SINGAPORE MALAYS’ ATTITUDE TOWARDS EDUCATION:
A LOOK AT THE IMPEDIMENTS TO EDUCATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

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SUMMARY

This research exercise is an attempt to look at the efforts of the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore to upgrade its educational performance and achievement. In conducting this study, sources from the past and current Malay society are used. Some old texts used include *Hikayat Abdullah* and *The Malay Annals*. Contemporary sources include the various local newspapers like the Straits times and Berita Harian. Ministerial speeches touching on the issues of education are also utilized to provide a view of the community leaders’ assessment of the topic in question.

This study also referred to other studies to obtain a grasp of the community’s views of the problem at hand. Although the primary concern is the issue of education of the Malays in Singapore, some of the materials covering Malaysia are also used to further enrich our understanding. In analysing the thinking of the Malay community and the views of the non-Malays on the problem of educational underachievement of the Malays, this study utilizes observations made through historical-sociological research using the methodology of sociology of knowledge.

The first chapter of this study highlights the current educational problems faced by the Malays in Singapore and how they affect the Malays’ development in Singapore. Chapter Two looks at the perception of the different interest groups on the issue of the educational performance of the Malays. Chapter Three studies the historical background of the Malays in Singapore from feudal times to the colonial and the contemporary period. This will help us to better understand the type of education the Malays have received and how this type of education has shaped the world-view of the Malays with regard to education and socio-economic matters. Chapter Four discusses the various measures the community has
attempted, specifically through the two self-help groups; Mendaki and the Association of Muslim Professionals, in their effort to overcome the educational underachievement among the Malay/Muslim, for the past four decades.

Finally, the last chapter analyses the value orientations of the Malay/Muslim that may have negative implications and hinder their achievement in the educational arena. It is important to have a good understanding of such value orientations and outlook, because not only do they shape the world-view and psyche of the Malays, but they also influence the ability of the Malays to adapt to changes brought by industrialization and globalization.

There has been little study on the Malay ideas on education especially in the case of Singapore Malay/Muslim within the framework of sociology of knowledge and sociology of education. I hope to contribute, in a small way, to the understanding of the problems of the Malay/Muslim in the field of education and to provide some insights in diagnosing the problems of educational underachievement.
Chapter One

Current Educational Problems Facing the Malays in Singapore

This chapter discusses the current educational problems facing the Malays in Singapore. An understanding of the contemporary problems is essential since this will help us have a better perspective on the issues that should be taken into consideration in the formulation of programmes to overcome the problem of lack of achievement among the Malay students in their studies. There have been several studies that discussed the educational issues and challenges that the Malay Muslim community in Singapore are confronted with. Each of them has contributed in their own right to our understanding of the Malay educational issue.

In discussing the educational problem facing the Malay/Muslim in Singapore, this study utilises some insights gained from reading Karl Mannheim’s perspective of sociology of knowledge to understand the discourse appropriately. 1 Basically, Mannheim emphasises the importance of understanding the relationship between ideas and social condition which has taken place in the development of human thought. 2 In considering the above discussion on education, it is pertinent for us to understand the extent to which ideas, values or concepts

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2 Generally, Mannheim’s evaluative sociology of knowledge stress the importance of historical-sociological method of research to analyse worldviews and human thought whereby a researcher is able to “judge the quality of truth in the different kinds of thought.” See Henk Worldring, Karl Mannheim, The Development of His Thought. (Assen/Maastricht: Von Gorcum, 1986) p. 367; Refer also to Mannheim’s Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge, especially chapter II.
differ from one group to another.\textsuperscript{3} It is interesting to note what has been said so far. At the same time it is crucial to take note of those ideas that have not been conceptualised and formulated. According to Mannheim, “the absence of certain concepts indicates very often not only the absence of a certain point of view, but also the absence of a definitive drive to come to grips with certain life problems.”\textsuperscript{4}

An understanding of sociology of education, as an extension of sociology of knowledge, is also indispensable in our discussion. The primary aim of sociology of education, in Mannheim’s term, is how to understand the prevailing educational issue, recognizing its historical dynamics and sociological approach, in order to plan possible reforms, as part of the reconstruction of man and society. “Our investigation into the sociological foundations of education cannot be a purely academic one, piling up facts for their own sake. There is something definite we want to know. We are in search of something which should never be lost sight of in our research. We want to understand our time, the predicament of this age and what healthy education could contribute to a regeneration of society and man.”\textsuperscript{5}

An intellectual tradition or structure of a society and its conception on education evolves throughout history. An educational paradigm that is cherished and persists on a society is more likely a product of a past historical period. But changes occurring in the

\textsuperscript{3} Without going into details of the methodology of sociology of knowledge, which is admitted as beyond the ability of this study to elaborate, we shall however, enumerate the summary of its perspective as provided by Alexander Kern, which has helped us to understand some insights pertinent in our study. “First, select a period for study and pick problem to be treated, setting up the leading concept and its opposite. Second, on the initial level of imputation analyze all the works involved, trace them to the central common idea, for example, transcendentalism, and produce a structural type which makes the Weltanschauung clear. Third, analyze the works and see to what extent they fit the construction. Blends and crossings of viewpoints within each work will be pointed out, and the actual history of the thought style will be charted. Fourth, …by going behind the Weltanschauung, seek to derive the structure and tendencies of thought style from the compositions of the groups, classes, generations… which express themselves in that mode. Fifth, explain the direction of development of the body of thought ‘through the structural situation and the changes it undergoes’ and ‘through the constantly varying problems raised by the changing structure.’” Please read, “The Sociology of Knowledge in the Study of Literature,” in Milton C. Albercht, et. Al (eds) \textit{The Sociology of Art and Literature} (London: Duckworth, 1970), pp. 553-561.

\textsuperscript{4} Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, p 246

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid, p. 160
contemporary world are moving so rapidly, that it often results in the inability of the education system to keep pace with the overgrowing changes. The functioning of a modern society cannot afford a sector within the community to remain aloof and ambivalent about changes that are taking place around them. Mannheim’s observation on this is relevant:

“Simpler and more traditional societies take themselves for granted and their educational aims and practices are relatively unquestioned…In a society which is liable to change, those who have the historical perspective can become aware of the transitions which are taking place during their lifetime and in the larger span of historical tome which they are a part. People thus aware of change have to digest and assimilate the knowledge which is theirs through their education and to detect what are to become the important aspects of this knowledge. They have to prospect in ideas ahead of their time. They have to do all this without losing faith in what has been handed on to them from their past and what their contribution is going to be in the future.”

Singapore Education System

Before dwelling into the problem of educational underachievement among the Malays, it is imperative to look into Singapore’s educational system. Generally an education system, according to Syed Hussein Alatas, must fulfil some basic objectives for it to be worthy enough to be called an educational system. These basic objectives are:

“(a) to acquire the necessary knowledge for living within the social and cultural system; (b) to acquire understanding of human and non-human life forms as well as other phenomena in the universe; (c) to ensure the spiritual, moral, psychological and intellectual development of the personality in the condition of physical well being; (d) to develop the proper sense of civic consciousness and social solidarity and (e) to attain good life”

The Singapore government’s education policy seeks to provide children with a balanced and well-rounded education to develop them to their full potential, and hence

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nurture them into good citizens who are responsible for the family, society and country. The Ministry of Education has prided itself in building a strong education system that:

“…aims to help our students to discover their own talents, to make the best of these talents and realise their full potential, and to develop a passion for learning that lasts through life….The task of our schools and tertiary institutions is to give our young the chance to develop the skills, character and values that will enable them to continue to do well and to take Singapore forward in this future. We have been moving in recent years towards an education system that is more flexible and diverse. The aim is to provide students with greater choice to meet their different interests and ways of learning. Being able to choose what and how they learn will encourage them to take greater ownership of their learning. We are also giving our students a more broad-based education to ensure their all-round or holistic development, in and out of the classroom. These approaches in education will allow us to nurture our young with the different skills that they need for the future. We seek to help every child find his own talents, and grow and emerge from school confident of his abilities. We will encourage them to follow their passions, and promote a diversity of talents among them - in academic fields, and in sports and the arts.”

The development of the Singapore education system shows that it is closely-linked to the social, political and economic developments in Singapore. Education is used by the government as an agent not just for economic but also social change. In fact, education plays a central role in the task of both nation-building and moulding Singapore into a vibrant economy with a competitive edge in the world market. Education has successfully transformed Singapore from a struggling post-colonial society plagued with problems of

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8 See Ministry of Education booklet, *Nurturing Every Child, Flexibility & Diversity in Singapore Schools*, p 1
9 A comprehensive study of the major changes of the Singapore’s educational system and the different phases of the reforms can be found in John Yip Soon Kwong, Eng Soo Peck and Jay Yap Ye Chin, *25 Years of Educational Reform*. The study categorizes the educational reform into four major phases. (1) 1946-65: Conflict-resolution and quantitative expansion, (2) 1965-78: Qualitative Consolidation, (3) 1979-84: Refinements and New Strides, (4) 1985-90: Towards excellence in Education.
10 Gopinathan, S, Education and Development in Singapore, p 41. Gopinathan noted that: “When the first steps to self-government were being taken in the late 1950s, the challenges of nation-building loomed large. Education and social policy under colonial rule had resulted in a fragmented society, which in some instances accentuated original cleavages, and in others added new ones...over the years government policies have led to standardization within the system, especially in terms of bilingualism, curricular requirements and examinations, a unified teaching force, the establishment in the sixties of integrated schools, greater emphasis on uniformed groups, seen as particularly useful for boys in preparing them for National Service, and a daily flag raising and lowering ceremony of the National Anthem and the recitation of a pledge.”
survival to an economically stable country, rated as the ‘fourth best place in the world in which to do business, next to Switzerland, Japan and Germany’"\textsuperscript{11}

Primary school education is structured to have a foundation stage\textsuperscript{12} of four years and an orientation period of two years, from Primary 5 to 6. At the end of Primary 4, pupils are formally streamed and according to their learning ability, move on to one of three language streams, namely EM1, EM2, and EM3\textsuperscript{13}. At the end of Primary Six, pupils sit for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and are again assessed and placed in a secondary school course that suits their learning pace and aptitude. Pupils who obtain the necessary standards are then admitted to secondary schools and placed in either the Special, Express or Normal stream according to their PSLE T-score.\textsuperscript{14}

The duration for secondary school education is four years for students in the Special and Express stream and five years for those from the Normal stream.\textsuperscript{15} Broadly, the

\textsuperscript{11} Straits Times, 1 December 1988

\textsuperscript{12} At the foundation stage, all pupils follow a common curriculum which provides them with a firm foundation in English, their Mother Tongue and Mathematics. Also included in the curriculum are subjects such as Music, Art & Crafts, Civics and Moral Education, Health Education, Social Studies and Physical Education. Science is introduced from Primary Three onwards. Pupils are also encouraged to participate in co-curricular activities.

\textsuperscript{13} Pupils in the EM1 and EM2 streams do English, Mother Tongue, Mathematics and Science. EM1 pupils may do Higher Malay/Chinese/Tamil as their Mother Tongue. Pupils in the EM3 stream do Foundation English, basic Mother Tongue and Foundation Mathematics. However, with effect from 2007, EM1 and EM2 streams have been merged, and the school will advise parents whether their child is eligible to take up Higher Malay/Chinese/Tamil.

\textsuperscript{14} There is no fixed cut-off line for going to Express or Normal. And this cut-off line is different for each school. It’s quite high for some of the best schools in Singapore while it’s low for average schools. And for each school also, it changes from year to year depending upon the overall results. But about 180-190 out of 300 could be taken as a rough guide line as the score which would qualify a student for Express Stream in an average school.

\textsuperscript{15} The subjects include English, Mother Tongue, Mathematics, Science, (Combined Humanities - only in upper secondary), History, Geography, Literature, (Visual Arts - lower secondary, Art and Design - upper secondary), Design and Technology, Home Economics, Civics and Moral Education, Physical Education and Music. In Secondary Three, pupils can opt for subjects of their choice, apart from the core subjects (English
Express stream is for students who score higher marks in their PSLE examination and Normal stream for others. To cater to a wider range of abilities and aptitudes among pupils, the Normal course was expanded in 1994 to include a technical-oriented curriculum known as Normal (Technical).  

At the end of their fourth year, students in the Special and Express courses will sit for their GCE ‘O’ level examination. Students taking the Normal (Academic) course take their Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education ‘Normal’ (GCE ‘N’) Level Examination at the end of the fourth year. Those who meet the criteria go on for a fifth year of study (Secondary 5 Normal) and sit for the GCE ‘O’ level examination. An alternative route for pupils who do not qualify for Secondary 5 Normal is the technical and vocational education at the ITE. Based on their GCE ‘O’ level results, students can continue to take up pre-university courses, either in the junior colleges or centralized institutes, or diploma course in polytechnics or technical institutes for their National Trade Certificate. Pupils in the

16 The Normal (Technical) curriculum provides a basic secondary education in four core subjects –English Language, mother tongue at the basic level, Mathematics and Computer Applications as well as Science, Technical Studies and Home Economics. These subjects are examination subjects. Non-examination subjects will comprise Social Studies, Civics and Moral Education, Physical Education, and Arts and Crafts

17 There is no fixed cut-off points for entrance to the junior colleges or polytechnics. It is different for each junior college or polytechnic. The top students with lowest points can gain entry to the best junior colleges like Raffles Junior College (RJC). And this cut-off point can be different every year depending upon the over all results. Although a low aggregate score would qualify a student for junior college, some parents and students prefer the polytechnic or ITE route as these institutions offer specialised / technical courses which, they consider, have better job scope.
Normal (Technical) course are prepared for a technical-vocational education with the Institute of Technical Education (ITE).\(^{18}\)

Post-secondary education, that is, the junior colleges and polytechnics cater to the different interest of the students. Junior colleges and centralized institutes continue to cater to academically able students who want to further their studies at university. At the end of the pre-university course (two years for junior college or three years for centralized institute), students sit for the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education 'Advanced' (GCE 'A') Level Examinations. Their eligibility for tertiary education is determined by the results of their GCE 'A' Level Examinations.

Students who opt to enter polytechnics are usually more technically and commercially inclined. Polytechnics are set up with the mission to train middle-level professionals to support the technological and economic development of Singapore. To cater to the wide range of abilities, aptitudes and interests of their students, the polytechnics provide numerous and varied courses that seek to train students with relevant and specific skills for the workplace to meet the challenges of a knowledge-based economy.

The Institute of Technical Education provides vocational and technical training programmes to meet the needs of students with ten years of general education.\(^{19}\) Established on 1 April 1992, Institute of Technical Education (ITE) took over the role and functions of

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\(^{18}\) At present there are 16 junior colleges and five polytechnics, namely, Nanyang Polytechnic, Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Republic Polytechnic, Singapore Polytechnic & Temasek Polytechnic. As for Institute of Technical courses, there are 10 branches of ITE.

\(^{19}\) Please see the Information Booklet on Education System, found in the Ministry of Education website (www.moe.edu.sg) for a detailed framework of the present education system and the new initiatives implemented by the ministry.
the Vocational & Industrial Training Board (VITB). The primary role of ITE is to ensure that its graduates have the technical knowledge and skills that are relevant to industry. Although since its formation, ITE has focused its effort on establishing the institute as a post-secondary technical institution of excellence, students usually opt for ITE only after they fail to get admission to the other post-secondary institutions.

Singapore government seeks to uphold meritocracy in education and training to enable every child to advance through the education system as far as his ability allows. As seen above, advancement to the next stage of the educational path is measured by the performance in the major examinations sat by students. In addition, at every stage of the educational ladder, students are streamed according to their so called ability, and as such, in order to enter a more rigorous course, it is important to perform well in every national examination that the students take. It is argued that this streaming process acts as a ‘class-leveller’ since the students from the lower income class will be able to succeed as long as they perform well in their studies. Moreover, examinations serve to level the playing field because there is equality in the way students’ results are measured. However, whether the Malays benefit from this system of meritocracy or are adversely affected remains debatable.

Defining the Problem in Education

The Malay Problem, a term used by the Malay leaders to represent a bundle of problems faced by the Malays, was first highlighted in 1971 in a seminar on Malay

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20 This is the argument by the dominant ethnic community and proponents of the meritocratic education system. This system is believed to have serve Singapore well and has been seen to also mean equality for all, regardless of race, in the area of education. This is the common thinking in interviews conducted with the dominant ethnic group from the different sectors. Those interviewed for the paper included students, teachers, principals, working adults. See paper written by Mark Lim Shan-Loong, Addressing the class inequality problem: The role of Singapore’s Education System on the widening class divide, Singapore, 1998.

