

The government should celebrate more ordinary Singaporeans who play by the rules, not just the winners

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Speaking at the yesterday at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference, Education Minister Heng Swee Keat said that society must avoid making meritocracy a "dirty word". The principle of meritocracy is that if you work hard and used your own abilities, you will succeed regardless of your family background and Minister Heng noted that upholding this was "the right thing to do".

When local politicians speak about meritocracy and social mobility, they tend to profile one or two students from a low-income family performing well at school and excelling in their CCAs. These students can come from neighbourhood schools, top JCs, ITEs or Polytechnics and they showcase students who succeed in meeting the performance metrics set by schools through their own hard work.

One of the more recent example is 11 year-old student named Ong Yong Jie whom Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighted as someone who put in hard work to win a bronze medal in the National Mathematical Olympiad of Singapore and a silver medal in the National Taekwondo Poomsae Championships. It comes as no surprise that Yong Jie is focused and disciplined and is able to juggle between homework, CCAs and his revision.

This constant driving of the same message that everybody stands the same chance to glory is a classic form of survivorship bias. For every Yong Jie out there, there are many more students at the same socio-economic strata with different variables in their lives that may deny them the chance to shine like Yong Jie. Some may not be as focused, some may not be academically-inclined, while others are just not that smart. And this is without even touching on external factors.

This type of survivorship bias may not resonate with the majority of Singaporeans who are not that top-class A student who have the drive, brains, and aptitude to excel in school. However, these thousands of students go on to form the bulk of the workforce in Singapore each year.

They keep this well-oiled machine called Singapore running. They make sure the streets are safe, keep companies productive, have our food cooked and they even form the bulk of the civil service. Meritocracy is not without its merits, but the focus on the victors ignore the crucial roles played by the rest of the rat pack.

Here's a thought: We should not cut down the "tall poppies" but we can appreciate the hardworking folks who keep the world from spinning out of control. It doesn't hurt the Government to show more gratitude for the mediocre.