

# Debunking the Myth of the Lazy Malays

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MENDAKI Occasional Paper Series  
***Education***

Issue No. 1

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November 2014

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# Debunking the Myth of the Lazy Malays

Zhang Jiayi

## **Abstract**

This study aims to investigate how socio-economic class is a moderator of education attainment among Malay Muslims in Singapore. This thesis argues that socio-economic class interferes with various factors correlated with optimising educational performance. In particular, this research explores the impacts of socio-economic class on individual cultural capital, values and norms, conduciveness of home environment, time use, and access to external educational resources. This thesis adopts qualitative research methods to gather ethnographic details relating to the experiences of Singaporean Malay Muslims from various socio-economic backgrounds. The impacts of structural factors like the structure of Singapore's educational system as well as the availability and structure of assistance on the less privileged students will also be analysed. This paper concludes with policy recommendations and the directions for possible future development of this thesis.

## **Background of the 'Malay Problem'**

The educational under-attainment of the Malay Muslims is often explained as a 'Malay Problem' (Barr & Skrbis, 2008). The passing rate of the Malay Muslims is generally lower than that of other ethnic groups for national examinations like the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education - Ordinary Levels ('O' Levels) as well as the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education - Advanced Levels ('A' Levels) (Ministry of Education, 2013). The percentage of Muslims students who further their education and go on to post-secondary educational institutions such as Junior Colleges (JC), Polytechnics, Institutes of Technical Education (ITE) and other private institutions is also lower than that of other ethnic groups. That means, in comparison to members of the other ethnic groups, a higher percentage of Malay Muslims drop out of school after their secondary education (Ministry of Education, 2013). Beyond that, the Malay Muslim community is also overrepresented in the lower strata of the Singaporean society (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2010).

Academics, scholars and even political leaders use the cultural deficit thesis to explain the persistence of the 'Malay Problem'. For instance, both Singapore and Malaysia's political leaders Mr Lee Kuan Yew (Lee, 2011) and Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad (Mohamad, 1970) have, on different occasions, asserted that the Malays are genetically less intelligent and lazy compared to members of other ethnic groups, especially the Chinese. The general intellectual community exerts that there is an inherent cultural problem with the Singaporean Malay Muslims that determines their educational under-attainment, low occupational achievements, and household incomes. The Malay

Muslims are often accused of being 'lazy' and less achievement oriented than the other ethnic groups in Singapore (Alatas, 1977; Chin, 1997; Stimpfl, 2006). The lack of drive and educational aspirations is then translated to poorer educational attainment and high school dropout rates (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Qian & Blair, 1999; Wilson, 1992). Some scholarly articles also exert that Malay families are poorly socialised (Chin, 1997; Zohri, 1990) and Malay customs are conservative and intolerant to social change (Tham S. C., 1983), causing them to lag behind in terms of educational and economic achievement. Islam was also largely criticised to be anti-modernist and resistant to progress, and hence one of the reasons behind the educational under-attainment of the Malay Muslims (Tham, 1983; Bafana, 1995). There is a case of racialisation of the 'Malay Problem', where members of the society engage in a dialectical process by which meaning is attributed to particular biological features of human beings, as a result of which individuals may be assigned to a general category of persons which reproduces itself biologically (Miles, 1989).

The visibility of the educational under-performance of Malay Muslims in Singapore, relative to the dominant ethnic Chinese majority, facilitates the racialisation of this sociological problem. The ideology of meritocracy in Singapore also reinforces the state's racialisation of educational under-performance among Malay Muslims in Singapore. The introduction of standardised national examinations which every Singaporean child has to sit for, it creates the illusion of equality and fairness. The blame of not doing well naturally falls onto the individual (Barr & Skrbis, 2008; Nasir, 2007). The underperformance of Malay Muslims as compared to their Chinese and Indian counterparts can then be conveniently constructed to be an 'ethnic issue' (Barr & Skrbis, 2008; Nasir, 2007).

However, it is inherently flawed to use the cultural deficit thesis to explain the sustained education underachievement of the Malay Muslims. These theories assume homogeneity of the Malay Muslim community, which is not true (Nasir, 2007). The cultural deficit thesis do not account for the variance of achievement of the Malay Muslim community in Singapore. Albeit a minority, there are Singapore Malay Muslims who are enrolled in tertiary education institutions and are rewarded by the educational system. Besides, the cultural deficit thesis places all the blame on the Malay Muslim culture and disregards the role of structural factors in explaining their underachievement (Adzahar, 2012; Nasir, 2007; Senin & Ng, 2012; Rahim, 1998). There is hence a need to delve deeper in understanding the 'Malay Problem', keeping in mind the presence of socio-economic variance within Singapore's Malay Muslim community.

### **Motivation of Study**

Upon understanding the limitations of the culture deficit thesis, this study aims to investigate how socio-economic class is a moderator of educational attainment in

Singapore. Contrary to the existing national discourse of educational under-attainment as a 'Malay Problem', this thesis argues that the analytical tool of 'class', instead of 'ethnicity', can better explain an individual's performance in Singapore's education system. Socio-economic class interferes with a plethora of factors - social, psychological, emotional, access to resources correlated with optimizing educational performance - which in turn determines if a child does well academically. In particular, some of the factors that will be addressed in this thesis include cultural capital, availability of external educational resources, conduciveness of home environment, choice of values and parenting style.

### **Nature of Study**

The first segment of this study takes on a qualitative research methodology. In-depth interviews are held with two different groups of students, namely the 'more privileged students' and the 'less privileged students. A qualitative research methodology is used as the educational under-attainment of Malay Muslims is a complex sociological issue. Qualitative research methods can better document the intertwining effects of political, sociological, psychological, and even emotional factors that led to or arose from the 'Malay Problem'. Qualitative in-depth interviews also grant me flexibility in collecting data from informants while amplifying the voice of the informants, which is vital in generating rich data and alternative lenses through which this phenomenon could be framed. Last but not least, this is an emotional topic for a lot of Malay Muslims as they fervently believe in the meritocratic system in Singapore and the upward social mobility it promises them of. Conducting qualitative in-depth interviews allows me to capture the emotions of Malay-Muslims when illustrating their educational journey.