21 A more thorough discussion of the effect of the education system on the Malays will be discussed in Chapter 3 in this paper.
Participation in National Development organized by the Singapore Majlis Pusat (Central Council of Malay Cultural Organizations) together with the Community Study Centre. Among the problems that were identified to have constituted in this so called *Malay Problem* are educational underachievement, drug abuse, disadvantaged and dysfunctional families, poor socio-economic standing and low skills of Malay workers. Although the *Malay Problem* is essentially an economic one, focus was given to education since the Malay leaders view it as the impetus to overcome the other issues related to the *Malay Problem*. In his opening address, the then Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Culture, Sha’ari Tadin, pointed out that:

“Although the Republic is now entering its second phase of social transformation – cultural development and gracious living – the bulk of the Malays are still struggling to compete for a living. Only a sprinkling of Malays who have acquired the economic status can enjoy all the ‘gracious living’ as is understood in the present context. But the majority must try to break through the educational barrier within the next 5 to 10 years, as time is against them…..You and I believe that only through a process of education and training can the Malays elevate themselves to take their place in a complex, competitive and progressive Singapore.”

Educational underachievement, on the other hand, is associated with the inability to do well in the above examinations. When a student is said to have underperformed, the student has achieved less than what he is capable of attaining. As a result, an underachiever who fails to make the grade will be placed in a weaker stream to cater to his ‘below-average’ ability.

Streaming in the Singapore's educational system started as early as in primary four, where the

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22 Although the seminar “Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore” held in May 1971 discussed the problems facing the Singapore Malays, it is multi-racial in composition. The organizers believe that “the problems of the Malays are not communal or racial in character, but that they are a national problem…With the non-Malays accepting the fact their help is for the long-term national good, and with the Malays knowing that although a minority, they have a place in Singapore, a path towards national intergration is assured.” Sharom Ahmat & James Wong, *Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore*, 1971, p 1

23 Shaharudin Maaruf terms this belief among the Malay leaders, “Educationism”. Briefly, this ‘trend of thought’ sees education as the answer to all other problems faced by the Malay community, be it social, cultural or economic problem. A detail discussion will be presented in Chapter 5.

students are separated into two different streams, the EM1 & 2 and EM3, the former being the better stream. Students in the latter stream will take elementary subjects at a less demanding pace to cater to their abilities. However, all students will sit for the PSLE examination at the end of their six-year primary school education. Based on their performance in the above examination, the students are further channelled to the Special, Express, Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) Courses in secondary level. More often than not, the students from EM3 will be placed in the weakest stream, the Normal (Technical) course where the curriculum is less academic, and therefore less rigorous, than the one for the other streams.\textsuperscript{25}

The high emphasis placed on good performance in Singapore’s educational system demands that students excel in all major national examinations in order to be promoted to the better streams. Similarly, students who underperform will be channelled to the weaker streams. Unfortunately for the Malays, a high proportion of the students are clustered in the weaker streams. For example, more Malay students can be found in the Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) Courses as compared to the better stream, the Express stream, in many secondary schools.\textsuperscript{26}

In an educational system that practises meritocracy, like in Singapore, the ability of a person is very much associated with the good grades he acquires in school. It follows then that having a good qualification will generally ensure him of a good job. Likewise, a person with a poor academic qualification will only be able to secure a low-paying, unskilled, blue-collar

\textsuperscript{25}For Normal (Technical) course, students take fewer subjects compared to students from the Express or Normal (Academic). Subjects covered in the course are English Language, Mathematics, Science, Basic Mother Tongue, Computer Appreciation and Office Administration. The two latter subjects are taken in their third and fourth year.

\textsuperscript{26}In the school where the author is teaching which is an autonomous school, more Malay students can be found in the weaker streams. Only about 15\% of the Malay-students population is placed in the Express stream, about 35\% in the Normal (Academic) stream and about 50\% in the Normal (Technical) stream. Similar scenarios can be seen in many secondary schools, especially the neighbourhood schools.
job. Consequently, with more and more Malay students obtaining low educational achievement, more Malays are found in the lower rungs of the occupational ladder. The problem of poor socio-economic standing among the majority of the Malay community in Singapore remains a reality.

Educational Problems of the Malays: Some Concerns

The problem of educational underachievement has always been the concern of the Malay intelligentsia. The diagnosis of the problem by this intelligentsia varies from one member to another as can be seen from the three works that will be highlighted below.

First, Wan Hussin Zoohri looks at the historical perspective of the Malay education problem and blames the British for the genesis of the Malays’ underachievement in education. According to him:

“The seed of the Malay problem was planted with the founding of Singapore by Stamford Raffles. The emergence of the problem was, in main, the consequence of colonial history, and in part, the internal inertia of the Malay community itself. The continued deprivation of the Malays is seen as a “problem” in relation to the growing prosperity and affluence of the non-Malays. … British pre-occupation with their own trade and commerce and their benign neglect of the Malays, especially in education, deprived the Malays of the knowledge and know-how of modern business and commercial activities, this resulted in the widening of the socio-economic gap between the Malays and the non-Malays.”

Aishah Mohamad Kassim also attempts to study the causes for education backwardness of the Malays and the self-reliant efforts of the Malays to upgrade their educational performance and achievement. In her assessment, Aishah concludes that:

“From the causes presented, one can detect an unsystematic approach to understand the problems of the Malays, particularly in the field of education.

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Though causes exposed many factors that correlate with underachievement, there is no specific research or professional approach to understand educational difficulties. The causes touch on general issues pertaining to the Malay problem. This in turn makes the course of action for solution difficult and vague. The efforts to uplift the Malays have so far been sporadic: trying to tackle all causes of problems without actually pinning down to one prioritised area of concern.\textsuperscript{28}

In his thesis “Education and the Malays in Singapore (1959-1979): The Position, Perceptions and Responses of a Minority Community”, Yang Razali Kassim looks into the political relationship between the government and the Malays against educational background. He observes that:

“To a minority group like the Singapore Malay community with unique economic and cultural encumbrances, education certainly has taken an unprecedented priority. But even so, their lack of political power has complicated their ability to fulfil their economic and cultural aspirations through education. They are not in the political position to influence the formulation and implementation of education policies to their favour since they are neither a legislative nor a political majority. There is also no effective Malay political party to champion the Malay interests in education.”\textsuperscript{29}

The issue of Malays’ underachievement in education has also been a major concern amongst the members of the Malay community in Singapore.\textsuperscript{30} Many seminars and conferences have been conducted by the community to find ways to upgrade the Malay


\textsuperscript{29}Yang Razali Kassim. \textit{Education and the Malays in Singapore (1959-1979) : the position, perceptions and responses of a minority community}, Academic exercise, Dept. of Political Science, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, 1980. p 137

students’ educational performance and achievement. The education system in Singapore places great importance on merit and in achieving good grades in examinations. Therefore, to survive and be promoted to higher levels in the educational ladder in such a system, it is imperative for students to obtain good grades at every crucial examination. Unfortunately, Malay students have not been performing to their fullest potential in this system.

Throughout the past few decades, the Malay students’ yearly performances were closely monitored. The Education Ministry's statistics have been used to track the performance of the Malay students. Through the years, the Malay students have made good progress in national examinations in subjects such as English, Mathematics, Science and Mother Tongue, especially in the PSLE, as illustrated by these statistics. However, since the educational position of the Malays relative to the other ethnic communities did not show incipient signs of improvement, these achievements made by the community in the field of education are not seen to be sufficient. The Malays are still deemed to be overly contented and complacent by the Malay leaders. They are said to be slow in responding to the quest for upward mobility through education.

(a) The Problem of the ‘Widening Gap’

What prompted the Malay leaders to make such observations is that the Malays’ problem in education has always been seen by them as the Malay students’ inability to match the overall performance of the Chinese in core subjects like English, Mathematics and

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31 The more recent conferences include Kongres Pembangunan Masyarakat Melayu-Islam Singapura held on 19-21 Mei 1989 organized by Yayasan MENDAKI; National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals with the theme Malay/Muslim in 21st century Singapore : prospects, challenges & directions held on 6-7 October 1990 at NPB Auditorium, Singapore, Singapore, organized by Association of Malay/Muslim Professionals; and followed by the 2nd National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals, entitled Vision 2010 : setting the community agenda in 21st century Singapore held on 4-5 November 2000 at the Singapore Expo Conference Hall by the same organizer.
Science. Often, the performance of the Malay students is also compared to that of the other minority group i.e. the Indians, who as a group has also performed better than the Malays. Statistical data on education has been used by both the government and the Malay political leaders to compare the performance of the Malay students against the Chinese students. These comparisons with the other ethnic groups are done to show that Malays are still “lagging behind” and that “the widening gap” has yet to be closed.

The assertion that Malays are still “lagging behind” is made despite the improvements made by the Malay students over the years. They have been repeatedly reminded that they have yet to close, or even narrow this achievement gap as the Chinese students continue to outperform the Malay students in all the major, national examinations, be it at the PSLE, GCE ‘O’ or GCE ‘A’ levels. For example, performance of the Malay students at PSLE has shown improvement from 63 percent passes in 1978 to 71 percent in 1987. Likewise, the Chinese’ performance continues to improve from 78 percent in 1978 to 90 percent in 1987. Whilst the percentage of Malay students streamed into Express/Special stream has been stable at 27 to 28 percent, those channelled to Normal has shown a slight increase from 41 to 44 percent. The percentage of Chinese streamed to Express/Special stream has remained high – at between 55 to 60 percent, and those streamed to Normal has shown a slight decrease from 32 percent in 1980 to 30 percent in 1987.

Percentage of Malay students obtaining at least 5 ‘O’ levels has shown a definite improvement; from 15 percent in 1978 to 39 percent in 1987. Unfortunately this is not seen as sufficient since the Chinese still perform better; an improvement from 41 percent in 1978 to 69 percent in 1987. This trend is also true in the percentage of students passing with at least 2 ‘A’ and 2 ‘AO’ at the GCE ‘A’ Level examination. Although the percentage of passes of
Malay students has increased from 50 percent in 1978 to 64 percent in 1987, the Chinese have also performed better, from 71 percent in 1978 to 85 percent in 1987.\textsuperscript{32}

The matter of Malay students lagging behind their Chinese counterparts is frequently mentioned at the various seminars, conferences and speeches made by the various Malay leaders. The Malay leaders are still preoccupied with this problem of “widening gap” between the performance of the Malay students and their Chinese counterparts. For example, at the National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals (NCSSMMP) in 1990, one of the trends reviewed was that performance gap with the Chinese that has yet to be narrowed. As noted in the working paper presented:

“Generally the gaps in attainment levels between Chinese and Malay students have widened. The gaps in percentage passes at PSLE, the percentage admitted into the secondary express stream and the percentage of passes at the General Certificate of Education Ordinary (GCE’O’) level Examination have widened by 3 to 5 percent. The gaps for the percentage of students streamed to Primary Four Normal and the percentage of ‘A’ level passes remain the same throughout the period under review (1980-1988). From the above performance data, it is noted that the Malays are still not catching up with the Chinese. This is despite the impetus they received with the formation of Mendaki, back in 1981.”\textsuperscript{33}

This so called problem of “lagging behind” the Chinese was again highlighted by Sidek Saniff, then the Senior Parliamentary for Ministry of Education at the Seminar on Education and Singapore Malay Society: Prospects and Challenges, held at the Malay Studies Department, National University of Singapore on January 31, 1991. Although he acknowledged that the community has made progress, he also reminded them that they are still behind the Chinese community. According to him:

\textsuperscript{32} These statistics was presented in the Kongres Pembangunan Masyarakat Melayu-Islam Singapura organized by Yayasan Mendaki on 19-21 May 1989, Appendix III.
\textsuperscript{33} National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim (1990),
‘There are signs that the Malays are making progress. Over the last ten years there has been an increasing number of Malays excelling in the school examinations and being among the cream in the cohorts. The number of Malay/Muslim students who get admitted into tertiary institutions is also increasing. However, the Malays as a group are still lagging behind the other ethnic groups in the academic achievement. Therefore much more needs to be done to help the Malay pupils improve their level of attainment in academic pursuit.’

A decade later the same concern on the continued failure of the Malays to pull alongside the dominant ethnic group in the educational field, is again the topic of contention in the papers presented in the Second National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim. While is acknowledged that the gap has somewhat been narrowed at the PSLE examination, the worry is that this performance gap is still extensive beyond PSLE. The Malays are presented with another challenge: to close this “widen ing gap” at the higher levels as well:

“The achievement gaps between Malay and Chinese students seemed to have narrowed for pass rates at PSLE, ‘A’ level and the number proceeding to post-secondary institution. However, the concern is at the GCE ‘O’ level again where gaps have widened since Malay performance has reached a plateau…The community may have felt contented with its performance at the PSLE. The community must be made to realise that there is a need for a quantum leap in performance at the higher level, ie, GCE ‘O’ level upwards, if they wish to reduce the gaps with the other communities. The challenge to the Malay/Muslim community is not about passing the PSLE but improving their performance at the GCE ‘O’ level and beyond”

The Malay leaders felt that although the “Gordian Knot” is loosening and that the Malay students have shown improvements, much more needs to be done as the community needs to narrow the gap further between their performance and that of the other ethnic groups. The community must make a marked improvement in performance at all levels, especially at post-secondary levels, and this needs to be done fast. The Malay leaders remind the community that in this age of knowledge-based economy, it is imperative that they obtain

35 2nd National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim, (2000), p 40
quality results not just to attain better job opportunities but also to guarantee that the community is on par with the other communities in its educational performance in the years to come.

(b) Low Performance in Core Subjects

As Singapore moves into a Knowledge-based Economy, subjects like Mathematics and Science have become very essential in promoting and acquiring growth. As such these subjects form the core in the Singapore education system and are needed to secure better job opportunities in the New Economy. Statistical data has confirmed that the Malay students have been underperforming in the core subjects like English, Mathematics and Science. Inevitably, more Malay students are channelled to the weaker streams. Statistics have shown that the Malays are over-represented in the EM3 stream in the primary school, and the Normal Academic and Normal Technical streams in the secondary schools.

The concern highlighted in the 2nd National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals was that the educational performance in Mathematics and Science at O-levels has reached a plateau. Analysis revealed that only a small percentage of Malay students acquired a good pass in Mathematics and Science at the PSLE. For example, in 1994 only 59.4 percent of Malay students who sat for their PSLE obtained a passing grade of A* to C in Mathematics. In fact, in 2003, there was a slight decline to 59.3 percent as compared to the national average of 85.0 percent in 1994 and 83.3 percent in 2003. For Science, the percentage was 77.2 percent in 1994 and 77.5 percent in 2003 as compared to the national averages of 91.2 percent in 1994 and 91.3 percent in 2003. It was concluded that the Malay
students do not have a strong foundation in Mathematics and Science and hence they cannot secure passes in these subjects as they proceed higher up the system (i.e. at the O-levels).36

The worry here is that if the Malays fail to cope with these core subjects in a system biased in science and technology, they may find themselves economically redundant and irrelevant in the Knowledge-based economy. As a consequence, the socio-economic position of the Malays remains low since they will not be able to grab the opportunities available in an economy that demands knowledge in high technology. Attention was drawn to this issue at the National Convention:

“In order to maintain the competitive edge, Singapore requires an intelligent and technologically flexible labour force. The education and training system will be even more biased towards science and technology. Unless concrete steps are taken to overcome the handicap of Malay/Muslim students in Science and Mathematics they will be unable to take advantage of career opportunities available. They may find themselves inadequate and perhaps irrelevant to the needs of a high-technology economy. This would be traumatic for the community.”37

The importance of Mathematics and Science in Singapore has been emphasised by the political leaders too. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has advised the Malay/Muslim pupils to build a solid grounding in English, Science and Mathematics, so that later in their lives, they can do more advanced courses and pick up new skills. In order to occupy high positions in the public and private sectors, Malays are also called to acquire skills in new growth areas in the New Economy and this requires the Malays to do even better in education, especially in IT (Information Technology), the sciences and mathematics.38

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36 2nd National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professional- Vision 2010: Setting the Community Agenda in 21st Century Singapore

37 National Convention, Panel Paper III, p. 8

38 Straits Times, Solid Grounding a Must for Malays 30 July 1999.
In his speech made during the 30th International Management Symposium at the University of St Gallen, Switzerland, Education Minister Teo Chee Hean reiterated that Singapore should pay particular attention to science and mathematics in our schools as they form the foundation for subsequent study of many of the professions, and branches of the physical and life sciences since ‘Education today has to cope with preparing graduates to be ‘world-ready’ and to cope with an explosion of knowledge’ 39

(c) Overrepresentation of Malay students in the Weaker Streams

Streaming has been a main feature in Singapore’s educational system, and according to Minister for Education, Mr T. Shanmugaratnam, it has remained an educationally sound policy. 40 The Ministry has always contended that ‘streaming provides opportunities for educational advancement to all students according to their aptitudes and abilities. Through streaming, MOE has reduced educational wastage and successfully aided the educational attainment of our students.’ 41

Unfortunately, streaming has not served the Malays well. It is felt that streaming at the end of primary four is too early and it is debatable whether to judge a ten-year-old’s academic ability and making it the basis of determining the position of students in the system is a fair assessment. Furthermore, students streamed to EM3 are perceived to be failures and are a condemned lot. This will result in a psychological drawback and the labelling and vilification process at a young age will adversely affect the child’s motivation to learn. Consequently, the teachers may not find it a pleasant and rewarding task to teach these less bright students due to the difficulty of sustaining the students’ high morale. As a result the

39 Straits Times, Education Melds Trailblazer, 30 May 2000.
40 Speeches, Schools-refinements to Primary school streaming: the Normal Course at www.moe.gov.sg
41 Speeches, Speech by Minister on Schools
ambience of optimal learning is jeopardised by the lower expectation of the teachers and the low morale of the students.

