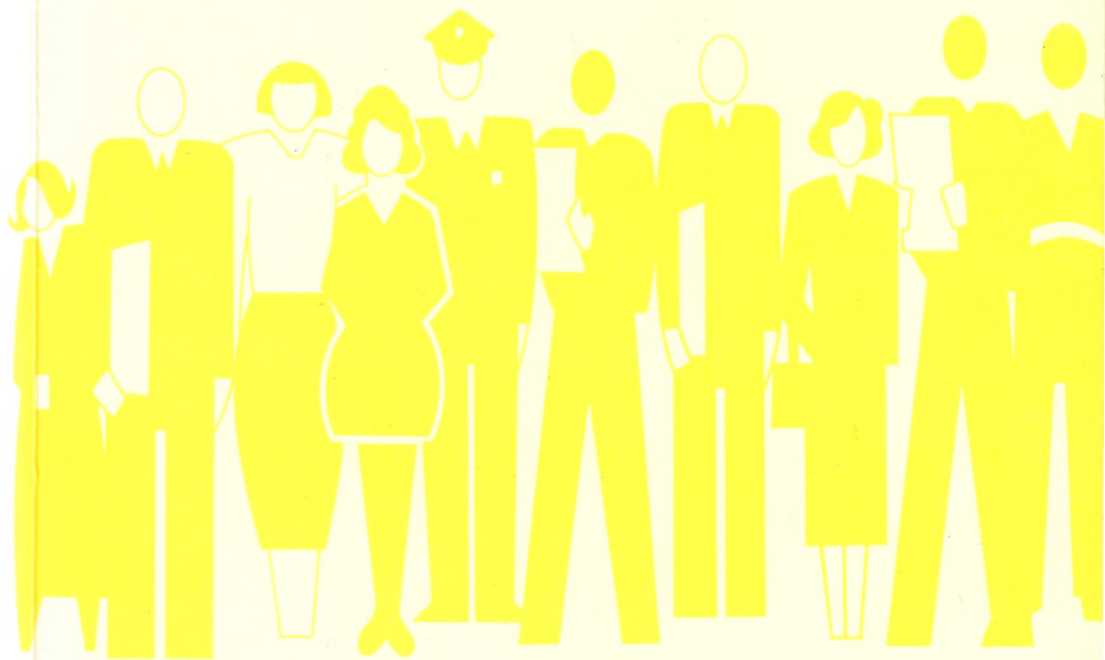


# Social *in* Class SINGAPORE

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## CONTENTS

List of Tables and Figures	vii
Preface	xv
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION <i>Stella R. Quah</i>	1
CHAPTER 2 SOCIAL CLASS IN SINGAPORE: AN OVERVIEW <i>Sharon Mengchee Lee</i>	23
✓ CHAPTER 3 EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CLASS IN SINGAPORE <i>Stella R. Quah</i>	38
CHAPTER 4 OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE AND OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE <i>Chiew Seen Kong, Ko Yiu Chung and Stella R. Quah</i>	74
CHAPTER 5 THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION <i>Chiew Seen Kong and Ko Yiu Chung</i>	116
CHAPTER 6 ETHNIC STRATIFICATION <i>Chiew Seen Kong</i>	138
CHAPTER 7 SOCIAL MOBILITY IN SINGAPORE <i>Chiew Seen Kong</i>	183
CHAPTER 8 STATUS ATTAINMENT <i>Ko Yiu Chung</i>	220
CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION: THE REALITIES OF SOCIAL CLASS <i>Stella R. Quah</i>	244
APPENDIX 1 NOTES ON RESEARCH PROCEDURE <i>Ko Yiu Chung, Chiew Seen Kong and Stella R. Quah</i>	271
APPENDIX 2 OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE SCORES SOPS AND SNORC, MEAN, STANDARD DEVIATION AND SAMPLE SIZE FOR 109 OCCUPATIONS, SINGAPORE, 1983-1984 <i>Stella R. Quah, Ko Yiu Chung and Chiew Seen Kong</i>	281
About the Authors	285

## LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table	Title	Page
1.1	Basic Indicators of Economic Development and Standards of Living, Singapore, 1970, 1983 and 1988	4
2.1	Subjective Class Identification	27
2.2	Most Important Characteristic for Subjective Social Class Identification	28
2.3	Most Important Characteristic for Subjective Class Identification by Subjective Class (In Percentages)	29
2.4	Highest Level of Education Completed	30
2.5	Distribution by Occupational Category	31
2.6	Distribution of Reported Self-Income Per Month	32
2.7	Occupational Category by Education (In Percentages)	33
2.8	Income Per Month by Education (In Percentages)	33
2.9	Income Per Month by Occupation (In Percentages)	34
3.1	General Literacy Rates Per Thousand Population Aged 10 Years and Over, by Ethnic Group and Sex, 1970 and 1980	43
3.2	Highest Educational Qualification of Population Aged 10 Years and Over, by Sex, 1980	44
3.3	Average Years of Formal Education of Male Respondents from Different Ethnic Groups and Age Cohorts	45
3.4	Average Years of Formal Education of Female Respondents from Different Ethnic Groups and Age Cohorts	46
3.5	Perception of Social Class Symbols by Ethnic Group and Years of Formal Education (In Percentages)	48

Table	Title	Page
3.6	Graduates from Universities and Colleges, 1950-1988	50
3.7	Male and Female Opinions on Least Amount of Schooling Needed by Young Men and Women in Singapore (In Percentages)	52
3.8	Respondents' Attitudes Toward Self and the Community by Their Number of Years of Formal Education (In Percentages)	55
3.9	Years of Formal Education of Male and Female Respondents by Their Parents' Years of Formal Education (In Percentages)	63
3.10	Years of Formal Education of Ever-Married Male and Female Respondents by Their Spouses' Years of Formal Education (In Percentages)	66
3.11	Years of Formal Education of the Respondents' Parents (In Percentages)	67
3.12	Years of Formal Education of Male and Female Respondents by Years of Formal Education of Their Best Friend (In Percentages)	69
4.1	Occupations by Mean Monthly Income, Singapore, 1966, 1975 and 1980	76
4.2	Employed Persons Aged 10 Years and Over, Singapore, 1966, 1970 and 1980	77
4.3	Citizens as Per Cent of All Employed Persons Aged 10 Years and Over, Singapore, 1970 and 1980	79
4.4	Employed Persons Aged 20 Years and Over, Singapore, 1970 and 1980	80
4.5	Estimated Number and Propotion of Employed Citizens Aged 20 Years and Over, by Occupational Group, Singapore, 1970 and 1980	81
4.6	Consistency of Respondents' Ratings	87
4.7	Reliability of Occupational Ratings	88
4.8	Occupational Prestige Scores in Singapore (SNORC) and Standard Deviations of Selected Occupations	89

Table	Title	Page
4.9	Respondents' Reasons for Rating an Occupation as "Excellent" (In Percentages)	91
4.10	Respondents' Reasons for Rating an Occupation as "Average" (In Percentages)	91
4.11	Respondents Reasons for Rating an Occupation as "Poor" (In Percentages)	92
4.12	Occupational Prestige Rating (SOPS), Education and Income of Working Respondents	92
4.13	Occupational Prestige Rating (SNORC), Education and Income of Working Respondents	93
4.14	Subjective Class Identification and Occupational Prestige Scores (SOPS) (In Percentages)	96
4.15	Beliefs About Power by Occupational Prestige Scores(SOPS) (In Percentages)	98
4.16	Self-Direction by Occupational Prestige Scores (SOPS) (In Percentages)	100
4.17	Social Participation and Occupational Prestige (SOPS) (In Percentages)	102
4.18	Per Cent of Respondents Indicating Membership in Organizations by their Occupational Prestige Score	103
4.19	Level of Social Participation and Occupational Prestige (SOPS) (In Percentages)	104
4.20	Leisure and Occupational Prestige Scores (SOPS) (In Percentages)	106
4.21	Perceived Attributes of the Ideal Job by the Respondents' Occupational Prestige Scores (SOPS)(In Percentages)	108
5.1	Working Persons Aged 10 Years and Over, Singapore, 1957-85	117
5.2	Employers and Own Account Workers to Employees, Singapore, 1957-85	118
5.3	Working Persons Aged 10 Years and Over, Singapore, 1970 and 1980	119

Table	Title	Page
5.4	Type of House by Employment Status of Head of Household, Singapore, 1980	123
5.5	Economically Inactive Persons Aged 10 Years and Over, Singapore, 1970-80	124
5.6	Economically Inactive Persons Aged 10 Years and Over by Citizenship, Singapore, 1970-80	125
5.7	Compared with Your Dad, You Are	126
5.8	Compared with Your Mum, You Are (For Female Respondents Only)	127
5.9	Personal Monthly Income and Self-Evaluation	127
5.10	Personal Monthly Income and Comparison with Best Friend	128
5.11	Perceiving Future Economic Changes	129
5.12	Gini Ratios of Personal Income Distribution	130
5.13	Distribution of Gross Personal Monthly Income	131
5.14	Distribution of Household Monthly Income	132
5.15	Financial Support in the Past One Year	134
5.16	Sex, Marital Status and Financial Support in the Past One Year	135
6.1	Population by Ethnic Group, Singapore, 1824-1980	139
6.2	Population Growth and Growth Components, Singapore, 1901-1980	140
6.3	Ethnic and Sub-Ethnic Groups, Singapore, 1980	142
6.4	Industry by Ethnic Group, Singapore, 1931	144
6.5	Working Persons Aged 10 Years and Over by Ethnic Group and Employment Status, Singapore, 1970-80	149
6.6	Persons Aged 5 or 6 Years and Over by Highest Qualification Attained and Ethnic Group, Singapore, 1970-80	152
6.7	Working Persons Aged 10 Years and Over by Ethnic Group and Occupation, Singapore, 1957-80	154

