

# RUBRIX

RAISING THE SPIRIT OF  
TOGETHERNESS

A Newsletter by Research and Policy Department  
Yayasan Mendaki



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# DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE LEARNERS

## THROUGH MASTERY OF COGNITIVE AND NON-COGNITIVE SKILLS

By: Siti Khadijah Setyo R S

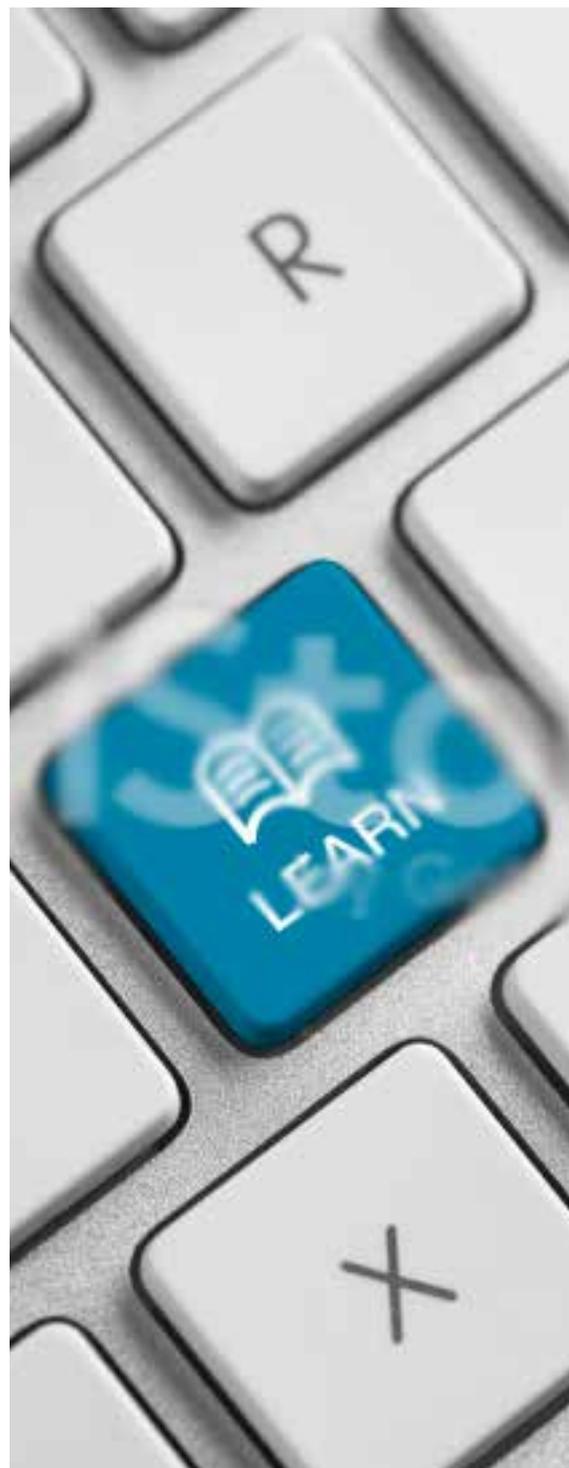
### INTRODUCTION

Conventional wisdom dictates that mastery of core academic subjects equates to success in school, career and life. Discourses on academic underachievement, especially amongst students from underprivileged backgrounds, have often prescribed academic support and intervention as the panacea to addressing academic underperformance in schools. While strategic academic support programmes and cognitive skills are important, they are not sufficient. As we prepare students to become "effective learners" for the 21st century and beyond, greater awareness needs to be raised on the importance of complementing academic support with "non-cognitive" or "soft" skills; as mastery of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills will be able to enhance students' academic and life success.



### WHAT IS AN EFFECTIVE LEARNER?

The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) published a paper in 2012 describing five factors that significantly influence student academic performance as well as success in life. These five factors, namely, academic behaviours (e.g. going to class and completing homework as assigned), academic perseverance (e.g. self-discipline and grit), academic mindsets (i.e. "growth mindset" or the belief that abilities are not fixed but develop through hard work), learning strategies (e.g. study skills) and social skills (collaboration and empathy), will contribute to the development of effective learners for the 21st century and beyond. It is clear that there exist two distinct but overlapping arenas in improving academic performance and developing effective learners – formal conceptual understanding (i.e. cognitive support and interventions) and positive attitudes, behaviours and dispositions (i.e. "non-cognitive skills") that influence learning and ultimately better academic achievements.



## FRAMING “NON-COGNITIVE SKILLS”

Defining non-cognitive skills is a challenge and there are ongoing debates amongst researchers and writers on what should constitute “non-cognitive” and “soft” skills. For this article, non-cognitive skills are defined as the “patterns of thought, feelings and behaviour” (Borghans et al., 2008) of individuals that may continue to develop throughout their lives (Bloom, 1964), and that play some role in the education process. Generally, these skills encompass traits that are not directly represented by cognitive skills, but instead by socio-emotional or behavioural characteristics that are not fixed traits of the personality, and that are linked to the educational process and can be nurtured throughout one’s life.

## NON-COGNITIVE SKILLS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Research has demonstrated the positive association between non-cognitive skills and educational attainment. A study by Olson (2012) highlights that the development of social skills allows for children to get along and interact with peers positively. This reduces aggressive or disruptive behaviours amongst them, and thus facilitating collaboration and learning. Another study often cited is the meta-analysis of over 200 interventions aimed at increasing the social and emotional learning (SEL) of children from kindergarten through high school conducted by Durlak and his colleagues in 2011. Compared to the controls, SEL participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviours and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement. Studies on executive functioning skills – self-regulation and self-control – demonstrate that specific soft skills such as self-control and self-discipline are predictive of better behaviours in the classroom which correlate with improved grades and other measures of academic performance (Duckworth, Quinn & Tsukayama, 2012).

▶▶ NON-COGNITIVE SKILLS ARE DEFINED AS THE “PATTERNS OF THOUGHT, FEELINGS AND BEHAVIOUR” (BORGHANS ET AL., 2008) OF INDIVIDUALS THAT MAY CONTINUE TO DEVELOP THROUGHOUT THEIR LIVES (BLOOM, 1964) ◀◀

## NURTURING NON-COGNITIVE SKILLS

Non-cognitive skills can be nurtured throughout one’s life and this section will explore the roles that parents, schools and teachers can play to nurture and enhance non-cognitive skills in their children and students from young.

