INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN SINGAPORE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

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Abstract — The independent schools scheme which was introduced in Singapore in 1987 represents a new phase in private schooling there. The government has relaxed its control of all schools and has allowed certain schools to turn independent. These schools enjoy autonomy in staff deployment and salaries, finance, management and curriculum, while continuing to enjoy substantial government financial support. This article examines the background to the establishment of the independent schools, and their organizational framework. It argues that the scheme reinforces social and educational inequalities. The discussion adds to the existing literature on the role of government in initiating school privatization policies, and on the relationship between private schools and social and educational inequalities.

INTRODUCTION

Private schooling in Singapore has entered a new phase with the introduction of independent schools. This article examines the development of the independent schools scheme, and the implications of this scheme for educational inequalities. Firstly, the issue of privatization of schools is viewed in a comparative perspective. A brief description of the nature of educational inequalities in Singapore is then given. Next, the background of events leading up to the introduction of the independent schools scheme is described, followed by an examination of some key features of the operational set-up in independent schools that impinge directly on educational inequalities.

It is argued that the independent schools scheme exacerbates disparities between schools in terms of educational outcomes. It also reinforces disparities in educational outcomes between students from different socio-economic backgrounds. The discussion adds to the existing literature on governmental involvement in, and the underlying philosophy of school privatization efforts, and the relationship between private schooling and social and educational inequalities. Specially interesting in the Singapore case is that while educational privatization efforts in such countries as the U.S.A. and the U.K. have been largely motivated by economic recession, similar efforts in Singapore are taking place against the backdrop of steady government surpluses.

SCHOOL PRIVATIZATION — A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Education has come to be viewed in many nations as an economically and socially productive investment in human capital (Fagerlind and Saha, 1989; Psacharopoulos et al., 1986). Consequently, public educational budgets increased dramatically from 1960 to 1975 in both the industrially advanced and developing nations (Coombs, 1985). However, adverse economic conditions and competition from other sectors for public funds have caused a global slow-down in the rate of growth of government expenditure on education. This has been aggravated by the tendency for educational costs per student to keep rising, without any concomitant improvements in productivity or educational quality.

One way to tackle this problem is to shift more of the cost of educational provision to the users by increasing the privatization of education (Edwards et al., 1985; Pscharopoulos et al., 1986; Jimenez, 1987; Lewin, 1987). The meaning of privatization in the current literature is not always clear. For instance, James (1984, p. 605) sees privatization as 'a government policy...which combines public financing with private production of the service'. However, she later (1988, p. 98) notes...
that:

the definition of 'private' is by no means clear-cut in a situation where many 'private' schools are heavily funded and regulated by the state. 'Source of funding' and 'degree of decision-making authority' may then yield different public-private categories, and many mixed rather than polar cases.

Among the forms of privatization are greater private contribution to public schools and government encouragement of the establishment of private schools.

Advocates of privatization suggest that benefits include greater variety and consumer choice, improved school efficiency and managerial accountability as a result of increased competition among schools, and increased mobilization of resources from families and other community sources. However, opponents fear that increased privatization of education will lead to a deterioration of the public school system and increased social inequities, with the private schools becoming the preserve of the wealthy elite (James, 1984).

This concern with social inequalities is present in various societies. For instance, studies in Australia and Britain have found a strong preponderance of upper-class students in private schools (Edwards et al., 1985). Even the now defunct Direct Grant schools in Britain, which were supposed to provide a bridge between state-maintained and independent schools, have been as socially selective as the independent schools (Griggs, 1985; Salter and Tapper, 1985; Whitty et al., 1989). The Direct Subsidy Scheme in Hong Kong, aimed at encouraging the growth of a strong private school sector, has been attacked as a move towards elitism and social segregation (Lee and Cheung, 1992). Samoff (1991) shows that the privatization of schooling in Tanzania reinforces existing socio-economic and regional inequalities. This has occurred despite the Tanzanian government's ideological commitment to schooling as a means of social mobility. Of course, private schools are not necessarily elite, prestigious institutions (Foon, 1988; Bray, 1988). However, this article will focus on private schools that fall into the above category.