The second segment of this study is dominated by secondary research on the educational system and the sources of help available for needy students. Much information was found on websites, past newspaper articles, books and journal articles.

### **Informants**

My informants are students ranging from 15 to 25 years old. They specifically identify themselves as Malays under Singapore's CMIO racial categories, and are Muslims by religion.

As this is a comparative study between more privileged and less privileged students, the respondents belong to two distinct groups. One group of fourteen consists of Singaporean Malay Muslims currently pursuing their undergraduate studies in Singapore Management University (SMU) and National University of Singapore (NUS). These students come from privileged family backgrounds. Almost all of them live in private housing and have a monthly household income of more than S\$8000. Their parents either own businesses or are professionals and managers in their respective fields. These

students also have more educational resources. They can afford private tuition and external reading materials like magazine subscriptions as well as encyclopedias. Many of their family members e.g. cousins are also university graduates.

The other group of respondents consists of 6 Singaporean Malay Muslim students benefitting from a range of Mendaki's programmes including the Mendaki Tuition Scheme (MTS), Empowerment Programme for Girls (EPG) and the Academic and Lifeskills Coaching Programme (ALCP). These students belong to families with a gross monthly household income of less than S\$3000 or a family per capita income of less than \$800 a month. The Mendaki Tuition scheme is their affordable alternative to private tuition, and these families often live from hand to mouth.

As this study involves minors as interview subjects, special attention is paid to ethical concerns. Informed consent is sought before conducting the interviews. Subjects are informed that they have the right to stop the interview at any point of time, and can feel free to inform the interviewer of "no-go" zones. Privacy, anonymity and confidentiality are also promised. The interviews are all held in private rooms or in the subject's own houses for their comfort. The identity of subjects is not disclosed; only relevant snippets of information are quoted, with no reference to the subject who provided the quote. Last but not least, subjects are given a hotline to call should they feel that their rights are violated during the entire research process.

### **Findings – The Lived Experience of the Malay Muslim Students**

#### **Convergence in the Perception of the Value of Education and Motivation Levels**

The Malay Muslims, regardless of their socio-economic status, are not ignorant about the importance of being educated and they emphasise their educational attainment as the medium for upward social mobility. Both groups cited qualifications as a way to 'getting a good job'. The less privileged group in particular believed that education is the way to break the poverty cycle.

Both the privileged and underprivileged students also exhibited similar motivation levels towards educational attainment. The two groups of students are equally and highly motivated, although they cited different reasons for their motivation.

The more privileged students tend to be motivated by 'past experiences in school'. They are 'constantly motivated by good results and by praises from their teachers', and they 'choose not to disappoint them by working harder'. They also cite 'healthy competition and encouragement' from their peers as a source of motivation. Their parents also play a big role by being 'involved in their educational journey and constantly exhibiting concern over their progress in school'.

The less privileged students, similarly, also cited 'encouragement from peers' as a reason. However, they think that parental support and encouragement, although present, is inadequate. This is because their 'parents are not educated' and they 'don't really know how to encourage them besides telling them to work hard'. Some of these students also cited the desire to debunk prevailing stereotypes of the underprivileged as a source of motivation, and they work hard because they 'want to prove other people who doubt their capabilities wrong'.

Although both groups converge on their perception of the value of education and motivation levels, there is disparity in their level of educational attainment. To understand this disparity, a closer dissection of the issue is required to tease out the factors explaining the differential educational attainment of the more privileged compared to the less privileged students.

#### Differential Access to Private Tuition

A student with more financial resources at home can afford to hire a private tutor. Having a private tutor enhanced the students' learning experience as well as their educational performance. They could also pursue their hobbies and other co-curricular activities, which could enhance their all-roundedness and resumes, hence bettering their chances to move on to better educational institutions later on in their educational journey. This is because educational institutions in Singapore and even scholarships awarded by ministries value non-academic qualities like leadership and excellence in co-curricular activities (CCA) in the admission criteria (Public Service Commission Scholarships, 2012).

The fact that these tuition sessions are expensive means that the less privileged students would not be able to afford them and hence would not be able to reap the benefits of having a private tutor. Less privileged students have to struggle with having no one to consult when they meet with difficulties when doing their homework. These students indicated that they 'have no choice' but to 'leave their homework blank'. By not fulfilling their homework requirements, these less privileged students risk being subjects of criticisms and labeling by their teachers. It can be said that the lack of tuition as a source of educational support has the indirect effect of causing students to lose motivation and interest in school because of the unconscious attitude of the teachers towards the student. Since motivation and interest are also important indicators of educational attainment, tuition is a mechanism that directly and indirectly results in poorer educational attainment of less privileged students.

#### Differential Access to External Educational Materials

Access to external reading materials is positively correlated to the command of languages as well as comprehension abilities, which is facilitates educational

performance and educational attainment (Navarro & Mora, 2013; National Institutes of Health, 1969; Katz & Wright, 1977). Being able to afford external academic materials like assessment books provides more privileged students with the opportunity to practice their work. It also exposes them to more types of questions and it better prepares them for examinations. As a result, they tend to score better than students who lacked practice in the examinations.

Conversely, less privileged students do not have the luxury of getting their hands on such expensive reading materials. They will have to settle for more accessible but less reader friendly materials like 'newspapers'. The lack of financial resources requires the less privileged students to make alterations to their lifestyle to come up with the money required for external resources required by the school. They are not able to afford additional external materials that are not compulsory in the school curriculum. This inevitably results in less practice and less exposure to different kinds of questions for these students, thus a higher probability of them underperforming compared to their more privileged peers.

#### Effects of the Lack of Financial Resources on Time Use

A typical day of a privileged student and an underprivileged student looks very different, and this has implications on the educational performance of both groups of students. More privileged households are likely to either have a stay-home parent, usually the mother as a full time housewife. For double income families, a domestic helper is often employed. This means that privileged students are unburdened by household chores and taking care of younger siblings if any.