### Role of parents

The environment that children are exposed to since young plays a crucial role in influencing the development of their non-cognitive skills. Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) point out that every aspect of early human development is “affected by the environments and experiences that are encountered in a cumulative fashion, beginning in the prenatal period and extending throughout the early childhood years.” Thus it is vital that parents are empowered with the knowledge and resources to create a home environment where young children are able to develop self-awareness and positive self-concepts. Parents can conduct activities such as “positive talks” and “show and tell” with young children for children to identify their likes and dislikes, and for children to identify and convey their emotions effectively. Parents should also be made aware on the benefits of play for children as through structured and purposive play, young children will be able to develop important social skills such as collaboration, awareness of diversity and cooperation.

### Role of schools and teachers

As children progress to formal school settings, their interactions with teachers and peers have significant influence to their learning and development. As noted earlier, empirical research on education that subsequently affect school policies, has traditionally focused on studying how school and teacher factors correlate with cognitive performance. It is high time that more attention is given to bringing non-cognitive skills to the forefront of educational discourses and strategies.

Recognising the importance of “soft” skills and preparing students for the 21st century, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has also developed the Framework for 21st Century Competencies and Student Outcomes; in which social emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of the framework. Through SEL, it is hoped that Singaporean students acquire



skills, knowledge and dispositions to manage self and relationships effectively and make responsible decisions essential for personal and social well-being.

While it is encouraging that MOE is aware of the importance of SEL and has taken proactive steps in infusing SEL in the curriculum, it is also important that professional development opportunities for educators are enhanced to instil awareness on the importance of non-cognitive skills. Schools can collaborate with professional development providers and incorporate non-cognitive competencies into their training programmes in-service teachers. The New Teacher Centre (NTC), a non-profit organisation based in the United States of America, provides coaching and professional development to first-year teachers and teachers have access to an online resource site that includes observation guides and assessment rubrics focused on SEL and academic behaviours.

While training opportunities are provided for teachers, it is equally important that teachers are able to model the attitudes and behaviours they strive to instil in their students. In the zeal to improve academic achievements amongst their students, teachers may not be able to put non-cognitive factors at the forefront of their work. For example, the seminal work on "growth mindset" by Carol Dweck should be introduced to teachers; so as to inform educators that abilities are not fixed but can be developed through the nurturance of non-cognitive skills such as determination and hard work. Such awareness would help teachers to change their own beliefs and mindset, and thus guide teachers to help their students to be effective learners.

Finally, it is important for schools to implement complementary efforts between in-school and after-school programmes. It is not uncommon for schools to expand learning time by providing after-school programmes that focus on the building of non-cognitive skills. While such supplementary programmes are beneficial for the learning and development of students, schools need to be prudent and ensure that students experience the same support for skill and behaviour development during school as they experience after school. Through such continuity and consistency, students will be able to reap the fullest benefits of non-cognitive interventions and support.

## CONCLUSION

While academic support and intervention are important in our pursuit to improve the academic achievements of our students, research has also shown that non-cognitive interventions are equally important in improving academic attainment of students. To be an effective learner for the 21st century and beyond, it is insufficient to only be well-versed in academic content and conceptual understanding, but to also be equipped with the right attitudes, behaviours and dispositions towards learning that can be nurtured throughout one's life.

In striving to provide a holistic support for our students, parents, teachers and schools play pivotal role in nurturing non-cognitive skills in their children and students. Through mastery of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills, it is hoped that our students will be able to become effective learners and achieve success in academic and life.

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# YAYASAN MENDAKI POST-NATIONAL DAY RALLY 2015 POLICY FORUM:

SINGAPORE AT 50: REFLECTING THE PAST & EMBRACING FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

By Siti Afiyah Mustapha

**Don't be afraid to embrace the future. It holds great promise for us.**

These were the words of assurance conveyed by Minister for Communications and Information, Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Dr Yaacob Ibrahim. He was addressing over 70 participants at Yayasan MENDAKI's post-National Day Rally 2015 Policy Forum. The forum themed "Singapore at 50: Reflecting the Past & Embracing Future Possibilities" was held on 28 August, 2015 at the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT). Attendees, comprising students and youths from various levels of academia and representatives of Malay/Muslim organizations, convened to reflect on Singapore's past developments, take stock of the present situation, and evaluate how Singapore can be made an even better home for all. Importantly, the forum was a platform for critical introspection and dialogue to discuss how new policy announcements can be capitalized and aspirations advanced, to further uplift the community.

Dr Yaacob was joined on the panel by academicians Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, Deputy Head, Social Lab and Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Dr Noorman Abdullah, Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore (NUS), and moderator Ms Rahayu Mahzam, Lawyer, Heng, Leong & Srinivasan.

The forum opened with an outline of key policy announcements and message highlights of the Rally. Guest speakers Dr Leong and Dr Noorman subsequently foregrounded the discussion with their respective insights on the speech. In his presentation *Casting the shadows of our past to illuminate our future*, Dr Leong observed that over and above conveying key deliverables or new policies, the essence of this year's Rally was to recap the success factors of the past fifty years, and identify those that will sustain it for the next fifty. He noted that as the younger generation takes over the mantle of leadership and developing Singapore,

▶▶ AS A CITIES EVOLVE TO ACCOMMODATE NEWCOMERS, IT TESTS THE HUMAN CAPACITY FOR COEXISTENCE. DESIGNING MORE SHARED FACILITIES WITH A MORE CONTINUOUS URBAN GRAIN THAT CONNECTS RATHER THAN SEPARATES COMMUNITIES IN SINGAPORE WILL BE INTEGRAL TO MULTI RACIALISM IN THE FUTURE. ◀◀

it is essential that continuing efforts are accompanied by a healthy sense of optimism and hopefulness. Dr Noorman's *Rethinking diversity: notes on and from the everyday* alternatively calls for a creative approach towards diversity and cross-cultural engagements in Singapore. It is often taken for granted that diversity is our wealth, and tolerance our virtue. In an urban context, diversity is usually interpreted as its ethnic and racial composition. But diversity has a much broader range of indicators: education levels, the spread of ages and incomes, and people born in the city versus newcomers. As a cities evolve to accommodate newcomers, it tests the human capacity for coexistence. Designing more shared facilities with a more continuous urban grain that connects rather than separates communities in Singapore will be integral to multiracialism in the future. Dr Noorman also urged to consider diversity in relation to inclusiveness. Policy formulation, for instance, ought to consider different types of family forms – ranging from nuclear to single parent families – to ensure no one is left behind.