Table	Title	Page
6.8	Ethnic Group by Highest Qualification, Singapore, 1984	158
6.9	Persons Aged 21-80 Years by Ethnic Group and Occupation, Singapore, 1984	159
6.10	Singapore Occupational Prestige Scale (SOPS) by Ethnic Group, Singapore, 1984	160
6.11	Singapore NORC Scale by Ethnic Group, Singapore, 1984	161
6.12	Gross Monthly Income by Ethnic Group, Singapore, 1984	162
6.13	Ethnicity, Highest Education Attained and Subjective Class Identification, Singapore, 1984	164
6.14	Ethnicity, Occupation and Subjective Class Identification, Singapore, 1984	167
6.15	Ethnicity, Highest Education Attained and Ethnicity of Best Friend, Singapore, 1984	169
6.16	Ethnicity, Highest Education Attained and Highest Education Attained by Best Friend, Singapore, 1984	171
6.17	Ethnicity, Highest Education Attained and Attitudes Toward Rich People, Singapore, 1984	174
6.18	Ethnicity, Highest Education Attained and Attitudes Toward Success, Singapore, 1984	176
6.19	Ethnicity, Highest Education Attained and Attitudes Toward Planning Ahead, Singapore, 1984	177
7.1	Working Persons by Age and Employment Status, Singapore, 1957-86	191
7.2	Working Persons by Year of Birth and Employment Status, Singapore, 195-86	194
7.3	Persons by Age and Completed Education, Singapore, 1966-86	197
7.4	Working Persons by Year of Birth and Highest Educational Attainment, Singapore, 1966-86	200

Table	Title	Page
7.5	Working Persons by Age Group and Occupation, Singapore, 1966-86	203
7.6	Working Persons by Occupation and Year of Birth, Singapore, 1966-86	207
8.1	Zero-Order Correlation, Mean and Standard Deviation of Status Variables for Women and Men	224
8.2	Partial Regression Coefficients of Models of Educational and Occupational Attainment for Singapore Women and Men (Standard Errors in Parentheses)	225
8.3	Direct and Indirect Effects of the Background Variables on First Job Attainment	228
8.4	Zero-Order Correlation, Mean and Standard Deviation of Status Variables for Sub-Samples of Respondents in Three Age Cohorts	230
8.5	Partial Regression Coefficient of Models of Educational and Occupational Attainment for Sub-Samples of Respondents in Three Age Cohorts (Standard Errors in Parentheses)	232
8.6	Direct and Indirect Effect of Background Variables on First Job Attainment (Percentages in Parentheses)	235
9.1	Correlation Among Occupational Prestige Scales in the Total, Male and Female Working Sub-Samples (Based on Respondents' Current Occupation)	247
9.2	Occupational Prestige Scores SOPS and SNORC of Selected Occupations and Their Respective Mean and Standard Deviations	249
9.3	Occupational Prestige Scores (SOPS), Mean Number of Years of Education and Average Income for Abbreviated Occupational Categories	254
9.4	Distribution of Social Class (SES) Scores for All Economically Active Male and Female Respondents Including Average Personal Income and Average Years of Formal Education	261

Table	Title	Page
9.5	Distribution of Social Class (SES) Scores for All Economically Active Respondents Including Average Personal Income, Average Years of Formal Education and Occupational Prestige (SNORC)	262
9.6	Five Intervals of Social Class (SES) Scores for All Economically Active Respondents Including Average Personal Income, Average Years of Formal Education and Occupational Prestige (SNORC)	263
9.7	Type of Housing of Working Respondents by Their Social Class (SES) Scores (In Percentages)	265
9.8	Working Respondents' Ethnicity and Social Class (SES) Scores (In Percentages)	266
9.9	Matrix of Pearson Zero-Order Correlation Coefficients for Economically Active Respondents	267

Figures	Title	Page
6.1	Ethnic Stratification in Netherlands India (circa 1900)	145
6.2	Ethnic Stratification in Singapore	179
7.1	A Social Mobility Model	189
8.1	Model of Education and Occupational Attainment	222
8.2	Path Diagrams	239

### CHAPTER THREE

## EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CLASS IN SINGAPORE

*Stella R. Quah*

“To enrich your family, no need to buy good land; books hold a thousand measures of grain.”

[Sung Emperor Chen-tsung<sup>1</sup>]

There is a certain undeniable respect for the educated found in most Eastern and Western societies. Among the Chinese, for example, becoming an educated person was traditionally regarded as the highest goal; the Chinese practice of bestowing educational degrees and sanctioning educational qualifications at the national level can be traced back to the second half of the sixth century when the official examination system was first established (Miyazaki, 1981:136).

Throughout this century, and particularly from the 1950s onwards, sociological studies have documented the importance of education in modern societies. Summarizing the evidence collected, Gerhard Lenski wrote twenty years ago that in the United States “educational status has become increasingly important as a resource in the struggle for power and privilege”. His words are just as applicable today as they were in 1966 (Lenski, 1984:392).

Indeed, the importance of education is heightened in contemporary societies when there are sufficient job opportunities to reward all those who succeed in achieving the required

educational qualifications. Correspondingly, when jobs at the top are scarce and the number of jobless graduates increases, the value of higher education may diminish, especially in the eyes of the parents and secondary school students who, respectively, have to pay for and make the decision to pursue higher education. The latter situation was experienced in the United States and Western European countries as a consequence of the recent international economic recession. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the high cost of obtaining a university degree overtook its economic rewards as many unemployed and educated young Americans and Europeans found themselves overqualified for the jobs available in the labour market. Nevertheless, as the economy recovers, the situation described by Lenski appears to become the norm again.

Although Singapore has also been affected by the economic recession, the high value of educational qualifications has not diminished either at the national level or in the private sphere of family priorities. On the contrary, during the economic recession of 1984–85, the government encouraged employers and workers to emphasise retraining and skills development. More importantly, popular belief has it that school education is the necessary instrument for children to have a better future. As the exigencies of Singapore’s economic development create more job opportunities for people with higher education, parental aspirations increase accordingly. A secondary school diploma may no longer be enough and children may be encouraged to seek a technical or professional qualification.

This chapter focuses on this and other aspects of the role of formal education and brings up the views of the random sample of Singaporeans to throw some light on these matters. It is difficult to separate a person’s education from his occupation, prestige and income; in real life these aspects of a person’s life are closely intertwined.<sup>2</sup> But there are some interesting questions on education that may be answered by the survey findings from this study and which will improve our understanding of the overall phenomenon of social class. This chapter consists of four sections. The first section deals with a concise review of relevant sociological concepts pertaining to the role of educational attainment in social stratification. The second section deals with the educational

attainment figures for the Singapore population and thus provides the necessary background for the subsequent discussion. The third and fourth sections report the survey findings on two important questions, namely: "How important is educational attainment in the context of social class in Singapore?" and "What is the relation between a person's educational attainment and his or her social networks involving parents, spouse and friends?" These questions have a special significance when explored in the Singaporean milieu of ethnic, age and gender differences.

### CONCEPTUAL ASPECTS OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

The field of social stratification enjoys one of the largest bodies of literature in sociology, and one of the aspects receiving attention by researchers is the role of educational level in status attainment. A brief review of the main conceptual contributions in the literature provides the needed background for the subsequent discussion of the survey findings.

A good summary of current conceptual work on the role of education is presented by Cicourel and Mehan (1985). These authors reviewed the main research contributions and identified two main perspectives in social stratification theory: one perspective, backed by intergenerational mobility research, "views schooling as the central channel of social mobility". The other perspective is based on findings showing that "background socio-economic variables" are better predictors of status attainment than educational achievement" (Cicourel and Mehan, 1985: 5).

Cicourel and Mehan concluded that the two main conceptual perspectives are not contradictory but that what was needed was the identification of intervening variables or "mediating mechanisms" which could explain the relationship between "people's background characteristics, their educational achievement and status attainment". They outlined four mediating mechanisms: "the child's inherited or developed capacities; the early socialization that precedes schooling; the child's and family's ability to convert his or her cultural capital

into skills or behaviour that becomes the basis of institutional interpretations" and those institutional interpretations themselves (1985:21). In other words, family and school are, together, important determinants of socio-economic status attainment.

