

Beware growing 'parentocracy': NIE don

He warns of students who get ahead thanks to parents with more resources, not merit

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Parents will play an increasingly vital role as the education system becomes more complex, but a side effect is that their varied backgrounds and means may widen social inequality, a National Institute of Education don said yesterday.

"It seems to me that instead of having a meritocracy, increasingly what we have in Singapore is a parentocracy," Associate Professor Jason Tan said at an Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) seminar on education.

He described how recent government attempts to recognise more non-academic achievements are viewed by some parents as yet more hoops for their children to jump through.

For instance, the Direct School Admissions scheme was introduced a decade ago to give primary school pupils talented in fields such as arts and sports early placement in a secondary school.

But some tuition agencies now provide coaching on how to prepare portfolios and write admissions essays for the scheme, Prof Tan pointed out. Parents with more financial means will hence have an advantage.

Youngsters also get an edge when parents can tap a strong social network and devise strategies such as polishing extra-curricular talents and preparing impressive portfolios for their children.

So, instead of merit and a child's hard work, parents and the social capital they command now wield greater influence over their offspring's future, he pointed out.

Addressing a 100-strong audience at AMP's annual Community in Review seminar, Prof Tan also dwelt on this year's theme of enhancing social mobility and exploring new approaches to improve Malay-Muslim students' academic performance.

He argued that the introduction of streaming from 1979 has had "very serious societal consequences" in the long run.

It institutionalised existing inequalities by segregating and producing a generation of students with very different educational outcomes, incomes and social networks, he said.

Now, people of that generation who were in less prestigious streams have become parents themselves, and are less equipped to prepare their children for the challenges of today's education system.

AMP leaders at the event expressed concern that while the community's academic performance has improved over the decades, it still lags behind other ethnic groups'.

Dr Mohamad Shamsuri Juhari, director of the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs, AMP's research arm, argued for the need to delve into underlying factors that may be holding students back in school.

For instance, poverty can limit students' opportunities by deflating aspirations.

Dr Shamsuri also drew on research showing that poverty can limit people's "bandwidth", or mental capacity, to make decisions that appear routine to others. Even as the education changes open up more pathways, he asked if lower-income parents have the bandwidth and income to consider such options for their children.

Existing schemes by Malay-Muslim

organisations may just attract students who are "already in the safe zone", he said. He proposed a "wrap-around" approach to education, where community partners work closely with the school and parents.

Last year, AMP piloted an after-school care scheme using this approach in a primary school. The school provided free lunches, transport and premises. AMP sponsored tutors who worked closely with teachers and supervised the students after school.

Without having to worry about cost and convenience, parents were willing to sign their children up, said Dr Shamsuri.

The seminar's third speaker, business trainer Zainal Abidin Rahman, emphasised the importance of mindsets and attitudes, such as learning to be more assertive as it is a quality employers value.

AMP chairman Azmoon Ahmad said the group intends to make education a priority this year. Another idea, proposed at AMP's 2012 convention, is a "parent school" where volunteers will reach out to parents and tell them about education options available to their children.

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