At the outset, the dialogue revolved around how the Malay identity could be upheld in an increasingly cosmopolitan country. Dr Yaacob reminded that the Jubilee celebrations were not only a milestone for Singapore, but for the Malay-Muslim community. When Singapore was expelled from Malaysia on Aug 9, 1965, the Malays went overnight from being a relative majority in the Federation to a minority



Panel members at the forum. From left: Dr Leong Chan Hoong, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, Ms Rahayu Mahzam and Dr Noorman Abdullah

community. At this point, Singapore's path was not set, and it would have been intuitively easier to pander to demands for continued preferential treatment of the Malays. Yet, it did not behave as a besieged community. Rather, it subjected itself to the same forces of meritocracy as everyone else and actively contributed to the development of multiracialism in Singapore. Despite troughs in the journey, the community's improved standards of living, home ownership, talents in many fields, movers and leaders, are a testament to its resolve and spirit. Broadly-speaking, Dr Yaacob avouched that the legacy of this generation has been the establishment and continuous upgrading of mosques island-wide with the Mosque Building Fund. The creation of wakaf or religious endowments of property to benefit the community and setting up Harmony Centre at An-Nahdhah Mosque to promote inter-faith understanding are fundamental ways in which the community continues to remain committed to multiracialism. Simply put, the key to upholding its identity is to stay united as a community, and to stay true to our faith and culture.

In a related query on how Singaporeans can better navigate tolerance in face of increasing immigrants and foreign talent, Dr Noorman articulated the need to be wary of ethnocentrism – that we should not use our own standards to assess different groups. While competing values, beliefs and ideas may exist, we must also look at interfaces, parallels and points of negotiation to learn from one another. Dr Leong adjoined that it is essential for a sense of social justice to permeate all levels of citizenry. Even with increasing competition from foreign talents or if one starts on unequal footing, every Singaporean should be entitled to the same opportunities to rise up the socio-economic ladder regardless of background.

Another hot topic was education and the national Skillsfuture initiative. Several audience members were keen to know if it is necessary for the Malay-Muslim community to contribute to the pool of top class talents by encouraging the entry of undergraduates and graduates into "certain indispensable professions" such as medicine, law, engineering and the sciences. In his response, Dr Yaacob stated that, by and large, the community has decided that education is the way forward. Whether or not the community collectively needs a plan to channel its younger generation towards certain professions, than the rest, will not only be difficult, but impractical. Rather, individuals should be given the liberty to find their own strengths and niche. His emphasis herein lies in creating a



Dr Yaacob Ibrahim talking to the participants from Anglo-Chinese Junior College (ACJC).

community of excellence – to strive for the best regardless of the fields pursued. Dr Yaacob gave the example of renowned local potter Iskandar Jalil, who earlier this year was conferred the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Rosette by the Japanese Ambassador to Singapore Haruhisa Takeuchi. The award bestowed by the Emperor of Japan, recognises Mr Iskandar's contributions, through pottery, in building cultural exchange and mutual understanding between Japan and Singapore for over 40 years. It is a profound example of how people and institutions need to appreciate individuals for their potential on their own terms, rather than forcing them into fields they cannot perform in.

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Dr Yaacob Ibrahim



Dr Yaacob Ibrahim talking to some of the participants at the Post-National Day Rally Forum.

Feedback additionally focused on how the Malay-Muslim community can ride on the national SkillsFuture wave and build its competitive advantage. Acknowledging SkillsFuture as a game changer for the community, Dr Yaacob shared that Yayasan MENDAKI will set up a new unit dedicated to the enterprise. It seeks to create awareness about the initiative and related programmes such as "Earn and Learn", "SkillsFuture Study Award", and "SkillsFuture Fellowships". It also intends to outreach to specific groups such as students and housewives desiring to return to work.

Concerns over the creation of a balanced and holistic education within the madrasah curriculum, rather than sole emphasis on academics, were also brought up. Dr Yaacob establishes that this is a decision that must be pondered upon seriously by the community. Even as the Government continues to work with MUIS to strengthen the teaching of secular subjects, such as mathematics and science, religious education will remain within the purview of MUIS and the community. He stated that knowing which aspects to prioritize in the madrasah curriculum is not a religious, but

an educational conundrum. The community has to be clear of what it wants out of madrasahs. Traditionally, the primary purpose of the madrasahs has been to produce top-tier asatizahs that are relevant. It is imperative that our religious scholars and leaders have a good grounding in non-religious subjects which prepare them to guide Singaporean Muslims living in a modern, technological society. At the same time, madrasahs need to provide a strong foundation for its students opting to transit into the secular stream. Thus far Dr Yaacob acknowledges that standards have improved, especially with the joint madrasah system, which unites some of the full-time madrasahs under a single system.

With regards to policy announcements, there were some anxieties voiced as to how changes in the parenthood policies could inadvertently cause couples to be cavalier in their decision to have children. Couples may treat the Baby Bonus increases, for instance, as reasons to jump onto the opportunity to have children without understanding the full implications of and investments needed to raise a child. Dr Yaacob assured that contrary to claims that the total fertility

rate (TFR) rose for the Malay community, the Malay fertility rates have declined, including for low-income earners. As with other mature economies, Singapore is also facing rising singlehood. Encouragement, rather, should be given to women in Singapore to give birth to more children. This will help retain not only the Singaporean core, but prevent the Malay community from being a minority within minorities. While the decision lies with the family, there must also be a concerted effort to extend parental education to couples intending to have children and support parenthood beyond short term monetary measures.

Beyond Malay/Muslim matters, Dr Yaacob impressed on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's call to the younger generation on sustaining Singapore as a "shining red dot". An audience member anecdotally shared that friends from other countries hailed the fact that he was from Singapore. Some even opined that Singapore is more "Islamically-run" than other countries professing to be Islamic, because the government is well-known for being effective at providing basic infrastructure, education, healthcare and other opportunities for human

▶▶ THE NEED TO NURTURE AN ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT AMONGST THE YOUNGER GENERATION THAT ACTIVELY SEEKS OUT CHANGE, RATHER THAN WAITING TO ADAPT TO CHANGE. THIS IS A MIND-SET THAT WOULD EMBRACE CRITICAL QUESTIONING, INNOVATION, SERVICE AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT FOR BOTH SOCIETY AND COUNTRY. ◀◀