Cicourel and Mehan correctly acknowledged that there is no conclusive evidence on which of the two main factors i.e. schooling or family background contributes most to a person's status attainment and social mobility (1985:21) and their own identification of mediating mechanisms is yet to be empirically verified. The controversy goes on. There are some researchers who strongly affirm that the family's influence is even more important than school quality. One of them is Hauser (1973). Lenski went further asserting that "The family is the most powerful single factor counteracting the egalitarian tendency in modern educational systems" (1984:391). Others see the educational system as important as the family system considering the impact they have upon the society as a whole. Janovitz (1983), for example, believes that the educational system in the United States has made a considerable contribution to acculturation.

However insightful these diverse opinions are, they overlook the fact that the occupational dimension of social class is rooted in the job market conditions and the prevailing principles of job allocation in every society, and that the influence of family background and schooling may change after the first job. In a recently published study on status attainment in Canada, Jones (1985:131) reported that family background or "social origin" [measured by father's education, father's occupation and number of siblings] accounted "for 30 per cent of the variance in educational attainment... However, where first occupation is concerned, the direct effects of social origin are greatly reduced and education becomes the dominant influence". Observing the first and subsequent occupations of his subjects, Jones found that, in contrast to the influence of family background, formal schooling exerted a pervasive influence "throughout occupational careers" (1985:131). This is mainly because a person's formal educational level is seen by employers as a reflection of his or her occupational skills even though such skills may be actually derived from work experience (1985:124-133).



If Jones' figures are correct, it may then be expected that the influence of family background may also weaken after the first job in societies where "educational meritocracy" prevails, that is, where "formal educational credentials serve as a criterion of allocating people to differentially rewarded jobs" (Krauze and Slomczynski, 1985:624). These are some of the latest relevant ideas and concepts paving the way for the presentation of the findings from the Singapore survey.

### EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF THE POPULATION

The urgency of improving the population's skills is reflected in the increased proportion of the national budget that the government allocates to education, particularly the proportion dedicated to developmental expenditure in education. According to calculations made from official figures, this proportion has increased steadily over the past ten years: from 11.2 per cent of the total educational budget for the financial year 1977/78 to 21.71 per cent for the financial year 1987/88 (Department of Statistics, 1988:278). From a longer historical perspective, the emphasis on development in education is not new. This proportion of 21.7 per cent is rather close to the 25.5 per cent of total government expenditure in education dedicated to development expenditure in 1965, when Singapore became an independent nation. The following decade saw a decline in the emphasis on development as the respective proportion fell to 3.7 per cent in 1972 and 4.7 per cent in 1973 (Skolnik, 1976:79).

With the total budgeted recurrent expenditure in education in the fiscal year 1987/88 as S\$1,385,211 and the gross national product at S\$43,272,200 for 1987, the expenditure in education as percentage of GNP was 3.20 per cent in 1987 (Department of Statistics, 1988:2, 278). This is a modest percentage compared to that of industrialized countries such as 4.6 per cent in West Germany, 5.5 per cent in the United Kingdom, 5.7 per cent in Japan, 6.7 per cent in the United States, and 8.5 per cent in Sweden (Brimelow, 1986:74). Nevertheless, such investment is significant for a developing nation like Singapore and it appears that the concern with education has given sat-

isfactory results if one considers the overall literacy level.<sup>3</sup> The literacy level of the Singapore population has increased continuously from 80.5 per cent of the total population aged 10 years and older in 1977 to 86.8 per cent of the same population in 1987. In 1977, 78.5 per cent of all children in the age group 6 to 17 were enrolled in schools; this proportion increased to 93.8 per cent in 1987 (Department of Statistics, 1988:15).

Tables 3.1 and 3.2 provide a more detailed picture of the improvement in the Singaporeans' level of education over a period of ten years. Table 3.1 indicates that of every 1,000 persons in 1970, 722 were literate i.e., "could read with understanding a newspaper" in at least one of the four major official languages of Singapore, namely English, Mandarin, Malay or Tamil (Department of Statistics, 1981:10).

That figure increased to 840 of every 1,000 persons in 1980. More importantly, the female population across the world follows the universal trend of having a lower educational attainment than males, and increasing female literacy is considered to be a significant indicator of development. In Singapore, female literacy level increased more dramatically than male literacy over the ten year period: from 601 literate women out of every 1,000 women in 1970 to 762 out of every 1,000 in 1980. The second main message in Table 3.1 is that different ethnic groups tend to differ in their level of literacy. The highest literacy levels are found among men in the group "Others"

TABLE 3.1  
General Literacy Rates Per Thousand Population Aged 10 Years and Over,  
by Ethnic Group and Sex, 1970 and 1980

Population	1970			1980		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
All	722	838	601	840	915	762
Chinese	697	820	575	826	909	744
Malays	770	892	642	865	932	793
Indians	839	886	759	898	928	857
Others	959	975	942	977	985	967

Source: Department of Statistics (1981) *Census of Population 1980 Singapore*. Release No. 3. Literacy and Education. Singapore: Department of Statistics, Table 1, p. 2.

**TABLE 3.2**  
**Highest Educational Qualification of**  
**Population Aged 10 Years and Over by Sex, 1980\***

Population	Total	Male	Female
All	100.0 (1,649,704)	100.0 (834,166)	100.0 (815,538)
No qualification	34.9	27.1	42.8
With qualification	65.1	72.9	57.2
<b>Qualification:</b>			
Primary	44.3	50.1	38.3
Secondary	12.4	12.5	12.4
Upper secondary	5.7	6.8	4.7
Tertiary	2.7	3.5	1.8

Source: Adapted from Department of Statistics (1981) *Census of Population 1980 Singapore*. Release No. 3. Literacy and Education. Singapore: Department of Statistics, Table 5, p. 6.

- \* The Department of Statistics defines "no qualification" as the situation where a person "never attended any school" or, if attended, did not obtain a Primary Six Certificate or equivalent. "Primary": the obtaining of a Primary Six Certificate or equivalent or attended secondary school but did not obtain a General Certificate of Education "0" level. "Secondary": when highest qualification is a GCE "0" level, general, technical or other type. "Upper Secondary": a GCE "A" level whether general, teacher training, technical, commercial or other. "Tertiary": obtaining a degree or post-graduate diploma from universities.

while the lowest literacy rate is among Chinese women. These differences have been practically unchanged over the past decade. It is important to keep in mind that literacy rates are calculated from our population using different languages. For the Chinese, dialects were until recently more commonly used than Mandarin and this might have affected the literacy rate of Chinese which was based on their ability to read and write Mandarin or English. With the increasing emphasis on bilingualism in the school system, the literacy rate differences across ethnic groups are likely to change in the future. Although the overall literacy rate in Singapore is high, the proportion of the population with tertiary education was still modest in 1980 (2.7 per cent); slightly higher proportions had attained upper secondary (5.7 per cent) and secondary (12.4 per cent) education; and the large majority of literate people had only primary

education, as indicated in Table 3.2. An improvement of these figures is expected in the population census of 1990.

## EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CLASS

The figures presented in Chapter Four confirm the universal proposition that a person's educational level contributes significantly to his or her occupational prestige and income and, consequently, to his or her social class position.<sup>4</sup> The role of education in status attainment is explored in detail in Chapter Eight. The objective of this section is to pursue further the analysis of the impact of education by treading a different road of focusing on people's perception of education as an instrument of status attainment. The main guiding question is "How important do people think that educational attainment is, for the purpose of moving up the social ladder?"

The preceding section outlined the educational profile of the total population. Now, before turning to the findings from the study to probe the above question, it is important to describe the overall educational attainment of the sample. Tables 3.3 and 3.4 provide the average number of years of formal education attained by the male and female respondents respectively, according to their ethnic background and age group. Follow-

**TABLE 3.3**  
**Average Years of Formal Education of Male Respondents from Different Ethnic Groups and Age Cohorts**

Ethnic Group	AGE IN YEARS							All Age Groups (N)
	25 or Younger	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51 or Older	
Chinese	10.4	9.7	10.0	8.9	7.5	7.2	6.1	8.5 (390)
Malay	9.5	8.9	7.9	8.2	6.1	5.8	6.3	7.8 (126)
Indian	9.2	8.2	9.9	8.7	9.4	9.0	6.9	8.6 (162)
Other	9.5	11.0	12.0	10.0	7.3	5.0	7.6	8.5 (19)
All ethnic groups (N)	9.8 (115)	9.3 (135)	9.6 (99)	8.7 (61)	7.7 (84)	7.3 (57)	6.4 (146)	8.4 (697)

TABLE 3.4  
Average Years of Formal Education of Female Respondents From Different Ethnic Groups and Age Cohorts

Ethnic Group	AGE IN YEARS							All Age Groups (N)
	25 or Younger	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51 or older	
Chinese	10.0	9.5	8.4	7.5	8.2	4.5	5.8	8.3 (295)
Malay	8.7	8.2	7.8	6.7	6.2	3.0	5.3	7.6 (164)
Indian	9.8	8.8	8.1	7.8	7.6	6.0	6.5	8.2 (151)
Other	10.4	6.3	6.5	7.0	10.0	6.5	7.5	7.5 ( 25)
All ethnic groups (N)	9.6 (131)	8.8 (156)	8.4 (115)	7.4 (74)	7.7 (59)	5.0 (37)	6.0 (63)	8.1 (635)

ing the trends in the general population, male respondents are, in general, better educated than the female respondents, but both groups show differences in educational attainment among ethnic groups and age cohorts. The younger generations are benefiting from the current universal education system and thus, it is not surprising to find that older men have a lower average number of years of formal schooling than younger men: the male cohort under 25 years of age has, on average, 9.8 years of formal education compared to the men in the age group 51 and above who have an average of 6.4 years of formal education. The same pattern is found among women. The ethnic differences in educational attainment are evident for males and females at all age levels, but there is less ethnic disparity in education among the youngest age cohort. This is another expected outcome of the national emphasis given to education and the high accessibility of schools for all ethnic communities in Singapore.

