Ensuring poorer kids don't feel marginalised in top schools

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For The Straits Times

Last month, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released a report showing that nearly half of low-income students in Singapore are concentrated in the same schools.

This has intensified calls from the public as well as policymakers to have a better mix of students in schools to better encourage social diversity and prevent class divides.

Indeed, earlier this year, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong called for social networks to remain open and permeable. He noted the perception that popular schools such as Raffles Institution had become less diverse and were attracting students from more privileged backgrounds. He warned that popular schools need to ensure that they do not become "self-perpetuating, closed circles".

Policymakers have reacted quickly to these developments. To ensure a more diverse mix of students, especially in popular schools, from next year's Secondary 1 posting exercise, 20 per cent of places in secondary schools which are affiliated to primary schools will be reserved for students without affiliation.

Changes have also recently been announced to the Direct School Admission scheme to streamline the application process and make it free, reducing barriers of application for students from low-income families.

These changes are welcome. After all, research has shown that by providing children with access to higher-achieving peers, placing economically disadvantaged children in schools where students tend to be better performing not only helps to improve their academic achievement, but can potentially alter their life outcomes by enhancing subsequent earnings and employment.

This happens because being surrounded by peers who are higher-achieving influences disadvantaged students to aspire to similar heights and leads to an upward-levelling of educational norms.

But even as we try to encourage greater diversity of backgrounds in the more popular schools, we need to be mindful that children from poorer families don't come to feel marginalised in their new communities. We need to make sure that they fit in and feel like they belong in the school.

This is especially true for disadvantaged students who are admitted to popular schools either because they just manage to meet the school's cut-off requirement or because they are admitted based on talents and strengths in non-academic domains.

This concern comes on the back of research showing that students who just make it to a better school often seem to feel marginalised and inferior, relative to their peers.

In particular, a study by professors Cristian Pop-Eleches and Miguel Urquiola of Columbia University, titled Going To A Better School: Effects And Behavioural Responses, published in the American Economic Review in 2013, found that students who just make it to a better school can end up suffering from negative interactions with their peers.

Students are more likely to feel that their peers are mean to them and experience feelings of marginalisation when their academic results marginally enable them to make it to a better school.

Marginalisation of disadvantaged children can occur at the school or teacher level as well, especially when schools engage in activities where the economic background of a student might matter.

Let me give an example from my own experience. I attended a junior college which most people would perceive as privileged. To raise funds for its development projects, the school would periodically organise fund-raisers such as funfairs and get students to sell tickets. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with this. But things became discomfiting when teachers openly expressed disappointment with students who did not manage to sell an "adequate" number of tickets or when the school openly expressed approval for students who managed to sell the greatest numbers of tickets.

It is easy to overlook the fact that the number of tickets one can sell depends very much on the number of friends and relatives who are willing to buy them, which is, in turn, dependent on their income and wealth. Children from economically disadvantaged families may not be able to raise as much as their privileged peers because they lack the social networks to do so. Although teachers and schools do not mean to intentionally impose either negative or positive sanctions based on student economic background, this example shows how they could inadvertently end up doing that.

There are other ways teachers might inadvertently marginalise poorer students. For instance, they may have classroom activities which require students to describe and share details about what their parents do for a living or the countries and places they have visited. Students whose parents work in less prestigious occupations or who have not had the opportunity to travel abroad due to financial constraints would naturally find these activities somewhat embarrassing. Although these activities might seem harmless, they can lead to feelings of inferiority among less advantaged children in the school.

As we work to increase the diversity of student backgrounds in popular schools, schools and teachers have to be mindful of socioeconomic differences between students and recognise that different students may face different constraints. They therefore need to be sensitised to ensure that socioeconomic differences between students are not needlessly highlighted in school and classroom activities.

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Gaining acceptance from teachers and peers is important because it empowers students to be active and engaged participants in school. Indeed, as an OECD report titled Student Engagement In School: A Sense Of Belonging And Participation argues, students who do not feel accepted by their classmates and teachers could end up slowly withdrawing from school life, and consequently perform badly in school. Some could gradually even become disruptive in class and exert a negative influence on other students.

The recent slew of changes to school admission policies has the potential to lift students from poorer families and encourage more diversity in our schools. Whether we can truly integrate students from poorer backgrounds so that they feel a sense of belonging in popular schools is the challenge.

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