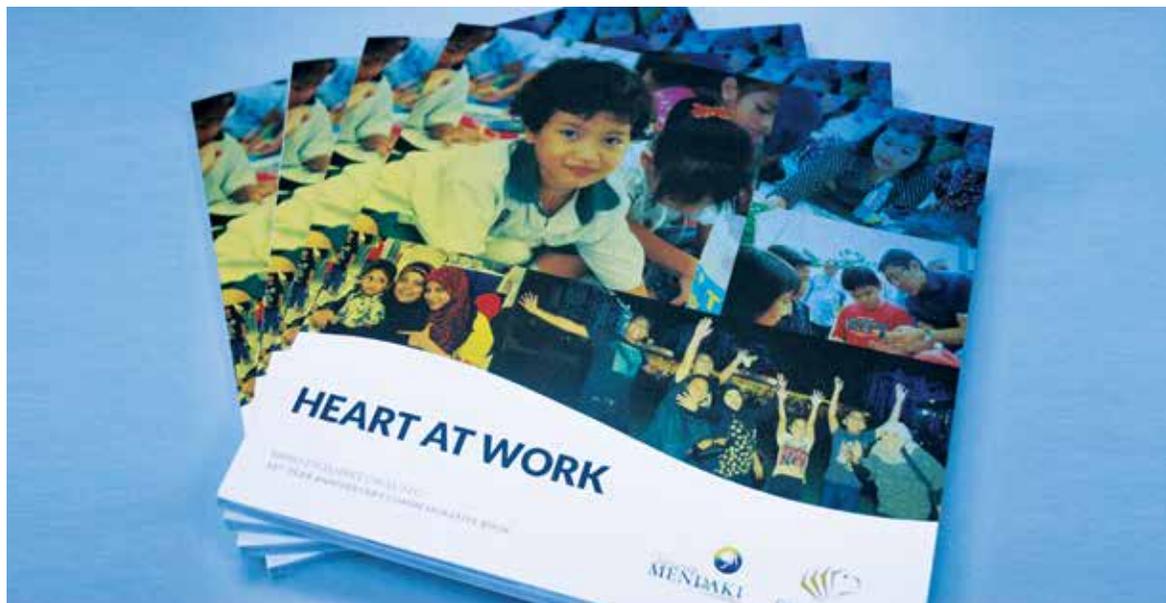
development. He felt that Singaporeans ought to steadily tap on this "Singapore brand" as a stepping stone to contribute and further the nation's interest on a global level. He also suggested the need to nurture an entrepreneurial spirit amongst the younger generation that actively seeks out change, rather than waiting to adapt to change. This is a mind-set that would embrace critical questioning, innovation, service and continuous improvement for both society and country. Building on the point, Dr Yaacob explained that while availability of resources and capital may bring a country competitive advantage, what ultimately matters more is the skilful use of these resources and what is brought to the global discussion table.

On the whole, the robust and honest discussion between panellist and participants positively attests to the gravity with which young Malay/Muslims treats community and national issues. As a partner of the community, Yayasan MENDAKI seeks to utilize such feedback to further its commitment in empowering the community through excellence in education. Moving forward, the community must be willing to place a stake in the ground about the change it thinks is necessary and be ready to re-calibrate those ideas with the shifts in domestic and global conditions. But it must start with turning itself outwards, learning to engage differently and innovatively, so that it can rise collectively to greater heights.

# LOW-INCOME PARENTS

SHOW SELF-HELP IS A WAY FORWARD

By: Dr Mathew Mathews



When the United States government in 1994 decided to provide poor families with the opportunity to move out of their ghettos into better neighbourhoods, believing this would alleviate their poverty, they did not anticipate their experiment would not yield the desired effects.

Many of those in the US\$80 million (S\$106 million at current rates) programme returned within several years to high-poverty neighbourhoods. They were not able to escape the clutches of income poverty.

Sociologist and urban planner Xavier de Souza Briggs, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) – who has tried to find answers to this failed experiment – points out that “disadvantaged people are often information-poor, lacking job

networks and networking skills”. He also highlights that they do not have the information about the best opportunities to upgrade themselves.

The possibility for low-income families to obtain much-needed information, build their social capital and tap opportunities to improve their lives is what attracted me recently to document the success of the Family Excellence Circles (FEC) programme in a published report.

## Parents reach out

Started by Malay-Muslim self-help group Yayasan Mendaki 10 years ago, the programme has an interesting genesis. Mendaki had developed an intervention programme to prepare children

who had missed out on pre-school. Despite their best efforts, the intervention did not produce the kind of results Mendaki had hoped for. But what came out of this programme was a group of parents who decided on their own accord to reach out to other parents whose children were not enrolled in pre-school.

This outcome was recognised at that time by the Minister of Muslim Affairs and then-Minister of Environment and Water Resources, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, in his speech at the Community Leaders Forum in 2004. He pointed out that these loose groupings of families existed in pockets. They not only supported one another but shaped behaviour and thus, there needed to be ways to replicate such informal groupings.

Today there are 45 FEC scattered around the island. The groups are made up of low-income Muslim families, a number of them single parent and blended families. Each group conducts a series of activities – members take part in group support meetings and embark on learning journeys together. Based on focus group discussions and family interviews with nearly 80 participants, it was apparent that the FEC programme did not merely offer support for members. There was the exchange of much-needed information, such as how to navigate through the complexities of the school system, how to motivate children in their educational pursuits and how to guide their teenagers through trying relationships.

The close relationships forged within the group have meant that participants are aware of the resources that other members are able to mobilise. For instance, husbands were not always able to attend group meetings, but wives were likely to volunteer their husband’s skills when needed.

Thus, if a group member had problems deciphering the information technology needs of their children, or if a single mother needed to be apprised of what National Service would entail for their sons, there was certainly somebody’s husband who could provide advice.

The subtle peer pressure within the group has spurred members to remain committed to their children’s education and their pursuit of family harmony. Members are motivated to pursue lifelong learning and career advancement, with those who attended Workforce Skills Qualification (WSQ) courses upgrading themselves, and sharing their experiences with others in the group. This helped remove inhibitions among those who found adult education a daunting task.

The families in these FEC have accepted that they can better

their lives instead of being absorbed in their deficiencies or viewing themselves as incapable of taking charge of their lives. They are now aware that they have something to contribute to others in their community. They did not always start with such a positive mindset. The social networks developed through the programme, the motivation the groups provided and the awareness that they could access existing national support schemes have changed their perspectives.

## It takes an FEC village

Tameez is one person who has benefited from the FEC. She joined the programme nearly a decade ago as a struggling single parent of three children. The FEC was the proverbial village which helped raise her children. Through the group support sessions and the workshops she has learnt important parenting strategies. She now knows how to set boundaries for her children without resorting to harsh disciplinary methods. She motivates her children in their studies and is proactive in communicating with her children’s school teachers so that she can better support her children’s learning.

While she and her husband of five years attend FEC meetings to find ways to better manage their financial situation, her children attend a youth meeting where they develop their confidence. The family actively volunteers to help other low-income families by providing child-minding assistance for parents who want to attend workshops.