Due to the disadvantages of streaming to the EM3 and Normal streams, the Malay leaders are concerned that Malays are found to be concentrated in the ‘weaker’ streams. Their weak foundation in the core subjects has resulted in many Malay students being streamed to these weaker courses. An average of 18 percent of the Malay students has been channelled to the EM3 stream each year since it was introduced in 1993. Although there has been a slight improvement in the percentage of Malay students channelled to these weaker streams, Malays still dominate. For example in 2001, 10 percent of the cohort of Primary One Malay students was admitted to EM3. The percentage of the non-Malays was only 4 percent. In sheer numbers, there are more non-Malays, but the Malays are found to be over-represented in terms of proportion. Based on the curriculum that these students go through, many will be placed in the Normal (Technical) stream in secondary schools.

Another worrying trend is that an average of 47 percent of Malay students is posted to the Normal (Academic) stream based on their mediocre PSLE results. This means that in every cohort, only the remaining 35 percent of Malay students do well enough to qualify for the Express stream in secondary schools. Since Malay students form the bulk of the Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical), it follows that upon completing their studies, these students will be qualified only for blue-collar, low-skilled, and low-paying jobs. As a consequence, there will be more and more Malays in the lower-strata of the occupational ladder. This will perpetuate the problem of low economic status of the Malay/Muslim. The vicious circle that the Malay/Muslims are trapped in repeats itself.
(d) Non-sustenance in Educational Progress among the Malays

Although Malays have performed well in PSLE over the years, this improvement is not matched by the performance of the Malay students at higher levels. Their performance in the secondary level is less heartening and still falls short of the national standards. To make matters worse the gap between their performance and the national average is even wider at both secondary and tertiary levels.\(^{42}\) This worrying trend was observed in the 2\(^{nd}\) National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals:

“Although the Malay community has made tremendous improvements as compared to the seventies and eighties, there has been a growing concern that the performance has reached a plateau at the ‘O’ levels. Although in absolute terms, the percentage of Malay students with 5 ‘O’ level passes had increased from 43% in 1990 to 49% in 1999, this 6% increase over 10 year period is in fact nominal. Furthermore, the percentage figures have ‘plateaued’ off in recent years (ie from the mid-nineties). This also holds true for Malay ‘O’ levels performance in Mathematics and Science - the two core subjects that are needed to secure good upgrading opportunities in the Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE).”\(^{43}\)

This ‘plateauing off’ in the performance of the Malay students is a cause for worry since it implies that Malay students are also unable to advance to a higher level in the education system. For example, in 1994, 84.3 percent of Malay students who sat for PSLE were eligible for secondary school education. However, of the same cohort who sat for their GCE ‘O’ examination in 1998, only 46 percent obtained at least five GCE ‘O’ level passes, the minimum results required to continue their education either to junior colleges or polytechnics since their poor results did not qualify them to continue their studies beyond secondary school. This indicates that a large number of Malay students are unable to obtain post-secondary education. As a consequence, the Malays are forced to enter the work force

\(^{42}\) Strait Times  Minority races doing better at school, 13 Jul 1998.
\(^{43}\) 2\(^{nd}\) National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professional- Vision 2010: Setting the Community Agenda in 21\(^{st}\) Century Singapore, p. 9
with low academic qualifications and are thus eligible for mainly low-skilled jobs. We have seen in the recent economic crisis, those low-skilled employees are the worst hit.

The above issue is another major concern that should be looked into by the Malay leaders. As Mendaki’s former CEO Mr Sumardi Ali acknowledged: ‘Yes, in the secondary schools, the challenge remains for us to improve by a quantum leap, and to quickly pull up our socks. This downward trend implies that while more students are making it to secondary school, the number of those doing well in the GCE ‘O’ levels and beyond still lags significantly behind the national standards. If this trend is not addressed, the Malays will be stuck at the lower rung of the socio-economic ladder’

(e) High Attrition Rate among the Malays

Another area of concern for the Malay community is that of premature school-leaving. In 1993, the drop-out rate in secondary schools, that is, pupils who leave school before sitting for their GCE ‘N’ or ‘O’ levels is 4.1 percent for the 1981 Primary One cohorts. Of the students who drop-out, 6.9 percent were Malays, 5.2 percent Indians and only 3.5 percent Chinese of the batch of Primary One pupils admitted in 1981. This rate does not improve over the years. In 2003, the percentage of Malay students who were not eligible for secondary schools was 7.1 percent, which was high when compared to the 1.4 percent and 5 percent for the Chinese and Indian communities respectively. This high attrition rate has negative implication for the community since without secondary school qualifications, this

44 *Straits Times*, 1 Aug 1998.

45 In his opening address at the Principals’ Conference organised by the Ministry of Education on 5th to 8th September 1993, then Prime Minister expressed his concerns: “The primary and secondary school drop-out rates for all races add up to 6.7 percent, or about 2 800 school drop-outs for the 1981 Primary one cohort. These figures are high. I find them unacceptable. We must do our utmost to bring the drop-out rates down and get more to pass at least their ‘N’ levels. All communities must try and reduce their respective school drop-out rates. The Malay and Indian communities must work extra hard.”, *Proceedings of the Principals’ Conference 1993, All Children can Learn and Achieve: The Schools’ Challenge*, Singapore: Ministry of Education, 1993, p 7

46 *Ministry of Education Singapore Educational Score Sheet 2004*
group will not have a bright future. It is envisaged that they will be stuck in the lower rung of the educational ladder and will therefore remain in the bottom of the socio-economic strata.

The problem demands immediate attention since the proportion of Malay students dropping out of the school system gets higher at each academic level. If this trend is not checked, more and more Malay students will drop out of school and this will create not just educational problems but social problems too. There is a possibility that with a lot of time in their hands, these students will be involved in anti-social activities. This concern is expressed in a paper entitled *Key Trends of Malay/Muslim in the 90s*’ by the Association of Muslim Professionals:

‘The rate of attrition increases significantly after Primary 6. The proportion of Malays who are not attending school is much higher that the other ethnic groups especially in the age group 12-16 years and this highlight the problem of Malay students either not attending school or dropping out of the school system prematurely. It was also found that the proportion of Malays not attending school increases steadily each year as students mature with age. It appears that these students are unable to cope with the challenges as they progress the educational ladder. If this trend is not arrested immediately, we can expect this core of non-schoolers to further increase given that the school curriculum will be even more demanding in the future. Needless to say, without proper education these non-schoolers will have a bleak future.’

The same problem was again highlighted and reiterated in the National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals in October 1990. The concern here is that this problem of dropping out among Malay students from the education system starts as early as at the foundation years of the primary school. The community is urged to identify these potential drop-outs early and carry out preventive measures to keep these students in schools longer. In reviewing the present Malay performance in education from 1980 to 1988, one of the trends noted is:

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47 *Malay/Muslim in the 90s Key Trends: with reference to the census of population 1990 data*, Association of Muslim Professionals, AMP Policy Studies Research Unit, Panel Paper III, p 3
High attrition rates amongst Malay students are traceable early in the education system. Statistics over the period show that 80 percent of the Malay Primary Three students succeeded to proceed to Primary Four (Normal). The more disturbing trend is that of this 80 percent about 2 percent failed the PSLE; about 3 percent passed the PSLE with average results and landed up in the Secondary Normal stream and only about 25 percent did well to qualify for the Secondary Express stream. Therefore, right from the foundation years, the community had ‘lost’ 75% of students, as only 25% are eventually admitted into the Secondary Express stream. Thus it is realised that the Malay education problem starts early from the moment the children enter formal school. The bottom 75% who have learning problems in the core subjects are the ones who must be tackled.48

The high attrition rate is also attributed to the increasing number of Malay students opting out of the mainstream schools and choosing the full-time religious schools (madrasahs).49 Every year, 500 Malay Primary 1 pupils- 5 to 6 per cent of the cohort – opt out of the system. This compares with 1.5 per cent and 4.5 per cent among the Chinese and the Indians respectively.50 The madrasahs are set up by independent bodies managing the schools. They do not get any funds from the government. The main concern here is that those who opted out would not receive the quality education necessary for good jobs, and would not be able to integrate well into the social and economic system.

Furthermore, the attrition rate in madrasah is very high. In his 1999 National Day Rally speech to the nation, the then Prime Minister commented on the high dropout rates


49 Today, there are six full-time madrasahin Singapore. They are Madrasah Alsagoff Al-Arabiah, Madrasah Al Junied Al-Islamiah, Madrasah Al-Maarif Al-Islamiah, Madrasah Wak Tanjong, Madrasah Al-Irsyad and Madrasah Al-Arabiah. In recent years, the popularity of madrasah has been increasing. Many parents opt to send their children to madrasah instead of national schools to provide their children with a balance between religious and secular education. For a detail discussion on madrasah education, see writings found in: Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Lai Ah Eng, Secular and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore . (Singapore : Institute of Policy Studies : Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2006) See also Mukhlis Abu Bakar, Islamic Religious Schools in Singapore: Recent Trends and Issues. Seminar Paper No. 26, Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, Academic Session 1999/2000

50 Ministry of Education, Educational Statistics
amongst madrasah students, citing figures from the past three years that some 65 percent of madrasah students dropped out of school each year without completing their secondary education.\textsuperscript{51} Others drop out of full time education or move to the secular system. This finding was disclosed to the Sunday Review by the madrasahs, but other sources indicate that only 35 per cent of those in the Primary Four madrasah cohort eventually make it to Secondary Four.\textsuperscript{52}

Again, this is clearly a waste of human resource, since without a certain level of qualification, these students will not be able to secure good jobs. Zainul Abidin Rasheed, Minister of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Mayor, North East District rightly observed that: ‘The amount of ‘wastage’ in terms of not equipping these people with the necessary skills to compete in the job market and contribute to society is significant.’\textsuperscript{53}

\textbf{(f) Few Malays in Tertiary Institutions}

The low educational attainment of the Malays has in turn, resulted in low enrolments of Malay students in the various institutions of higher learning. Admission to university is based on merit and limited to the cream of the cohort. For the Malay community to compete successfully for places in universities, the Malay students need to improve the quality of the examination results obtained at GCE ‘A’ levels and in the polytechnics. This was noted in the Association of Muslim Professionals’ report, \textit{Malay/Muslim in the 90s Key Trend}:

The overall educational attainment of the Malays has improved significantly in line with the higher standards achieved for all Singapore residents in 1990. For the Malays, the proportion with secondary or higher qualifications increased from 14.3\% to 30.8\% in 1990. However, in comparison to the other ethnic groups, their numbers are still relatively small in the higher qualifications

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Berita Harian, 5 Sept 1999.
\item \textsuperscript{52} See Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Lai Ah Eng, \textit{Secular and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore}, (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies : Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2006) p 152
\item \textsuperscript{53} Sunday Times: \textit{Why are more Malay pupils going to Islamic schools} by Zuraidah Ibrahim, 1 Mar 1998.
\end{itemize}
category. These findings point to the fact that the pool of Malay graduates remain small and there is not enough of them to propel the community forward to scale new heights in socio-economic development”

Another major concern is that the number of Malay students who have made it to the institutions of higher learning has not been encouraging despite the various initiatives taken by the community to improve the educational performance of the Malay students over the past decades. For example, although the improvements in the percentage of Malays having tertiary qualification over the years, i.e. from 0.6 in 1990 to 2.0 in 2000 and 3.4 in 2005 have been encouraging, they are still too few if we were to compare with the other ethnic groups in Singapore.

Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, in his speech to Malay/Muslim organisations in January in 2005, emphasised that the next phase in raising the capability of the Malay community lies in improving the quality of achievements. He urged the Malay community in Singapore to reflect upon his advice and consider how a focused programme can be implemented which will raise the aspirations of able Malay students and help them to qualify for admission to top universities. Earlier, in his 2000 National Day Rally, the former Prime Minister Goh also noted that not as many Malay students are moving on to post-secondary education. He pointed out that:

“...This is most unfortunate because the higher their educational attainment level, the brighter their future. In 1990... only 36% of the Malay Primary One cohort was admitted to post-secondary institutions. By last year (1999) this figure had more than doubled to 77%! The community has made tremendous progress. You can be proud of this. But I want you to do even better. For this decade, I want the Malay community to make another big effort to get more of their children to go beyond basic secondary education. Though the 77% figure is good, the equivalent national figure is 89%. I would like to see, by 2010, 90% of Malay Primary One students go on to pre-university classes, polytechnics or institutes

54 Malay/Muslim in the 90s Key Trend: Association of Muslim Professionals Policy Studies, Research Unit, (1990) p 4
of technical education. This is a big challenge. We must have the resolve to lift up the bottom 23% of Malay students to go beyond secondary education.”55

In his speech at the Berita Harian Achiever of the Year Award, Deputy Prime Minister Dr Tony Tan reiterated the same concern:

‘In today’s knowledge-driven global economy, education is the pathway to success in life…..Although much has been achieved, one particular area of educational achievements needs more attention and that is the number of Malay students admitted to university particularly top universities. Admission to university is on merit and limited to the cream of the cohort. For the Malay community to compete successfully for places in the universities, it would be necessary to improve the quality for examination results achieved by Malay students at ‘A’ levels and in the polytechnics.’56

Educational Success Achieved by the Malays

As early as the 70s, Malays have been trying to elevate themselves to a higher socio-economic status through education. Since then, the Malays have attained a high level of literacy and have been doing better and going up the educational ladder. More and more Malay students who take PSLE qualify for admission to secondary school. In 2004, 93.5 percent compared to 84.3 percent in 1994 and about 70 percent in 1984 of Malay pupils have proceeded to secondary schools. The Malays have also performed better in Mathematics and Science as shown in the results obtained from the Ministry of Education. In the PSLE examination, the figure for Malay students obtaining grade C or better in Mathematics has improved from 37.4 percent in 1984 and 46.6 percent in 1991, to 64.6 percent in 2000. Similarly, more Malay students have passed their Science in 2000 compared to 1990.

Malay students have also fared well against international benchmarks. The results of a study known as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Survey (TIMMS)

56 Progress of the Malay Community in Singapore since 1990: PM Goh Chok Tong speech
conducted in 1999 showed that Malay students who participated in the 45-nation study were ranked among the top six countries in Mathematics at both primary and secondary. In Science, they were ranked amongst the top seven countries at the secondary level and 14th at the primary level. Their performance was better than students from the United States and Britain, nations with a long scientific tradition.57

In the same study conducted in 2002-2003, the Malays again ranked well above the International Average for both Mathematics and Science. For example, in Mathematics, Malay students from Secondary Two performed as well as students in Netherlands and Belgium who were the top performing European countries in the study. They also performed significantly better in Mathematics than students in the United States, Australia, Sweden and Israel. This is indeed an achievement since the Malays have been traditionally weak in these two subjects.

The number of Malay students from each cohort who complete secondary education has increased. This rise has been matched by increased admissions into university and polytechnic. The proportion of Malays attending institutions of higher learning in 2005 has improved significantly compared to 2000 and 1990. In 2005, 3.4 percent of Malays obtained university qualification, as compared to only two percent in 2000, and 0.6 percent in 1990. Above all, there are significant increases in the number of Malay graduates in the fields of engineering, medicine, dentistry and Information Technology.58

In the field of socio-economics, the Malays are now employed in better jobs, enjoy higher incomes and live in bigger flats. In 2000, 6.9 percent of Malays were in the

57 The Straits Times See how the Malays sprint. 5 Jan 1998,
58 see Census of Population Report, 2000
professional, administrative and managerial fields as compared to only 3.2 percent in 1990. More Malays are now living in bigger houses and private housing; 64.9 percent in 2000 as compared to 41.4 percent in 1990. Average household income for Malays has increased by almost a thousand dollars for the past decade. In 2000, the average household income was $3148 as compared to only $2246 in 1990.59

A more encouraging development is that an increasingly significant number of Malay students have excelled academically and are among the cream of the national cohort. Malay students also produce stellar performance not only locally but also at the international level. A good example is the recipient of Berita Harian Achiever of the Year Award 1999, Dr Mansoor Abdul Jalil, who earned his doctorate in physics from Cambridge University, is the first Singaporean to achieve first class honours in physics from Magdalene College. He is now a lecturer and researcher at the National University of Singapore’s engineering faculty and is working on developing the world’s tiniest computer chip for data processing. Another exemplary Malay is Dr Azlinda Anwar who has a doctorate in microbiology, and is the first Malay female scientist doing research work at the prestigious Johns Hopkins Singapore. She was also the proud recipient of the Young Scientist Award conferred by National University Hospital and National Medical Research Council in 200160. These achievements are indeed something that the community can be proud of.