#### Education as a Social Class Symbol

The probing into people's perception of education and class may begin by referring to their responses to the question: "In deciding whether a person belongs to your class or not, what do you think is the *most important thing* to know about that person?" The perception of social class symbols found in the total sam-

ple follows an expected pattern: the top five "things" or symbols of social class mentioned, in order of the proportion of respondents mentioning them, were: "money, wealth or income" (24.2 per cent of the 1,627 respondents) "personality, beliefs and values" (18.4 per cent); "occupation" (14.1 per cent); "speech and behaviour" (14.1 per cent); and "level of education attained" (11.9 per cent).<sup>5</sup>

An interesting array of perceptions were unveiled when the answers to the same question were analysed in terms of the number of years of education of the respondents, as illustrated in Table 3.5. Among people with no formal education, there is an unmistakable variation in the perception of social class symbols accompanying ethnic identity. Yet, such ethnic differences diminish steadily as the respondents' level of education increases to the point where people from different ethnic backgrounds in the most educated group do not differ significantly from each other in their perception of social class symbols.<sup>6</sup>

While money is the principal symbol of social class for people at all levels of education, when observing the ethnicity of the respondents one sees that it is really the Chinese who are the most inclined to see wealth in this way. For example, 45.7 per cent of the Chinese with no formal education believe that money is the most important symbol of social class in contrast to only 21.4 per cent of the Malays and 23.3 per cent of the Indians. The latter two groups are more inclined to see speech and behaviour as the most important manifestations of a person's social class. Among people with 1 to 6 years of schooling, the largest proportion of Chinese again mention wealth, while Malays seem to emphasize speech and behaviour and the Indians personality, values, speech, and behaviour. The same pattern is found among people with 7 to 12 years of schooling. However, as indicated earlier, Table 3.5 shows that the most educated group does not present significant ethnic distinctions in their perception of social class symbols: roughly one out of every three respondents with more than twelve years of education (i.e., post-secondary school education) see money as the principal symbol of social class, regardless of their ethnic background.

TABLE 3.5  
Perception of Social Class Symbols by Ethnic Group and Years of Formal Education (In Percentages)

PERCEIVED SYMBOLS OF SOCIAL CLASS	Chinese	Malay	Indian	All**
<b>No Formal Education [a]</b>				
Money, wealth, income	45.7	21.4	23.3	35.5
Personality, beliefs, and values	8.6	21.4	26.7	14.7
Occupation	14.6	1.2	10.0	9.8
Speech, behaviour	1.3	27.4	30.0	12.8
Level of education	12.6	14.3	3.3	12.1
Family name or status	7.3	2.4	-	4.9
Other	9.9	11.9	6.7	10.2
Total* (N)	100.0 (151)	100.0 (84)	100.0 (30)	100.0 (265)
<b>1-6 Years of Education [b]</b>				
Money, wealth, income	27.7	8.5	15.0	19.8
Personality, beliefs, and values	8.8	17.1	32.7	16.3
Occupation	25.7	9.3	8.4	17.5
Speech, behaviour	6.4	33.3	29.9	18.8
Level of education	12.4	15.5	7.5	12.2
Family name or status	7.6	1.6	2.8	4.9
Other	11.2	14.7	3.7	10.5
Total* (N)	100.0 (249)	100.0 (129)	100.0 (107)	100.0 (485)
<b>7-12 Years of Education [c]</b>				
Money, wealth, income	30.9	13.3	14.2	22.5
Personality, beliefs, and values	15.7	23.3	32.6	22.0
Occupation	20.3	12.0	5.3	14.3
Speech, behaviour	5.4	20.7	22.1	13.3
Level of education	12.9	12.7	10.0	12.0
Family name or status	6.0	2.7	5.8	5.2
Other	8.9	15.3	10.0	10.6
Total* (N)	100.0 (350)	100.0 (150)	100.0 (190)	100.0 (690)

TABLE 3.5  
Perception of Social Class Symbols by Ethnic Group and Years of Formal Education (In Percentages) (Continued)

PERCEIVED SYMBOLS OF SOCIAL CLASS	Chinese	Malay	Indian	All**
<b>13 or More Years of Education [d]</b>				
Money, wealth, income	38.5	27.3	30.8	36.0
Personality, beliefs, and values	21.5	18.2	7.7	19.0
Occupation	16.9	9.0	-	13.5
Speech, behaviour	4.6	-	15.4	5.6
Level of education	13.8	9.1	15.4	13.5
Family name or status	1.5	18.2	7.7	4.5
Other	3.2	18.2	23.0	7.9
Total* (N)	100.0 (65)	100.0 (11)	100.0 (13)	100.0 (89)

[a] For the group of respondents with no formal education, the correlation between perception of social class symbols and ethnicity was significant (level of significance  $p = .00001$ ); Cramer's  $V = .371$ ; Contingency Coefficient  $C = .464$ .

[b]  $p = .00001$ ; Cramer's  $V = .355$ ;  $C = .449$ .

[c]  $p = .00001$ ; Cramer's  $V = .268$ ;  $C = .355$ .

[d]  $p = .0581$  (not statistically significant).

\* The total number excludes 34 respondents who did not provide information on their perceptions of social class symbols, and 8 respondents whose ethnicity was not recorded.

\*\* The group "Others" has been excluded because of its small size.

Why do higher levels of education diminish the cultural differences in the perception of class symbols? It appears that the exposure to higher education acts as an "equalizer" in a multi-ethnic society, by weakening the attachment to some traditional perceptions of "class" in one's own ethnic community such as the importance of smooth personal manners and correct behaviour, in exchange for a more "rational" calculation of what gives people advantage over others when climbing the social ladder. This point is confirmed by another relevant aspect of Table 3.5, namely, how important educational level is as a symbol of social class in the minds of people. Only a minority of the respondents from all ethnic groups and educational levels

perceive level of education as “the most important” symbol of social class. The proportion of respondents indicating this ranges from 3.3 per cent (of the Indian respondents with no formal education) to 15.5 per cent (of the Malay respondents with one to six years of education). Inevitably, one wonders what happened to the Singaporean idea of meritocracy and the popular notion that education is the key to social advancement; if this notion were true, one would expect the majority of the respondents to perceive “level of education” as the most important symbol of social class. Instead, education ranked fifth, and money first, in the answers from the total sample.

Such a pattern of answers does not reflect a general disregard for education. Quite the contrary, the proportion of the Singapore population attaining post-secondary education has increased consistently over the past few decades as can be appreciated in Table 3.6. In 1950 there were only 1.7 males and 1.2 females who were college or university graduates for every 10,000 males and 10,000 females in the population. That proportion increased steadily to 54.7 males and 40.4 females in 1988. Then why is education given a lower rank than money and occupation as a symbol of social class? Perhaps the most likely explanation lies in an instrumental approach to education among

TABLE 3.6  
Graduates from Universities and Colleges, 1950-1988

Year	Males		Females	
	Total*	Rate per 10,000 Male Population**	Total*	Rate per 10,000 Female Population**
1950	90	1.7	53	1.2
1960	1,115	13.0	649	8.2
1970	2,216	20.9	1,485	14.7
1982	3,891	30.1	2,814	23.2
1988***	7,375	54.7	5,256	40.4

\* Department of Statistics (1983) *Economic and Social Statistics Singapore, 1960-1982*. Singapore: Department of Statistics, 240-243.

\*\* Calculated from population figures provided in Department of Statistics (1983:8). The rate for 1950 is based on the 1947 population figures.

\*\*\* Calculated from Department of Statistics (1989) *Yearbook of Statistics Singapore 1988*. Singapore: Department of Statistics, 29, 304-5.

Singaporeans whereby education is seen primarily (if not exclusively) as a means to obtain power and wealth rather than as an end in itself. The marketability of a diploma or degree and not the wisdom of acquired knowledge is what makes education an instrument of social mobility in this modern society where meritocracy dictates that your job depends on your paper qualifications. And the data show that nobody knows that rule of the game better than people with post-secondary education. The recent world recession and the effects it triggered in Singapore and Malaysia brought those sentiments to the surface when a large number of jobs were lost and the generating of new ones came to an abrupt halt. As one young man put it, “What is the use [of a degree] if you are an unemployed graduate?” A person does not prove his or her social status with diplomas but rather with what a diploma or degree can buy, that is, a prestigious job, a high salary, and other things that follow a high income.