Governments face a constant dilemma in trying to control both public and private education while maintaining equity between the two. Government subsidy of private schools is seen as reinforcing the advantages enjoyed by the more prestigious private schools, which have access to private sources of funding; but reductions in government funding of private schools can be seen as an erosion of parental choice (Edwards et al., 1985; Foon, 1988). Arguments that private schools enjoy better pupil attainment and retention rates have painted a picture of government schools as 'relatively uniform and drab' (Edwards et al., 1985, p. 40). However, critics have attributed the superior academic record of private schools to the social background of their student intakes. There has also been controversy in Australia and Britain over the creaming off of able students from, and a decline in numbers, resources and confidence in the public sector. Government-run schools are increasingly being seen as inferior to private schools. Referring to Great Britain, for example, Campbell et al. (1987, pp. 376–387) state that:

It cannot be entirely fanciful for us to see three curricula emerging from the system. The national standardized curriculum for the mass of the population, in poorly funded schools transmitting powerful messages of limited expectations through their shabby buildings and learning resources; a technically and vocationally oriented curriculum in the city technology colleges . . . ; and a free floating academically challenging and often innovative curriculum in the independent and grant maintained schools. These would be apt curricula for a system designed to reproduce the increasingly divided society towards which we seem to be heading.

Bondi (1991) sees four interlinked themes emerging in school education in Britain and the United States: an examination of the appropriate boundary between state provision and individual responsibility; a challenging of bureaucratic decision-making methods and resource allocation, and the championing of market or quasi-market mechanisms; the displacing of equity considerations by notions of excellence; and the replacement of the principle of uniform provision with a commitment to diversity in education.

SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES IN SINGAPORE

The scope of discussion on inequalities will be limited here to two aspects: the disparities in educational outcomes between (a) different schools; and (b) students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Although there has been a tremendous amount of social mobility through educational attainment over the last
few decades, there are signs of a re-emerging relationship between educational attainment and socio-economic background in Singapore (see, for instance, Li, 1989; Action Committee on Indian Education, 1991). Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds enjoy, among other things, better financial resources and exposure to the official school languages (Gupta, 1990; Kwan-Terry, 1991). Pang (1982) found that students whose fathers were university-educated and/or professionals were over-represented in the University of Singapore.

Socio-economic disparities are in turn closely linked with the disparities between schools in terms of students' academic attainment levels in national examinations. A 1979 report noted 'a wide variation in school performance, especially among ... secondary schools' (Goh, 1979, pp. 3-5). The report also found that 'good' schools had higher percentages of pupils from higher socio-economic backgrounds (as measured by father's occupation and educational level) than 'average' or 'poor' schools. Facilities and locality were found to have no significant impact on pupil outcomes. In fact, the 'poor' schools were found to have lower teacher/pupil ratios than the 'good' schools. The lack of relationship between teacher/pupil ratio and pupil performance was attributed once again to the better quality of students in the 'good' schools.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN SINGAPORE

The 1957 Education Ordinance (later replaced by the Education Act) included provisions for the registration of schools, managers and teachers, and provisions governing the role and responsibilities of school management committees. The Ordinance was followed by regulations which gave government and government-aided schools equal funding, and which stated that staff qualifications and salaries and fees should be the same in both types of school. In addition, the Director of Education was given control over staff recruitment and dismissal in all schools (Doraisamy, 1969; Gopinathan, 1974). This marked the beginning of moves towards a highly centralized system of education. Over the next decade further steps included the standardization of subject syllabuses and educational structures across the various language streams, and the institution of common terminal examinations (Yip et al., 1990).

A major boost to the idea of freeing schools from centralized control was given by the then First Deputy Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, in 1985. He spoke of the need to allow more autonomy within schools, and of giving principals the right to appoint staff, devise school curricula and choose textbooks, while conforming to national education policies such as bilingualism and common examinations. Goh asserted that prestigious schools had lost some of their individuality and special character due to centralized control (Straits Times, 30 May 1985).

While the scheme was applauded by the principals of a few elite schools, it drew criticism centering around the prospect of yet more elitism. The Minister for Education, Dr Tony Tan, countered the charges by saying that there was elitism under the present system anyway, but gave the assurance of financial aid for poor students (Straits Times, 15 September 1986; 9 October 1986). According to him, greater autonomy to schools would help foster creativity and innovation.