The Malays are always reminded that they are ‘still a long, long way from their target’ and that ‘the Singapore Malay/Muslim community has not yet arrived’61. They are told to intensify their efforts to achieve better results. However, what results are expected to be

60 Both examples are quoted from ‘In Quest of Excellence - A Story of Singapore Malays’, p 157 and p 80. 
61 Mohd Alami Musa, ‘Our Land of Opportunities’, in Tanahairku: Singapura
achieved, were never articulated or made known to the community. The only known target for education was mentioned in Mendaki’s Ufuk 2009 whereby Mendaki envisioned ‘parity passes at critical examinations and the doubling of admissions into tertiary institutions in 15 years’ time.’ If we look at statistical data, in 1990, the number of Malay undergraduates in tertiary institutions was 0.6 percent. In 15 years time, the target set by Mendaki should be 1.2 percent or more. In 2005, the number of Malays studying in tertiary institutions has increased to 3.4 percent. Clearly, the Malays have surpassed the target articulated by Mendaki in this respect.

However, what Mendaki meant by ‘parity passes at critical examinations’ was not clearly spelt out. It is therefore rather unreasonable for the Malays to be deemed complacent and overly contented and that they still have a long way to go from their target when the target is not expressed and made known to them. In fact, the community has successfully exceeded the target set by Mendaki for tertiary education and this should be commended by the leaders.

The only clear benchmark made known by the Malay leaders was and still is the performance of the Chinese and Indian community. Instead of comparing the performance of the Malays to the national averages, the leaders compare it with the performance of the other two communities. Whether making the achievements of the other ethnic groups as the benchmark is a right decision, remains debatable. Also questionable is whether the issue of the Malays lagging behind the Chinese should be a major concern.

62 This vision was mentioned by Abdullah Tarmugi during a session with Top 10 percent PSLE students and parents on 28 January 1995, quoted from Speeches, Vol 19, No. 1
63 see Census of Population, 1990.
64 See General Household Survey 2005
Some have argued that the Malays should stop comparing their achievements to the non-Malays, since ‘it is not that Malay students have been sliding but that Chinese Singaporeans’ rate of progress has consistently been higher.’ In the educational race, if the Malays were to move forward, so will the other races. The Malays cannot expect the other races to wait for them in their effort to climb the educational ladder. For example, more Malays have qualified for secondary education over the years.

In 2004, 93.5 percent Malay students qualified for secondary one, as compared to only 88.6 percent. However, the percentage for Chinese students who qualified for secondary one in 2004 is higher than that of the Malay students, i.e. 98.7 percent, surpassing the national average of 97.4 percent. Thus, it is obvious that if the performance of the Chinese students is used as the benchmark, the Malays will find it an uphill task to catch up since this target is a moving target.

To summarise, the biggest success in the last five years has been the emergence of a new spirit, a renewed confidence of a stronger achievement orientation and an enhanced sense of self-worth as a community. As discussed above, there have been many success stories among the Malays for the past four decades since independence. There has been better performance in examinations, with more and more Malay students topping their schools, a securing higher passing rate in Mathematics exceeding the 50 percent psychological barrier. There is an enlarging class of professionals, an increasing number of entrepreneurs and improvement in the skills and wages of workers. All these are several key signs that the community is making headway.

65 A few articles discussing this issue were published in the local newspaper, the Straits Times (ST). For examples, ‘See How Malay Sprint, Straits Times, 5 Jan 1998’, ‘Malays Here Can Rise Up To Global Challenge’ Straits Times, 1 Nov 1998.
However, a greater concern is that the Malay problem still lingers on many fronts. In education, the Malays still face a serious premature school-leaving problem and the quality of passes is still below what is needed for tertiary education. Many young Malay/Muslims are handicapped with little or no skills when they rush into the work force without training.
This chapter will attempt to discuss some perceptions of certain groups of people of what has attributed to the problem of lack of educational achievement among the Malays in Singapore. It is interesting to note that the Malay underachievement in education is attributed very much to their attitudinal and cultural values and perception. Such a position reflects the cultural deficit thesis upheld by both Malays and non-Malays leaders.

The cultural deficit thesis, clearly blames the underachievers for their failure to perform well. Proponents of this thesis believe that these underachievers have only themselves to blame for their predicament. Their problem lies in their deviant value system, the ‘culture of poverty’, and not being ‘acculturated’ to life in the fast-paced modern age of technology. Such negative attributes impede their progress, be it in education, or in their socio-economic status. They are ‘trained’ to be uneducated by their culture and their family life thus making them ineligible for a passport into affluent society. Since they cause their own troubles, they have to find their own solution. As Lily Zubaidah puts it:

“The cultural deficit thesis essentially posits that socially disadvantaged ethnic communities have remained economically and educationally marginal primarily because of their negative values and generally moribund attitudes which in turn create the material conditions that reproduce their social disadvantage. As the culturally deficient communities are largely responsible for their marginality, the onus is thus placed on them to reform their negative values and attitudes… As the problem is supposed to lie with the marginal ethnic community, the solutions are expected to emanate from the community.”

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66Ibid, p 3
This cultural deficit thesis is frequently used as an excuse to divert the attention from the crux of the problem, in our case, underachievement, to the underachievers themselves. In his study on the problems of the Negro community living in the slums in America, an American psychologist and social scientist, William Ryan, maintains that the cultural deficit thesis or what he calls ‘cultural deprivation theory’ becomes ‘an omnibus explanation for the educational disaster’ among the supposedly deviant Negro who is ‘miseducated’. In his own words:

“He is blamed for his own miseducation. He is said to contain within himself the causes of his inability to read and write well. The shorthand phrase is ‘cultural deprivation’...conveys what they allege to be inside information: that the poor child carries a scanty lack of cultural baggage as he enters school. He doesn’t know about books and magazines and magazines and newspapers, they say. They say that if he talks at all – an unlikely event since slum parents don’t talk to their children – he certainly doesn’t talk correctly....if you can manage to get him to sit in a chair, they say, he squirms and looks out the window. (Impulse-ridden, these kids are motoric rather than verbal). In a word, he is ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘socially deprived,’ .... and this, of course, accounts for his failure to learn much in school.’67

This cultural deficit thesis, promoted by the British colonial administrators to explain the Malays’ low socio-economic and educational status, was readily accepted by some Malay leaders, during the colonial times, and this acceptance has perpetuated to the present time. As we will see in the following pages, this cultural deficit thesis obscures the thinking of many Malay leaders and they perpetually put the blame on their community for not doing enough to catch up with the other ethnic communities in Singapore.

The Colonial Legacy

The British administrators in Singapore and Malaya did not portray a positive image of the Malays. In fact, Malays were commonly characterized by them as possessing traits of

67 William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*, (New York, Pantheon, 1971) p. 4
complacency, indolence, apathy, a love of leisure, unmotivatedness and ill-discipline. They were generally deemed to be lacking in the highly esteemed material pursuits of commercial enterprise which the immigrant communities possessed. For example, in his book, an orientalist, Richmond Wheeler made a scorching remark that Malays are an incapable lot, unable even to take care of their own country. His assessment of the Malays was as follows:

‘As a race…(the Malays) have shown no capacity for developing their rich country, nor for entering into commerce or even agriculture beyond what is required for their own simple needs. After the stormy centuries of nominal independence, their extreme illiteracy and lack of interest in education in the 19th century were obvious to all.’

Another orientalist, Frank Swettenham made the same observation about the Malays. However, in his description of the Malays, he failed to make a distinction between the ways of life of the peasants with the people of rank. What he described is more appropriate for the ruling class rather than the peasants:

“The leading characteristic of the Malay of every class is a disinclination to work. Nature has done so much for him that he is never really cold and never starves. He must have rice, but the smallest exertion will give it to him; and if he will not grow it, he can buy it for very little. …. Probably that accounts for the Malays’ inherent laziness; that and a climate which inclines the body to ease and rest, the mind to dreamy contemplation rather than strenuous and persistent toil.”

The above negative cultural stereotype promoted by the British is used to explain the causal factor that led to the Malay underachievement not only the economic but also educational areas. The argument is that because of the negative cultural deficit of the Malays, they are unable to match the achievements of the other immigrant communities who are said to possess the positive attributes that led to their success in all fields, including economic and

69 Frank Wettenham, British Malay: An account of the origin and progress of British influence in Malay,(London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, pp 136-137
educational fields. Thus the Malays have themselves to blame should they perform badly in their studies and thus remain in the low strata of the socio-economic ladder.

The British ignored the fact that it was the colonials that treated the Malays unfairly as a means to their selfish ends and hampered the Malays’ opportunity to participate actively in their own economy due to the restraining policies, be it social, economic, political or educational. For example, the colonial educational policies segregated the Malays and alienated them from the commercial activities that were happening in Singapore at that time.\(^\text{70}\)

The cultural deficit theory has also been used by many of its proponents to explain why the Malays underachieved in education. Due to the negative Malay traits such as their indolence, indiscipline and a failure to attach importance to work, the Malays fail in many areas of their lives, including education. Perhaps the above theory is more appropriate to describe the Malay ruling class instead of the Malay masses. The problem of indolence among the Malays has been refuted by Alatas. According to him:

“I have sufficiently exposed the roots of the image of the lazy native to demonstrate that it was an important element in the ideology of colonial capitalism. It was a major justification for territorial conquest, since the degraded image of the native was basic colonial ideology.”\(^\text{71}\)

According to Alatas, nothing concrete and empirical has been brought forward to illustrate the Malay concept of indolence. The Malays do not condone indolence and it is not a trait among the Malays. On the contrary, there are many instances to indicate that indolence was evident among the ruling class instead:

\(^{70}\) A more thorough study of how the British educational policies were detrimental to the Malays in Singapore will be discussed at a later chapter.

A life of leisure and little physical effort was reserved for the ruling class, both among the natives and colonial rulers. Native rulers never complained of the laziness of their subjects. The reason was that they were aware of the indigenous system of values which placed industriousness and labour in high esteem. Historical records stressing the value of labour and industriousness were rare to find since most of these values were orally transmitted, and since indolence had never been felt or perceived as a problem in the pre-colonial indigenous societies. Nevertheless there are some records discovered recently. One of them is the Malay Undang-Undang Sungai Ujong. It expresses the indigenous philosophy of values and social life of the pre-colonial society. Basically the values upheld by the digest were those common to the Malay world. The Malays strongly disapprove of indolence (malas). In the Malay society it is a disgrace to be called a pemalas, one who is indolent.\textsuperscript{72}

Although the colonial negative stereotyping of the Malays met with objections from many scholars such as Alatas, unfortunately, this cultural deficit theory of the Malays is shared by many Malays too. For example, in Malaysia, Senu Abdul Rahman echoes the same argument to explain the underachievement of the Malays in Malaya. In his book, Revolusi Mental, he attributed the Malays’ negative attitude to explain why the Malays are lagging behind in education:

“A person who accepts or opposes something through critical thinking, expresses constructive views, implements them and explores new avenues, has a positive attitude. On the other hand, a person who opposes something through blind sentiment without suggesting or doing something better and leaves everything to fate, has a negative attitude. If there are many people with negative attitudes in a society or community, progress will be difficult. Unfortunately, the Malay community has many members with negative attitude. Negative attitudes have two undesirable manifestations. One is the attitude of refusing to examine oneself for weaknesses; and this leads to backwardness. Everything is blamed on others ...Another manifestation is the attitude of always asking for help from the government and others and not wanting to act on one’s own oar stand on one’s own feet. This attitude will enfeeble the Malay community.”\textsuperscript{73}

Elsewhere he notes that the Malays have not yet attained progress on par with that achieved by the non-Malays due to the negative values among the Malays. He discredits

\textsuperscript{72} ibid, pp 136-7
\textsuperscript{73} Senu Abdul Rahman, p. 190-192.
other more important factors such as the structural and historical problems that contribute to this underachievement in education. To quote him:

“This weakness is not due to lack of intelligence in Malay students,…the weakness of the Malays is due to external factors: 1) Lack of effort.. does not mean that the Malays are lazy…but did not have sufficient time allocated to study; 2)a lack of proper planning – no time allocation for revision; 3)there are many well-to-do Malay parents who do not realise that education is the key to success in this world and even the hereafter…They place more importance on luxurious items than school expenses.; 4)they are easily discouraged. We Malays easily lose heart…in short, our view of education and success is negative; 5)Many parents are not aware of the specific objectives in education; 6)Most Malays expect quick results and are not farsighted; 7)Malays are unaware of the benefits of a nutritious and balanced diet.”

Although Singapore has gained independence for more than four decades, the colonial negative perception of the Malays continues to haunt the contemporary Malay. Many groups still hold on to the same belief in explaining the Malays’ lack of achievement and economic success. The Malays are chastised for their deficient cultural values that impede any attempt at progress or alleviating the Malays from their debilitating state. In the Malay Dilemma, Mahathir Mohamed vehemently supports the cultural deficit thesis and to a certain extent the biological determinist theory to fault the Malays. Echoing the thoughts of the colonial orientalist, he makes this claim:

“There was plenty of land for everyone and the hills were never necessary for cultivation or permanent settlement. The lush tropical plains with their plentiful sources of food were able to support the relatively small number of inhabitants of early Malaya. No great exertion or ingenuity was required to obtain food. There was plenty for everyone throughout the year. Hunger and starvation, a common feature in countries like China, were unknown in Malaya. Under these conditions everyone survived. Even the weakest and the least diligent were able to live in comparative comfort, to marry and procreate. The observation that only the fittest would survive did not apply, for the abundance of food supported the existence of even the weakest…. Actual work takes up only two months, but the yield is sufficient for the whole year. ..There was a lot of free time. Even after the gathering of other food-

74 Senu Abdul Rahman, p 250.
stuffs, there was still a lot of leisure left. The hot, humid climate of the land was not conducive to either vigorous work or even mental activity. Thus, except for a few, people were content to spend their unlimited leisure in merely resting or in extensive conversation with neighbours and friends."\textsuperscript{75}

**Malay leaders’ perception**

There is also a tendency among the Malay leaders to readily accept the cultural deficit perspective as the major causal factor for the educational underachievement of the Malays. Blaming the attitudinal problem as the main reason of their educational underachievement, Malay leaders continuously urge the Malay students to re-examine their attitude and that they must adapt themselves to changing conditions and new situations that are happening in Singapore. In the numerous meetings, discussions, seminars and conferences, Malays are urged to rectify this problem in order to expedite their community’s progress in the educational sphere and consequently uplift their socio-economic status amongst the other ethnic communities.

“The Malays, as a whole, are a particularly poor people. Poverty is their most outstanding characteristic and their greatest handicap in the race of progress. Poor in money, poor in education, poor in intellectual equipment and moral qualities, they cannot be otherwise but left behind in the march of nations. The word ‘poverty’ as applied to them does not merely mean destitution of wealth or riches. It means terribly more. The poverty of the Malays is an all-round poverty. It envelops them on every side. That they are poor people on many matters goes without saying. But what is more distressing is the fact that they are also poor in all other equipment which can lead to success and greatness.

They are not, however, naturally of poor intellect, or incapable of high morals. Potentially, they possess such qualities as much as do any other people. But the actualised part of this potentiality is still too poor to bear comparison with what we find in other progressive peoples in the country. Intellectually, the Malays are poor in knowledge, in culture and in the general means of cultivating the mind. Their literature is poor and unelevating; their domestic surroundings from childhood are poor and seldom edifying; their religious life and practice is poor and far removed from the pure original teachings of the Prophet. In short, the Malays cut poor figures in every department of life.” \textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{75} Mahathir Mohamed, *The Malay Dilemma*, pp 21-22.

\textsuperscript{76} W.R Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 151.
For example, Sha’ari Tadin, the former Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Culture, believes that the negative aspect of the Malay culture is responsible for the Malay educational underachievement. He calls the Singapore Malays ‘very confused beings’ in their attempt to strike a balance between modernisation and retaining their ancestral values. At a seminar on Malay Participation in the National Development in 1971, he blames the ‘soft attitude’ of the Malays for the lack of achievement in the Malay families. In his opening address at the above seminar, he comments:

“First, the Malays were given the ‘wrong kind of education’ – wrong from our present point of view. It was a cultural education, which made the Malays contented and obedient. The result was that the Malay mind was not an inquiring one…”  

The editorial in the same seminar holds the same belief that the value system of the Malays is not congruent to the changes and developments that Singapore is experiencing. Sharom Ahmat advocates that there is a need for the Malays to readjust their thinking to accept the realities of the ever-changing environment and to fit the mould of these changes:

“…the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organisations, aware of the fact that it must be the Malays themselves who have to initiate changes, has also formed parallel committees. There is also a fourth committee on Social Education, which the Council has set up for the specific purpose of trying to quicken the pace of re-orientation of Malay minds to the realities of situations today. What will be attempted is to assist Malays to understand through the various communication media, the fast changing developments in the Republic on various fronts- economic, political, educational and social. In particular, Malay value systems must be re-examined. This is because Singapore Malays must adapt themselves to changing circumstances; circumstances cannot be modified to fit the Malays.”


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In the Education Congress held on May, 28 to 30 May 1982, Dr Ahmad Mattar, then the Minister in-charge of Muslim Affairs, again displays the same belief that the fault lies in the underachievers and their parents. He thus reminds them that the onus is on them to be committed and willing to play their part in uplifting themselves by improving their educational performance. He reiterates:

“Whatever is done by the government including the educational system, whatever the encouragement by Mendaki and its intellectuals and activists, it will not be able to replace the attitudes necessary for every family, every individual and every student. …Mendaki can do everything, but if students are not interested, nothing can be achieved. Parents, too must realise the importance of education and accept that educating their children is an investment.”

