

Stories from the Birthday Book 2018

Observations on the way from working class to middle class

Being able to bear the cost of making mistakes is a luxury that not everyone can afford

Jamie Tan

At midnight, I stood at the payphone, the black plastic receiver pressed tight to my ear to catch every word from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The voice on the line was friendly and warm. She had such a strong American accent that I marvelled she could decipher my flat tones. After I hung up, I felt like I was hallucinating, the warm American voice still ringing in my head while I stood in shorts and slippers in the cool silence of the void deck, in a blazing strip of light under dark, sleeping HDB flats.

It was my first overseas call; I had prepared a \$10 phone card. This was 1996. I would set up my first e-mail account later that year, as a freshman in university.

Because of my own experience, I believed in the meritocratic nature of Singapore's education system, and how it made society more equal. It was astonishing that the daughter of a taxi driver could at-

tend an Ivy League institution, with its eye-watering fees. If I had been born to a taxi driver in China or a bus driver in Cambodia, would my journey to an Ivy League university even have been possible, let alone so smooth and uneventful?

Earlier in 1996, however, the taxi driver's daughter had had an argument with her parents. She had not wanted the full ride to the Ivy League institution offered by the government; instead, she had wanted the nearly full ride offered by a non-Ivy League institution. The parents had two younger children; they did not know whether they could, or should try to, afford the balance of the non-government scholarship option. The daughter, who was smart enough to receive full-ride scholarship offers, was not smart enough to understand the household's financial circumstances.

So I took the government scholarship. It was a bad decision from the start, and also wasn't. It was a bad decision because I accepted it for the wrong reasons, and I had ample years to regret my foolishness. It

was a good decision because I learnt my lesson thoroughly – that I must live the consequences of all my decisions. It was a good decision because it was a mistake and I learnt how to live with mistakes. It was a good decision because I realised that mistakes are how you see them. Once you have learnt how to make better, wiser decisions, what previously seemed like a mistake can be seen as an opportunity to learn.

There are actually no mistakes, I wanted to tell my own students in later years. They are all opportunities to learn.

What was my mistake in 1996? I was financially naive; I did not even know my family's household income. I can rectify that now in hindsight but, in 1996, I barely knew what I didn't know. How are some 16-year-olds financially savvy and some not? Had I failed to read enough books on financial literacy? (There was no Google in 1996.) If parents did not share and schools did not teach, who could have told me, "Eh, come, you should know about financial planning".

In Singapore, many discussions speak of middle-class families' ability to pay for private tuition as a significant advantage. Having grown up working-class and moved into

the middle-class – the result of Singapore's meritocratic education system and the scholarship I had accepted so ungraciously – I believe that less visible advantages are as important.

In Secondary 2, we were working on a project at a classmate's house when she realised that her recording microphone was faulty. All of 14 years old, she did something I had never seen my own parents do – she called the company, informed them that their equipment was faulty and that they should fix it. The confidence with which she handled the world dumbfounded me.

This is similar to what a 2012 New York Times article called, in the context of higher education, the affluent's "advocacy edge". According to sociologist Annette Lareau: "Middle-class students get the sense the institution will respond to them... Working-class and poor students don't experience that." In my experience, confidence and ease in dealing with institutions extends beyond education. Middle-class parents make policies and their children learn by watching.

These advantages carry over to job interviews. Middle-class children have their parents' social capital as a resource. Interviewers pick up candidates' cultural cues and hire those who look like them and who fit the company culture. Associate Professor Lauren A. Rivera, author of *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*, wrote: "Class-biased definitions of fit are one reason investment banks, management consulting firms and law firms are dominated by people from the highest socio-economic backgrounds."

Every time I offer my own children the support that a middle-class parent can – help with maths problems; explaining the Latin roots of words; my social network – at the back of my mind I wonder how my children's working-class classmates can access the same sup-

port. Like the interviewers, I am invested in those who look like me – how could I have known then? How can they know now?

Because I believed in the meritocratic nature of Singapore's education system, and how it made society more equal, I did feel quite foolish upon realising that the system that had worked for me was in fact entrenching social stratification.

It's not as if I hadn't seen the signs myself, as a 12-year-old joining an elite school, where the socio-economic make-up was clearly different from my primary school's. My classmates went skiing. I don't think I even knew what skiing was.

I am grateful for the work done by several researchers, including Associate Professor Teo You Yenn, in establishing that our education system perpetuates social inequality instead of ameliorating it, in asking for a policy review, and for actors in it to be conscious of how their own choices might contribute to the problem. To improve social equality, helping lower-income children and families gain access to social capital, social networks, and an insider's understanding of how institutional systems work will also be important.

When I wanted to tell my students that there was no such thing as a mistake, I think I spoke as someone who had moved into the middle class.

Mistakes are costly; the middle class can bear this cost more easily. As Prof Teo wrote in *The Straits Times* in 2016: "People with extra money and social capital can mitigate the consequences of 'bad' choices, but people without those buffers face severe consequences over time... It is not 'bad choices' per se that are the problem. They have limited options and face especially negative consequences when they make missteps."

Perhaps this explains why my parents were reluctant to fund the balance of the nearly full-ride, non-Ivy League scholarship. The cost of a po-

tential misstep here was too high for them to take on without the buffers of the middle class.

The safety net, the ability and freedom to make mistakes, is so important.

In their book *Art & Fear: Observations On The Perils (And Rewards) Of Artmaking*, authors David Bayles and Ted Orland relate the experience of a ceramics class where half the class was asked to produce pots in quantity while the rest were asked to produce one perfect pot. They wrote: "...came grading time and a curious fact emerged: The works of highest quality were all produced by the group being graded for quantity. It seems that while the 'quantity' group was busily churning out piles of work – and learning from their mistakes – the 'quality' group had sat theorising about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay."

Being able to make mistakes and learn from them – being able to afford the cost of learning in effect – is a luxury that at present only the middle class seem to possess (and they don't seem to be taking full advantage of that – but that is another story).

I believe in the goal to make the education system work as well for disadvantaged students as it did for the rest of us, for it to bring greater equality, not wider divides. With that, I hope that the luxury of mistakes will be available to all, not just some – that we can all afford failure and the cost of the lessons we have to learn.

• Jamie Tan (a project manager at SIM) studied literature at the University of Pennsylvania. After teaching for a few years, she stepped out of the classroom to see a school from other angles. She worked in business development, helped to set up new schools, learnt what made a good school, and how to make good ideas viable.