This is in stark contrast with the time use pattern of a less privileged student who shared that she works part time outside to earn her own pocket money. After school, she rushes to work and head home after work to do some housework because she is the eldest daughter. She does her homework only after completing the housework. It is often very late when she completes her homework, hence her sleeping time is compromised. Her social life is also compromised due to her hectic schedule.

This is aggravated by the fact that these students are generally academically weaker, and hence they have no choice but to take on lower paying service jobs instead of higher paying tutoring jobs. That means that these students have to work for longer hours to be able to earn enough money to support themselves. The shortage of time a less privileged student experiences because of demands from work and home compromises on the time the student has to commit to academic related activities. These students have less time to do their homework and to revise, and this inevitably results in lower familiarity of the curriculum content, which in turn compromises on their educational performance. In addition, the demands from work and home drain the student, resulting

in him/her not able to focus and concentrate in class. This compounds the academic difficulties the student faces.

#### Effects of the Lack of Financial Resources on Home and Study Environment

An environment conducive for studying is another factor correlated to good academic performance. It is noted however, that an environment conducive for studying is a luxury for less privileged students. They often live in cramped one or two room flats, and they do not have a permanent study space such as a personal study desk. Their study periods are also often intermittent and interrupted due to the lack of space for family activities at home. The lack of an environment conducive for studying compounds the various obstacles faced by underprivileged students in their educational journey. They have to deal with disruptive and uncomfortable study spaces and this impedes their capacity to capitalise on their scarce study time. The effectiveness of studying and revision is also not optimised.

The comfortable study spaces that are accessible to privileged students pose a stark contrast to that described by the less privileged students. More privileged students often have their own study rooms which is comfortably furnished. As some of these students live in private condominiums, they have access to study lounges which are air-conditioned and quiet. These students are hence more able to keep focused during their stipulated studying times. They also incorporate relaxation methods in their study spaces to better help them overcome stress that comes from studying. All these factors help these students to capitalise on their study time and optimise the effectiveness of their studying regimes.

#### Effects of Socio-Economic Class on Language Use

Delving into the issue of the language used at home is important as English medium schools dominate government schools in Singapore. Most of the other subjects, such as Science and the Humanities are taught in English, and thus having a good command of English is inextricable to understand the content of these other subjects. Having parents who are not fluent in English is characteristic of underperforming students (Ow, 1992). A good command of English is often associated with better educational performance.

It is observed that students from privileged backgrounds tend to use English to communicate with family members and friends at home. This is because their parents tend to be 'well-educated', and they converse with their parents in English. They also 'watch English television programmes' and 'listen to English radio stations'. By the time they entered school, they were already proficient in English.

On the other hand, less privileged Malay Muslims have less exposure to the English language. They 'only speak English with their Chinese and Indian friends'. They converse in Malay at home, and did not have a good grasp of English before entering school.

As such, it is evident that socio-economic status has an impact on the language use of the students. This in turn has an effect on educational performance. By being fluent in English from a young age, they are more likely to build a good foundation to comprehend the various subjects taught in English. They inevitably have better grammar and possess a wider vocabulary. This has implications on the educational performance of students as classes and examinations are conducted in English. Having a low command of English results in students not comprehending the content covered in school (Chang, 1997).

#### Effects of Financial Resources on Cultural Capital and Peer Association

The proverb 'birds of a feather flock together' aptly captures the social networks of students. Students of privileged backgrounds tend to associate themselves with students of similar family backgrounds and/or students with similar chances of attaining the same level of education as them. This is because they 'talk about the same things' and that their 'goals are aligned'. The concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1979) is evident in this case, where different groups of students have different sets of goals, ideas, expectations and preferences, and hence they associate themselves with each other. This selective association has profound effects on educational attainment levels. These students tend to 'share information on scholarships' and refer each other to 'good online resources' to enhance each other's life chances of getting into prestigious educational institutions and getting their hands on prestigious scholarships. These students also usually have older siblings and cousins who do well and are able to give them advice. This advice often gives them a head start in education, putting them in a better position to outshine their peers without this knowledge.

A student of less privileged family background misses out on the perks of having extensive cultural capital. They often have no one to advise them on the steps to take as most of their older cousins tend not to go as far in the education system, and have to rely on themselves to look for information. They inevitably stumble more on the way, and face more stress in progressing further in the education system. Many of them drop out of the education system in early stages because they simply did not know what to do and missed out on application deadlines. Others will have to settle for their alternative plans. The lack of information due to the limited cultural capital they have had led them down to paths that are less desirable, and they would have been able to attain higher levels of education 'if they had known'. The expense of the lack of information for them is time, as well as the opportunity cost of the prospect of a higher level of education.

More importantly, it has also cost them a possibility of a better job and higher wages, and a better life in future.

The concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1979) also applies to less privileged students when they choose who to socialise and associate themselves with. They tend to choose the people who they think understand how they feel, and are in similar circumstances. They see each other as sources of support and strength to overcome obstacles and unhappiness together. These students get associated with 'bad company' in the void decks of their flats, who happen to face similar social circumstances, and pick up habits like smoking and drinking.

It is important to understand the circumstance behind this phenomenon and the effects it has on educational attainment. This company that the less privileged students associate with is less likely to give them good educational advice and they miss out on the perks of having good cultural capital. They also discourage the less privileged student from pursuing educational attainment, as most of them have dropped out of school, or have given up on an education. Continuous and frequent interactions with people with negative experience with education reinforces negative feelings towards the educational system (Adzahar, 2012) and thus these less privileged students are less likely to persist in their educational journey. This also explains why students born into working class families end up in working class jobs and perpetuate their social reality (Willis, 1977).