On many occasions, the Malays are accused of adopting a negative attitude that is not compatible to the present economic situations. Yet again, in line with the cultural deficit thesis, Malays are blamed for their underachievement. The Malays are urged to change their alleged negative traits and to emulate the other ethnic groups’ work ethic. In addition, Mendaki called on the Malays to analyse their own attitudes and to adopt positive values in tackling their socio-economic problems. The following messages, contained in the 126-page book during Mendaki’s first Education Congress in 1982, specifically dedicated to the Singapore Malays:

“They could keep up with the other communities in Singapore if they worked hard to increase their educational standards. They could elevate themselves to greater achievement with foresight, sacrifice and self-reliance. They should learn from the success of the Japanese and from the work of the Chinese and Indian communities in Singapore.”

Once again, in one of the workshop sessions held for the top 10 percent PSLE students, the attitudinal problem of the Malays is depicted as the bane of the Malay underachievement

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79 cited from *Mendaki 10 years: Making the Difference*, p 103.
80 Mendaki 10 years *Making the Difference*, (Singapore, Eurasia Press) p 94
in education. Sidek Saniff, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Education, endorses the need for the Malay/Muslim to get the ‘right mental attitude’ that is necessary to achieve educational success. He stresses that ‘the will to do better was vital for the educational success of their children’. He echoes similar thoughts in a seminar held at the Malay Studies Department in National University of Singapore:

“But the education institutions, the home and the community must work closely together to ensure effective implementation of the well-thought strategies. There is a need to broaden and intensify our effort to change the attitude and educate some parents, especially those from the lower socio-economic group, on the necessity to complement the work of the school and the Malay/Muslim organizations.”

Malay leaders continue to blame the lack of home support or parental neglect in their children’s education to be the cause of the educational underachievement among the Malay students. In view of this general neglect of parents Abdullah Tarmugi, former Minister in-charge-of the Muslim Affairs, has this advice for the parents:

“Take interest in your children’s education and be more proactive and continue to monitor and guide your children especially in the new environment. As parents, we must be life long learners too and become effective co-educators in our children’s life. Be familiar with the education system and what it requires, attend talks, seminars and workshops that can add value to your role in the home. You must sustain the drive and balance your time between work and your responsibility towards your children.”

This question of parents’ attitudes has perturbed community leaders and educationists for many years. Parents’ indifferent attitude toward their children’s education and learning became a central concern, and this disconcerting mind-set is believed to have hampered the progress of the Malay students in their studies. Abdullah Tarmugi reminds parents and

81 ibid, p 105
82 Sidek Saniff, Seminar on Education and Singapore Malay Society: prospects and challenges” p. 2-3
83 We will discuss in the following chapters some of the speeches made by the Malay leaders who called for the Malay parents to be more involved in their children’s school work, implying the Malay parents have been neglecting their children’s education or lack interest in them.
84 Tarmugi, Abdullah, ‘Take Interest in Your Children’s Education’, Speeches, vol 24 No 2 p 88
community leaders not to be ambivalent or unconcerned about the educational challenges the community faced. He notes that:

‘Our attitudes and mindsets will have to be re-orientated towards the need to achieve, to excel, and not to accept mediocrity or to be content with the average. Parents could either reinforce or undo what Mendaki and schools were trying to do for the children. They should realise the important role they played in their children’s education, and help them run an education race where the other participants are stronger and perhaps more determined and better prepared.’

Abdullah Tarmugi continues to compare the Malay community with the Chinese. His references to the other ethnic groups acts as a reminder to the Malay community to continue to be as competitive and aggressive as they are in order to remain in the educational race towards excellence in education. According to him, this can only be achieved if the Malay community are prepared to attune to the positive attitude of hard work and perseverance necessary to accelerate their progress in education.

Unfavourable family environment and lack of parental supervision and encouragement are viewed as the contributing factors to the Malay students’ under-performance in their studies. What is interesting to note is that on one hand, the Malay leaders consistently affirm their subscription to the cultural deficit theory when explaining the socio-economic and educational underachievement, but on the other hand, prefer to disassociate themselves and deny that they exhibit such cultural deficit. They attribute their success to the hard work put in in achieving their present social standing. This trend of thought is aptly described by Lily Zubaidah:

“The ideology of Malay cultural inferiority has also been uncritically endorsed by sections of the Malay middle and professional class. Having attained high educational credentials, material success, and social mobility, …serves to

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85 Straits Times, . 2 Mar 1998, Mendaki plans on having ‘Smart’ parents
flatter their achievements and accords them the esteemed status as role models of exceptional qualities. Their socio-economic distance from the general Malay community and their ethnic difference from the non-Malay community places them in a position of double alienation. This profound level of alienation has rendered the Malay middle class socially vulnerable and susceptible towards uncritically accepting the cultural deficit thesis which gratifies their ego for having extricated themselves from the negative cultural attributes afflicting the Malay community.” 86

**Dominant Ideas of Educational Underachievement**

The Malays are continuously being compared to the non-Malays, especially with the Chinese. The common perception is that the Chinese possess all the positive attributes that led them to achieve success, both socio-economically and educationally. Often, the Malay students are stereotyped as being lazy and enjoy idleness to hard work, unlike the other two ethnic groups since ‘this had not been a problem among the Chinese or Indians of Singapore, who inherited the insecurities of their immigrant forebears and generally work harder.’ 87 They are said to be easily contented and complacent and lack competitiveness. Unfortunately, this argument and view of negative cultural traits among the Malays clouds many discussions and is shared by many, both Malays and non-Malays. The view of the non-Malays is best summed by Tania Li, in her study on the Malays:

‘There is a strong conviction among some members of the Malay elite, the national government, and among many ordinary Chinese, that Malays are less hard-working and less achievement-oriented in education and in economy generally than the Chinese and that inappropriate cultural values account for their poor educational and economic performance.’ 88

She further reasons that it is not just the Chinese who believe that the Chinese possess all the favourable traits to ensure academic success, even the Malays concur to the same view. She continues to assert that:

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86 Lily Zubaidah, p 59.
87 10 years Mendaki p 89
'The Chinese are also regarded as ‘better’ than Malays in the field of education, and the entire ethnic group is credited by many Malays with the qualities of diligence and seriousness in studies. The efforts that Malay parents make to control their children, especially boys, are directed at limiting their exposure to Malay peers. Malay youths’ failings in terms of drug abuse and inattention to study are perceived by Malay parents to come from outside the home but within Malay society…In the process of attempting to gain social mobility through education, it is not only non-studious children who must be avoided but Malay children in general, since non-studiousness is a trait taken by Malays (as well as non-Malays) to characterize Malays as an ethnic group.'

Tania compares the value systems between the Malays and the Chinese. Unfortunately this comparison is biased and does not show a good understanding of the Malay value system:

“Malays are more inclined to stress values like social responsibility, especially their obligation to serve their family (particularly parents) and their community. Themes like achievement and accumulation of wealth were never prominent in Malay literature which can mean two things: either such qualities were not important or that it was completely non-existent. As such, Malays are not highly motivated in areas like business… Value orientation is different in the Malay community. The Malays, for example, will give high regard to a man who is well-versed in the Quran but to the Chinese, the man of knowledge is one who knew the traditions, philosophy and classics of Chinese life…the Malays would be happy to have enough income to live comfortably, rarely motivated to seek extra wealth. … they lack the competitive spirit. Usually values like honesty and integrity override profit motivation…The social and upbringing of the Malays tended to emphasise this conservative attribute. Hence, although the Malays have experienced urbanisation, these values are still very dominant in their way of life. The Malays view life (as Muslims), as something temporary, not permanent. Hence, material gains are not emphasised since they are not the ultimate aim in life. They are easily contented and satisfied with whatever they earn. Failure in life is also not scorned. This lack of competitive spirit is a disadvantage especially in this highly meritocratic education system.”

After Singapore gained her independence, education became and still is the top priority for the Singapore government. The government believes that an educated work-force is an effective component to enhance economic development and socially cohesive

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89 Ibid, p 134
90 Aishah, p. 54-56
Singaporean identity.\textsuperscript{91} The government believes that a system of meritocracy should be the guiding principle for the new state, and no one community should be favoured over the others, in all areas, economic, social, political or education.

The cultural deficit thesis, and to a lesser extent the biological determinist thesis is also promoted by the government to explain the weak educational achievement of the Malay community. Poor parental supervision of Malay parents towards their children has long been cited by the government to explain the educational underachievement of the Malay community. It is alleged that due to lack of parental support, Malay students do not perform as well since they are not motivated and challenged to perform to their full potential. A study conducted by the Mendaki-MOE Joint Committee (MMJC) identified various problems, among which are socio-economic, attitudinal and familial.\textsuperscript{92}

The parenting methods used by the Malays are also faulted to be cause of underachievement among the Malays, especially the Malay boys. It is noted that Malay parents do not supervise their children closely, especially the boys. In his speech at the LBKM Bursary Award Presentation in 1990, then the Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew:

“For some years I have been puzzled why Malay girls out-perform Malay boys in our junior colleges an universities…My Malay colleagues in Parliament offer me this explanation, that Malay parents look after daughters more carefully than boys. Sons are given more freedom to play with their friends. Girls are under closer supervision. They are expected to remain at home to help in the general housework. The result of better parental discipline over girls is higher scholastic achievements.”\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{91} For a detailed analysis of the various educational policies in Singapore after independence, see Lily Zubaidah, \textit{Singapore Dilemma} (1998)
\textsuperscript{92} MMJC
\textsuperscript{93} Lee Kuan Yew, Education-Key to Progress, Opening address at Prophet Muhammad’s Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Boards’s (LBKM) Bursary Award Presentation, October 6, 1990
The government also believes that the Malay parents do not instil in their children the desire to further their studies as far as possible. In the National Day Rally 2000, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong expressed his concern that many Malay Singaporeans still ‘do not fully realise the impact of the Knowledge Revolution on their children’s future. They do not fully appreciate the need for their children to have some form of post-secondary education in the Knowledge-based Economy.’\textsuperscript{94} However, the findings in a study done by AMP Research Department, *Factors Affecting Malay/Muslim Pupils’ Performance in Education*, prove otherwise:

“The findings show that on average about 76.7\% of pupils from all four achievement groups received assistance in their school work from their parents. This is a strong indication that the majority of Malay/Muslim parents are now more actively involved in their child’s schoolwork. This trend is very encouraging as it suggests that Malay Muslim parents are now more concerned over their child’s education and consciously trying to assist their child to perform better in school.”\textsuperscript{95}

Therefore, the allegation that the Malay parents do not support their children cannot be accepted. Lack of achievement may not be due to negative attitude or apathy on the part of the parents. As reported in the above study, there are many other factors, one of which is the parents’ educational background. Due to their low educational status, parents are incapable of providing assistance to their children and this is the reason for their children’s underachievement in education, as alleged.\textsuperscript{96} According to the report:

“There appears to suggest that there is strong correlation between the parents’ educational background and pupils’ achievement level. This may then imply that given the overall high degree of parental involvement, in that the achievers tend to have a high proportion of parents with GCE ‘O’ level qualifications and above. Given the high degree of parental involvement overall, this indicates that better qualified parents are likely to provide better

\textsuperscript{94} Prime Minister’s National Day Rally 2000 Speech.

\textsuperscript{95} *Factors Affecting Malay/Muslim Pupils’ Performance in Education*. Association of Muslim Professional Research Department, Educational Research Unit, 1994, p 6

\textsuperscript{96} A more detailed discussion on the correlation between low socio-economic status, low occupational status affects educational achievement of lack of it will be elaborated in the next chapter.
quality assistance to their children resulting in better academic achievements.”

Educationists such as Barbara Flores, Patricia Tefft Cousin and Esteban Diaz, believe that it is a myth that parents of underachieved children, especially those from the low income families, do not show any interest in their school work. They claim that this myth has been perpetuating among educators for too long. In fact, through interviews with parents, they discover that the opposite holds true. It is a misconception to interpret parents’ ‘silence’ as lack of interest in their children’s work in school. They are other reasons to explain their silence:

“… at risk children have problems because parent don’t care, can’t read, or don’t work with them. Blaming the children’s parents, the culture, and their language for their lack of success in school has been a classic strategy used to subordinate and continue to fault the ‘victim’ … interviews with parents, however, revealed a completely different perspective. Parents were extremely concerned about the education of their children, but they were reluctant to contact teachers and school personnel about this for several reasons. Parents felt that their role was to support the teacher at home, especially in matters of discipline.

A second reason stated by parents for not contacting the teacher was their English language fluency and the possibility of embarrassment or miscommunication. Not surprisingly, teachers had interpreted parental silence as a lack of concern or interest. Nothing could have been farther from the truth. The problem was not with the parents but with school personnel who misinterpreted parental behaviour through the lens of a perspective that reflected only the view of the institution.”

The cultural deficit theory put forth by the colonial rulers to explain the low economic and educational standing of the Malays is accepted by many, from political to non-political leaders, both Malays and non-Malays. The fact that many scholars have rejected the theory does not deter the leaders, both Malays and the non-Malays to use it to explain the Malay underachievement, in both economic and education. However, more and more contemporary

97 ibid, pp iv-v.
Malays have rejected this theory since they have been able to adapt to changes of modernisation and have joined the mainstream by taking part in the activities of the wider society sharing the standard values of Singaporeans.

William Ryan analyzes the ideology of what he calls “Blaming the Victim”. He believes that, although this ideology is unintentional, it has corrupted the minds of many Americans and as such hinders any effective diagnosis of the real problem under study. As a result, this ideology becomes the stumbling block to objectively finding a solution to overcome the problem at hand. As Ryan succinctly puts it:

“I have now come to believe that the ideology of Blaming the Victim so distorts and disorients the thinking of the average concerned citizen that it becomes a primary barrier to effective social change. And, further, I believe that the injustices and inequalities in American life can never be understood (and, therefore, can never be eliminated) until that ideology is exposed and destroyed.”

Ryan believes that this ideology of Blaming the Victims blinds the authorities from the real issue at hand. He continues to assert that:

“In defining the social problems in this way, the social pathologists are, of course, ignoring a whole set of factors that ordinarily might be considered relevant – for instance, unequal distribution of income, social stratification, political struggle, ethnic and racial group conflict, and inequality of power.

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99 Ryan calls Blaming the Victim an ideological process since it fits in Mannheim’s description of an ideological process. He writes: “Blaming the Victim is an ideological process, which is to say that it is a set of ideas and concepts deriving from systematically motivated, but unintended, distortions of reality. In the sense that Karl Mannheim used the term, an ideology develops from the ‘collective conscious’ of a group or class and is rooted in a class-based interest in maintaining the status quo (as contrasted with what he calls utopia, a set of ideas rooted in a class-based interest in changing the status quo). An ideology, then, has several components: First, there is a belief system itself, the way of looking at the world, the set of ideas and concepts. Second, there is the systematic distortion of reality reflected in those ideas. Third is the condition that the distortion must not be a conscious, intentional process. Finally, though they are not intentional, the ideas must serve a specific function: maintaining the status quo in the interest of a specific group. Blaming the Victim fits the definition on all counts...Most particularly, it is important to realize that Blaming the Victim is not a process of intentional distortion although it does serve the class interests of those who practice it.” William Ryan, p. xv

100 William Ryan, p. 14
Their ideology concentrates almost exclusively on the failure of the deviant.”

Sometimes failure to diagnose the problem well leads to ineffective measures to deal with the socio-economic problems faced. Ryan points out that:

“Good intentions and vigorous actions to improve social conditions are constantly being crippled, sabotaged, and deflected by insidious forces that have already pre-shaped the channels of thought. Because those who intend good and act with vigor also believe certain things to be true about the poor, the black and the victimized. And, so believing, they are easily tempted into accepting the mythology of Blaming the Victim.”

Another writer Barbara Forbes also contends that this misdiagnosis of the problem of underachievement hampers any attempts to correct the problem. She calls for the abandonment of this myth that the underachievers are to be blamed for their predicament:

“The myths about children of color, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and children identified as learning disabled need to be exposed and discarded from our beliefs, our expectations and from our everyday practices. Debilitating myths imprison the mind and render people voiceless and therefore powerless. This voicelessness and powerlessness perpetuates the cycle of oppression, the cycle of inadequacy, the cycle of failure. We can no longer believe in this myth; we can no longer tolerate their intellectual presence; we must begin to transform ourselves by not participating in their daily use.”

A parallel can be drawn to the scenario painted by Ryan to the Singapore context. Such belief, perpetuated by the colonials: By using the cultural deficit thesis to explain the underachievement amongst the Malays, the blame is shifted to the community instead. Lily Zubaidah contends that:

“Importantly, by locating the source of the ‘problem’ firmly within the marginal ethnic community, the racial discourse disentangles the significance of structural, institutional, and historical factors in contributing to their poverty. As the culturally deficient ethnic communities are largely

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101 William Ryan, Blaming the Victim, (New York, Pantheon, 1971) p. xiv
102 William Ryan, p 13
responsible for their socio-economic malaise, the onus is thus firmly on them to reform their ‘deviant’ and deficient ways.  