It appears, then, that the instrumental value of education is widely accepted in Singapore. But how much education do people believe is necessary to succeed in Singapore? Considering that this study sample represents a cross-section of the population with people from all walks of life (as opposed to a group of only potential or actual high-flyers), the respondents were asked to indicate what was, in their opinion, “the least amount of schooling that a young man needs to get along well in Singapore?” The question was then repeated about young women.

The figures in Table 3.7 describe how the male and female respondents see the minimum educational requirements for men and women to live comfortably in Singapore. Although there is a tendency for males and females to disagree on the least amount of education a young man needs in Singapore, the disagreement is minor. Interestingly, men and women agree on the least amount of education that a young woman needs in Singapore.

Four out of every ten respondents feel that the minimum amount of formal education a young man should receive is secondary school education. That is, he should at least complete his “O” levels to get along well in Singapore today. Nearly three

out of every ten respondents see the "A" level as the minimum level of education for a young man and 2 out of every ten feel that a post-graduate degree is the minimum. Compared to the males, female respondents are slightly more inclined to see the need for higher levels of education for young men.

Those gender differences in opinion disappear when the subject of conversation is the education of young women. Gen-

**TABLE 3.7**  
**Male and Female Opinions on Least Amount of Schooling Needed by Young Men and Women in Singapore (In Percentages)**

Least Amount of Schooling a Young Man Needs in Singapore [a]	Males	Females	All
Primary school	5.1	3.4	4.2
Secondary school up to "O" level	42.6	39.9	41.1
Junior college or preuniversity, "A" levels	27.0	28.7	27.9
Polytechnic, technical college, IE	7.1	5.2	6.1
Post-graduate levels (higher degree)	18.2	22.8	20.7
Total* (N)	100.0 (747)	100.0 (858)	100.0 (1,605)
<b>Least Amount of Schooling a Young Woman Needs in Singapore [b]</b>			
Primary school	7.3	5.9	6.6
Secondary school up to "O" level	46.3	46.5	46.4
Junior college or preuniversity, "A" level	27.6	27.4	27.5
Polytechnic, technical college, IE	4.4	2.9	3.6
Post-graduate levels (higher degree)	14.3	17.2	15.8
Total* (N)	100.0 (749)	100.0 (860)	100.0 (1,609)

[a]  $p = .036$ ; Cramer's  $V = .080$ ;  $C = .079$

[b]  $p = .208$  (not statistically significant association)

\* There were 22 respondents who did not answer the question on the least amount of schooling for young men, and 18 who did not answer the question on young women.

erally speaking, of every ten respondents, nearly five think the minimum amount of schooling for women should be secondary school ("O" level); and about three think women should get at least the "A" level. These responses are rather similar to those obtained on the education of young men. Only a fraction of the respondents indicated that the least amount of schooling for young men or women should be primary school. Furthermore, there are no major differences in opinion on this matter among people of different levels of education, ethnic backgrounds, married or single people, younger or older adults. These figures reflect clearly the widespread realization of the importance of education and, in particular, the perceived need to attain at least secondary school education to be able to compete in Singapore's job market today.

#### Education and Attitudes about Self and the Community

Another aspect of the link between education and social class is the attitudes that people with different levels of education may have concerning their relations to others and their own position in the community's affairs. More specifically, in addition to the influence that education exerts upon one's chances to get a well-paid job, the exposure to formal education is expected to affect also one's attitudes towards others, towards the community and the role the individual plays in it.

This effect of the educational system upon the attitudes and values of the population has been widely discussed in the sociological literature. As Janowitz (1983:73-78) rightly indicates, the influence of the school goes well beyond skills-oriented syllabi, encompassing the explicit learning of the citizens' role in the nation-state as well as the implicit need for acculturation. Following the lead of Thomas and Znaniecki's study of Polish peasants in America (1920), Janowitz points to the conceptual distinction between acculturation and assimilation, a distinction which is rather relevant to Singapore:

Assimilation implies abandoning or rejecting one's cultural traditions and communal resources to accept completely a new set of values and norms. The assimilated Jew, for example, is no longer a Jew.

Acculturation is much more gradual and less drastic. It implies continuity with one's background but involves learning and internalizing key elements of the new society into which the migrant has moved. Acculturation can be extensive without assimilation. (1983:76).

Thus, in Singapore, as in many other modern societies, two of the main goals of education are: (a) shaping young people into citizens of the nation-state following the underlying acculturation premise of a national identity; and (b) training them as workers for the labour force. Some scholars consider these two goals contradictory in the sense that the school system imparts the values of an egalitarian, democratic nation while at the same time it helps to maintain the inequalities of the capitalist market (see, for example, Carnoy and Levin, 1985:144-145). In contrast, other analysts see compatibility in the goals of the educational system: the school is a potential vehicle to prepare young people "to deal with the dilemmas of an advanced, industrialized nation" (Janowitz, 1983:73) depending, of course, on the nature and content of the school curriculum. In his historical analysis of the educational system in the United States, Janowitz (1983:106-107) attributes the transition from acculturation to communalism and the revival of "ethnic/racial group consciousness" during the 1960s and 1970s, to the weakening of the school curriculum's pre-World War II emphasis on civic education.

The Singapore respondents' attitudes on self and the community will now be discussed against this conceptual background. It is argued that people with higher levels of education, and thus with a longer exposure to the educational system, will differ in attitudes from their counterparts with lower or no exposure to formal education. Table 3.8 presents a summary of the responses to ten statements geared to ascertain people's attitudes towards themselves and their place in the community. Basically, there is a slight but significant difference among people of different educational levels in eight of the ten attitudinal aspects in Table 3.8. Compared to the less educated, the better educated respondents are more inclined to see

**TABLE 3.8**  
Respondents' Attitudes Toward Self and the Community by Their Number of Years of Formal Education (In Percentages)

Attitudes	Years of Formal Education				
	0	1-6	7-12	13+	All
<b>1. People have different ideas on just how they fit into community affairs. Would you say you are [a]</b>					
No part of the community at all	7.8	5.4	5.2	2.1	5.5
Just an ordinary person in the community	84.5	80.3	69.1	67.7	75.2
A person who is active but not one of the decision-makers	4.9	8.6	16.6	22.9	12.4
A person who contributes to community decisions	2.8	5.8	9.1	7.3	6.9
Total* (N)	100.0 (283)	100.0 (502)	100.0 (734)	100.0 (96)	100.0 (1,615)
<b>2. Poor people have very slim chances of being heard in matters that affect the community. [b]</b>					
Disagree	28.5	35.7	36.7	45.4	35.4
Undecided	7.3	4.4	1.1	3.1	3.3
Agree	64.2	60.0	62.2	51.5	61.2
Total* (N)	100.0 (288)	100.0 (502)	100.0 (733)	100.0 (97)	100.0 (1,620)
<b>3. Rich people can get away with almost anything because of their money. [c]</b>					
Disagree	34.6	42.3	45.1	53.6	42.9
Undecided	6.3	5.0	1.9	5.2	3.8
Agree	59.1	52.7	53.0	41.2	53.3
Total** (N)	100.0 (286)	100.0 (503)	100.0 (732)	100.0 (97)	100.0 (1,618)

TABLE 3.8

Respondents' Attitudes Toward Self and the Community by Their Number of Years of Formal Education (In Percentages) (Continued)

Attitudes	Years of Formal Education				All
	0	1-6	7-12	13+	
<b>4. Would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be careful in dealing with people? [d]</b>					
Need to be careful	84.4	86.5	85.8	76.3	85.2
Can trust most people	15.6	13.5	14.2	23.7	14.8
Total* (N)	100.0 (288)	100.0 (503)	100.0 (732)	100.0 (97)	100.0 (1,620)
<b>5. Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves? [e]</b>					
People just look out for themselves	55.6	57.6	62.5	62.1	59.7
People try to be helpful	44.4	42.5	37.5	37.9	40.3
Total* (N)	100.0 (286)	100.0 (496)	100.0 (730)	100.0 (95)	100.0 (1,607)
<b>6. Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you or would they try to be fair? [f]</b>					
They would take advantage	42.4	44.9	51.2	47.9	47.5
They try to be fair	57.6	55.1	48.8	52.1	52.5
Total* (N)	100.0 (283)	100.0 (492)	100.0 (734)	100.0 (96)	100.0 (1,605)
<b>7. Becoming a success is a matter of hard work. Luck has little or nothing to do with it. [g]</b>					
Disagree	14.6	11.3	21.1	41.7	18.1
Undecided	3.5	2.8	2.4	1.0	2.7
Agree	81.9	85.9	76.5	57.3	79.2
Total* (N)	100.0 (287)	100.0 (503)	100.0 (736)	100.0 (96)	100.0 (1,622)

TABLE 3.8

Respondents' Attitudes Toward Self and the Community by Their Number of Years of Formal Education (In Percentages) (Continued)

Attitudes	Years of Formal Education				All
	0	1-6	7-12	13+	
<b>8. It is not always wise to plan too far ahead because many things turn out to be a matter of good or bad fortune anyway. [h]</b>					
Agree	48.8	47.3	48.8	33.0	47.4
Undecided	7.0	4.4	2.2	1.0	3.6
Disagree	44.2	48.3	49.0	66.0	49.0
Total* (N)	100.0 (285)	100.0 (503)	100.0 (735)	100.0 (97)	100.0 (1,620)
<b>9. People can learn more through working than going to school. [i]</b>					
Agree	51.2	58.0	57.8	50.5	56.3
Undecided	9.5	5.6	2.9	8.2	5.2
Disagree	39.3	36.5	39.3	41.2	38.5
Total* (N)	100.0 (285)	100.0 (502)	100.0 (735)	100.0 (97)	100.0 (1,619)
<b>10. Education enables us to make the best possible use of our lives. [j]</b>					
Disagree	2.4	4.6	5.3	1.0	4.3
Undecided	7.0	2.0	0.5	-	2.1
Agree	90.6	93.5	94.1	99.0	93.6
Total* (N)	100.0 (287)	100.0 (504)	100.0 (735)	100.0 (97)	100.0 (1,623)

[a] Significant but weak correlation:  $p = .00001$ ; Cramer's  $V = .115$ ; Contingency Coefficient  $C = .196$ .