The FEC is not the only programme available in Singapore to help low-income families. However, it is among the few which – rather than merely focusing on the needs of the low-income – have developed structures to empower participants to become part of the solution. More emphasis needs to be given to such initiatives. They may not be the kind of grand structural changes which some envisage are needed to help the poor, but these programmes can certainly make a big difference.

The author of this piece, Dr Mathew Mathews, is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, NUS. This essay is based on his presentation at the MENDAKI Research Seminar II – Empowering Learning Families, Realising Aspirations on April 25. It was published in The Straits Times on 1 May 2015 and is also available on the IPS Commons website.

# EXPANDING FAMILY EXCELLENCE CIRCLES

THE STRAITS TIME – EDITORIAL

By: (C) Singapore Press Holdings Limited

## OPINION

THE STRAITS TIMES  
TUESDAY, MAY 12, 2015



A22

A23 The rise of hybrid warfare

A23 What Cameron's win means

## Expanding family excellence circles

**I**T IS a matter of concern that about two-thirds of low-income Malay households do not seek help from social services. Explaining the reasons for the misplaced reticence, the study that revealed this astonishing fact cited a lack of awareness of available schemes and the fear of stigmatisation.

The first reason could be addressed through making more information available to families at risk, so that they know where to turn in a crisis. Since some households are deterred by the need to fill up several forms, a database of needy families, that includes the latest information on them, would help social security officials to expedite assistance. The key task is for the Government and

voluntary welfare organisations to intervene before the financial and family situation becomes precarious.

It is the second reason that is more problematic. The fear of stigmatisation is a sign of the dignity these families possess. Their attitude is markedly different from the welfare dependency mindset in societies where reaching out to the state has become a habit of first resort and an increasingly unsustainable fiscal burden. However, Malay families should not go to the other extreme of viewing the need for assistance as reflecting poorly on themselves and, worse, on the self-esteem of their community. There is no pride in falling into a poverty trap that is avoidable. The

more this happens, the more the community will suffer and, with it, the nation.

It is here that family excellence circles make a cultural difference. Consisting of parents in similar circumstances, these social support networks enable low-income Malay families to assist one another. The spirit of self-help in these 45 groups keeps community pride intact while encouraging families to participate more fully in the education of their children, instead of denying the reality of challenges in self-inflicted despair.

The peer pressure that exists subtly in the groups acts as an added incentive in motivating members and preventing them from giving up. At a practical level, the circles have contributed to the

pooling of resources, such as after-school care.

The initiative furthers Malay-Muslim self-help group Yayasan Mendaki's overall mission of advancing the community's interests through excellence in education. Educational achievement and expectations empower the young for the employment market and enhance their prospects of social mobility – a matter that Singaporeans as a whole have a stake in.

The effectiveness of the circles points to their utility in preventing the formation of an underclass within other communities as well. People helping each other can represent a powerful force for change.

Source: Straits Times, 12<sup>th</sup> May 2015

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# YAYASAN MENDAKI RESEARCH SEMINAR:

'EMPOWERING LEARNING FAMILIES, REALISING ASPIRATIONS'

By: Muhammad Farouq Osman

On 25 April 2015, Yayasan MENDAKI's Research and Policy Department (RPD) held its second research seminar at the Lifelong Learning Institute (LLI). While its previous seminar focussed on enhancing motivation in students, this latest one took on the theme of 'Empowering Learning Families, Realising Aspirations'. The seminar was conceived as a platform for two academics- Dr Caroline Brassard (Adjunct Assistant Professor, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy) and Dr Mathew Mathews (Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies) - to present their reports on a study of low-income Malay families and MENDAKI's Family Excellence Circle (FEC) respectively. This was followed by a dialogue session led by a panel comprising the two speakers, together with MENDAKI's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Mdm Tuminah Sapawi and Ms Ida Iryanee Nooraman of the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), who acted as moderator. The seminar successfully attracted around 100 participants drawn from the ranks of professionals from the social sector, community leaders and students, among others.

The event started with the guest-of-honour, Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Dr Yaacob Ibrahim giving his opening remarks. In his speech, Dr Yaacob emphasised the defining

role played by families, pointing out that a strong and stable family unit makes for conducive learning environment for our children. This, in turn, he added, would translate into good academic performance. Recognising the importance of research, Dr Yaacob also said that studying various aspects of the Malay/Muslim family, such as social capital support and helping low-income families in the community, are crucial, as its findings can help to shed light on ways in which the community can improve its aggregate educational attainment and socio-economic status as a whole.

The seminar proceeded with the first presentation by Dr Brassard on her collaborative study with MENDAKI titled: Living on a Tight Budget in Singapore - A Qualitative Study of 25 Malay/Muslim Low-income Households. Dr Brassard's study focussed on shedding light on the lives of low-income Malay households in order to understand their vulnerability to shocks, daily challenges and needs, as well as their aspirations and perceptions about the future. Her research revealed that low-income parents, just like any parent from any income group, have high hopes and aspirations for their children's education. Indeed, they regard education as a way to get better jobs and overcome poverty. On the flip side, Dr



Panel members at the research seminar. From left: Mdm Tuminah, Dr Mathews, Dr Brassard and Ms Ida.

Brassard talked about the reticence on the part of many of her respondents in seeking social assistance, cited as partly due to the fear of being stigmatised, and the daunting application process which requires multiple paperwork. Many of the low-income families surveyed also said they do not receive support from the Family Service Centres (FSCs) or Community Development Councils (CDCs), pointing to a lack of awareness about the various assistance schemes they could leverage. Speaking to reporters, Dr Yaacob remarked that the findings highlighted the need to adopt a "last mile approach" through outreach by going door-to-door to engage and offer assistance to such families.

Dr Mathews presented his report titled: Empowering Low-income Families: Documenting the Contributions of Family Excellence Circles. Commissioned by RPD, his work aimed to identify features of the FEC which is a social support network for parents to interact, exchange ideas, share best practices on how to cope with daily challenges and embrace life-long learning. The report documented how these circles foster family development, by encouraging resilience among low-income Malay/Muslim families and leveraging socio-emotional support from social capital, among others. More

►► SPEAKING TO REPORTERS, DR YAACOB REMARKED THAT THE FINDINGS HIGHLIGHTED THE NEED TO ADOPT A "LAST MILE APPROACH" THROUGH OUTREACH BY GOING DOOR-TO-DOOR TO ENGAGE AND OFFER ASSISTANCE TO SUCH FAMILIES. ◀◀

Dr Yaacob Ibrahim



Seminar participants being intellectually engaged.