It is also interesting to notice that some of the more privileged Malay students interviewed tend to choose to associate themselves with Chinese students. They attribute their ability to enter university to 'having Chinese values' and thus they choose to associate themselves with the Chinese because 'they are very hardworking' and are 'good influence' who will help them in their education. Some less privileged Malay Muslim students are also forthright in sharing that they choose to mingle with their Chinese classmates because they think they are better influence.

This suggests that this group of Malay Muslims take part in the social process of racialisation. They attribute being hardworking and competent as "Chinese values", and they think that it is superior to "Malay values". Their cognitive schema that the Chinese are academically superior translates into behavior; they see their Chinese counterparts as positive influences, consciously choose to associate themselves with their Chinese counterparts and spend more time with them. There was also a hint of admiration when these students speak of their Chinese friends as high achievers.

For other less privileged Malay Muslim students, they express that they are intimidated by their Chinese friends. They think that 'they (Chinese friends) are so smart' and they

are scared that they are ‘too slow for them’. They also mentioned that they ‘cannot click with them (Chinese friends)’ because of the difference in family backgrounds. The concept of habitus in peer association is present in this instance. The Malay Muslim students felt that they are unable to connect with their Chinese peers, as they perceive that their Chinese peers have a different experience with education. They also think that they vary vastly in terms of family background, and that poses as an obstacle for the Malay Muslim students to mingle with the Chinese students. There is also a racialisation process, where the Malay Muslim students attribute intelligence to the Chinese students, and think that they are necessarily academically inferior to the Chinese students. This is to the extent whereby they think these Chinese students are out of their league and they find difficulty associating themselves with the Chinese students. This is also ostensibly an internalisation of racial discourse.

### **Findings – Structural Factors Influencing the Lived Experiences and Educational Attainment of Malay Muslims Students**

#### **Structure of the Education System**

##### ***Policies Governing Entry into Primary Schools***

Entry into primary schools is a huge source of concern as it is the start of the formal educational journey of all Singaporean children. There are also many policies governing the entry of students into primary schools, some of which place less privileged students at a disadvantage.

As priority is given to children of alumni members, there can be as little as only 30 spaces left in the top primary schools<sup>1</sup> before the general public get to ballot for a space (The Straits Times Singapore, 2005; The Straits Times Singapore, 2011; The Straits Times Singapore, 2013). An overwhelmingly huge proportion of the spaces are taken up by the children whose parents are alumni members of the school (The Straits Times Singapore, 2005; Edupoll, 2012). This illustrates how social reproduction is facilitated by Singapore’s education system as parents who have benefitted from the prestigious primary schools tend to have better life opportunities than their counterparts, which their children can inherit. This violates the premise of meritocracy and equal opportunities on which Singapore’s education system is ideologically based. It breeds elitism and benefits the families that come from these top schools<sup>2</sup>, while systematically excluding those who did not have such prior advantage (The Straits Times Singapore, 2011; The Straits Times Singapore, 2005; Edupoll, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> These primary schools include Henry Park Primary School, Ai Tong School, Red Swastika School, Nan Hua Primary School as well as CHIJ St Nicholas Girls’ School (The Straits Times Singapore, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that all three of Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s children were enrolled into Nanyang Primary School (Edupoll, 2012), one of the most prestigious primary schools in Singapore. Most of his grandchildren were also enrolled into Nanyang Primary School (Edupoll, 2012).

In addition, some alumni groups of prestigious primary schools are accused of reinforcing the divide between the haves and the have-nots by erecting high financial barriers to entry (The Straits Times Singapore, 2013). There is a range of membership fees the alumni associations of these reputable primary schools charge. Some schools charge a sum of \$100, and others charge up to \$1000 for parents to become alumni members of the school (The Straits Times Singapore, 2013). This prevents less well-off parents from being able to join these alumni associations (The Straits Times Singapore, 2013), and it follows that the children of more privileged families or parentage who are able to afford the exorbitant memberships fees of these reputable primary schools will have an edge in entering these institutions.

It does not help that these prestigious primary schools systematically produce better results in the Primary School Leaving Examinations compared to neighborhood schools, which advances their students' interest in terms of attaining better educational prospects further down their education journey. This is due to the mechanism of social reproduction through these policies governing the entry into primary schools. More privileged students enter into prestigious primary schools and have a better chance at scoring well in the Primary School Leaving Examination<sup>3</sup>. They are then more likely to enter the Express stream in secondary schools<sup>4</sup> and hence have a better chance to obtain good 'O' Level results<sup>5</sup>. This in turn puts them in a good position to enter a prestigious junior college<sup>6</sup> and subsequently good 'A' Level results<sup>7</sup>. These students then have a good chance to obtain a university degree.

Parents who clock 40 hours as a volunteer in primary schools also gain priority in enrolling their children in the primary school of choice. This policy also has an asymmetric effect for families with different socio-economic statuses. It benefits the children whose parents have stable jobs and positions, and who can therefore afford to take work leave to commit to these volunteer programmes (The Straits Times Singapore, 2011). These parents are usually more educated and belong to the higher socio-economic strata of the Singaporean society (The Straits Times Singapore, 2011). It

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, 24.5% of students from Ai Tong School obtained a PSLE score of 250 and above (Ai Tong School, 2012). The proportion of quality passes (A/A\*) of all subjects examined in the PSLE of Henry Park Primary School was higher than the national average (Henry Park Primary School, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> 8 out of 10 Ai Tong students entered the Express stream (Ai Tong School, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Victoria School, a school that only caters to Express stream students, saw 99.4% of its students with 5 'O' Level passes or more (Victoria School, 2012). This is higher than the national average of 81.3% (Channel News Asia Singapore, 2014). In addition, 31% of student obtained 5A1s and more (Victoria School, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> 96% of Victoria School students qualified for junior colleges (Victoria School, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> 4 students from Raffles Junior College scored 9 distinctions in the 'A' Levels (The Straits Times Singapore, 2014). 97.6% of its students scored at least 3 H2 passes with a pass in either General Paper or Knowledge and Inquiry (Raffles Press, 2014), which is above the national average of 91.6% (Raffles Press, 2014; The Straits Times Singapore, 2014). 339 Raffles Junior College students achieved a perfect score of 90 for the University Admissions Score (UAS) (The Straits Times Singapore, 2014). UAS is used for admission by four autonomous universities in Singapore. In addition, 170 students achieved distinctions in all subjects offered (The Straits Times Singapore, 2014).

follows that children of more privileged socio-economic backgrounds tend to be facilitated in gaining access into more top primary schools compared to their less privileged counterparts. This also means that top primary schools will have more parents volunteering and thus more human resources to run programmes for its students, further exacerbating the divergence of exposure, life opportunities, as well as the privileges between students of less prestigious primary schools and more prestigious primary schools.