She continues to explain that:

“…biological determinist explanation were systematically challenged by social psychological research (Myrdall, 1944; Allport, 1954). Instead of focusing on the cultural shortcomings of the ethnic minority community, this research approach drew attention to the attitudes and beliefs of the dominant ethnic community in circumscribing the socio-economic life chances of minorities. Building on Myrdall and Allport’s researches, sociologists such as Jencks (1972) drew linkages between unequal school performance and unequal social context and questioned the credibility of IQ tests. The structural linkages between race, class and gender based ‘under-achievement’ directly contradicted the conservative perspective which saw them as separate phenomena. Many educationists (Bowles and Gintis, 1977; Apple, 1979; Dale, 1989) have continued to challenge the notion that academic (under)achievement rests largely on innate talent, coming on the side of nurture in the nature versus nurture debate. They have critically examined and pointed to the institutional factors such as early streaming, resource allocation of different schools, minority representation in special schools, higher education and the school curriculum, teacher attention, stereotyping, and expectations to explain the educational marginality of ethnic minorities and other socially disadvantaged students.”  

As such, the Malay/Muslim community must have a proper diagnosis of the problems of the educational underachievement among them. The community must not be blinded by the cultural theory thesis purported by many quarters as a simplistic explanation of this problem. Only with proper diagnosis, and not just relying on the above myth or blaming the underachievers, can the effective measures be implemented.

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105 Lily Zubaidah, pp. 184-185
Chapter Three

Analysing the Educational Problems Amongst the Malays

The basic argument of this chapter is to show that the educational underachievement that the Malays are facing today has its genesis in the depressing and stifling educational environment during the time when Singapore was under the feudal system. This problem was further heightened and reinforced by the British during their occupation in Singapore in the early 19th century. The point of bringing out the historical aspect to the problem is to highlight the fact that the problem is deep-rooted. The position of the Malays in trying to improve themselves is a difficult one because of this poor head start.

This chapter also tries to assess other factors, such as structural, lack of cultural capital and attitudinal, that contributed to the problem of Malay educational underachievement. As have been noted in the preceding chapter, the negative cultural traits used to explain the educational lag of the Malays in the last chapter are too simplistic since they downplay the impact of the structural and historical factors that have contributed to the problem.

Historical Factors

In discussing the factors that contributed to the educational backwardness of the Malays, it is important to look at the problem from a historical perspective. Many studies\(^{106}\) blame the historical factor as the genesis to the perpetual problem of educational underachievement among the Malays. Wan Hussin Zoorhi believes that the “feudal values which were incompatible with the advent of the more progressive and dynamic and values of the West” coupled with the “neglect for education and the unwillingness to change” had

stifled the development of the Malays in the trade and commerce that were thriving at that time. To quote him:

“This was the political and social setting of the Singapore Malay ruler in the early 19th century. Their thoughts and actions were not geared to any form of economic development. Their behaviour traits were what could be termed as manifestation of ‘negative representations’ which were the antithesis of the traits essential for economic development like self-confidence, industriousness, perseverance, rationality, discipline and acquisitiveness. Such a fragile and backward society would be no match for the more dynamic and resourceful British and the industrious and persevering immigrants. In Singapore, with the influx of the immigrants from India and China, the Malays were outstripped demographically and economically within a few years after it was founded... With the speed with which the immigrants laboured and progressed, the position of the Malays worsened rapidly. At the close of the century, the Malays were already in a state of economic oblivion.” 107

Aishah in her thesis also blames the Malay rulers for the education malaise of the Malays. According to her, the problem of Malays’ educational underachievement is deep-rooted and the Malays effort to improve themselves is a difficult one because of this poor head start. Since there was no intellectual tradition, the community had the gargantuan task of building up the foundation of such a tradition and at the same time coming to terms with their problems.

“Another great defect of the Malay rulers was their neglect of education. Rulers brought up their children according to their whims without any stress on responsibilities of ruler to the ruled. The majority of them were ignorant. Indolence and the unwillingness to change amongst the Malay rulers immobilized Malay society and literacy. Literacy and study of language were completely neglected. The absence of motivation to look for knowledge accounts for the slow development of the Malays in the field of education.” 108

(a) Education of Malays during pre-colonial times

One of the reasons for the Malays’ educational backwardness is because the Malays were ill-prepared for a Western type of education due to the strict feudal system the Malays

108 Op. cit, p. 44
were under. The ruling class did not show any interest in promoting education among their concerns. The masses were treated with disrespect, condemned to be subservient to their tyrannical rulers without daring to question this authority for fear of the daulat of their rulers. In fact the Malay masses were said to be the most condemned group of people during the feudal period. In such a situation, there was an absence of the spirit of independent judgement due to the constant fear of offending the ruler. Such attitudes proved to be a major hindrance to the development of scientific thinking and progress and technological changes during British occupation in this region.

The first significant Malay writer on Singapore history was Munshi Abdullah, whose autobiography *The Hikayat Abdullah*, first published in Singapore in 1849, tells much about the Malay heritage and the social conditions at that time. Singapore’s history is very closely linked to Malaya. Inevitably, Singapore experienced a similar feudalistic system as the rest of Malaya and much of what happened in the other parts of Malaya was happening in Singapore as well. Abdullah was the first to attribute the cause of backwardness to the abuse of the ruling elites. The extinction of the will to learn, to work and to accumulate wealth was all the result of oppression by the ruling class. This was unfortunate for the Malays as these were the values that were needed to progress within the capitalistic system brought by the colonialists. When the British came, such values were not eradicated since the social structure remained intact.109

One major characteristic of the Malay feudal system was a rigid, hierarchical structure where there existed ‘a big gulf between the poor (usually peasants) and the rich (usually nobleman and chiefs), in the economic, social political and judicial field. In the feudal

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concept of society, the elite or the ruling class is regarded as the only prime force in history. The common people are mentioned only in terms of their relationship to the ruling class.'

Malay feudal society subscribed to very distinctive authoritarian values based on the concept and notion of divinizism, whereby a clear distinction between the ruling class and the subjects permeated all areas of life. Abdullah cited the inhumane, repressive, tyrannical and authoritarian treatment of the ruling class towards their subjects. Instead of safeguarding the welfare of his subjects, the Malay rulers despised them and treated them with disrespect. Abdullah writes:

"I have mentioned the injustices of the rajas because it is always the custom of the Malay ruler to despise his subjects, as though he thought of them as animals. Whenever a common man meets his ruler, he is obliged to squat on the ground in the mud and filth. If a ruler desires the daughters or chattel of ordinary folk he just seizes them, with no sort of fear of Allah and without sparing a thought for the poor people. The law and punishments which he imposes on his subjects depend solely on his own private whim. Those who find favour with him he treats kindly, and the wicked behaviour of his own kith and kin at the expense of the common people he condones and hides. He keeps hundreds of debt-slaves, men who have brought ruin to the common folk, murdering people with no more compunction than killing an ant. The rulers make no attempt to protect their subjects, only themselves."

When the Temenggong of Johore settled here with his followers in 1811 they brought Islam with them. The spread of Islam had brought the first wave of consciousness of education to the Malays. However, education was then simple and entirely religious-oriented. There was no formal, structured education system available for the Malays at that time, except for the occasional Qur’an class. There is no doubt that there existed even before the arrival of Raffles a few Qur’an schools which were attended by girls as well as boys. The purpose of these Qur’an schools was to teach the boys and girls the principal prayers in Arabic after studying the Arabic alphabet and the importance of leading an ordered life with emphasis on

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110 see Shaharuddin Maarof, *Malay Ideas on Development: from feudal lord to capitalist*, (Times International, Singapore, 1988) for a detail recount of the feudal values and systems.

111 ibid., p 269
good character. Islamic education among the Malays did not end with the arrival of Raffles in 1819. On the contrary, Islamic teaching grew even stronger as a counter-reaction to the introduction of Western-type formal education.112

“For the masses, education was of no significance. The only form of education that existed was religious education for the village children. Religious education was provided mainly by religious persons usually village elders who could read the Quran and know the rituals of Islam. Learning was by rote where students normally memorized and learnt Arabic scripts of the Quran without understanding their meanings. This type of religious education was popular amongst the Malays because they saw their duty as Muslims to at least know the basic rituals of Islam and to read the Quran.”113

The early Muslim missionaries who helped to spread Islam were traders and many of them were Sufi mystics. They were concerned with the propagation of the faith. The Muslim missionaries established in the course of time a prototype of religious teacher in the Malay society. He was and still is called the Sheikh or Syed if he has Arab ancestry, Maulana if he is of Indian origin and Ustaz or Haji if he is a Malay religious teacher. It was the practice among the Malays to entrust their children to a religious teacher when they reached the age of five or six.114 The children were taught the Arabic alphabet and reading of the Qur’an in Arabic and the rudiments of the religion, particularly the prayers. Good manners in speech and conduct were especially inculcated in them. In some cases, after learning to read the Qur’an in Arabic they were taught a little Malay.115 Private tuition in the home of the teacher or the home of the taught, and instruction in the village mosque (surau) played an important part in Muslim education until the early nineteenth century when Qur’an schools become more numerous. They were conducted in masjid (mosques), surau or the teachers’ homes.

112 quoted from 150 years of Education in Singapore p 100
113 Op. cit. p 42
114 For a further discussion on the traditional education system, see Rosnani Hashim, Educational Dualism in Malaysia: Implications for theory and practice, Oxford University Press, KL, 1966.
115 Quoted from Aboo Bakar Bin Alias, ’Malay School Leavers in Singapore’ p 19
Sir Stamford Raffles, accompanied by Abdullah Munshi, visited in 1819 a Qur’an school in Malacca and was surprised that the children were learning to read verses from the Qur’an in Arabic which they did not understand. The teacher told Raffles that the parents had ordered him to teach the Qur’an first before commencing Malay. In those days the general opinion was that it was improper to give instruction in the Malay language because it was the indigenous language and no school had ever been started to teach the Malay language. Similarly, the children of the Malay rulers received religious education conducted by the village ulama (those learned in religion). However, they did not attend the same Qur’an classes as the village boys. They were usually tutored privately at home, although the content of their religious education was almost identical. They learnt by rote the same prayers and passages from the Qur’an.  

The structure of Malay feudalism had a restraining impact on the progress of education amongst the Malays. To start with, the rigid structure of the feudal system dampened any form of social mobility, and anything that indicated a promotion of such mobility was perceived as a means to develop oneself. The absence of such an experience explains the lack of interest amongst the Malays in education brought in by the British. At the time of the British arrival in Malaya, there were two sorts of schooling: the Qur’anic schools mentioned earlier and an ‘education based on a system of apprenticeship to parents and others’117. Both types of schooling were very different from that in existence today. As observed by R.J Wilkinson, a British administrator in Malaya:

“Education was based upon a sort of apprenticeship. Most boys picked up a good deal of industrial knowledge by assisting their parents in the work of agriculture, fishing and trapping. They acquired manual dexterity by working in wood and rattan…They also learnt to be observant. A few youths of exceptional

117 This is not similar to the type of apprenticeship as understood by the West.
gifts would go further and learn something of art and metal working by giving occasional help to a village craftsman; a few more might specialise in reading and writing, either for religious purposes or with a view of becoming doctors, diviners, sorcerers and letter-writers.” 118

Due to the Malays being insulated in their own areas, they failed to seize the opportunity of the expanding economy and thriving trade and commerce that were taking place in Singapore. In addition, because of the rigid social structure and the oppressive ruling class, the value of hard work and accumulation of wealth were not instilled among the subjects. 119 This proved detrimental to the Malays since these values were necessary to survive in a competitive economy that Singapore was experiencing at that time. Swettenham offers this explanation for the lack of initiative, or incentive for acquiring wealth among the Malays:

“It is, however, extremely probable that the Malay’s disinclination to exert himself also due to the fact that, in the course of many generations, many hundreds of years, he has learned that when he did set his mind and his body moving, and so acquired money or valuables, these possessions immediately attracted the attention of those who felt that they could make a better use of them than the owner.” 120

The historical reason is highlighted to show that the Malay problem is deep-rooted. When the British came to Malaya and Singapore, the situation did not change due to the British’s policy of minimal intervention in other areas except economic area. This policy did

118 Wilkinson, ‘Malay Customs’ p 46
119 As noted by Aishah: “The extinction of the will to learn, to work and to accumulate wealth were all the result of oppression by the ruling class. This was unfortunate for the Malays as these were the values that were needed to progress within the capitalist system brought by the colonists. When the British came, such values were not eradicated since the social structure remain intact. Lack of participation on the part of the Malays in the economy had encouraged the British to open the Malay states to Chinese and Indian immigrants. While the Chinese and Indians profited from exploiting every economic opportunity that existed, the Malays remain static in their own niche. Economic transformation for the Malays in Singapore was also slow as the Malay Sultan of Singapore had arrogantly refused to the opportunity to be involved in trade and commerce.” Aishah M Kassim, pp 47-49
120 cited from :Syed Hussein Altats, Myth of the LazyNatives, p. 45. Many other colonial writers such as Hugh Clifford, L.R Wheeler, Sir Richard Windstedt, painted a distorted picture of the Malays being indolent, passive and disinclined to work.
not help to improve the Malays and in fact adversely affected them. The colonial education was biased towards the ruling class and did nothing to help the Malay natives.

(b) The Colonial Education in Singapore

Many academic studies (Djamour, 1965; Bellington, 1974; Betts, 1975; Syed H Alatas, 1977) have cited the deficiencies of colonial educational policies for the poor educational and socio-economic standing of the Malay community during the colonial and post-colonial period.\textsuperscript{121} The British started a structured education system for the Malays but whether this benefited the Malays remains debatable. More often than not, British educational policy proved to be detrimental and did not provide the Malays with an opportunity to play an active role, against the background of a progressive and prosperous trade and commerce that was flourishing in Singapore at that time.

The elitist and socially hierarchical nature of the colonial educational regime handicapped Singapore Malays from keeping pace with the fast urbanizing and competitive society that was unfolding on the island. Many factors, such as the general poverty of the Malays, the poor educational and teaching facilities of village and religious schools, the avoidance of the good educational facilities at secular and Christian missionary schools due to the fear of conversion, have all contributed in varying degrees towards laying the weak educational foundations of the Malay community.\textsuperscript{122}

What inspired the British policy in the East was commerce rather than conquest and that their main concern was trade and not territory nor people. Education, if it was to be

\textsuperscript{121} Lily Zubaidah ‘Singapore Dilemma’ p 185
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid, p185
considered at all, was only of secondary importance to the British authorities. The history of education in Singapore since the early 19th century was dictated by the persons or administration in power. These men who came only to reap the benefits of trade had very little interest in providing Malays with education; they did not go beyond providing free primary education in the Malay Language for the ethnic Malays. By education, the Governor, Sir Cecil Smith, meant:

“…the training of penghulus in village management and grooming of a few members of the aristocracy for minor posts in district administration. For the majority of Malays, vernacular education was designed to lead them back to the padi field or to swell the ranks of manual labourers.”

The colonial administrators were more concerned in their vested interest and were indifferent to the welfare of the inhabitants of the place they occupied. When Raffles came to Singapore in 1819, he suggested the setting up of Raffles Institution to improve the standard of education in the native languages through formal schooling. However, when Crawford was appointed Resident on 9th June 1823, he reported that the establishment of the Raffles’ Institution was premature. He then recommended that the education of the natives to be confined to elementary education since the ‘present inhabitants of the island were stranger to European education and method of instruction.’ He proposed that elementary education

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123 Ho Seng Ong rightly points out that: “Government’s interest in Malay education was of course dictated by a sense of duty towards a people with whom the British had assumed certain treaty obligations; there was also the British tradition of respect for another man’s point of view and reluctance to interfere in and change native customs and beliefs.” Ho Seng Ong, Education for Unity in Malaya: An evaluation of the educational system of Malaya with special reference to the need for unity in its plural society, Malayan Teachers’ Union, Malaya, 1949. p 87


125 Ho Beng Seng compares the British administration to the American government in Philippines. He aptly points out: "One need not hark back to the past, but for the sake of a truthful record, it must be stated that Malaysans, one and all, feel that British administration has unduly barred the doors of educational progress and opportunities and retained the highest positions for Europeans. Prior to 1945, not one local teacher had been sent to England at Government expense to receive higher education; the two or three who went proceeded at their own expense and without much encouragement from the authorities. Contrast this with the generous action of the Philippine government which sent 503 students during the years 1903-1924 to the American colleges for teacher-training courses.”. op. cit., p 96.
should be limited to reading, writing and arithmetic in English. He believed that the chief benefit of instruction should accustom the ‘Asiatic to regular habits of subordination.’ Crawford’s proposal to abandon Raffles’ original scheme altogether dealt a death-blow to the concept of collegiate-institution. The Governor of Bengal agreed with Crawford’s proposals and empowered the Resident of Singapore to act in accordance with his proposals and recommendations.126

The British administration believed in keeping the existing dualistic traditional system and this was translated into their educational policy for the Malays. In conformity with their policy of preservation and being against innovation, the British devised an education policy which would retain the class division and the demographic pattern existing in the country. There were two distinct educational systems for the Malays: a system of rudimentary education in the Malay language for the broad mass of the Malay peasantry on one hand, and on the other, English education for a select number of Malays who were mostly the sons of Rajas and Chiefs. This style of providing dualistic educational system is described as ‘protective and paternalistic’. These views were expressed in several annual reports. Sir George Maxwell, the Chief Secretary of the Federated Malay States for example wrote in 1920:

“The aim of the Government is not to turn out a few well educated youths, nor a number of less well educated boys: rather it is to improve the bulk of the people and to make the son of the fisherman or the peasant a more intelligent fisherman or peasant than his father had been, and a man whose education will enable him to understand how his own lot in life fits in with the scheme of life around him.” 127

126 see 150 years of Education in Singapore, p 10
127 Quoted from Keith Watson, ‘Rulers and Ruled’ p 157. The aim was first reported in the Annual Report 1920, Federated Malay States.
While the ruling class enjoyed a more privileged western-typed education where English was allowed and they were trained to be involved in the administration of the government, the masses received a very restrictive and limited form of education. They are kept at literacy level where they were confined to the kampong, away from the capitalistic activities that were taking place in the heart of Singapore. As a result, Malay society remained static and feudalistic. Mobility was still impossible with education. As Syed Hussein Alatas observed, upward social mobility through education was then a virtually non-existent phenomenon among the native subjects. Colonial rule hampered any opportunity for the masses to aspire to move upward since the top positions in the government were reserved for the colonials:

“The process of displacing the native from the top positions in the political, economic and administrative hierarchies was completed throughout the Archipelago by the 19th century...All the top positions in the political, economic and administrative hierarchies were reserved for the members of the colonial ruling elite. The result was the blocking of upward mobility amongst the native aspirants. Thus colonial rule had blocked the social mobility of the native society. It had restrained the growth of motivation amongst the natives to aspire for a better position in life. This phenomenon was in turn used by the colonial elite as an argument in support of the contention that the natives lacked drive and ambition. They attributed to the natives traits which they had created themselves.”