▶▶ CITING AN EXAMPLE, DR MATHEWS SAID THAT THE FEC GROUPS MAKE THE POOLING OF RESOURCES SUCH AS AFTER SCHOOL CARE POSSIBLE, ALLOWING PARENTS TO BE MORE INVOLVED IN THEIR CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION. ◀◀

Dr Mathew Mathews

importantly, it was found that such support translates into the parents' gaining better ways to navigate through the education landscape and assist in their children's learning journey. Citing an example, Dr Mathews said that the FEC groups make the pooling of resources such as after-school care possible, allowing parents to be more involved in their children's development and education. These findings will be useful as MENDAKI strives to improve on the structure and content of FECs - which have existed since 2005.

The seminar witnessed a lively question-and-answer session with members of the audience sharing their thoughts on the two research reports. On the study of low-income Malay/Muslim households, a questioner asked the panel about addressing the issue of stigma faced by disadvantaged families which prevented them from seeking help. In response, Mdm Tuminah pointed out that such apprehensiveness was present in other communities too, based on her experience working in MSF. Mdm Tuminah suggested that FEC members can play a part in engaging such families by leveraging on rapport and sharing how the former benefitted from the various schemes offered. At this juncture, Dr Brassard took the opportunity to remind her audience that "tolerance of a situation should not be confused with resilience." Another participant, a social worker, shared her observation that fathers tend to play a less active role in household and family matters, compared to their spouse. She wondered how FEC can help change the perception of fathers in this case. Agreeing with the questioner, Dr Mathews acknowledged that there is broad understanding that fathers need to be more involved in taking care of the family, other than supporting financially. Dr Mathews added that some husbands joined FEC after hearing from their spouse about the effectiveness of such support groups.

The event ended with many participants choosing to stay behind to ask the speakers more questions and share their thoughts on how to further help our families. They truly heeded Dr Yaacob's pronouncement to keep the discussion going post-seminar as we seek to uplift the community.

# PROJECT JOY 2015 SURVEY

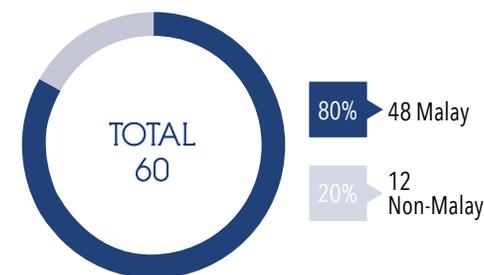
## ON MALAY FAMILIES AND CHILDREN'S LEARNING TRAJECTORY

On 27 June 2015, Yayasan MENDAKI held its annual charity drive, Project JOY, at Spectra Secondary School. The event saw some 600 needy families receiving groceries and supermarket vouchers during the Ramadan fasting month. This year's run was extra special as it came under the 'SG50 KITA Service to the Nation Week' initiative, in commemoration of Singapore's 50 years of nationhood.

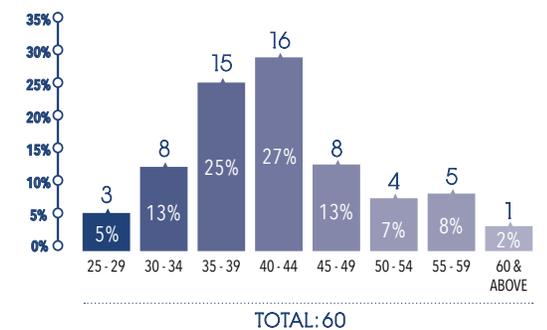
In conjunction with Project JOY, the Research and Policy Department (RPD) of MENDAKI conducted a survey on Malay families and their children's learning trajectory. The respondents were mainly low-income Malay beneficiaries of the charity project. The survey aimed to further understand the challenges faced by our low-income families in supporting the educational and socioemotional development of their children, during the crucial preschool period of zero to six years of age.

### SECTION 1: RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

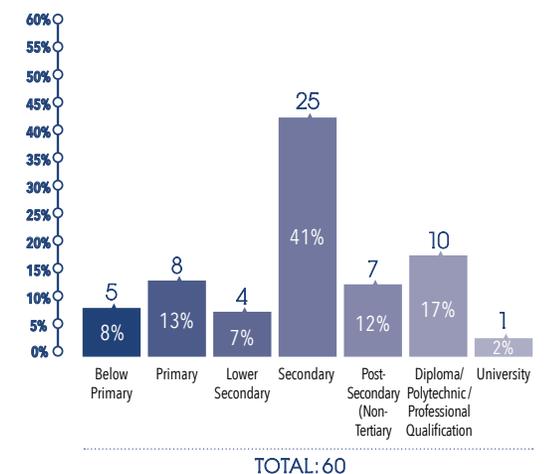
(1) Ethnic Group



(2) Age



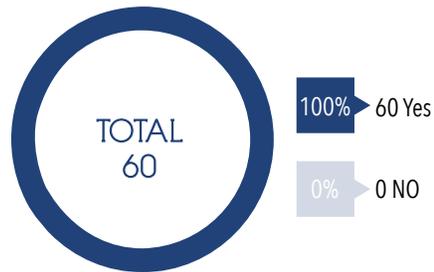
(3) Highest Education



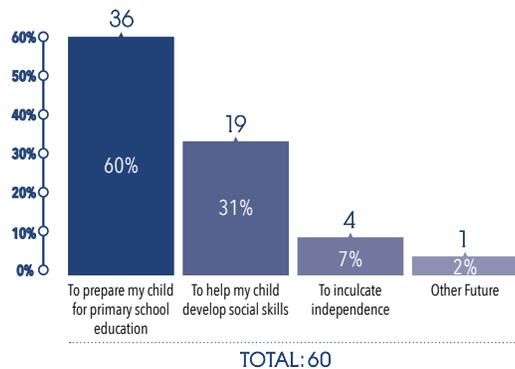
# SECTION 2: HELPING CHILDREN DEVELOP THEIR LEARNING ABILITY

## PART 1-SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

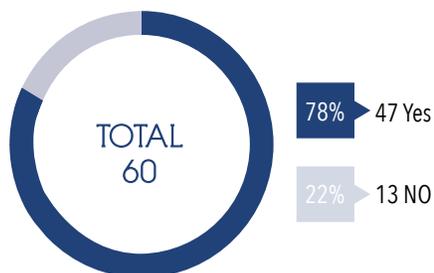
(4) Do you think sending your child to preschool is important?



