

IPS Forum on Parents & Schooling

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ON 31 AUGUST 2017, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) organised a forum on parents and schooling. This forum aimed to address a plethora of issues related to education from the nature of a good school, to the tuition and stress epidemic, and the future of education with the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Parents: Three Prototypes

Dr Mathew Mathews of IPS opened the Forum by presenting a cluster analysis based on the IPS survey on [Parents' Perception of the Singapore Primary School System](#), which characterised three different types of parents: “new-school parents”, “old-school parents” and “loving lions”. New-school parents believe children should excel holistically and are less likely to believe that parents should play an active role in their child’s education or to be stressed. Old-school parents believe children should excel academically, that parents should play an active part in their child’s education and are less likely to be stressed. Loving lion parents believe children should excel both academically and holistically, that parents should be involved in their child’s education and are more likely to be very stressed. This typology helps us to explore the possibility of how educational policies and aid should be tailored differently to varying groups of parents.

Is Every School a Good School?

The first panel discussion raised the question of whether schools have to be subjected to the same expectations of “good”, and if definitions of “good” can be subjectively set by schools. This session was chaired by NUS Sociology Associate Professor, Dr Tan Ern Ser. The first speaker, Genevieve Chye of the Ministry of Education (MOE) highlighted how MOE has increasingly introduced new educational pathways such as more aptitude-based intakes or holistic forms of education. She stated that schools are not inherently different and resources have been equally allocated. Associate Professor Jason Tan of the National Institute of Education (NIE) agreed, stating that all schools were working towards bettering themselves. He added that as parents have differing aspirations, schools should be diverse, to some extent, in terms of what they offer.



John Yap, who heads the school advisory committee at Temasek Secondary, provided some first-hand observations. Despite Temasek Secondary adding value to student development both academically and holistically, it is not considered a good school by most. Thus, the “goodness” of schools is often determined by its “elite” status, instead of what it actually does for its students. Aidaroyani Adam, Director of Research and Policy at MENDAKI, accounted for the views of the less fortunate students. It is important that good schools have equitable systems that provide equal opportunities for all students, regardless of background.

In response to the question of how MOE could make student discretionary interviews for aptitude-based school admissions objective, Ms Chye said that the act of recognising raw talent through these interviews is not subjective and should not taint process of aptitude-based school admissions. In response to a question on whether the MOE has shifted towards a more values-driven curriculum in the last five years, A/P Tan stated that this is still a work-in-progress in that this shift is long-term. Ms Chye agreed, stating that while MOE was on the right path, more time was needed for results to be seen. In response a question on the transparency of admissions processes for schools, Ms Chye acknowledged that MOE was continuing the refining of its selection criteria and had put in place selection tests to identify raw talent, making the process more meritocratic and transparent.

Tuition & Stress

The second panel of this forum revolved around tuition and the need to shift away from purely academic ways of teaching and assessment. This session was chaired by Associate Dean of Research Communications in NIE, Dr Dennis Kwek. Carmee Lim, Mentor Principal of MindChamps began this session by highlighting the importance of incorporating holistic

subjects such as art, music and drama into a child's education when he or she is young. These exciting forms of art shape an imaginative and inquisitive mind, something Mrs Lim's preschool aims to accomplish. NIE Assistant Professor, Suzanne Choo, said that pedagogies should constantly evolve, to incorporate the needed skills of this century. This should include the changing roles of teachers (from knowledge providers to those who empower students); changing skills taught (a shift to soft skills such as critical analysis, networking, collective intelligence etc.); changing modes of assessment (from rigid exams to fluid, collaborative modes of assessment); and changing philosophies (from a human capital centred approach to a human capability approach).



Tong Yee, Co-Founder of The Thought Collective, agreed with AP Choo on the need to teach literature, as it “helps unpack the complexity of current affairs.” He added that many parents faced pressure to send their kids to tuition, resulting in a tuition epidemic. All three speakers agree that changing pedagogies to become less academic-centred might alleviate this tuition epidemic and switch tuition back to its supplementary status. In response to a question on what determined curriculum, AP Choo mentioned that curriculum has been largely aligned to university entrance requirements, which in turn is aligned to employer interests. A dialogue between these different stakeholders on curriculum is vital. When asked about changing curriculums and mindsets of parents, AP Choo stated that communicating these philosophies to parents delicately is important; convincing them to stray away from *kiasu* culture and focus on values is paramount.