To the British, education for the masses meant preserving the existing fabric of the Malay traditional society and its peasant base. The Malay vernacular education remained at a rudimentary level, to ensure that the vernacular education did not provide opportunity for upward mobility. Schools for the boys provided a four-year primary education, and teaching was confined to reading, writing and arithmetic. Pupils were also taught habits of cleanliness, punctuality and obedience. This was to ensure that the boys were not given more than what was required, thus there was no opportunity for the boys to be exalted higher than their

fathers as it would have gone against the interests of the British. This was indicated by Birch, the British Resident of Selangor in his annual Report of 1893:

“Vernacular education is in my opinion useful in so far as it makes the Malay regular and cleanly in his habits, but where it exalts boys, as it often does, above the calling of their fathers, who for the most part will remain small agriculturists or fishermen, it does more harm than good.”

No English was taught in the Malay ‘vernacular’ schools. The reason given was that the aim of Malay vernacular education was to give the pupils a sound practical education to fit them for a living as farmers and fishermen. It was also accepted as a principle that a child should commence his education in his own mother tongue. Malay boys who wished to learn English would have to enrol in an English school from the first year or compete for transfer to an English school after completing four years in a vernacular school, as long as they had not reached the age of eleven. Since all English schools were located in towns and only a few Malay parents could afford to send their children direct to English schools from the first year, the number of Malay pupils in Government and aided schools was small compared to that of other races. Aside from its poor intellectual content, Malay vernacular schools suffered other handicaps. This is how the state of the Malay schools was described:

“Buildings and equipment were far inferior to those of English schools. Most schools had no proper classrooms. A common feature was the use of low movable partitions to separate one class from another. Under such conditions the teaching in one class was often drowned by the chanting or reading lessons in the next. Few headmasters had an office in which he could be left to do his administration in peace and quiet. It is true that textbooks were free but they were perennially in short supply. It was not unusual that a textbook had to be shared by three or four pupils. A library was a luxury. There were not enough books in Malay available in the local bookshops to build up a school library. The proportion of untrained teachers, especially in the rural areas,

\[129\] Chang, Ming Phang Paul, Educational Development in a Plural Society A Malaysian case study p 15
\[130\] 150 years of Education in Singapore, p 34
was high. The standard of teaching was generally low. There were no facilities for secondary education.” 132

It can be said that education in Malay before 1942 provided very limited opportunities for economic and social advancement. Vernacular education besides giving a sound grounding in the three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic) was to foster an interest in agriculture, thus preventing and discouraging the future Malay peasants from leaving his land. This policy tended to isolate the majority of the Malay community from the mainstream of social and economic changes that were taking place in their midst. In addition, a restrictive four year primary course arrested the growth of the Malay language. As observed by Alatas:

“In the absence of a well-developed Malay vernacular, the child in a Malay school could not be introduced to a world of thought, of achievement and of conduct outside the immediate experience of his village and his own people. It was claimed that Malay education was designed to preserve the Malay’s traditional way of life and was not intended to be an instrument of change.” 133

Earlier in 1915, R H Kenion, an unofficial member in the Federal Council remarked:

“The great aim of education… is to train a man to make a living… You can teach Malays so that they do not lose their skill and craft in fishing and jungle work. Teach them the dignity of manual labour, so that they do not all become kranies (clerks) and I am sure you will not have the trouble which has arisen in India through over-education.” 134

It was obvious that there was no intention to improve the Malays socio-economic state through education even then. In 1919, the High Commissioner expressed similar views:

“It is not real education that qualifies a pupil in reading, writing and arithmetic and leaves him with a distaste, or perhaps even contempt, for the honourable pursuits of husbandry and handicraft. It will not only be a disaster to, but a violation of the whole spirit and traditions of the Malay race if the

132 ibid, p 9  
133 ibid, p 16  
134 ibid, p 136
result of our vernacular education is to lure the whole of the youth from the kampong to the town.”

R.O Winstedt, a well-known writer, was appointed to the post of assistant Director of Education, in 1915. Often looked upon as the ‘modernizer’ of Malay education, he was no different from the other administrators. Sent to Java and the Philippines in 1916 to study the colonial education, Winstedt made recommendations which formed the backbone of the formulation of educational policies for the Malay masses and were to have far-reaching implications on Malay education. His ‘new education’ for Malay schools advocated a policy of ‘rural bias’ thereby circumscribing Malay educational progress so as to ensure that the Malay peasant did not get ideas above his status. What Winstedt advocated showed his fundamental lack of concern for Malay intellectual development, thereby protecting the vested interest of the colonialist. Furthermore, unless the Malay students went to an English medium school, they were at a disadvantage in terms of access to higher education and opportunities of employment.

Winstedt restricted the vernacular schools to only the most elementary instruction. For the rural Malay peasants, the number of years in elementary schooling was reduced and the curriculum was oriented to such manual skills as basket weaving and horticulture. This paternalistic, custodial outlook in education tended to highlight the general colonial assumption that the Malay peasantry should be preserved in their traditional kampong environment and thus be saved from the disturbances of modernization. Under the false pretence of trying to ‘protect’ the Malays from the impact of modernization and in keeping

135 Ibid p 138
136 This discussion can be found in Roff, Origins of Malay Nationalism. Roff wrote: “At heart an administrator and an analyst rather than a creator or a true scholar, he showed little real understanding of the Malay spirit and its strivings, despite his undoubted knowledge of the language and his enormous corpus of writings on a variety of Malay subjects. Nothing in his 1917 report strikes one more than the absence of any thoughtful reflection on the aims and effects of vernacular education, or any concern at all beyond the practical aims of British colonial rule.” Ibid, p.139
them in a subservient position, the British colonial authorities disadvantaged the Malays vis-à-vis the other ethnic groups and inhibited them from greater participation in the mercantile, trade and commerce thriving in modern Singapore. The British colonial educational policy had succeeded in alienating the Malays on their indigenous land, and by insulating the Malays from the development, the colonials had put the Malays at a disadvantage, vis-à-vis the other races in Singapore.

Another hindrance to the Malays’ greater participation in the economic and social advancement in Singapore was the British’s policy of restricting the teaching of English language in Malay schools. During the 1870s and thereafter, British officials both in the Straits Settlements and the Malay States prescribed to the prejudice against the undiscriminating and unrestrained progress of English education in British colonial territories. As far as Malaya was concerned before 1942 the British Government had no intention of providing English education to the whole school-going population. Officials representing this school of thought in the Malay States included Frank Swettenham, then the Resident of Perak in 1890 who warned against any attempt to teach English indiscriminately. The policy was clearly explained by Frank Swettenham when he declared:

“The one danger to be guarded against is an attempt to teach English indiscriminately. It could not be well taught except in a very few schools, it is not at all advisable to attempt to give to the children of agricultural population an indifferent knowledge of a language that to all but the very few would only unfit them for the duties of life and make them discontented with anything like manual labour. At present the large majority of Malay boys and girls have little opportunity of learning their own language, and if the Government undertakes them to this, the Koran, and something about figures and geography… this knowledge, and the habits of industry, punctuality and obedience that they gain by regular attendance at school will be of material advantage to them, and assist

137 Many objections were raised against British administration for restricting the learning of English. Those who questioned the British includes Rev. W. E. Horley,: “English education is of vital importance in Malays. We neglect it our peril. The public are clamouring for it. Why restrict it?”, quoted from Ho Seng Ong, Education for Unity in Malaya: An evaluation of the educational system of Malaya with special reference to the need for unity in its plural society, Malayan Teachers’ Union, Malaya, 1949, p. 105
them to earn a livelihood in any vocation, while they will be likely to prove better citizens and more useful members than if imbued with a smattering of English ideas which they would find could not be realised.” 138

The accessibility to education in English was mainly restricted to children in the urban areas and to those who could afford to pay fees although a limited number of free places and scholarships were made available to the Malays and the poor and deserving non-Malays. Opportunities for higher education were restricted to those who attended English schools. Vernacular schools were a cul-de-sac which led nowhere except to jobs that required little or no skill at all and no knowledge of English. 139 The teaching of English in particular was to be shunned since it might invite all sorts of dangerous thoughts against the colonialist In his report in 1894, Swettenham further acknowledged the political grounds for proceeding slowly with the introduction of English schools:

“I am not in favour of extending the number of English schools except where there is some palpable desire that English should be taught. Whilst we teach children to read and write and count in their own language, or in Malay… we are safe” 140

The Malays in Singapore were living in a world dominated by business and commerce that required English as the working language. What was needed was an education that cultivated an inquiring mind and skills to prepare them for the technological changes that are happening in their midst. Malay education at that time failed the Malay pupils in both respects. With their language handicap, it was difficult for the Malays to get good jobs since English was a prerequisite for such jobs. Thus Malays held only junior posts such as office boy. It was neglect of the welfare of the Malays by the British colonials which helped to preserve and reinforce the poverty among the Malays. As noted by Chai Hon-Chan:

138 Cited in Loh, Philip, Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940, (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1975) p 15
139 ibid p 27
140 ibid, p 16
“Swettenham’s belief that vernacular instruction would be ‘of material advantage’ to the Malays and that it would ‘assist them to earn a livelihood in any vocation’, certainly did not materialize. On the contrary, due to the Malays’ ignorance of English, they were automatically disqualified from employment as a clerk in the Government service or commercial firms. The only dignified vocation for Malay educated in his own language was teaching at a monthly salary of twenty dollars.”  

When Skinner was appointed Inspector of Schools in the Straits Settlements, Malay education received a new impetus. He was willing to develop Malay High Schools if there was a need for them. In 1855, the Temenggong of Johore and E.A. Blundell, the Governor of the Straits Settlement, each contributed $1 500 for imparting education to the Malay youth. This amount was used to support Keasberry’s private vocational school for Malay boys at River Valley Road and to establish two Malay Day Schools in Singapore in 1856 – the Malay Day School at Telok Blanga and Abdullah’s School at Kampong Glam. With the success of these two Malay schools in providing education up to Standard IV, the government was challenged to do something about higher education of the Malays. A Malay High School was opened in 1876. The demand for Malay teachers throughout the Settlements moved the Education Department to the decision to convert the Malay High School into a Malay Training College in 1878.

The education for the children of the Malay ruling class followed a different alternative. The British in the Malay states and in Singapore had always acknowledged the ruling position of the traditional elite. It was decided that the traditional elite, unlike the masses, should be trained in matters of government, in conformity with the aim stated in the Education Report, that is, to see to ‘the provision of special facilities to instruct Malays to

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141 see Chan Hon-Chan, Development of British Malaya p 239-240
142 150 years if Education in Singapore, p 104-105
143 ibid, p 105
become useful public servants.'\textsuperscript{144} Sultan Idris of Perak paved the way for the establishment of the Malay College at Kuala Kangsar in 1905.\textsuperscript{145} One of the objectives of the college was to educate and groom children of the Malay aristocracy for positions in the British administration.

The education in Singapore met with rigorous changes with the coming of the British. The first formal instruction given to Malay boys in the Malay language was in the Singapore Free School in 1834. More and more boys joined the school, and the boys showed much progress in their proficiency of the Malay language. However, this came to an abrupt end when the Malay department of the Free School was abolished due to the great apathy of parents towards secular education and even prejudice demonstrated by the Malays towards receiving such education, especially under the foreign teachers.

Due to the fear that their children would be deculturalized or worse still Christianized if they were to attend these secular schools, especially the English schools, the Malay parents avoided sending their children to these schools. To persuade these children to attend schools, the Malay schools had to use some system of coercion such as compulsory education for the boys living in the neighbourhood, attendance agreements and even the use of pressure through the village councils to entice the pupils into the classrooms.\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{144} cited in Roff, Origins of Malay Nationalism, p 273

\textsuperscript{145} Roff makes a comparison between Malay College and Sultan Idris Training College (SITC). He writes: “Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) named in honour of the late Sultan Idris ibni Raja Iskandar of Perak, was opened at Tanjong Malim, a small town just north of the Perak-Selangor state boundary., late in 1922. The students were drawn from the most part of peasant farmers and fishermen. In this the SITC contrasted markedly with the only comparable educational institution in the country, the Malay College at Kuala Kangsar, whose pupils came mainly from the ranks of the aristocracy…On one hand, at Kuala Kangsar, there were the sons of the traditional ruling class and the wealthy, undergoing training for entry into the English-speaking world of government and administration and occasionally the professions; on the hand, at SITC, the sons of the peasantry and the poor, undergoing training for return to the Malay-speaking world of the rural village school.” Ibid, p. 143.

\textsuperscript{146} J. M. Gullick give the ways to induce Malay parents to send their children, among which were:
The reluctance of the Malays to accept Western-type formal education also resulted in the widening of the gulf between Malays and the other immigrants in the country. The perceived unfavourable attitude of the Malays towards this type of education also impacted and influenced British policies towards Malay education. The Isemonger Committee of 1893, which studied the state of vernacular education in Malaya and Singapore, recommended the closing of all Malay schools if the average attendance was less than 15 students. As a result of these recommendations, 22 Malay boys’ schools were closed in 1895. Malay education in Singapore received a severe set-back through these measures.\(^\text{147}\)

Another inhibiting factor to the progress of the Malays in education was the Malays’ fear towards Western, secular education. The resistance to these new ideas was wide-ranging, among which was the fear felt by the Malay parents that their children would be deculturalized. Amidst such fear and uncertainty which had a bearing on their psychological readiness, these children entered the Western education system later. In addition, to safeguard their vested interest, the religious teachers resisted this type of education. The implication had a long-term impact in that the Malays were left behind in their quest for progress since Western, secular education was the key to their social mobility. Their failure to seize this opportunity led to a big gulf between the Malays and the other races in the educational field, and consequently in the economic, social and political areas.

\(^{147}\) 150 years of Education in Singapore, p 107
Structural and Institutional Factors

(a) Social-economic Status of the Malays

Educational sociologists have argued that academic excellence and occupational success are closely-related in a meritocratic system. According to Havighurst, ‘education will be the main instrument for upward mobility, and the lack of education or failure to do well in one’s education will be the principal cause of downward mobility.’ Therefore, in our discussion on the educational (under)achievement of the Malays, we need to look at their occupational status in relation to the other races. In terms of occupational distribution, the Malay community are still occupying the lower occupational strata in the economy. We can safely conclude that this low level of occupational status is a reflection of the generally low educational level of the Malays.

According to Singapore Household Census, in 2000 the Malays occupied three main occupational areas of low strata, namely, clerical, sales and services, production and related services, and cleaners and labourers. About 75% of the total Malay labour force is concentrated in these occupations. It is in the administrative and managerial and related categories that the Malays are visibly underrepresented. In 1990 and 2000, only 1.1% and 2.9% respectively of working Malays were in these occupations, compared with 11%, 7.1% and 13.2% of the Chinese, Indians and others in 1990, and 15.9%, 12.5% and 27.0% of the Chinese, Indians and others in 2000. The Malays are glaringly short of professionals too since only 5.2% of the Malay population are professionals.

As the Malays form the majority in the lowest occupational strata, it follows that the total income earned by them as a group is also the smallest compared to the other two races. The

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average monthly household income for the Malays was $3148 in 2000 compared to $5219 and $4556 for Chinese and Indians respectively. The statistics nevertheless highlight the present situation of the Malays in Singapore. The fact remains that a disproportionately large number of Malays are in the lower occupational group, with Malays heavily concentrated at the lower levels of white and blue collar jobs whereas at the professional level there is an obvious scarcity. This apparent weakness, by extension, reflects the relative inability of the Malays to perform as well as the other races in the educational field.