It is also pointed out that well-off parents can afford to take advantage of the 1km radius priority policy. This policy allows families living 1km within the radius of the primary school to be prioritised in several primary school registration phases. This means that families with the financial capacity to do so can choose to reside or relocate to residential areas within 1km from the primary school of choice (The Straits Times Singapore, 2011). In this regard, Malay Muslim students from less privileged families are further disadvantaged since the top and more prestigious primary schools are usually located within private housing estates. One good example will be Raffles Girls' Primary School, which only has landed private property within 1km of its radius (The Straits Times Singapore, 2011). This further decreases the chance of less privileged students, who are more likely to be enrolled in neighborhood primary schools, to enroll into prestigious secondary schools. It is evident from the policies governing entry into primary schools that it facilitates social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), where the children of privileged families can inherit the opportunity to receive an education in more prestigious primary schools and be in better position to be rewarded by the education system.

#### Entry into Secondary Schools – Affiliation Programme

It does not help that these prestigious primary schools are affiliated with its equally prestigious secondary schools. The affiliation programme enables students of primary schools to be able to enter the affiliated secondary schools with a lower PSLE score. It follows that the students from more privileged backgrounds stand a better chance of being enrolled in prestigious primary schools, who are subsequently better positioned to enter prestigious secondary schools (The New Paper, 2012).

#### Entry into Secondary Schools – Direct School Admission Programme

The Direct School Admission (DSA) programme is yet another scheme that more privileged families can capitalise on to enroll their children into prestigious secondary schools. The DSA programme is an admission exercise that allows participating secondary schools to select some Primary Six students for admission into their schools at the Secondary One level before the release of the PSLE results (Ministry of Education Singapore). These selections are based on academic and non-academic talents and achievements (Ministry of Education Singapore). Some examples of these talents and

achievements are leadership qualities, good academic track record as well as sports achievements. The objective of this scheme is to promote holistic education by giving secondary schools more flexibility in selecting their students (Ministry of Education Singapore). It is also to encourage students to demonstrate a diverse range of achievements and talents in seeking admission into their secondary school of choice (Ministry of Education Singapore).

While this scheme sets out to recognise talents and reward them duly, which can be a potential source of upward social mobility and recognition to students who possesses talent in areas like sports, leaderships and the arts, it has become a tool manipulated by privileged families to enter their secondary school of choice (The New Paper, 2013). These students tend to be more financially capable of, for instance, hiring music teachers to teach them music from young, or enrolling into external sports classes as a form of enrichment from young (The Straits Times Singapore, 2012; The New Paper, 2013). Parents who have the financial resources even enroll their children into enrichment classes that teach them how to behave during interviews that are part of the DSA selection process (The New Paper, 2013). These children inevitably become more qualified to be selected for admission via the DSA scheme. It is not necessarily so that they have extraordinary talent; it is more often the case whereby they had earlier exposure to these other activities that translates into better performance in these activities.

The DSA programme handicaps the less privileged students who have less exposure to external activities that can boost their chances of entering into prestigious schools. This is worsened by the fact that in the case of some prestigious schools, about 50% of the spaces is taken up via the DSA programme (The Straits Times Singapore, 2013; Ministry of Education Singapore). This means that even before the release of the PSLE results, the secondary schools have already taken in half of its secondary one enrollment numbers. It is peculiar that different types of schools have a varying discretion with regards to percentage of students that can be enrolled via the DSA scheme. The most prestigious secondary schools, such as Raffles' Girls Secondary School and Raffles Institution can enroll up to 100% of its students via the DSA programme as these prestigious schools often also offer the Integrated Programme (IP). It follows that privileged students have a major advantage in entering these secondary schools via enrolling into good primary schools or via the DSA programme. These students can also bypass the 'O' Levels and easily enter the affiliated prestigious Junior Colleges via the Integrated Programme (IP) later in their educational journey.

It is hence unsurprising that there is an overrepresentation of students from families of higher socio-economic status in prestigious secondary schools (The Straits Times Singapore, 2012). 60% of students enrolled in Raffles Institution, a top secondary school

in Singapore, have parents who are both graduates (The Straits Times Singapore, 2011). Few of them belong to the minority races (The Straits Times Singapore, 2011). This has implications on peer association, as most students from these top secondary schools do not have friends of other academic streams and from lower-income households. The social networks formed in these schools have long lasting impacts on educational performance, educational attainment as well as upward social mobility. These ties reinforce good education and employment prospects amongst this group of elite students (The Straits Times Singapore, 2012).

It is heartening to note however, that the Ministry of Education realises the unlevelled playing field that the DSA scheme has created. In a recent parliamentary response, Mr Heng Swee Kiat, the current Minister of Education, announced that a broader definition of merit will be defined for the DSA scheme (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2014). The DSA scheme will explicitly take into account personal qualities such as resilience and care for others (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2014). The Ministry of Education is in the midst of making the DSA scheme more inclusive to reward a more diverse range of students (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2014).

#### Structure of Secondary School Curriculum

MOE suggests there are supporting mechanisms for late bloomers and for students who have started their educational journey on the wrong foot to move on to better streams and better their chance of further educational attainment. However, a closer look at the syllabus of the Normal Academic stream and Normal Technical stream (Ministry of Education Singapore) challenges this notion.