[b]  $p = .00001$ ;  $V = .104$ ;  $C = .146$ .

[c]  $p = .0002$ ;  $V = .090$ ;  $C = .126$ .

[d]  $p = .068$  (not statistically significant)

[e]  $p = .133$  (not statistically significant)

[f]  $p = .039$ ;  $V = .072$ ;  $C = .071$ .

[g]  $p = .00001$ ;  $V = .134$ ;  $C = .187$ .

[h]  $p = .0001$ ;  $V = .092$ ;  $C = .129$ .

[i]  $p = .0008$ ;  $V = .084$ ;  $C = .118$ .

[j]  $p = .00001$ ;  $V = .124$ ;  $C = .173$ .



[\*]The number of respondents in each item varies slightly because the total excludes those who did not answer the respective questions. To simplify the presentation of findings, in all items recording the degree of agreement, the answers "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree" have been combined with the answers "agree" and "disagree", respectively.

themselves as people who contribute to community decisions; are more likely to believe that poor people have good chances to do the same; more likely to disagree that rich people "can get away with almost anything because of their money"; more inclined to see "luck" as part of their success but more likely to accept that planning for the future is important; and more inclined to believe that "education enables us to make the best possible use of our lives".

The first three items in Table 3.8 address the person's sense of control over community affairs and, as expected, in all three instances people with no or low formal education manifest a lower sense of control. However, these attitudinal differences found when educational levels are considered, are not detected when occupational prestige is analyzed: respondents in different types of occupations tend to agree on the weaker power of poor people compared to the rich, as discussed in the next chapter on occupational prestige and occupational structure. Education, or the lack of it, appears to play a more important part in shaping people's sense of control in community affairs.

On the other hand, both education and occupational prestige are associated in the same way to the sense of a person's self-direction as ascertained by the answers to items 7 and 8 in Table 3.8. The impact of occupational prestige is discussed in detail in Chapter Four. Here the focus is on education: the higher one's educational level, the more inclined one is to acknowledge that "luck" is part of the formula for success. While 81.9 per cent of the respondents with no formal education believe that "success is a matter of hard work" and that "Luck has little or nothing to do with it", only 57.3 per cent of those with post-secondary education agree. The better educated are more ready to accept that success involves more than just hard work while the less educated tend to believe more completely in the well-advertised fruits of hard work. This trend

must be seen in connection with the attitudes towards forward planning: 48.8 per cent of respondents with no formal education believe that "it is not wise to plan too far ahead because many things turn out to be a matter of good or bad fortune anyway". In contrast, only 33 per cent of the respondents with post-secondary education agree with that statement; the majority of this educated group, i.e., 66 per cent, believe in the wisdom of forward planning. Seen together, the answers to these two items indicate that although the better educated respondents appreciate that "luck" is an ingredient of success, they also know that a more important element is planning for the future.

Items 9 and 10 in Table 3.8 focus on the respondents' perception of education and reveal an interesting perspective. Concerning item 9, the majority of the respondents (56.3 per cent) feel that "people can learn more through working than going to school". But, at the same time, the overwhelming majority (93.6 per cent) agree that "education enables us to make the best possible use of our lives" (item 10). This is another manifestation of the pragmatic attitude of Singaporeans towards education, discussed earlier in this chapter. People recognize the value of work experience and on-the-job training in the process of learning a trade or acquiring skills. Indeed, the largest percentage of respondents agreeing with item 9 is found among respondents who have attained only primary school education or a secondary school diploma and who learned their trade as workers in specific jobs. On the other hand, education has been hailed in Singapore as one of the main paths to national and individual progress. It is then not surprising that the intrinsic value of education is acknowledged by most but, particularly, by people with post-secondary education.

The impact of education upon some attitudes towards self and the community is supported by the preceding figures. Now, the other important question to ask in the context of our multi-ethnic society is: Do these attitudes towards self and the community differ among the different ethnic communities and, if they do, does education play a part in minimizing such differences? Chapter Seven discusses in detail the ethnic dimension of social class in Singapore, but at this juncture the

role of education must be explored, albeit briefly, in terms of the assumption that schools and a national curriculum foster acculturation in a multi-ethnic society.

Taking the first part of the question first, all the attitudes ascertained by means of the ten items in Table 3.8 vary significantly from one ethnic group to another.<sup>7</sup> A comparison of the three main ethnic groups' responses to those items according to the number of years of formal education of the respondent, confirms the trend reported earlier: the attitudinal differences across ethnic lines tend to weaken or disappear as the exposure to formal education increases. More specifically, the ten items presented in Table 3.8 unveil ethnic differences among people with no formal education, or with 1 to 12 years of education; but such differences among Chinese, Malays and Indians of the same educational level, tend to diminish considerably among people with post-secondary education.<sup>8</sup>

The postulate put forward by Janowitz (1983:73-78) on the role of education in fostering acculturation appears to be supported by the data on the respondents' attitudes towards self and the community, with two qualifications. Firstly, it is among the highest educated population that acculturation (or the learning and internalizing of common values and goals) is clearly manifested. Secondly, the sample in this study is a cross-section of the population of adults and, thus, most of the respondents with no education or only primary education are in their late forties or older (see Tables 3.3 and 3.4), as a result of the lower opportunities for formal education during the colonial and war periods. In contrast, the current generation of school children may, perhaps, manifest a stronger tendency towards shared values when they reach adulthood, considering the improved educational methods and emphasis on civic education in our schools today.

## EDUCATION AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

In the analysis of education and its role in shaping people's attitudes and behaviour, the final aspect to be explored in this chapter is the possible link between educational attainment and the formation of social networks as "distinct units of social

structure" (Gottlieb, 1981:11). It is assumed that people tend to move in social circles comprising others with similar attributes and, that in Singapore today, educational level may be one of the key common attributes shared by close social networks particularly those involving spouses and close friends.

The analysis of educational attainment and its influence upon the formation of social networks will be conducted in two steps. The first step is to explore the situation "before" adult social networks are formed, that is, the influence of parental level of education upon the subject's own level of education. The second step is to examine the situation "after" adult social networks are formed and investigate whether the selection of marriage partner and best friend may be influenced by one's level of education. This "before" and "after" analysis will be cautious as the time dimension here is implied, not real. On the other hand, the comparisons will be straightforward i.e., checking for the existence of correlations among a set of four variables namely, the number of years of formal education of the respondent, his or her parents, spouse, and best friend.

### Parental Education

At the beginning of this chapter the work of Cicourel and Mehan (1985) was mentioned concerning their position vis-à-vis the two main perspectives on the effects of education upon social mobility. One of these perspectives argues that it is the school which is the main vehicle of social mobility, while followers of the other perspective see the family as the main influence. Cicourel and Mehan (1985) see both influences acting together but, they correctly declared that there is no sufficient evidence to settle the controversy just yet.

Their ideas are relevant as this point where the main question is on the role of parents' level of education in Singapore. Three assumptions must precede this discussion of the Singapore figures: (a) job attainment in Singapore is primarily based on educational qualifications; (b) the high regard people have for formal education (as suggested by the answers to item 10 in Table 3.8) may be manifested in parental encouragement and support received by children to attend and complete their

school education; and (c) the higher the educational level of the parents, the stronger the encouragement and support they give to their children to advance in educational attainment. If these assumptions are correct, then the influence of the family on a person's educational attainment and social mobility would be strong.

Regarding the first assumption, Singapore's emphasis on meritocratic principles in employment may be verified by the pattern set in the civil service's recruitment exercises, which the private sector tends to emulate. There are no direct data available to support the second assumption, but the third assumption on the influence of parental level of education is corroborated by the figures in Table 3.9 (see further data in Chapter Eight). This table illustrates the association between father's and mother's level of education with that of male and female respondents.