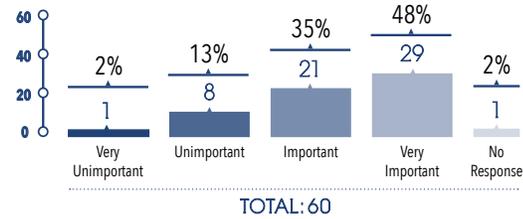
(4A) If yes, what is the most important outcome you hope to achieve for your child through preschool education?



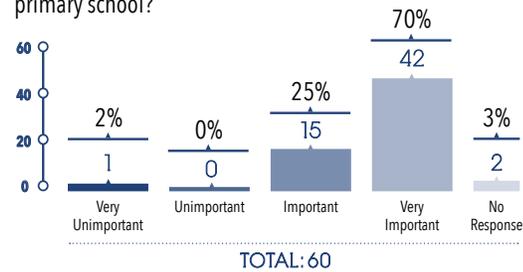
(5) Are you familiar with preschool syllabus?



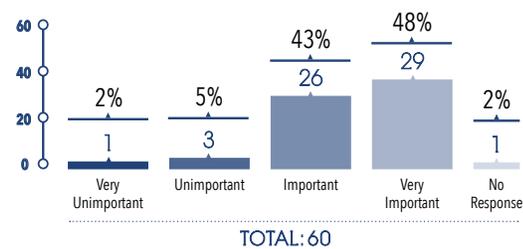
(5A) On a scale 1 to 5 please rate the importance of preschool learning for children age 2-6:



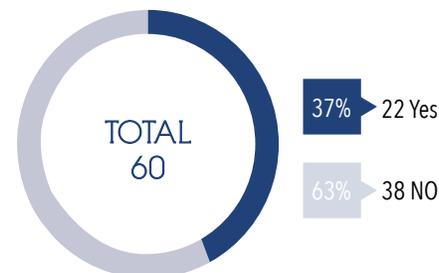
(5B) On a scale of 1 to 5, how important do you think your child is able to count, read and write before he/she attends primary school?



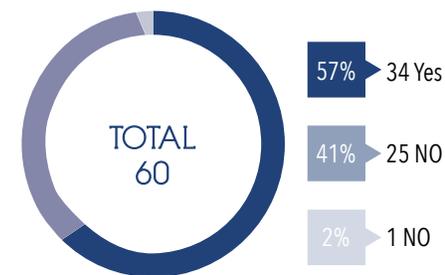
(5C) On scale of 1 to 5, how involved do you think you are ensuring that your child is able to count, read and write before he/she attends primary school?



(6) Does your child have any learning difficulties in school?

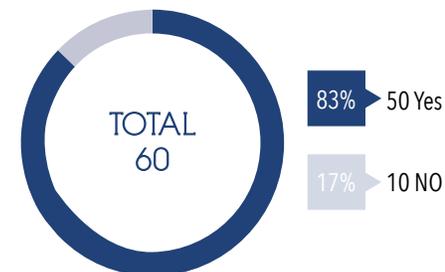


(7) If you have a child in primary school, is he/she ever in Learning Support Programme for English (LSP) /learning Support for Maths (LSM)?

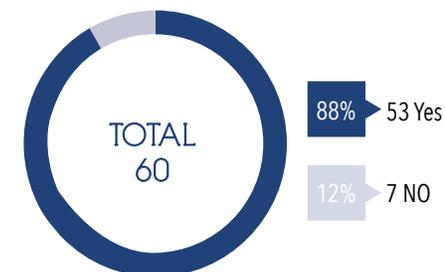


## PART 2-HOME LEARNING INVOLVEMENT

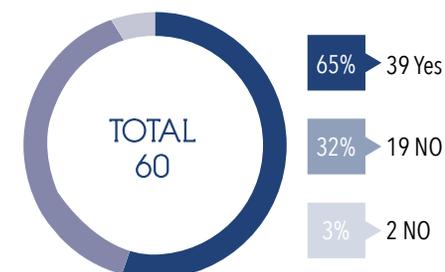
(8) Do you have any educational material for your child aged 0-6 years at home? Examples included reading books or educational toys.



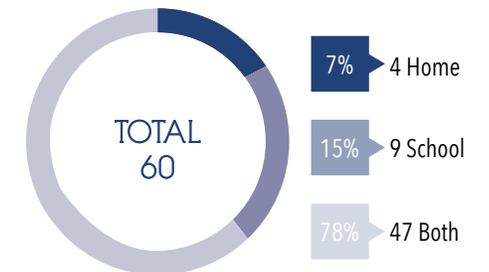
(9) Do you teach your child at home? Examples include reading aloud to your child or counting objects at home?



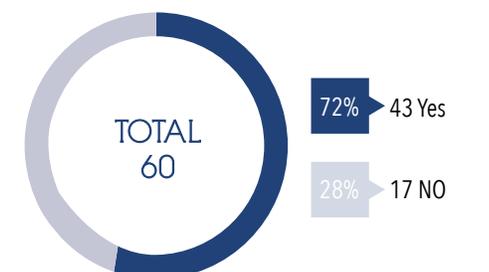
(10) Do you feel sufficiently involved in your child's development and education?



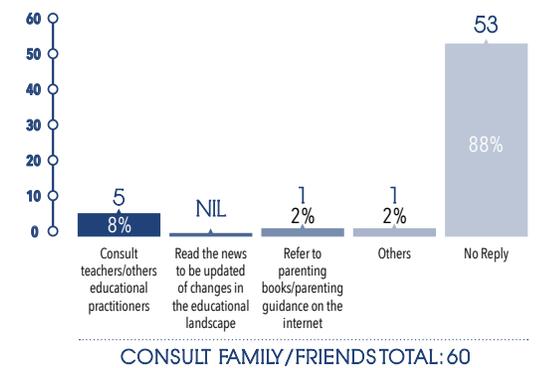
(11) In your opinion, where should learning take place for pre-schoolers?



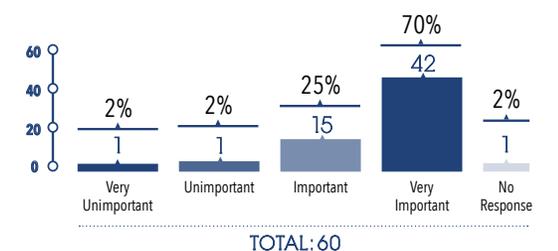
(12) Do you have Specific plans to support your child's education, other than sending him/her to school?