The curriculum of the Normal Academic stream is comparatively a lot more rigorous than that of the Normal Technical stream, as it aims to prepare students for the 'N' Levels in 4 years and subsequently the 'O' Levels in 5 years (Ministry of Education Singapore). It is in essence an Express stream programme, differing only in duration from 4 to 5 years. The curriculum is thus very similar to that of the Express stream.

However, the Normal Technical curriculum is designed to prepare students for technical-vocational education at the ITE (Ministry of Education Singapore). Emphasis is put on strengthening the student's proficiency in English and basic Mathematics (Ministry of Education Singapore). The curriculums for both streams are vastly different. Academic subjects like Geography, History, English Literature and Additional Mathematics are offered in the Normal Academic syllabus. Subjects that are more geared towards technical education like Computer Applications and Design and Technology are offered in the Normal Technical syllabus. It is not hard to imagine the difficulties arising from the drastic change in syllabus a Normal Technical student will have to face upon switching to the Normal Academic stream in hope to pursue better future educational opportunities.

The distinct difference in focus of both curriculums makes educational mobility hard for the students in the Normal Technical stream, especially for the Normal Technical students to fulfill the requirements of the Humanities and The Arts segment of the Normal Academic curriculum.

This restricts mobility of better performing students of the Normal Technical stream into the Normal Academic stream. The path of the Normal Technical students is thus destined to lead to the Institutes of Technical Education (ITEs), with little opportunity to make it into Polytechnics to obtain a diploma, much less into a University to obtain a degree. Such an educational path design stunts their educational attainment opportunities significantly.

#### *Special Assistance Plan (SAP) Programme: Further Disadvantaging the Malay Muslims*

The Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools are first set up in 1979 in effort to nurture bicultural and bilingual students (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2008; The Straits Times Singapore, 2013). It is also to preserve the ethos of Chinese medium schools in pre-independent Singapore (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2008). These schools boast of a strong background in Chinese language and culture, and are also mediums to instill sound Chinese values in their students (The Straits Times Singapore, 2013). These schools are also known to be prestigious. However, due to the language requirements of these SAP schools, only Chinese are admitted into these schools. The SAP schools require students to take Higher Chinese as a subject of study, which is a huge barrier of entry to the non-Chinese (Barr & Skrbis, 2008).

Moreover, some schools such as Dunman High School, River Valley High School, as well as Nanyang Girls' High offer the Direct School Admission (DSA) and Integrated Programme (IP). It means that only students proficient enough in Chinese are allowed to enter these schools, and a spot in the corresponding junior colleges is assured upon enrollment in Secondary One. This makes entry into these SAP schools not only subtly discriminatory against the less privileged students, but also against the non-Chinese students.

#### *Entry into Post-Secondary Institutions – Integrated Programme*

Upon the end of secondary school, Express stream students sit for their 'O' levels examination. But for students who are enrolled in schools offering the Integrated Programme, they can bypass the 'O' levels and enter the junior colleges paired with the secondary schools. This means that these students do not have to face the exam stress of the 'O' Levels, and are assured of a space in their respective paired junior colleges when they enter their secondary schools. The difficulty of entering these prestigious junior colleges can be said to be much lower than an Express stream student that is not in the Integrated Programme scheme.

It is observed that students need to obtain almost perfect scores in the 'O' Levels to enter prestigious junior colleges. The admission criteria are even more stringent for Hwa Chong Junior College and Raffles Junior College, which require students to have obtained bonus points on top of achieving almost perfect scores. These bonus points are then deducted from the raw L1R5 'O' Level score<sup>8</sup> that is obtained, which makes it possible for outstanding students to obtain a score that is lesser than the perfect score of 6.

The bonus points system greatly penalises the less privileged students. Since only students who have done well for their PSLE are granted the chance to take on Higher Mother Tongue<sup>9</sup> and a third language<sup>10</sup> as part of their syllabus (Ministry of Education Singapore) which offers them more bonus points, this bonus points system restricts the mobility of students who faltered in the PSLE but managed to catch up in the 'O' Levels. These students are disqualified of a chance to enter prestigious junior colleges such as Hwa Chong Junior College and Raffles Junior College, which requires at least 3 bonus points to enroll into, at the point in time when they receive their PSLE results. This double penalises the less privileged students; (1) they stand less chance of taking advantage of the Integrated Programme as they are less probable to enter prestigious secondary schools and (2) they are less likely to obtain the bonus points which puts them in better position to enter these prestigious junior colleges as they are less likely to do well in the PSLE and hence will be deprived a chance to take on Higher Mother Tongue and a third language as part of their syllabus. It is hence appropriate to assert that students who enter top primary schools earlier in their educational journey increase their chances of entering prestigious secondary schools, which ensure them of a place in top junior colleges that produce university-eligible students.

In addition, the less privileged students are also less likely to do well in their co-curricular activities (CCA)<sup>11</sup>. This is because of the lack of time and resources that restrict their commitment levels in their CCAs as mentioned in the previous sections. They are hence less likely to score well for their CCA, which in turn decreases the number of

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<sup>8</sup> The L1R5 score is computed by adding the number grades of a language subject and five other relevant subjects. These five relevant subjects must include at least a mathematics subject (Elementary Mathematics or Additional Mathematics), a science subject (Physics, Chemistry or Biology), and a humanities subject (English Literature, Chinese Literature, History or Geography) (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Only the top 10% of the PSLE band or the top 11% to 30% PSLE band who meets the language criteria of A\* grade in Mother Tongue or at least a Merit in Higher Mother Tongue are offered to take up Higher Mother Tongue in the secondary level (Ministry of Education Singapore)

<sup>10</sup> Only the top 10% of the PSLE band are offered to take up a third language in French, German, Japanese and Spanish. These students also have to be either Singapore Citizens or Singapore Permanent Residents (Ministry of Education Singapore)

<sup>11</sup> CCA is graded using the LEAPS scheme, which awards CCA points in 5 categories: Leadership, Enrichment, Achievement, Participation and Service (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2003). Under the 'Achievement' category, there are three sub-categories, namely Representation, Attainment and Accomplishment (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2003). More points will be awarded to students obtaining a title in competitions than merely representing the school in competitions.

bonus points that they can obtain. Moreover, as students more prestigious secondary schools have access to better resources such as better coaches and better facilities, they are more likely to excel in the CCAs. These students are also more likely to take part in competitions that are more prestigious, and even take part in international competitions. Since the grades awarded for CCAs also take into account the prestige and scale of competitions and activities students take part in (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2003), these more privileged students who have a better chance to make it to prestigious secondary schools thus also have a greater opportunity to receive excellent grades for their CCA. This qualifies these students for more bonus points.

