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ADDRESS BY DR TAY ENG SOON, MINISTER OF STATE FOR EDUCATION AT
THE ALUMNI DINNER OF THE ALUMNI INTERNATIONAL AT THE MANDARIN
HOTEL ON FRIDAY, 27 NOVEMBER 1981 AT 7.30 PM

When I accepted your invitation to tonight's dinner and asked your President on what he thought I should speak, he did what many of my colleagues and I dread most. He gave me carte blanche. Of course in doing so, he was taking a risk on your behalf! When a friend of mine heard that I was going to be in the Ministry of Education, he sympathised with me and said that I would soon have many parents after me because every parent who has a child at school would have an opinion on education.

I am sure by now you have guessed that I am going to talk about education. I want to talk about a familiar subject but one which has been raised with me at many gatherings that I attended and which obviously still worries some people. This is the subject of streaming. As you know, we have streaming in our schools at two points - at the end of Primary 3 when pupils are streamed into the Normal, Extended or Monolingual streams before they go into Primary 4, and at the end of Primary 6 after their PSLE when they are streamed into essentially the Normal and Express streams at Secondary I.

The reasons for streaming are well-known and were the subject of an extensive debate in Parliament in 1979 when the New Education Policy following the Goh Keng Swee Report was being introduced. All educationists and many parents have always recognised that in any large group of pupils, there is always a wide variation of abilities, ranging from slow learners at one end to the intellectually well-endowed at the other. There is of course still some debate about this, but most psychologists agreed today

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that this spread of abilities is endowed by nature and only secondarily affected by social and economic factors. In fact Prof Eysenck, the well-known British psychologist estimates that nature or heredity accounts for at least 80 per cent of a person's ability endowment.

The dilemma that all educationists have to face is how to provide an educational course which can cater for the full spread of our pupils' abilities. In fact there is no satisfactory way to run a course which simultaneously copes with the slow as well as the fast learners. You will end up either penalising the slow learners by making the course too difficult for them or the fast learners by making it too easy for them.

Up to 1976, we had a single broad stream which tried to do just that. In reality, the course was catering for the average and above average pupils. The result was to be expected. Those at the lower end became chronic failures because they could not keep up. But up to 1976, we had automatic promotion and those who failed simply went up from one level to the next until they finally reached Primary 6. There they failed again and had to leave school. As you can imagine, the literacy level of these premature school leavers was very low.

From 1976, automatic promotion was stopped. Those who failed were retained. But if they failed a few times and became overaged, they had to join another stream called the Basic stream. This Basic stream was the fore runner of our present Monolingual stream. Pupils in the Basic stream were provided with a much simpler syllabus, the aim of which was to give them basic literacy and numeracy. Obviously, the system after 1976 was better than the automatic promotion system in that at least the slow learners went to a course which was better tailored to them.

One weakness of the Basic stream system was that the pupil had to fail many times and be overaged before he was transferred to the Basic stream by which time his morale was extremely low. This brings me to the further reforms which were introduced after the Goh Report in 1979.

In the new system, as I said earlier, all pupils are streamed at the end of Primary 3 into the Normal, Extended and Monolingual streams. It is this which I would now like to explain in more detail because some parents and teachers have expressed to me their grave anxieties about it.

Basically, they have raised two objections to streaming at Primary 3. The first is that it is too early to stream pupils. Secondly, there is the basic objection to streaming and the acute anxiety of some parents that their children will be streamed when they reached Primary 3. I want to talk about these two problems because there are still doubts in some people's minds and it is right that their doubts should be answered.

Is streaming at Primary 3 too early? Pupils who are now placed in the Monolingual stream have in all cases a track record of failure in Primary 1, 2 and 3 that is they are manifestly weak pupils who are not coping with their course. The question then is this. We have a weak pupil. Should we leave him in the normal course for another two or three years and stream him later? Or should we place him in the Monolingual course at Primary 3 so that he can start immediately on a more simplified and more achievable course better suited to him? If we take the first approach and delay streaming till he is older, how will it help him? Having failed in Primary 1, 2 and 3, he will most certainly fail again in the higher levels. So what will we achieve by delaying streaming? Obviously, early rather than late streaming will help those who are not coping with the normal course.

Advocates against streaming always talk about late developers and cite Einstein and Churchill as examples. Let me say first of all that Einstein and Churchill had superbly intelligent minds. They were late developers because they were in humdrum school environments in which they were bored stiff. I was told by the Israelis during my recent trip that very bright pupils need a much more stimulating and strenuous course. They can sometimes lose interest when given a normal course. But those who are affected by streaming in our schools are at the other end of the scale. They are struggling to keep up with the normal course and fail each year. I am not aware of a single case of such a slow learner who somehow becomes a fast learner sometime later.

Is streaming wrong? When we had automatic promotion, there was no streaming. But the system concealed those who could not cope only to throw them out after Primary 6. With streaming at Primary 3, those who cannot cope are given a new chance in a less demanding course to become literate. I know that some teachers have heartburn because they hate to have to stream pupils under their care. It goes against their instincts.

None of us wants to fail anyone. But streaming to the Monolingual Stream should be seen not as failure but in its true light, ie to give the struggling learner a new and better chance to become literate. Previously when there were failures under automatic promotion, no one had heartburn over it despite the dreadful fate of the failures. This was because they were concealed until they reached Primary 6 and then they left their school.

Finally, I must allay the anxieties of those parents who fear that their children will somehow be streamed to the Monolingual stream at Primary 3. First of all, parents should realise that only about 10 per cent of all pupils are placed in the Monolingual stream. The figure of 10 per cent is consistent with what numerous studies in the UK and elsewhere have shown that around 10-15 per cent of all pupils can be classified as slow learners. So the parent who is anxious for his child should ask if he believes his child is among the 10 per cent.

Those who are finally streamed to the Monolingual course would first of all have a track record of failure in Primary 1, 2 and 3. When they fail Primary 3, they are given a second achievement test to make doubly sure that they have been correctly assessed. If they fail this test the school then recommends to the parents that the child should join the Monolingual stream on the evidence of his performance. The final choice lies with the parents. Most accept the recommendation. But a few refuse to accept it and insist that the child must remain in the normal stream. Their wish is accepted but they are told that if the child fails again, then he will be transferred to the Monolingual stream. So from what I have said, there are enough safeguards to ensure that no error in streaming can take place. Parents whose children have passed Primary 1 and 2 should therefore not worry unnecessarily about their Primary 3 year.

I'm afraid I have only covered half the subject because I have said nothing about the Extended Stream which is in between the Monolingual and the Normal Streams nor have I said anything about streaming in Secondary I. I do not want to go on with what is becoming a lecture rather than an after dinner speech. But I hope I have said enough to show you that streaming is not a punishment but is intended to help the slower ones among our pupils.