In 1986, 12 school principals were invited to accompany the Education Minister to study the management of 25 'acknowledged successful schools' in the U.K. and U.S., and see what lessons could be learnt for Singapore. The principals' report recommended that selected schools (though no basis for selection was mentioned) be given greater autonomy, functioning either as:

- aided-schools under School Management Committees,
- government schools under School Executive Committees or independent schools under Boards of Governors. Such schools would stimulate educational innovation and be a guide to the Ministry as to what areas of school management can be delegated to principals and teachers to enable our schools to respond more promptly and sensitively to the needs and aspirations of pupils and parents.

(Ministry of Education, 1987, p. ix)

Accepting the recommendations, Dr Tan stated that 'excellence in education can only be achieved through better schools'. As he saw it, those schools with prerequisites for independence would be well-established with capable principals, experienced teachers, strong alumni, and responsible boards of governors (Straits Times, 5 November 1986; 9...
February 1987). Dr Tan promised that there would not be an across-the-board increase in fees (*Straits Times*, 20 March 1987). The independent schools would take part in a pilot project in which they would be given autonomy and flexibility in staff deployment and salaries, finance, management, and the curriculum. These schools were to serve as ‘role models to improve Singapore’s education system’. They would also help set the market value for good principals and teachers by recruiting staff in a competitive market (*Straits Times*, 1 September 1987).

In 1987, three well-established boys’ secondary schools, the Anglo-Chinese School (ACS), the Chinese High School (CHS), and St Joseph’s Institution (SJI) announced their intentions to go independent in 1988. They were followed a year later by two prestigious government-aided girls’ secondary schools, the Methodist Girls’ School (MGS) and the Singapore Chinese Girls’ School (SCGS). In 1990, the premier government boys’ secondary school, Raffles Institution, became the first government school to go independent.

Since then, five other schools have announced their intention to join the ranks of the six existing independent schools. Raffles Girls’ School (the premier government girls’ secondary school), and Nanyang Girls’ High School (a government-aided secondary school) indicated their intention to go independent in 1993 (*Straits Times*, 15 January 1992). Victoria School (a top-ranking government boys’ secondary school) and Dunman High School (a co-educational government secondary school) have also announced plans to go independent within the next few years (*Straits Times*, 28 April 1991), while the Catholic High School, a government-aided school, and the first school with both primary and secondary sections to join the scheme, hopes to do so by 1997 (*Straits Times*, 26 May 1991).

This move towards greater autonomy in school management must be viewed against the background of increasing government concern over the role of education in moulding Singapore’s future. The government in 1984 unveiled its vision of Singapore in 1999 as ‘a city of excellence’ and ‘a cultivated society’, ‘which develops the talents of its people to the fullest’, and ‘an innovative society, a society with ideas’ (Chong, 1985, pp. 310–311). A greater sense of urgency was lent to this theme by the 1985–1986 economic recession. An Economic Committee recommended, among other things, the education of each individual to his maximum potential, and the development of creativity and flexible skills in order to maintain Singapore’s international competitiveness in the global economy (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 1986). The need for creativity and innovation was repeated in a report by the Economic Planning Committee in 1991 (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 1991).

The independent schools scheme is also part of an attempt by the government to pass a greater proportion of the costs of operating social services such as education and health to the public (Low, 1991; Milne and Mauzy, 1990). The policy aims to lessen government subsidies and to make Singaporeans more self-reliant (*Straits Times*, 19 August 1986; Vasil, 1992). The government has been careful to avoid using the term ‘privatization’ with its connotations of ‘profit-making’. Its position is that the government will continue to subsidize basic education, but that the cost of high quality education is to be borne by the public (Low et al., 1991). What is interesting here is that existing education subsidies are not straining the government’s budget, as it continues to enjoy healthy surpluses, estimated at S$7255.2 million (U.S.$4500 million) in 1991 (Ministry of Labour, 1992, p. 135).

THE FRAMEWORK OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

This section will examine only those aspects of the organizational framework in independent schools that impinge directly on the areas of educational inequalities under discussion.