The parental level of education has a significant positive influence upon the children's educational attainment. However, such influence, although positive, is not uniform. Two interesting features are observed when father's and mother's educational levels are analysed in terms of their effects upon sons' and daughters' educational attainment. The first feature is the stronger influence of the fathers' educational level on the sons' ( $r = .297$ ) and daughters' ( $r = .352$ ) educational attainment compared to that of the mother's ( $r = .284$  and  $r = .328$  respectively). This is an expected outcome as the father's, more than the mother's, educational level is a manifestation of his earning capacity which, in turn, determines in no small measure the family's standard of living and the family's capacity to provide financial support for the education of the children.

The second feature is perhaps more noteworthy: parental education plays a more important part in the educational attainment of daughters than in that of sons, as indicated by the values of the Pearson's correlation coefficients in Table 3.9. This feature is interesting because it corroborates the findings from other studies. In the context of an Asian society such as Singapore, the preponderance given to sons over daughters in the family is well known. In the Singapore part of the crossnational study on

TABLE 3.9  
Years of Formal Education of Male and Female Respondents by Their Parents' Years of Formal Education (In Percentages)

Respondents Years of Formal Education	Father's Years of Formal Education				All
	0	1-6	7-12	13+	
<b>Male Respondents*</b>					
No formal education (0)	10.8	4.2	1.6	-	7.3
1 to 6 years	38.7	34.7	13.6	16.7	33.1
7 to 12 years	46.8	53.1	69.6	33.3	52.1
13 years or more	3.7	8.0	15.2	50.0	7.5
Total (N)	100.0 (406)	100.0 (213)	100.0 (125)	100.0 (12)	100.0 (756)
<b>Female Respondents**</b>					
No formal education (0)	39.5	17.2	6.7	-	26.8
1 to 6 years	27.9	37.5	20.8	16.7	29.4
7 to 12 years	30.1	41.2	61.7	71.4	39.3
13 years or more	2.5	4.1	10.7	28.6	4.6
Total (N)	100.0 (448)	100.0 (267)	100.0 (149)	100.0 (7)	100.0 (871)
<b>Mother's Years of Formal Education</b>					
	0	1-6	7-12	13+	All
<b>Male Respondents***</b>					
No formal education (0)	9.2	2.1	-	-	7.3
1 to 6 years	38.6	17.7	15.2	-	33.1
7 to 12 years	47.3	68.1	63.0	50.0	52.1
13 years or more	5.0	12.1	21.7	50.0	7.5
Total (N)	100.0 (565)	100.0 (141)	100.0 (46)	100.0 (4)	100.0 (756)

**TABLE 3.9**  
**Years of Formal Education of Male and Female Respondents by Their Parents' Years of Formal Education (In Percentages) (Continued)**

Respondents' Years of Formal Education	Mother's Years of Formal Education				All
	0	1-6	7-12	13+	
<b>Female Respondents****</b>					
No formal education (0)	39.2	7.9	-	-	26.8
1 to 6 years	29.8	35.7	8.9	-	29.4
7 to 12 years	34.3	50.7	69.6	100.0	39.3
13 years or more	3.0	5.7	21.4	-	4.6
Total (N)	100.0 (674)	100.0 (140)	100.0 (56)	100.0 (1)	100.0 (871)

\* Pearson's  $r = .297$ ;  $p = .00001$

\*\* Pearson's  $r = .352$ ;  $p = .00001$

\*\*\* Pearson's  $r = .284$ ;  $p = .00001$

\*\*\*\* Pearson's  $r = .328$ ;  $p = .00001$

the value of children, conducted between 1975 and 1977, it was found that sons were preferred over daughters and that sons were more likely than daughters to be expected to contribute to the financial support of the family (Chen, Kuo and Chung, 1982:40-44). A similar preference for sons over daughters was also reported among Koreans, Taiwanese, Japanese, Filipinos and Thais in the other country studies of the value of children project (Arnold et al., 1975:64-65). While it is common to associate such value patterns with Asian cultures, the greater status given to males over females in the family is a phenomenon of much wider proportions. In their analysis of data from Western countries, Delphy and Leonard indicate that the main principle "justifying" this gender stratification may be the belief that a woman's labour produces lower financial returns and that the traditional male role of breadwinner is usually seen as more prestigious (1986: 62-63).

The Singapore figures showing that parental education has a greater impact on the daughters' compared to the sons' educational attainment, are easier to understand against that back-

ground. Parents tend to exert a greater control over daughters than over sons; and parents with no formal education or low educational attainment are, on the whole, more likely to subscribe to the traditional belief that daughters do not need formal education or a high educational level. More educated parents, on the other hand, are more inclined to see the importance of educating their daughters. The data suggest that the parental position on this aspect is important as daughters depend more than sons on their parents' support to get an education.

### Spouse's Education

The second step in the analysis of the influence of social networks involves the aspect of spouse's education. More specifically, it is pertinent to investigate to what extent a person's level of education influences his or her "choice" of spouse. The term "choice" must be used with caution as in real life, many factors are involved in one's decision to marry a particular person. Nevertheless, the level of education of the potential spouse may be one of such factors, at the very least, on grounds of propinquity: people tend to interact and establish relationships with people whom they meet in their fields of daily activity. The data on the association between the respondents' and their spouses' educational attainment are presented in Table 3.10 overleaf.

The majority of the respondents (72.9 per cent of the men and 82.8 per cent of the women) were or had been married at the time of the interview. Only a fraction of the ever-married respondents were separated, divorced or widowed (2.5 per cent of the ever-married men and 11.2 per cent of the ever-married women, most of the latter widows). Table 3.10 covers all the ever-married respondents and illustrates an important aspect of the influence of education in the formation of the most intimate of social networks, the one based on marriage. Both men and women are decidedly inclined to marry partners who share their educational qualifications. The correlations between the educational attainment of male respondents and their wives' ( $r = .598$ ) and of female respondents and their husbands' ( $r = .601$ ) is stronger than the association between the respondents'

**TABLE 3.10**  
Years of Formal Education of Ever-Married Male and Female Respondents by Their Spouses' Years of Formal Education (In Percentages)

Spouse's Years of Formal Education	Respondent's Years of Formal Education				All
	0	1-6	7-12	13+	
<b>Spouses of Male Respondents*</b>					
No formal education (0)	76.5	31.1	10.6	5.4	24.2
1 to 6 years	21.6	54.8	27.6	2.7	35.6
7 to 12 years	2.0	13.9	59.4	59.5	36.9
13 years or more	-	-	2.4	32.4	3.3
Total (N)	100.0 (51)	100.0 (208)	100.0 (254)	100.0 (37)	100.0 (550)
<b>Spouses of Female Respondents**</b>					
No formal education (0)	28.9	13.1	3.5	-	14.3
1 to 6 years	56.9	38.9	11.0	-	33.6
7 to 12 years	14.2	47.5	75.6	33.3	46.6
13 years or more	-	0.5	9.8	66.7	5.5
Total (N)	100.0 (225)	100.0 (221)	100.0 (254)	100.0 (21)	100.0 (721)

\* Pearson's  $r = .598$ ;  $p = .00001$

\*\* Pearson's  $r = .601$ ;  $p = .00001$

and their parents' level of education (see Table 3.9).

As the sample included people from various ethnic communities which are known to differ in their customary approach to spouse selection, the strong association found in the total sample between the respondent's education and that of his or her spouse; was tested among the sub-samples of Chinese, Malay and Indian ever-married respondents. The same statistically significant ( $p = .0001$ ) correlation persisted in all three groups although it was stronger among the Chinese ( $r = .592$ ) than among the Indians ( $r = .482$ ) and the Malays ( $r = .436$ ). These figures suggest that whatever the process of spouse selection (whether it is based on romantic love or arranged marriages or any other system), there is a very high probability that a person

will marry someone of his or her same level of education.

Moreover, contrary to a popular notion, this trend towards the marriage of educational equals is not new. As illustrated in Table 3.11, the parents of the adult sample in this study presented the same pattern. They provide a glimpse of the importance of education in mate selection during the first half of this century in Singapore.

The implications of these findings for social mobility should not be overlooked. With the marriage of educational equals as the main trend; with the educational background of parents influencing the educational attainment of children; and with educational qualifications as the main vehicle for higher income and occupational status, then a certain degree of "social immobility" or perpetuation of the social classes is to be expected. Under these conditions, children of illiterate parents, or of parents with low education, face a herculean task staying in school and competing to succeed in the educational system with the children of educated parents. The latter group typically enjoy a more conducive family environment where verbal communication, access to books and the habit of reading are all part of everyday family life together with the inculcation of the value of education. These are aspects that Jencks (1972:159) called "elusive noneconomic differences between families" in his detailed study of the effect of family and schooling in the

**TABLE 3.11**  
Years of Formal Education of the Respondents' Parents\* (In Percentages)

Mother's Years of Formal Education	Father's Years of Formal Education				All
	0	1-6	7-12	13+	
No formal education (0)	95.9	63.5	40.5	21.1	76.2
1 to 6 years	3.3	35.0	30.7	5.3	17.3
7 to 12 years	0.8	1.5	28.5	52.6	6.3
13 years or more	-	-	0.4	21.1	0.3
Total (N)	100.0 (854)	100.0 (480)	100.0 (274)	100.0 (19)	100.0 (1,627)

\* Pearson's  $r = .562$ ;  $p = .00001$

United States. He found that "the most important determinant of educational attainment is family background" (1972:158-159).