Hence, it is evident that it is much easier for students who are already enrolled into prestigious secondary schools to enter the prestigious junior colleges because of the Integrated Programme that allows them to bypass the 'O' Levels. It is also evident that the bonus points system discriminates against the less privileged students in the entry into junior colleges.

There are also an increasing number of institutions offering both secondary and post-secondary education enrolling students after the release of their PSLE results. For this special group of students, they enter these institutions at the Secondary one level and are assured of graduating with an 'A' Level certificate. It is also observed that these schools are known to be prestigious. A few examples of these schools are Temasek Junior College, River Valley High School and National Junior College.

For the Normal Academic students, they are less likely to go into these prestigious schools and move on to their 'A' Levels as these schools do not offer the Normal Academic curriculum. While it is possible for Normal Academic students to do well and move into the Express stream, the route of entering the Integrated Programme is not open to them. These students complete their 'N' Levels first, then move on to the 'O' Levels, in which more academically inclined students enter the Junior Colleges while most of these students enter the Polytechnics and graduate with a Diploma.

The route of educational progression for the Normal Technical students is a lot more restricted. The difference in the curriculum of the Normal Technical stream and the Normal Academic stream is a barrier for Normal Technical students, which less privileged students and Malay Muslims make up a substantial part of (Albright, 2006), to move into the Normal Academic stream and increase their life chances by obtaining a diploma from a Polytechnic. It follows that most of the students from the Normal Technical stream move on to Institute of Technical Education to obtain a National ITE Certificate (NITEC). Some of these students move on to obtain a Higher NITEC.

The policies governing entry into primary schools and secondary schools, the DSA scheme, the IP scheme, the affiliation programme, as well as the structure of the

secondary school curriculum are elements in the Singaporean education system that compromises on the educational attainment of the less privileged students. In addition, the SAP schools scheme further disadvantages the Malay Muslims in their educational journey.

### Structure of Assistance

#### *Structure of Funding of Community Based Self-Help Organisations*

Currently, the assistance available to underprivileged Malay Muslim students who require educational and financial support mostly come from community based self-help organisations like Mendaki, Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA), and Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC). The source of funding of these organisations usually comes from the monthly contributions of Singaporeans from the respective races. These contributions are pegged to wage levels. As Singapore's population is dominated by the Chinese and the Chinese are overrepresented in the higher income groups of Singapore, it follows that the CDAC will have more funding than the other two organisations, although the figure of contribution might be lower. This means that more resources and assistance can be distributed to the needy Chinese, but the same cannot be said for the students of the minority races.

This is true especially for the Malay Muslims, who are overrepresented in the lower strata of the Singaporean society. While Mendaki has a lot of helpful programmes that has benefitted the interview subjects that I have spoken to, many of these programmes have limited outreach. For instance, the Academic and Lifeskills Coaching Programme (ALCP) is only open to Malay Muslims ITE students (Yayasan Mendaki, 2013). This programme is designed to support these ITE students, help them stay in school and excel in their studies (Yayasan Mendaki, 2013). However, subjects did reveal that it would be helpful for this programme to be open to primary and secondary school students. Similarly, the Empowerment Programme for Girls (EPG), which is designed to engage female Malay Muslims (Yayasan Mendaki, 2013), also has outreach to a limited number of secondary schools.

#### *Scholarship Criteria and the Definition of Merit*

Moreover, the existing narrow definition of merit has caused scholarships to be out of sight of the needy less privileged students. It does not help that most scholarships offered by educational institutions and the Ministries are focused on selecting the cream of the crop in terms of academic and non-academic performance (Public Service Commission Scholarships, 2012). There is a lack of diversity within the scholars handpicked by the Public Service Commission. They usually come from the top notch junior colleges, where 60% of these scholars graduated from Hwa Chong Junior College and Raffles Junior College (The Straits Times Singapore, 2013). A glance at the scholarships recipients list tells the same story (Public Service Commission Scholarships,

2010). These students also have excellent track record performance in national examinations and possess outstanding achievements in their co-curricular activities. They are also usually from privileged families (The Straits Times Singapore, 2013) and are less needy for this financial assistance in pursuing further education. It follows that a bulk of scholarships are given to people who do not need it to finance their education, while the students who need the awards are in no position to obtain the awards as their achievements pale in comparison.

It is heartening to note that the chief of the Public Service Commission, Mr Eddie Teo, has stepped out to speak about this issue. He informed Singaporeans that the Public Service Commission will seek to offer scholarships to individuals with diverse backgrounds and encourage diversity within its pool of scholars to hatch against elitism (Teo, 2009).

#### *Impact on Educational Equality of School Alumnus Contributions*

Another source of help in terms of financial resources which puts the less privileged students at disadvantage is the encouragement of school alumnus to give back to their alma mater. While the motive behind this initiative is commendable, it has caused divergence between the prestigious schools and the neighborhood schools. This is because the prestigious educational institutions tend to have more economically successful alumnus, and they would be able to contribute larger sums to these schools to offer more programmes and initiatives to enhance the learning experience of the existing students. On the other hand, neighborhood schools will have to solely depend on the budget allocated by the Ministry of Education, and thus its programmes and initiatives will be limited. For instance, Raffles Institution managed to raise a whopping \$10,000,000 during one of its alumnus fundraising events (My Paper, 2011; The Business Times Singapore, 2011). These funds will be utilised to fund scholarships for needy students, student-run community projects, science research labs, sporting programmes and teacher training (The Business Times Singapore, 2011). It follows that prestigious educational institutions will become more prestigious, more well-equipped, and enriched with these alumnus donations, while other schools fall behind in terms of infrastructure, programmes and initiatives as well as student financial support.

