

When poor children in school don't dream big

It's important to raise the aspirations of students, so they dream big and aim to achieve, regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds

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For *The Straits Times*

Recent debates in Parliament and outside have delved into the issue of inequality in Singapore's education system.

While most of the concern has been on how to better help students from less advantaged families "level-up" academically, less attention has been given to how to help them in other ways. For example, efforts to raise their educational aspirations may also be important.

But first, we have to examine if students from less advantaged families differ in their school experiences from students from more advantaged families.

We explored data from the most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) study. This is a large-scale global study involving a nationally representative sample of 15-year-old students across many countries.

Our research used the educational attainment of a child's parents to measure the socioeconomic background of the child, classifying children as belonging to a more advantaged family if at least one parent had some form of tertiary education (polytechnic or university); and belonging to a less advantaged family if neither parent received tertiary education.

We found that students from less advantaged families lagged considerably behind their more advantaged counterparts in academic performance. The gap is large, ranging from 0.47 to 0.55 of a standard deviation of the test score distribution, depending on the subject (Pisa evaluates



According to the writer, one way in which government policy can help raise the educational aspirations of less advantaged children is by increasing the overall quality of education offered to underperforming students and to provide them with a supportive study environment. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

student performance in three subjects – science, mathematics, and English).

DIFFERENT ASPIRATIONS

We found that students from less advantaged families had vastly different aspirations towards education compared to those from more advantaged families.

The former are less likely to expect that they will successfully complete a university education and less likely to aspire to be among the top performers in class.

Especially striking is the difference in their expectations of educational attainment: While 72.6 per cent of students from more advantaged families expect

to complete a university education, only 46.6 per cent of students from less advantaged families expect this.

Why do such differences in aspirations exist? There are several reasons. Students from less advantaged families may have lower aspirations because their parents might set lower expectations for them.

The lack of financial resources also means that they might anticipate not being able to cover the costs (such as fees) of furthering their education and associated spending such as student housing.

In addition, they are less likely to receive good advice and support

from parents on the importance of receiving quality education and ways to navigate the education system. They are also less likely to be exposed to peers who have high aspirations. Furthermore, the very fact that their academic performance tends to be worse could discourage them from "dreaming big".

These stark differences in aspirations are worrying, because research shows that, by influencing subsequent educational attainment and occupational choices, aspirations in youth can strongly influence a person's labour market outcomes.

Will these aspirational differences disappear if we help

students who are less advantaged catch up academically? Our analysis suggests that, while this will help to reduce the aspirational disparity somewhat, it will not entirely eliminate it.

More specifically, even when we restrict comparisons to children with the same academic performance, we still find that less advantaged children have much lower educational aspirations.

SOME SOLUTIONS

What can government policy do to help raise the educational aspirations of the less advantaged?

The most obvious way is to help less advantaged children catch up academically. This would include

efforts to increase the overall quality of education offered to underperforming students and to provide them with a supportive study environment.

More incentives and opportunities can also be provided so that students from different socioeconomic backgrounds can better come together to mix in a meaningful way. For instance, encouraging more regular participation in inter-school adventure camps or other co-curricular activities.

The idea is not only for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds to come together to build bonds, but also to allow less advantaged students to be exposed to, and be influenced by, those who might possess higher aspirations.

Of course, targeted financial subsidies in education, food and healthcare will go a long way to help needy students and their families, by making it less likely that these students would need to give up their educational ambitions due to financial constraints.

Apart from these, the Government could consider setting up a one-stop centre for parents to access advice and information on education-related issues. This centre's role need not be limited to providing advice on funding but it could provide information on job market trends and other career development advice.

However, lower-income families often experience other constraints, not only financial, such as manpower needs when a child is expected to help his parents in their jobs. Constraints such as poor health or physical disability of parents may also compel children to drop out. Thus, a one-stop centre can provide useful advice, for instance, by linking students and parents from disadvantaged families with social welfare agencies.

When children no longer are limited by the social standing of their parents, they start to dream big, and begin to effect a better future for themselves.

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