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Headline: Do away with race-based annual academic data – Eugene Tan

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Every year, Singapore’s Ministry of Education (MOE) publishes data on how Singaporean students fared in the previous year’s national examinations, that is, for the Primary School Leaving Examination, and the GCE O- and A-Levels.

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The data demonstrates the significant progress of Singaporean students over the past two decades. Last year, 95% of the 2003 Primary One cohort proceeded to post-secondary education after 10 years of schooling.

Before last year, the annual releases were titled Performance by Ethnic Group in National Examinations. They are now titled 10-Year Trend of Educational Performance. However, the data remain primarily organised and broken down according to the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) racial classification.

Raising academic standards is a collective national effort. We should not allow success or failure to be perceived in racial terms when other factors such as socio-economic status are playing a larger role.

Such a routine public release of annual data on the major ethnic groups’ academic performances is likely to have the unintended consequence of reinforcing racial stereotypes, especially of the minority groups.

The MOE should replace the current practice of annual reporting of such data with periodic reporting every five or 10 years. As the ministry stated in its 2014 data release earlier this month, “year-to-year fluctuations are to be expected as each batch of students is different, so it is more meaningful to focus on longer-term trends over 10 years”.

In November 2012, I asked in parliament whether the objective of providing feedback to the communities on their students’ academic performance can be achieved by a limited release at five- or 10-year intervals, when comparisons and analyses can be more meaningful and productive.

The MOE’s senior parliamentary secretary Hawazi Daipi replied that the annual release of data “enables the respective communities to monitor the effectiveness of their educational programmes, and recognise and celebrate their children’s achievements. There is also value in providing such information so that the community, ethnic self-help groups and the public can study the data and discuss areas for improvement”.

If ethnic self-help groups need the information annually to assess and tweak their programmes, the MOE can easily provide the data directly to them away from the public glare. But circumspection is needed with annual data, since such programmes take time to raise academic standards and performance.

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Provide data based on socio-economic status

To be sure, the data is of some use in examining educational performance trends. Yet, in presenting trends, such data are not necessarily better if they do not provide meaningful information, and this undermines the primary purpose of releasing it.

For example, the data show that Malay students, despite making the biggest improvement in mathematics, still do not fare as well as their non-Malay counterparts.

In 2004, 67.8% of Malay students passed O-Level mathematics. The figure has hovered at around 70% since 2009. The comparative figures for Chinese and Indian students were 93% and 80% respectively last year. But these statistics do not tell us why some groups perform better than others.

This is not to mollycoddle some groups or to massage the facts of educational performance of the various races. Instead, greater attention and care should be put on the type and regularity of the information released, and how to release it in a measured way that will strengthen the efforts and self-esteem of groups that do not do so well.

How about publishing data on how students perform according to their socio-economic status (using proxies such as housing types and household income), which is more relevant than race in explaining and uplifting educational performance?

Is it not more likely the case that a non-Chinese student who needs help in mathematics would have more in common with his Chinese counterpart who also needs help in the same subject than with a fellow non-Chinese student who is doing well in mathematics?

Research has shown that academic performance is not simply a function of actual ability. It is affected by the shared beliefs that people hold about the performance and abilities of their own and other social groups, whether it is race, religion or gender.

Stereotypes are beliefs people have about different social groups, and how these beliefs affect our attitudes and abilities. Stereotype threat occurs in situations where people fear that their poor performance, when judged by or treated in terms of their race, fulfils a negative stereotype about their group. When people perceive a stereotype threat, they tend to underperform, thereby conforming to the stereotype.

Context matters, too, and affects how we view presented data. We have long imbibed the dominant meritocratic discourse, which often equates academic success with one's individual ability and effort. Hence, education successes and failures are commonly framed and seen as resulting from factors originating outside our well-regarded education system.

The data is organised along race, but do particularistic factors such as race explain why a group lags behind academically, never mind the significant progress made?

In educational psychology, the cultural deficit model posits that some groups underachieve vis-a-vis the dominant majority group because their culture is disadvantaged in important ways – in skills, knowledge, and behaviour – which contributes to poor school performance generally.

At a time when the CMIO racial classification is less relevant with more interracial and international marriages, we must do away with racial stereotypes or notions of cultural deficits,

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because they undermine the very students we seek to help. Only then can our students develop to their full potential, unencumbered by the stereotypes and baggage of race, religion and language. – Todayonline, November 21, 2014.

* Eugene Tan is associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University School of Law and a former nominated member of parliament.

* This is the personal opinion of the writer or publication and does not necessarily represent the views of The Malaysian Insider.