#### **Discussion and Recommendations**

The crux of the issue that the education system must address is the definition of merit. Although Singapore proclaims it is a meritocracy, it is evident that a lot of the “merit” that is rewarded by the system can be “bought”. This is because while Singapore’s education system provides equality of opportunity, where everyone is given a chance to be educated, it does not take into account the inequality of conditions of students. The socio-economic condition of each student to do well varies, and the current structure of the education system is unforgiving towards the students with worse socio-economic conditions. This calls for a serious review of these institutionalised structures.

Singapore's Ministry of Education has to make up its mind on the role of education. Should the Ministry insist that education is a source of social mobility for the lower socio-economic strata of the society, these un-meritocratic institutionalised structures have to be revised. Inter-stream mobility, availability of information and education councilors, openness of prestigious educational institutions as well as rethinking the various 'bonus schemes' can be enhanced to ensure less privileged students an equal chance to do as well as their more privileged counterparts.

Rethinking the definition of merit is also imperative. The existing definition of merit is not inclusive towards the less privileged students. The fixation on perfect track records in the enrollment process as well as the selection of government scholars (Public Service Commission Scholarships, 2012) inevitably disqualifies the less privileged Malay Muslims students of a chance. A few other qualities that are less affected by socio-economic class such as moral character and conduct can be considered alongside the existing set of meritocratic requirements.

This is however easier said than done. On closer look, some of the policies instituted are to reward a more diverse range of students. The DSA scheme, for instance, sets out to reward students with talent in non-academic areas (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2014). However, parents with financial resources are able to capitalise on the system by pursuing all means to better the life opportunities of their children.

Scholarship agencies can consider the notion of needs-based scholarships, which is widely available in countries like the United States. These scholarships take into account the socio-economic situation and needs of scholarships applicants, and award scholarships to deserving and needy students. This increases the chance for less privileged students to obtain scholarships that can be integral to them pursuing higher education.

More emphasis can also be put on early childhood education. By ensuring that all children have a basic command of English before entering primary school, the issue of language use in families can be diminished and the playing field may be evened. It is a timely decision for the government to set up the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) as well as more kindergartens to cater to the population in the heartlands (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2014). It is also heartening to note that the Kindergarten Fee Assistance Scheme (KiFAS) is enhanced recently to make Kindergarten education 'more affordable for low and middle income families' (Early Childhood Development Agency Singapore, 2014).

More transparency is also warranted in the funding as well as manpower for schools. In light of the current 'Every School is a Good School' scheme, it would help to convince the

general public that the MOE is going the extra mile to ensure equal access to quality education. To start, MOE could look into retaining good teachers in public schools. Funding for different categories of schools should be revised to help neighbourhood schools bridge the resource gap.

Perhaps it takes more than structural alterations to the system to undo the disadvantage posed to less privileged Malay Muslim students. A mindset change is also required. The population can start by being more empathetic towards the educational under-attainment of the Malay Muslims, and cast aside the cultural prejudices we have of the Malay Muslim community. By viewing the issue of educational attainment as a 'socio-economic' issue instead of an 'ethnic' issue, hopefully the population will relate to the issue as a responsibility of the entire Singaporean community instead of solely the Malay Muslim community.

The structural change that can follow this mindset shift would be to allow for more equal distribution of funds to the CDAC, SINDA as well as Mendaki to reach out to the population segments that require these resources the most. Instead of donating directly to the three different community self-help groups, the donations can be pooled by a central agency housed in the Central Provident Fund (CPF) Board. This pool of funds can then be more evenly distributed to the self-help groups, taking into the account the number of beneficiaries and dependents they are currently serving. This ensures that a less privileged Malay Muslim student can potentially receive as much educational and financial assistance as a less privileged student of other ethnic groups, and this will inevitably alleviate the problem of scarcity of resources available to the larger pool of Malay Muslims students who requires assistance. This in turn puts the Malay Muslims in a better position to perform in the education system.

This is indeed a difficult issue to tackle. It is inevitable that social and income inequalities in the private sphere will seep into the educational arena, resulting in a divergence of educational performance between more privileged students and less privileged students. However, it is a battle that policy makers and educators must fight. It is beneficial for Singapore to continuously fine-tune its education policies to weed out elements that are more conducive for social reproduction instead of upward social mobility. Education in Singapore should persist in its primary function of rewarding the most deserving students, ensuring that every child realises his/her potential and are equipped with the skills and opportunities to best contribute to the society and economy.

### **Directions for Further Research**

It takes further research and studies to substantiate politically and socially viable solution to resolve this issue of educational stratification. Further studies on how the less privileged families of other ethnic groups fare in the education system, the types of

help they receive as well as the effectiveness of these assistance schemes can be done. Good practices can hence be shared to enhance the effectiveness of existing assistance schemes in Singapore for the benefit of the students who rely on these assistance schemes. Educational and financial assistance schemes in other countries can also be explored, giving Singapore policy makers a fresh insight on how to structure assistance schemes to better help the less privileged students.

It will also be especially illuminating to study the decision-making processes of Malay Muslim families regarding marriage, parenthood and financial management. It is interesting to note that almost all of my respondents from the less privileged group come from broken families. They usually have 6 to 9 step-siblings due to the remarriage of their divorced parents. These big families mean that there is a greater financial burden on their parents, creating a push factor for them to enter the employment market early in their education journey. Since these decisions play a vital role in the socio-economic circumstances of these less privileged students, it would be helpful to tackle the issue at its roots by understanding the logic and decision making process of the parents of these students.

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## Author's Profile



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MENDAKI Occasional Paper Series 2014  
Issue No. 1  
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