Management and finance

Each independent school is run by a governing board. The board’s responsibilities include: (1) appointing the principal; (2) hiring, promoting, and firing teachers and other staff, and deciding their wages; (3) fixing admission policies and conditions for dismissal of students; (4) determining school fees and using the fees for running the school; and (5) approving major financial policies and budgets, and changes in school policies (School Boards (Incorporation) Act, 1991). However, the governing boards normally delegate staff recruitment, pupil admission and curriculum
INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN SINGAPORE

Table 1. Fees payable (S$) at independent schools in Singapore

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-Chinese School</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Chinese High School</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Joseph's Institution</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>150</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist Girls' School</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore Chinese Girls' School</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raffles Institution</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-independent Sec. School</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These rates apply only to Singapore citizens or children of Singapore citizens.


matters to the principals (personal interviews conducted by the writer). The principals are also free to appoint vice-principals, deans or bursars to assist in school administration. Fifty-two out of 132 non-independent secondary schools have no vice-principals, and each of the remainder have only one (Ministry of Education, 1992).

One may argue that by being given greater flexibility in management, these schools are better able to cater for the needs of their students. For instance, they can exploit the greater flexibility they enjoy in curriculum decision-making, so as to provide a more diverse curriculum, or boost their students' chances of examination success. However, if one bears in mind the above-average nature of the student intake in these schools, it is clear that the already advantageous position of these students is being further enhanced relative to other students.

Each independent school receives an annual per capita grant equivalent to the recurrent cost of education in other government/government-aided schools. The government also subsidizes up to 80% of an independent school's building fund. This is 10% less than its existing subsidies for new government-aided schools. The Boards of Governors of individual schools have to raise the remaining amount from fees, alumni and other sources. In addition, the government matches every dollar the schools raise, up to the first million, for their $10 million tax-free endowment funds to be used mainly to help needy students.

Each individual school decides its own fee schedule. Table 1 shows how the fees have increased dramatically in the last few years, and four out of the six schools have had three fee hikes since 1988. Reasons cited by the schools for the increases include the hiring of more teachers, the costs of teacher training and refresher courses, a more diversified curriculum, and special student enrichment programmes (Straits Times, 3 November 1989).

The government has sent mixed signals in response to mounting public criticism of the costs of education in independent schools. Before the implementation of the scheme, Dr Tony Tan said it would be 'totally wrong' and 'unacceptable' for independent schools to charge high fees (Straits Times, 9 February 1987). However, the most frequently heard response is full support for the schools' decisions. The Education Minister and the Minister of State for Education have said on various occasions that the government will not intervene in this area, as the schools should be given a free hand to carry out their innovations in response to parents' wishes and demands. It is up to each school to decide its own fees based on the per capita grant it receives, its curriculum, and projected operating costs. In fact, controlling school fee increases would be tantamount to holding back the progress of these schools. At the same time, the govern-
Table 2. Eligibility for Financial Assistance Scheme (FAS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Subsidy available</th>
<th>Original eligibility (announced on 22 June 1987)</th>
<th>Revised eligibility (announced on 5 September 1990)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Family with monthly household income of $800 or less, or $400 or less per dependent child</td>
<td>Family with monthly household income of $800 or less, or $400 or less per dependent child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75%</td>
<td>Family with monthly household income between $800 and $1400, or between $400 and $700 per dependent child</td>
<td>Family with monthly household income between $1400 and $2000, or between $700 and $1000 per dependent child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Family with monthly household income between $800 and $1200, or between $400 and $600 per dependent child</td>
<td>Family with monthly household income between $1400 and $2000, or between $700 and $1000 per dependent child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3. Percentage of students (paying independent school fee rates) in four independent schools receiving FAS financial assistance in 1992

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of students receiving FAS financial assistance</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>School D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100% subsidy</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75% subsidy</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50% subsidy</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Personal views conducted by the writer with administrators of independent schools.

The government will not raise its subsidies to the independent schools as this would not be fair to the non-independent schools. The government sees its responsibility, instead, as being that of ensuring that there is enough financial assistance so that no student who qualifies for an independent school place will be denied one solely on financial grounds.

The government has therefore set up a Financial Assistance Scheme (FAS) for independent school students. Students need only apply for the scheme once to enjoy the subsidies for the duration of their secondary school education. Details of the FAS are given in Table 2. Assistance received under the FAS does not affect eligibility for other government financial aid schemes, like the secondary school bursary awards (S$120 annually), or the textbook loan scheme. The independent schools also have their own financial assistance schemes, such as endowment funds, parallel FAS schemes, and scholarships to help needy students, though these are not as well-publicized as they could be.

