese teacher with 18 years of experience, observed that there were significant economic and social differences between students attending mainstream and elite schools. He characterized students attending elite schools as being more affluent and ethnically homogeneous, and students from mainstream schools as underprivileged and ethnically heterogeneous. Wei Sheng, too, noted that his students required far more financial assistance and “belonged to the lower strata of society” compared to students from other elite schools.

Teachers’ divergent views on the causes or origins of socioeconomic inequality constituted the second major finding. Nine of them particularly recognized the absence of family and other basic support structures, cultural background or upbringing, lack of access to opportunities to hone abilities and broaden worldview, state policy, and ethnic affiliation as the most striking causes of socioeconomic disparities. For example, Jameerah pointed to the dearth of robust family structures or support mechanisms that contributed to better living conditions. She talked about how her experience teaching Normal Technical (NT) students...
who came from single-parent families shaped her understanding of social inequality. Other teachers, on the other hand, regarded cultural background or upbringing as instrumental in perpetuating economic and social disparities. Chang Ming, for instance, argued that efforts by the state to address socioeconomic inequality through education were inadequate because they tended to neglect cultural nuances in terms of the value attached to schooling and success. He discussed how “the Chinese being a bit more hardworking and...focused on their studies” have been more successful economically than other ethnic groups that spent time “mingling” among themselves or “playing soccer at the void decks or open field.”

The third major finding concerned the participants’ anecdotes about meritocracy and social mobility. Six of the 12 teachers showed a clear understanding of these concepts. Of the six, five agreed that having a meritocratic system in place, despite its limits, contributed to social mobility. For instance, Komala suggested that “a minority group” would potentially be subjected to discrimination “because of sheer numbers” if there was no opportunity for people such as herself (a minority) to “move forward.” For her, a meritocratic system afforded her with avenues that improved her “odds of being heard.” She further contended that a “degree of unfairness” was expected under this system because people have diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Lea, in constrast, maintained that Singapore is a “Chinese state.” She based her assessment on her students’ anecdotes about hiring practices that tended to favour Mandarin speakers and the ethnic minorities’ lack of viable opportunities to move up the economic and social ladder. A member of the minority herself, she preferred to study and talk to her students about issues such as the “marginalisation of Malays” and “income disparity.”

Substantiated conclusions
The teachers’ conceptions of distributive justice varied greatly. Upon critical examination, we noticed that the teachers’ divergent views on the causes of socioeconomic inequality and social mobility greatly informed their complex and distinct conceptualisations of equality of educational opportunity. Three of the 12 social studies teachers leaned toward a more formal depiction of equality of educational opportunity. They believed that inequalities generated by academic differentiation are morally justifiable, provided that individuals of different ethnic backgrounds, gender and socioeconomic status have equal opportunity to obtain an education (Howe, 1994). They also felt that ethnic minorities and underprivileged segments of Singapore society could be upwardly mobile owing to a relatively robust meritocratic system that mitigated the impact of entrenched asymmetries in wealth, social status and political power.

Nine teachers, on the other hand, claimed that adherence to meritocratic principles does not automatically translate to equal access or opportunity. They maintained that efforts to mitigate various ways by which underprivileged groups can be further marginalized should go hand in hand with the absence of formal barriers or constraints to equal access. Brandon, Lea, and Tung Mei, for instance, recognized some of the limitations of the formal conception of equality of educational opportunity and advocated a more compensatory perspective. They contended that the absence of formal barriers to access does not necessarily engender an equitable set of standards for evaluating academic performance. As cultural assumptions, and biases and normative values impinge upon, and skew the evaluation criteria, the prospect of producing purely merit-based assessments of students’ academic ability appear to be unattainable (Walzer, 1983; Young, 2002).

Notably, none of the participants explicitly articulated their ideas about the democratic conception of equality of academic opportunity. Three of the nine teachers who favored a compensatory approach, however, suggested that prevailing standards and purpose of education should be critically assessed - a key feature of the democratic conception of
equality of educational opportunity. While the absence of formal obstacles to access, and the employment of compensatory measures to alleviate the condition of disadvantaged groups were necessary, they appeared convinced that interrogating prevailing standards and goals of education was similarly important. For instance, Brandon suggested that the process of reassessment and rethinking likewise required teachers to challenge the criteria used for evaluating educational success, most notably “ethnocentric assumptions about what is success.”

**Significance of the study**

Studies in the United States and Canada suggest that personal beliefs and experiences, community values, and norms have an impact on teachers’ pedagogical decisions (Bickmore, 2002; Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000). For instance, Davis (1995) observed that the pre-service teachers participating in her study unconsciously adopted “the myth of meritocracy” and this influenced their beliefs about the academic success and failure of students. Few research studies, however, have directly explored teachers’ beliefs about socioeconomic inequality, distributive justice, and meritocracy and this study thus fills the gap in the literature. In contrast to Davis’ work, this study’s findings suggest that the majority of the Singapore teachers have a more nuanced and critical understanding of distributive justice and meritocracy. The majority of the teachers adopted a compensatory perspective of equality of educational opportunity and this is particularly notable given that within Singapore, equality of educational opportunity is associated closely with the principle of meritocracy and is widely assumed to mean the absence of formal barriers of access. None of the participants, however, were able to challenge and critique the existing social order and the purposes or standards of education.

**References**

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Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Qualitative and case study applications in educational research*. San
Appendix I. Profile of research participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Type of school</th>
<th>Teaching experience</th>
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<td>Elite</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Seven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chang Ming</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Eighteen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Twenty-one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safiya</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Eight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tung Mei</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Eleven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jameerah</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Sixteen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Komala</td>
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<td>Mainstream</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lea</td>
<td>Malay</td>
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<td>Nancy</td>
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<td>Mainstream</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei Sheng</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
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Appendix II. Survey question

Extract 1: Meritocracy

Meritocracy is a key part of the principle ‘Reward for work and Work for reward’. Meritocracy means a system that rewards hard work and talent. When people are rewarded based on their abilities and hard work, they are encouraged to do well. For example, students who perform exceptionally well in their studies and co-curricular activities are rewarded. The Edusave Scholarship and Merit Bursary schemes reward the top 10% and 25% of students in schools and the Institutes of Technical Education. Meritocracy helps to give everybody in society an equal opportunity to achieve their best and be rewarded for their performance, regardless of race, religion and socio-economic background. (p. 37)


In your opinion, is meritocracy an effective way of equalizing opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds? Please explain your answer.