How can children of uneducated or poorly educated parents be helped to compete fairly in the educational system? The schools may be part of the answer and Jencks' suggestion is thus relevant to Singapore: his research indicated that the school's curriculum and, particularly, the school's certification system are important. When "credentials are distributed entirely on the basis of grades" instead of on the basis of standardized tests, the advantage of the middle-class students over their lower-class counterparts is significantly reduced (Jencks, 1972:159-160).

#### Best Friend's Education

The final aspect to be explored concerning the link between education and social networks involves friends. The respondent's best friend was the subject of conversation during the interviews, after the relevant information on his or her spouse and parents were recorded. The definition of "best friend" was left entirely to the respondent and was not discussed. Instead, the respondent was asked about the main activity, occupation, place of work, educational attainment and other relevant characteristics of his or her best friend.

Table 3.12 presents the figures on the association between the respondents' and their best friends' educational attainment. There are two features of these findings that deserve special attention. One such feature is the unmistakable influence of educational background upon the establishment of close friendship: a person's close friend is most likely to be someone with similar educational qualifications. This is an expected finding due to the well-known principle that friendship is established on the basis of sharing common interests.

The second special feature identified in Table 3.12 is the difference between the friendship networks of men and women. The correlation between the educational attainment of the respondent and that of his or her best friend is significant and rather strong in both cases, but it is stronger for women ( $r = .645$ ) than for men ( $r = .505$ ). As most men hold jobs outside

**TABLE 3.12**  
Years of Formal Education of Male and Female Respondents by Years of Formal Education of their Best Friend (In Percentages)

Respondent's Years of Formal Education	Best Friend's Years of Formal Education				All
	0	1-6	7-12	13+	
<b>Male Respondents*</b>					
No formal education (0)	26.2	5.8	2.4	-	7.3
1 to 6 years	37.6	69.5	22.1	8.2	33.1
7 to 12 years	34.0	24.7	69.7	54.1	52.1
13 years or more	2.1	-	5.9	37.6	7.5
Total (N)	100.0 (141)	100.0 (154)	100.0 (376)	100.0 (85)	100.0 (756)
<b>Female Respondents**</b>					
No formal education (0)	58.2	27.9	6.3	1.9	26.8
1 to 6 years	27.5	57.5	20.8	3.8	29.4
7 to 12 years	13.9	14.5	69.4	45.3	39.3
13 years or more	0.4	-	3.6	49.1	4.6
Total (N)	100.0 (273)	100.0 (179)	100.0 (366)	100.0 (53)	100.0 (871)

\* Pearson's  $r = .505$ ;  $p = .00001$

\*\* Pearson's  $r = .645$ ;  $p = .00001$

the home while most women do not, the social networks of men are understandably more varied while those of the women tend to be more homogeneous. Nevertheless, the main trend for both sexes is to select close friends within a narrow circle of educational equals.

The implications of this trend are the same as those drawn from the findings on parental educational and spouse selection. More specifically, the findings outline a situation whereby people tend to move within confined social networks, the boundaries of which are determined, among other things, by a shared educational background and hence, by similar social class position. Such a situation has been documented so extensively in other nations that it has become one of the universal

premises in sociology. This study confirms that the Singapore society is not different from others in this respect. Yet, these findings need to be highlighted here because it is popularly assumed that there are no major social class distinctions among Singaporeans.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has identified some of the numerous sociological questions about the role of formal education, reviewed the relevant figures on educational qualifications of the population at large, and presented the findings from this study on two specific questions of interest: "How important people think that educational attainment is for the purpose of moving up the social ladder?" and "What is the link between a person's educational attainment and his or her social network of parents, spouse and friends?"

Concerning the first question, it has been found that people are inclined to see education more as an important instrument of social mobility than as a symbol of social class in itself. Moreover, the different perceptions of education found across ethnic groups among people with no or low formal education weakened or disappeared among people with higher education. This particular influence of education is confirmed by the analysis of the respondents' attitudes towards their positions in the community, thus suggesting that in Singapore, as in other modern and multi-ethnic societies, exposure to higher levels of formal education fosters acculturation.

The findings on the link between education and the formation of social networks suggest that Singapore shares a situation of class homogeneity in social networks similar to that found in other modern societies. People are likely to have the same educational qualifications as their parents, spouses and best friends. This means that their social networks are made up of people from the same social class which, in turn, implies a low level of close interaction with people from other social classes. This is a phenomenon found in most modern and traditional nations and is one of the most informative findings from this study with reference to Singapore. Our findings indicate in

various ways that there are distinct social classes in Singapore, thus dispelling the myth of Singapore as a one class ("middle-class") society.

Finally, this chapter has dealt with selective aspects of education and, hence, it provides only a partial view of the possible influence of formal education upon the attitudes, values and actions of individuals and upon the nation's social and economic development as a whole. The preceding discussion was undertaken in the hope of eliciting interest in the subject and fostering further sociological research. Singaporeans have striven, as a nation, to follow the principle of educational meritocracy in their development plans. It is thus crucial to keep an eye on how this principle is working and on the improvement of everyone's chance to attain higher education.

## NOTES

- 1 Lines from a poem written by the Emperor Chen-tung praising the importance of education. This poem was quoted by Ichisada Miyazaki in his 1963 book on the Chinese Examination system. See Miyazaki (1981:17).
- 2 The Pearson's correlation coefficient for the association between number of years of formal education with personal monthly income is  $r = .5084$ ; and with occupational prestige (SOPS)  $r = .4444$  and (RAOS)  $r = .4052$ . All three coefficients are significant at  $p = .00001$ .
- 3 This is said with caution. It is difficult to ascertain precisely the gains obtained in educational attainment for the population for any given budgetary investment, particularly because such gains vary from country to country. For example, a recent study of the United States educational system revealed that "expenditures are unrelated to school performance as schools are currently operated" (Brimelow, 1986:76).
- 4 The link between educational level, personal income and occupational prestige is strong, as indicated in footnote 2 and discussed further in the chapter on status attainment. Furthermore, the factor analyses of the variables in this study confirmed that "highest level of education completed" forms part of the same social class dimension with "gross personal monthly income" and occupational prestige as measured by the respondent's "abbreviated occupational scale". The respective factor loadings in a varimax rotated matrix were: .7313 (REDUC); .6873 (RINCOME); and -.7003 (RAOS). The same pattern is obtained when using different indicators of these variables such as years of education (RSCHYR), total household gross income per month (HSEINCOM), the Singapore Occupational Prestige Score (SOPS) or the Singapore NORC score (SNORC).
- 5 A variety of other class symbols were mentioned by rather small numbers of people: "race, ethnicity or cast" (1.0 per cent); "family name or status" (5.0 per cent); "way of dressing" (0.5 per cent); "place of residence or type of house" (2.2 per cent); "amount of power and influence" (0.4 per cent);

and an assortment of other aspects (6.0 per cent). Only 2.1 per cent (34) of the respondents did not answer this question.

- 6 There was a significant correlation (at  $p = .00001$ ) between the perception of social class symbols and ethnic group among respondents with no formal education as well as among those with 1 to 12 years of schooling. However, the strength of such correlation weakened and finally disappeared as the respondents' level of education increased as indicated by the Contingency Coefficient (C) and Cramer's V tests below:

Level of Education	C	V
No formal education	.468	.306
1-6 years	.456	.296
7-12 years	.360	.222
13 years or more	No significant correlation	

The variable ethnicity in these correlations includes the group "Others".

- 7 The following table shows the level of significance ( $p$ ) obtained when assessing the correlation between ethnicity and every one of the ten items in Table 3.8 and the changes observed in the same correlation when the number of years of education is controlled ( $p$  is considered significant at a value of .05 or less):

	Ethnicity	Controlling for Education			
		0	1-6	7-12	13+
Item 1	.00001	.222	.0001	.00001	.295
Item 2	.00001	.142	.00001	.403	.492
Item 3	.0083	.087	.0002	.761	.203
Item 4	.00001	.095	.0001	.0002	.354
Item 5	.00001	.141	.0189	.0105	.682
Item 6	.00001	.0096	.0012	.00001	.251
Item 7	.00001	.0224	.0131	.007	.214
Item 8	.00001	.0011	.0010	.152	.109
Item 9	.000001	.00001	.00001	.00001	.105
Item 10	.00001	.002	.002	.280	*

\*No statistics could be calculated as there was complete uniformity in the responses: all respondents with post-secondary education from the three ethnic groups agree that "education enables us to make the best possible use of our lives".

- 8 The association between ethnicity and these ten attitudinal items was ascertained by means of several tests. Chi-square was used as the principal test as it applies clearly to correlations where nominal variables are involved. The other test used was ETA which is applicable when the dependent variable is interval and the independent variable is nominal or ordinal. The strength of significant correlations was ascertained by means of the Cramer's V test and the Contingency Coefficient C. The same tests were used when the correlation between ethnicity and attitudes was explored for every one of the four educational groups as indicated in footnote 7.

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