To reassure parents further, the Ministry of Education has claimed that one-third of all independent school students will be eligible for help under the revised FAS, compared with one-tenth under the original FAS (Straits Times, 3 September 1990). However, Table 3 shows that the percentage of independent school students in receipt of FAS assistance is lower than one-third. There have been suggestions that some parents do not ask for financial help for fear of loss of face. It is not possible to collect data either on how many such cases there are, or on how many parents choose not to enrol their children in independent schools because of the fees.
Table 4. Percentage breakdown of father's educational qualifications for students in three independent schools (1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational qualifications</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>Males aged 35–59 years (1990)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below secondary</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>64.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper secondary (including A Level, Polytechnic diplomas)</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>_</td>
<td>_</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.


Table 5. Percentage breakdown of father's occupation for students in three independent schools (1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational category</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>Singapore labour force (1991)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional/technical</td>
<td>68.9</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative/managerial</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales/services</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>40.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.


Student admission

The independent schools determine their own student admission figures, a privilege denied to non-independent schools. They continue to receive students through the centralized school allocation system operated by the Ministry of Education, and all of them claim to admit students primarily based on academic merit. Raffles Institution, however, makes provision for students with 'special musical, artistic, sporting or other talents' to 'help create a richer school community' (Straits Times, 2 September 1987). At the same time, those independent schools with primary feeder schools (ACS, MGS, SCGS and SJI) give priority to students from these schools. Three of the four school administrators who were interviewed by the writer specifically mentioned that children of alumni would receive special consideration subject to their meeting the basic admission criteria. Two of these schools are now admitting fewer feeder school students largely as a result of their smaller student intakes. The demand for places in these schools continues to be great. For instance, one school administrator mentioned that his school has been receiving more applications despite two successive fee increases since going independent.

The data on independent school students' socio-economic background in Tables 4–7 were collected in the course of personal interviews the writer conducted with independent school administrators in July/August 1992. Table 4
Table 6. Percentage breakdown of predominant home language of students in three independent schools (1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>Singapore population (1990)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>73.0</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese dialects</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other languages</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Table 7. Percentage breakdown of housing of families of students in three independent schools (1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of housing</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>Singapore population (1990)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public flats</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 or 2 room</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 room</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 room or larger</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condominium/private flat</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landed property</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

shows a marked under-representation of fathers who have not completed a secondary education, as well as an over-representation of those with post-secondary qualifications. There also is a predominance of the children of professional and administrative/managerial staff, and an under-representation of those of production workers (Table 5).

The figures on predominant household language (Table 6) show a difference in home language background between School B and the other two schools. However, there is an under-representation of students coming from predominantly Chinese dialect-speaking homes. One must bear in mind here that there is a close relationship in Singapore between household language use and socio-economic status (Tay, 1985). The use of Chinese dialects decreases progressively with each higher level of educational attainment of the household head, while the opposite trend is true for English and Mandarin. The figures for housing (Table 7) confirm the general pattern. There is an under-representation of students from lower-income one-, two- and three-room public flats, and an over-representation of those from private flats and landed properties, especially in the case of School A.

One limitation of the data is that they cover only the three independent schools which agreed to provide the necessary information. However, there is no obvious evidence that the student profiles in the other three independent schools would be significantly different. There-
Table 8. Percentage of graduate teachers in teaching staff and teacher–student ratios in four independent schools (1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of graduate teachers</td>
<td>88.3</td>
<td>90.0</td>
<td>81.0</td>
<td>86.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher–student ratio</td>
<td>1:12.8</td>
<td>1:17.4</td>
<td>1:15.9</td>
<td>1:15.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Therefore, one can say with some confidence that students from better socio-economic backgrounds are over-represented in the independent schools, despite government financial aid for needy students. This can be attributed in part to the significant advantages better-off students enjoy, for instance, in terms of financial resources, and parental help and concern. Similar factors were mentioned by Samoff (1991) with reference to Tanzania. Griggs (1985, p. 86), writing about the Direct Grant schools in Britain, found that

the examination (for entry into direct grant schools) in general produced the usual results; what was intended as academic selection inevitably became social selection. It was found that 75% of pupils came from houses of white collar workers; 60% had fathers in professional or managerial occupations whilst only 7.5% came from a semi-skilled or unskilled worker’s family.