The third panel addressed the issue of stress, one closely tied to education. This session was chaired by CEO of Yayasan Mendaki, Rahayu Buang. SMU Dean of Students, Professpr Paulin Straughan highlighted the epidemic that is stress, which is often amplified

by tuition. The “loving lions” from Dr Mathew’s presentation are a testament to toxic levels of stress. What is at the root of this problem? While all schools may be good schools, Prof. Straughan attributed much of it to parents’ understanding of stratification. Parents conceptualise schools with high barriers to entry as better schools, perpetuating a cycle of tuition, stress and CCA development. Flattening hierarchy, eliminating stratification and supporting many dimensions or peaks of excellence would combat this problem. Assistant Professor Cheung Hoi Shan of Yale-NUS College who is also Research Committee Member of the Singapore Children’s Society, provided a qualitative touch to the discussion. She discovered that many parents truly perceived elite schools as objectively better and saw degrees as vital for job security and survival. Many prioritised academic outcomes and as a result had strained relationships with their child, with the child experiencing high levels of pressure and anxiety.

Dr Dennis Kom, Lead Specialist and Assistant Director in the Guidance Branch of MOE, elaborated on “eustress”. Amidst the vilification of stress, one should acknowledge that some stress helps motivate students and build resilience. He also shared some findings from a recent survey MOE conducted with teenage students on different types of stressors and how they cope with them. The study revealed that 75-95 per cent of students could cope with various multifaceted stressors (not just academic). He added that MOE would be implementing more coping strategies for students. In response to a question about what types of stressors are good or bad, Dr Kom stated that parents should communicate with kids to define stress. Prof. Straughan added that stress may be subjective but its effects in terms of driving kids to depression or suicide is very real.

Dr Kom agreed, stating that MOE was doing its best in monitoring and identifying students with mental health issues. In response to a heartfelt sharing by an audience member on stress, panellists agreed that more could be done to quell stress. For example, Prof. Straughan suggested placing a barometer to measure and standardise the amount of homework given by teachers. In response to a question on differentiation amongst schools being a good thing, Prof. Straughan reinforced the point that it boils down to messaging; the government could do more to educate parents on the purposes of school-differentiation.



The Future of Education

The final panel discussed the future trajectory of education. The first speaker, Dr Lim Lai Cheng, Executive Director of SMU, described the rapidly changing nature of jobs. As Artificial Intelligence (AI) may displace a plethora of jobs in the future, the question of which skills and subjects would remain relevant in educational curriculum must constantly be evaluated. Hiring techniques are also changing, where companies seek skills instead of qualifications, calling for a re-evaluation of the meanings attached to degrees and conventional education.

Dr Tay Hui Yong, a lecturer at NIE added that it was vital to being to incorporate technology into the way we teach in classrooms. This includes redefining classroom spaces and the role of teachers, to better “future-proof” the education system. The final speaker Khairul Ryusdi, Co-Founder of Reactor, elaborated on the rising rates of entrepreneurship. As AI gains prominence, entrepreneurship would become a highly valuable sector. The skills of theorising and problem-solving remain unique to humans; and these skills can be useful in the field of entrepreneurship, as businesses evolve to provide solutions to existing problems. It is thus imperative for the education system to incorporate the teaching of more entrepreneurial skills. These include creativity, innovation, collaboration, public speaking and risk-taking.

Some of the questions here revolved around arts and education; what did the panellists think about arts as a subject and medium of learning? Dr Lim agreed that the arts were important; we live in a “creator economy” and a child that is well-versed in the arts will thrive in such an economy. Mr Khairul agreed, stating that for entrepreneurship to flourish, one requires an eye for aesthetics and theatrics. In response to the question of how we should convey

messages of lifelong learning to youths without adding to their stress, Dr Lim advised that students needed to stop associating good learning with top-notch grades. Mr Khairul likened lifelong learning to iterative learning — sourcing for feedback, improving constantly and developing resilience.

In response to a addressing a potential “digital divide”, Dr Tay said that MOE would support those who lack access to resources and Mr Khairul shared that the provision of technological infrastructure to the less fortunate could also be fulfilled by start-ups and social enterprises.

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