(12A) If Yes, Please specify (you may select than one choice):



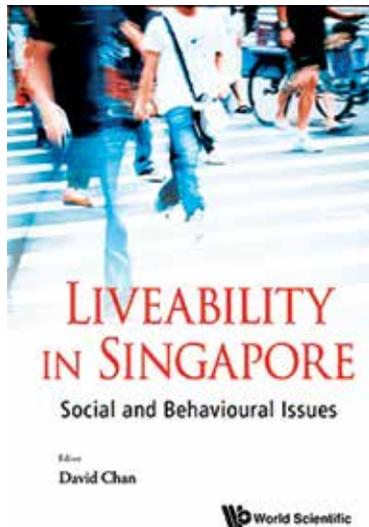
(13) On a scale of 1 to 5, how important do you think it is for your child to attain post-secondary education?



# BOOK REVIEW - LIVEABILITY IN SINGAPORE

SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES (2015)  
EDITED BY DAVID CHAN

By: Nur Amira Binte Hashim



Singapore has always been doing well in global rankings on various liveability indices. Latest reports by Employment Conditions Abroad (ECA) international (2015) showed that Singapore ranked the most liveable city in Asia. This is mainly due to a number of factors namely good air quality, solid infrastructure, decent medical facilities, low crime and health risks. This brings us to the question of what exactly is meant by liveability. As mentioned by David Chan, liveability is multi-dimensional and encompasses different variables. There is no unanimity on the definition of liveability and methods to measure the concept. Conventional

methods of measuring liveability looks into GDP per capita, life expectancy, education and income levels etc. This however, overlooks other important aspects such as individual's welfare and quality of life.

The book *Liveability in Singapore: Social and Behavioural Issues* (2015) edited by David Chan, seeks to analyse the concept of liveability in a more comprehensive manner. It is a book based on the proceedings of the Behavioural Sciences Institute Conference 2014, held on 10 March 2014. Contributed by academics and practitioners of various backgrounds, this book examines the concept of liveability from multiple perspectives. Specifically, it looks into the social and behavioural issues relating to health, urban planning, social class, social services, well-being and quality of life that impacts liveability. Besides David Chan, who is a Professor of Psychology and Director of Behavioural Sciences Institute at the Singapore Management University, the book also sees contributions from Ang Bee Lian, Gerard Ee, Han Fook Kwang, Heng Chyke Kiang, Tommy Koh, Laurence Lien, Jeremy Lim, Liu Thai Ker, Sudha Nair and Tan Ern Ser. Each contributor seeks to explore the concept of liveability in accordance to their respective fields of expertise/practice.

The book is organized into four parts. Part I provides an overview of liveability issues. Part II examines liveability from the perspectives of health and urban planning.

Part III explores the relationships linking quality of life to social class and social services. Part IV is a panel discussion whereby academics and public intellectuals exchange their thoughts and insights.

It is worth noting some of the salient points brought up by the contributors. Part I sees Laurence Lien highlighting the need for the Government and citizens to work together to improve liveability in Singapore. He noted that Singapore can do better in areas such as social connectedness, individual well-being and environment. He felt that there is an under-focus on the social, emotional, cultural and spiritual needs of the people. David Chan proposed the concept of "Home-in-Community" as a building block for addressing liveability matters. This concept can be applied to enhance liveability by building socio-psychological resources for the individual to achieve goals. In Part II of the book, Jeremy highlighted that health and liveability is mutually reinforcing. He emphasized that health does not only mean the absence of disease but a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. Also, achieving health and liveability requires joint individual and community actions. On the other hand, Heng highlighted the need to ensure liveability through good urban planning. According to him, there is a need to conduct rigorous studies to better understand new planning models and paradigms when designing new HDB towns in order to make them more liveable and sustainable. In Part III, Ang Bee Lian addressed the relationship between social services and liveability. She noted that liveability needs to consider how inclusive and open a society is towards diversity including disadvantaged groups. She also pointed out that a city is more liveable when more mutual help exist in the form of volunteerism and philanthropy. The panel discussion for the last part addresses specific questions on liveability in terms of public transport, cost of living, government's public communications, role of free market values in town planning, civil society and citizen well-being.

Relating issues discussed in this book to the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore, we could probably question if Singapore is a liveable city for the Malays. Citing a survey, high cost of living seems to be the most prominent issue faced by the Malay community in Singapore as pointed

out by 62% of respondents. This is especially so among low income households. 32% of the respondents do not believe that they get enough external support to help cope with their needs. Those who felt that they are not given enough support tend to be older, have children and fall within the middle to lower personal income range. Here, we see the issue of social class brought into play with those from the lower and middle income being more affected with the high cost of living in Singapore. We have to bear in mind that ultimately, a liveable city is one which ensures that the most vulnerable group in the society can participate fully in the community life and are able to meet their day-to-day needs. As mentioned by Ms Ang Bee Lian, increased volunteerism and philanthropy is probably helpful and this could also complement the existing efforts made by the government to help those from the lower strata of the community.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Ang Bee Lian is Director of Social Welfare at Ministry of Social and Family Development.

<sup>2</sup>Gerard Ee is President of the Institute of Singapore Chartered Accountants.

<sup>3</sup>Han Fook Kwang is Editor-At-Large of The Straits Times.

<sup>4</sup>Heng Chye Kiang is Dean of the School of Design and Environment at National University Singapore.

<sup>5</sup>Tommy Koh is Ambassador-At-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chairman of the Centre for International Law and Rector of Tembusu College at the National University Singapore.

<sup>6</sup>Laurence Lien is Chairman of the Lien Foundation and the Community Foundation of Singapore, Deputy Chairman of Caritas Singapore Community Council, and Board Member of the Centre for Non-profit Leadership and the Lien Centre for Social Innovation at the Singapore Management University.

<sup>7</sup>Jeremy Lim is Partner and Head, Health and Life Sciences Practice, Asia Pacific, Oliver Wyman.

<sup>8</sup>Liu Thai Ker is an Architect-Planner and has been a Director of RSP Architects Planners & Engineers Pte Ltd since 1992.

<sup>9</sup>Sudha Nair is Executive Director of PAVE, a specialist centre for interpersonal violence and multi-stressed.

<sup>10</sup>Tan Ern Ser is Head of Social Lab at the Institute of Policy Studies and Associate Professor of Sociology at the National University of Singapore.

<sup>11</sup>The survey is commissioned by Associate of Muslim Professionals (AMP) in 2011 to understand the aspirations and expectations of the Malay/Muslim community today in terms of its progress and position in Singapore's development and its contribution to nation building. Approximately 350 members of the Malay/Muslim community were interviewed. 59 key influencers in the Malay/Muslim community completed online interviews. In depth interviews were also conducted with a handful of opinion leaders in the community.



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