Curriculum

Beyond having to conform to three specific national educational policies, namely, bilingualism, the teaching of civics/moral education/religious knowledge, and the preparing of students for national examinations, the schools are free to decide their own curricula. Each independent school has diversified its curricula, especially at the lower secondary levels which are less driven by national examinations. However, the upper secondary curricula remain largely geared towards the national examinations. Two administrators in independent schools mentioned the need to meet parental demands in this respect. Each school has also hired more teachers, especially graduate teachers, in order to reduce class sizes and improve teacher–student ratios (see Table 8).

As part of its 1991 election manifesto, the government promised to reduce class size. The reasons cited were to allow for a wider range of peer group activities and closer interaction, and to allow teachers to give greater individual attention to pupils (Singapore: The Next Lap, 1991, p. 38). However, it now appears to have backpedalled on this promise. Its new stand is that since there are no conclusive benefits to having smaller class sizes, it is not worth investing so much money to hire more teachers (Straits Times, 14 March 1992). The fact that independent schools are being allowed to reduce their class size assumes an added significance in this context.

GOVERNMENT MOVES TO EXTEND AUTONOMY TO NON-INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

The number of schools taking the plunge to become independent has grown from just three in 1988, to six in 1992, with four other schools set to follow within the next few years. This setting aside of high-performing students in a few selected schools is consistent with a well-entrenched elitist philosophy of the Singapore government (Milne and Mauzy, 1990). The rationale for this philosophy is summed up succinctly in this quote from former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who believes that Singapore has approximately 5% of its population:

who are more than ordinarily endowed physically and mentally and in whom we must expend our limited and slender resources in order that they will provide that yeast, that ferment, that catalyst in our society which alone will ensure that Singapore will maintain its pre-
eminent place in the societies that exist in South and Southeast Asia.

(George, 1973, p. 186)

Therefore, it is highly unlikely that the Singapore government will implement any changes to the secondary school student allocation system.

In response to public criticism that the independent schools scheme is elitist, the government has begun to temper its elitist philosophy, especially since this philosophy is seen as having cost it votes in the 1991 general elections (Singh, 1992). There has been questioning of the link: excellence in education equals independent schools equals better facilities and programmes equals higher costs (Straits Times, 19 September 1990). Several Members of Parliament have urged the channelling of more resources to ordinary, non-elite schools (Straits Times, 18 August 1991), while others have suggested giving all schools the autonomy currently enjoyed by independent schools, while keeping school fees low (Straits Times, 4 October 1990; Sunday Times, 29 December 1991). Lee Kuan Yew has stated that it would be possible to have 50–60 semi-independent schools in 15–20 years’ time (Straits Times, 18 July 1990).

The government has decided to give all non-independent schools the discretion to raise their miscellaneous fees, which can then be used to buy teaching materials and equipment, or to fund new educational programmes. The Prime Minister announced in July 1992 that several government schools will be turned into ‘autonomous government schools’ within the next few years. They will be given greater autonomy and resources to introduce curricular innovations along the lines of the independent schools, while at the same time keeping fees low. These schools are supposed to provide greater parental choice and also competition for the independent schools (Sunday Times, 19 July 1992). It was also announced that the number of independent schools would stay at eight for the time being. Two more schools will join the scheme in 1993, but Dunman High and Victoria School have been told to defer their plans. The official reason was that there were not enough ‘outstanding principals and teachers to run such schools’ (ibid.), but Gopinathan (1992) sees this as a move to quieten controversy over the independent schools.

In addition, new modifications to the administration of the Edusave fund have been announced. Firstly, the fund will make annual grants to all government and government-aided secondary schools, which can be used for hiring extra specialist staff, buying additional equipment or for bursaries. Secondly, two types of scholarships will be funded. The first kind of scholarship will enable one-quarter of independent school students to cover their school fees. The second kind of scholarship will be for the top 10% of students in each non-independent secondary school. One sees here again more evidence of the setting apart of independent school students as a special group.

The rationale for these schemes has been that '[w]e need to develop the independent schools into outstanding institutions, to give the most promising and able students an education matching their promise . . . [a]ttention paid to independent schools will not be at the expense of the other schools. Instead the other schools will benefit from ideas tested out successfully in the independent schools. By demonstrating what is possible, the independent schools will help other schools to raise standards' (Straits Times, 7 January 1992).

This of course begs the question of whether what proves effective in the independent schools, which are all well-established and prestigious, can in fact be transplanted into other schools (Lim, 1989). Bray (1988, p. 18) points out that alumni organizations are much stronger in elite schools, because of the ‘larger numbers of former students in prominent and prosperous positions’. The government’s reasoning also ignores the part played by student intake — all the independent schools have above-average or excellent student intakes, so it is not clear to what extent their success as schools is a function of their student intakes, and to what extent their experiences can be valid lessons for the bulk of Singapore secondary schools, struggling with less-than-ideal student ability levels. This point has been raised in another context by James (1990, p. 506) who poses the question whether organizational cohesion and school practices are themselves a function of student body composition rather than variables that can be independently manipulated. James stresses the need to distinguish between generalizable and non-generalizable factors when trying to account for the success of effective schools.
CONCLUSION

All the government moves mentioned so far presuppose that the number of independent schools will remain small, and that they will cater to an elite group of academically able students. This has been clear even from the initial statements urging the setting up of such schools. It is unlikely that any schools other than those that are well-established will entertain thoughts of turning independent. However, Lee Kuan Yew has urged establishment of more privately funded schools, on two main grounds. Firstly, Lee believes that competition between schools for students will lead to better schools. 'If any school goes down in quality, parents and students will not go to that school. Then the principal will be changed and the school re-organized' (Straits Times, 16 August 1989). This argument, of course, ignores the fact that competition between schools on equal grounds is not possible due to different background factors like student intake. Secondly, Lee is of the (questionable) view that students of privately funded schools are more likely to maintain a sense of lifelong loyalty to their schools, and to be more concerned with the schools' continued well-being (Straits Times, 18 July 1990; 5 November 1991).

The Singapore independent schools scheme may be viewed as a government-initiated privatization exercise to the extent that it encourages greater mobilization of private and community sources of funding, and allows independent school principals greater autonomy in school management. It aims to promote greater innovation in educational management, with the independent schools serving as role models. Heavy government financial support for the independent schools, all of which are prestigious and well-established, has enabled these schools to compete on more than equal grounds with non-independent schools, given their increased access to private sources of funding. This has implications both for inter-school disparities in educational outcomes, and by association, socio-economic disparities in educational attainment as well. The Singapore experience in this respect seems similar to that in Australia, the U.K. and Tanzania.

The role played by the Singapore government also seems to parallel that in the U.S.A. and the U.K. where central or state governments have recently been actively involved in various school privatization efforts. The four themes mentioned by Bondi (1991) seem especially pertinent in the Singapore situation. The boundary between state provision and individual responsibility for educational financing has been redefined. Next bureaucratic domination of decision-making and resource allocation have been identified as factors hampering school efficiency and effectiveness. At the same time, the language of market economics has been introduced, with the benefits of parental choice and increased competition among schools being extolled. Finally, there is a commitment to diversity in education after an earlier period of centralized educational provision.

Two significant points of difference can be detected between the Singapore experience and those in the U.K. and the U.S.A. While Bondi (1991) mentions that earlier governmental concerns with equity seem to have been displaced by concerns with excellence, the Singapore government has all along been concerned with excellence and has been unabashedly elitist. Another point of difference relates to the context in which the school privatization efforts are taking place. Concerns with educational excellence across the various countries are motivated largely by the need to maintain international competitiveness in the global economy. However, while financial stringency is also a key motivating factor in the industrialized nations, Singapore's school privatization efforts are taking place even as the government enjoys healthy budgetary surpluses.

The Singapore government has not yet evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the independent schools scheme. However, it is clear that it remains strongly committed to the scheme both financially and ideologically. It is also clear that despite government efforts to provide heavy fee subsidies for needy students and to grant other schools greater autonomy, existing disparities in educational outcomes between schools, and disparities between students from different socio-economic backgrounds, will continue to be a part of the Singapore educational scene.

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NOTE

1. This article is based on visits to four of the six independent schools in July/August 1992; and government and other documents. The frequent citation of the Straits Times newspaper testifies to the relative paucity of work in this field.

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