As demonstrated above, the Malays in Singapore are socio-economically weak. Although the Malays have experienced an upgrading in occupational structure, with more being employed in managerial, professional and technical jobs over the years, the bulk of the community still hold jobs in low-skilled, blue collar sectors. One of the reasons for the failure to do well in schools among the Malay students is said to their being in a low socio-economic status. Studies have shown that there is a correlation between academic performance and socio-economic position of the children:

“From a number of national studies and international comparisons made in US and Europe, a few general patterns emerged. The working-class children have the tendency not to continue their studies till post-secondary level or beyond, and even if they do, they are less likely to finish their studies at these higher levels. It was also reported that relatively more children from lower status families are also scholastically retarded…Another study demonstrated that there is a progressively worsening of opportunities for the student of low socio-economic status at successive stages of the educational process.”

The above studies support the findings that children from a low socio-economic position do not do well in their academic studies to secure places in the higher educational ladder and are more likely to acquire low academic qualifications. Their social mobility will

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be hampered and they will be stuck in the low position. Both Aishah\(^{151}\) and Lily Zubaidah\(^{152}\) maintain that many Malays get trapped in this vicious circle and this explains why they are unable to climb up the socio-economic ladder.

A low economic status, indirectly means low income and disadvantageous living conditions. Many Malay parents, coming from low income families, are unable to provide their children with a good head start in education. As a result, Malay students are unable to compete with their peers on an equal footing from the very beginning and are left behind.\(^{153}\)

In contrast, many non-Malays are in the higher income bracket since they are from the higher occupational strata, so naturally, they will have the means to better prepare their children for formal education at a younger age. Thus, it is not that the ability of the children from the low socio-economic status is lower than that of the high socio-economic status. Rather, it is their state of preparedness for school that separates them apart. As observed by psychologist William Ryan:

“...great discrepancies between the dogma of cultural deprivationism and the findings that have emerged from the ingenious, but rather scanty research from which it allegedly is derived. They found that lower class children, particularly lower class minority children, have had less exposure than middle class children to certain kinds of experiences that are helpful in the school situation. What kind of experiences? We are by no

\(^{151}\) Aishah wrote : “The vicious circle explains the difficulty of the Malays in trying to break away from their problems. This difficulty lies in the situation which perpetuates itself. Socio-economically, Malays are not well off. The disadvantages associated with lower social economic status are said to be the reason for failure to do well in school. With poor performance in school, the majority of them will end up in the lower social-economic class.” MA thesis, p. 50

\(^{152}\) Lily Zubaidah also agrees that “the weak economic standing of the community has served to reinforce their weak educational standing, which further reinforces their weak socio-economic standing. This cumulative cycle of socio-economic and educational disadvantage helps to explain the inability of the Malay community to narrow the gap with the non-Malay community and the persistence of the Malay community on the margins of society.” p 208

\(^{153}\) It was reported that 33% of students in the Learning Support Programme (LSP) from 50 primary schools are Malay students. Many of these students are from low income families. This reflects that many Malay students are not well prepared to enter formal primary education. LSP is introduced in 1992 with the aim of raising the standard of reading and prestige of weak students in Primary 1 and 2. Cited from Berita Harian, 6 December 2003.
means sure, but they seem to be related to hearing, talking and seeing. Middle class youngsters see and hear a greater variety of things that are important for school work.”  

According to Ryan, the experiences of the middle class students are more in congruent with the demands of the education system. As such they are more familiar and thus are able to cope better with the system. He aptly points out that:

“Middle class kids are better able to distinguish between words that sound alike, are better able to perceive colors and shapes and, in imitating their parents’ speech, have learned to talk in a style similar to that of most teachers. Thus, the middle class child is somewhat better prepared for the school experience than is the lower class child. But it would not be unreasonable to present this proposition in its reversed form: The school is better prepared for the middle class child than for the lower class child. Indeed, we could be tempted to say further that the school experience is tailored for, and stacked in favour of, the middle class child. The cause-and-effect relationship between the lack of skills and experiences found among lower class children and the conditions of lower class life has yet to be delineated.”

The lower income class child, on the other hand is exposed to those experiences that may not be suitable for school. This difference in experiences, Ryan claims, puts the low income child in a poor light as compared to his peers from the middle class. As such, Ryan reiterates that it is not the cultural or intellectual deficits that set the two groups apart:

We know poor and middle class children exhibit certain differences in styles of talking and thinking, but we do not know yet why and how these differences occur. We know, however, that these differences - really differences in style rather than ability—are not handicaps or disabilities (unlike such barriers to learning as poor vision, mild brain damage, emotional disturbance or orthopaedic handicap). They do represent inadequate preparation for the reality of the modern urban school. They are, in no sense, cultural or intellectual deficits.”

Other studies also concur to Ryan’s argument that children from low economic status are at a disadvantage when they start formal education since they are not exposed to the necessary experience useful for school. Due to their socio-economic status, families lack the cultural

155 Ibid, p. 35
156 Ibid, pp. 35-36
capital to provide for their children. In addition, they do not have access to the hidden curriculum\textsuperscript{157} necessary to excel in their academic studies:

“Research by Bowles (1972) and Brittain (1976) have found family background to have a profound influence on educational attainment and economic status. In particular, the socio-economic status of the family determines the extent of cultural capital attained which consequently allows easy access to the ‘hidden curriculum’ in schools. Access to cultural capital and the ‘hidden curriculum’ is dependent upon factors such as the quality of reading material and intellectual environment at home, the linguistic skills of parents which are passed down to their children, and the educational attainment of the parents which also affects their ability to take an active interest in their children’s progress. Children from socially privileged backgrounds are thus equipped with the cultural capital to have a head start in deciphering the ‘hidden curriculum’ and general demands of school life. By contrast, those from socially disadvantaged family backgrounds are not adequately equipped to compete in the educational race with others who have had an educational head start. They are disadvantaged, by having parents who are less adequately equipped with the cultural capital and material resources required for high academic achievement. Schools can thus be metaphorically viewed as a race between teams of pupils and parents who compete for the limited prizes.”\textsuperscript{158}

(b) Lack of Proficiency in English

As mentioned earlier, the lack of proficiency in English among the Malay students has handicapped the Malays in attaining good academic results. This weakness, stemming from the paternalistic and restrictive education system for the Malays by the colonials, continues to be another major hindrance for lack of achievement amongst the Malays till today. The main reason for this weak English language proficiency amongst Malay students is their limited home exposure to English.

For example, in 1990, only 6.1 percent of Malay households spoke English at home compared to 19.3 percent for Chinese and 32.3 percent for Indian households. By 2000, the

\textsuperscript{157}Cited from Lily Zubaidah, p.141. Footnote no 86 on p. 156, “Put simply, the ‘hidden curriculum’ includes the standards of social conduct, social skills, and interaction with peers and teachers. These social standards are that of the middle classes and alien to most students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.”

\textsuperscript{158}Lily Zubaidah, p 141.
proportion of Malay households speaking English had increased to 7.9 percent. However, this still fell far short of the 23.9 percent of Chinese and 35.6 percent of Indian households speaking English. This indicates the general tendency among the less educated Singaporeans to speak in their vernacular languages or ‘mother tongue’ rather than English at home. It also holds true that the Malay household’s limited usage of the English language is generally reflective of the community’s relatively weak socio-economic standing. This also exemplifies the fact that students who spoke English at home tended to be from middle-class families with parents holding largely professional and white collar jobs. In addition, lack of exposure and unfavourable setting to the English language can also explain their linguistic handicaps. Since English is used widely in schools, this linguistic deficiency is translated to poor performance in examinations. The findings by AMP prove this point:

“There is a high correlation between language skills and academic success. The proficiency of the English Language is thus an important tool in improving academic performance. More emphasis should be placed to ensure that a reasonable level of proficiency in the language is acquired. This may be achieved through regular usage of the language and the acquisition of positive reading habits.”

Lily Zubaidah sees the need to assist students from the low economic status in this linguistic aspect to enable them to start on an equal slate with the students from their middle class counterparts:

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159 *Singapore Census of Population 2000*. Advanced Data Release No. 3, Literacy and Language, p. 4
160 In 2000, 91.6 % of Malay household speaks Malay at home compared to only 75.1 % of Chinese household speaking either Mandarin or Chinese dialects and 42.9 % of Indian household speaking Tamil. *Ibid*, p. 4
161 As reported in the Singapore Census of Population 2000: “There is a positive relationship between socio-economic status and the use of English at home, with higher usage of English among occupants of the larger type of housing. Among residents in private housing, 56 % of the Chinese, 41% of the Malays and 65% of the Indians indicated English as their most frequently used home language. The corresponding proportion was only 11% of Indians and less than 5% of Chinese and Malays who occupied HDB 1- and 2- room flats, ibid, p. 7.
162 In general, the proportion speaking English increases with higher educational qualification. Among university graduates, 47 % of the Chinese, 38% of the Malays and 43% of the Indians spoke English at home in 2000. For those with primary or secondary education, vernacular languages (Mandarin, Malay or Tamil) tended to be the most common languages spoken at home”. *Singapore Census of Population 2000*, Literacy and Languages, p. 6
163 *Factors Affecting Malay/Muslim Pupils’ Performance in Education*, p. 18.
“Due to their lack of cultural capital (English proficiency) and material resources, limited academic assistance, and intellectual stimulation from their parents, many Malay students, like others from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, commence primary school with a distinct handicap. If not given special assistance to catch up in the early years of school life, they are likely to lag further behind in the competitive educational race.” 164

The lack of proficiency in English has had negative repercussions on the achievements of the students in other subjects as well. Subjects such as Mathematics and Science require students to have a good grasp of the English language in order to understand abstract terminology and complicated concepts. Students with a weak understanding of the language will have difficulty in understanding these subjects well and this will adversely affect their performance in these subjects. As pointed out by Lily Zubaidah:

“Studies (Husen, 1967; Oakes, 1988) have found that a weak foundation in English and poor performance in Mathematics are strongly linked to the socio-economic background of the student. This has been corroborated by the 1992 Ow Chin Hock Report on Chinese educational underachievers which found that the socially disadvantaged Chinese students tended to be weak in English, Mathematics, and Science. The salient linkage between class and academic performances in subjects like Mathematics serves to dispel the assumption by the PAP leadership that Malays are inherently weak in Mathematics.” 165

It is important to stress here that the underachievement of Malay students, the bulk of whom comes from the low economic background, is not because of their so called negative attitude towards education or lack of motivation, but because of their frustrations in coping with school. Since their foundation in English, which is the working language in schools, is weak, they find difficulty understanding the lessons conducted by teachers. In order to improve the Malays’ educational prowess, this particular handicap needs to be rectified.

164 Op. cit, p193
165 Op cit p 196
(c) Effects of Early Streaming

As discussed in the preceding chapter, in the Singapore education system, students are streamed as early as in primary four when they are ten years old. Instead of assisting the students in their school work, streaming is seen by many academics as aggravating the problem of educational underachievement. Barbara aptly asserts that separating the academically weak students from the better students may be counter-productive. She contends that the authorities should not just put the blame on the students, but to find the solution to this problem by looking at the teacher:

“Educators, policy makers, and parents have complacently accepted that if a child has a problem, the explanation for the problem is found in the child. We often do not question the teaching that has or has not taken place. Instead, the student is identified and placed in a categorical language or special education program. An entire bureaucracy has evolved as a result of our focus on finding deficits in the child’s learning ability, language, and culture.

Such separation also conflicts with our understanding of how cognitive development is best supported. Vygotsky postulates that since cognition is a social process, individuals become proficient learners by engaging in social interactions and experiences under the direction of those more proficient than themselves…when the less proficient learners are separated from the proficient learners, the demonstrations taking place in the classroom are decreased or provided by others who are also confused by the process being discussed by the class.” ¹⁶⁶

Psychologist, William Ryan, draws attention to his observation on two kind of schools in Harlem and Roxbury:

“In the early grades, when, presumably, the effect of the home background—and the cultural deprivation or advantage—are greatest, there is little or no difference in reading performance between children in the two kinds of schools (Harlem and Roxbury). But four or five year later, when the influence of the school has had a chance to take effect, the ‘culturally deprived’ child shows his expected reading deficit. Clearly, whatever mechanism accounts for these strange findings is found primarily in the interaction of the school with the child.” ¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Op. cit p 371
¹⁶⁷ William Ryan, p 55
He has clearly shown that it is not the cultural deficit that attributed to the educational underachievement among the so-called “culturally deprived” students. In fact, his observation also points to the school system. He correctly points out that:

“A great deal of the relevant research that goes beyond endlessly repeated descriptions of the surface aspects of the problem… can be tied together to support the following linked hypotheses: first, that the effect of poverty, race and family background can be observed to a small extent in the interactions in the classroom, which ultimately produces a falling off of academic performance; second, that the primary effect of poverty, race and family background is not on the children, but on the teacher, who is led to expect poorer performance from black and poor children (when such children make up the great bulk of the class, the teacher’s expectations of the teacher are a major determinant of the children’s performance.”

Do teachers’ expectations of students’ performance affect how well their charges do? Harvard psychologist Robert Rosenthal thought so. His seminal study in the 1960s of young students in what he called ‘Oak School’ found that when teachers expect students to do well and show intellectual growth, they do. Likewise, when teachers do not have such expectations, performance and growth are not and may in fact be discouraged in a variety of ways. His conclusion known as the Rosenthal Effect: Teachers’ expectations about intellectual performance can lead to an ‘actual change’ in how the students do later. What happened in between? A self-fulfilling prophecy, going by Professor Rosenthal’s observation: “If you think your students can’t achieve very much, are perhaps not too bright, you may be inclined to teach simple stuff, do a lot of drills, read from your lecture notes, give simple assignments calling for simplistic factual answers; that’s one important way it can show up.”

Ryan asserts that:

“The conclusion to be drawn from the Rosenthal experiment is that teacher expectations are, in fact, a major contributing factor to pupil performance. It takes no great leap of logic to conclude further that the pervasively low teacher expectations found in slum and ghetto schools must be a major cause of the poor

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168 William Ryan, pp 53
achievement in slums and ghetto schools. The anecdotal and descriptive evidence offered by such writers as Fuchs, Kozol, Herbert Kohl, Edgar Friedenberg, and Jeremy Larner confirm this conclusion. The hypothesis developed by Clark, Jones, and the Haryou staff from the findings of their study seems to be confirmed by this additional data.  

Attempts to analyse the contributing factors of the lack of achievement amongst the Malays, have surfaced many possible causes. Having a good understanding and a correct assessment of these causes are important as they assist the planners in determining the nature of solutions that the Malays can undertake to solve the Malay problem. Unfortunately, the causes put forth are not exhaustive, nor conclusive. Furthermore, the Malays do not have a clear idea of the primary cause of the problem. Hence it is not an easy task to look for solutions to tackle the problem of underachievement in education among the Malays.

When we talk about excelling in education, more time and resources should be spent on reflecting on the measures that have been carried out and what have not been expressed in the community assessment of educational achievement. Less time should be spent on being concerned about catching up with the other ethnic group. It is common among the community to use the family background and attitudinal factors to explain the Malay/Muslim students educational underachievement. Rarely does the community diagnose the problem in terms of structural, institutional or historical factors that could explain Malays’ underachievement in education. As long as we refuse to closely examine these factors, all measures to increase educational achievement in the long run will not be effective.

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\[169\] W Ryan, p 59
Chapter Four:

Attempts to Improve Educational Performance

This chapter tries to discuss the steps taken by the community and their leaders to find a way out, and eradicate the problem of lack of achievement in education among the Malay students. There is a strong belief among the Malay leaders that the plight of the Malay/Muslim community lies in education. However, attempts made by the community to upgrade the achievement of the Malays in education have been limited to non-political areas, mainly through forums, seminars, memoranda or direct proposals made to the Government.

Initial efforts by Malay organisations to tackle the educational problem of the Malays were uncoordinated, sporadic and on an ad-hoc basis. Different organisations focussed on different ways of solving the problem. Among the organisations set up by the Malay community to uplift themselves are the Singapore Malay Teachers’ Union or Kesatuan Guru-guru Melayu Singapura (KGMS), the Prophet Muhammad’s Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board or Lembaga Biasiswa Kenangan Maulud (LBKM), the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organisations or Majlis Pusat Pertubuhan-Pertubuhan Budaya Melayu Singapura (Majlis Pusat), the Singapore Malay-Muslim Economic Congress or Kongres Ekonomi Masyarakat Melayu-Islam Singapura (KEMAS) and the Malay Affairs Bureau (MAB).170

However, generally, Malay organisations felt that the way to tackle the low performance was to organise remedial classes to help Malay students cope with school work and to provide the students who cannot afford tuition, with a cheaper educational alternative. As a result, remedial classes conducted by different organisations mushroomed in an effort to assist Malays to improve educational performance. Nonetheless, although results proved to be

170 Please see Wan Hussin Zoorhi, The Singapore Malays- the Dilemma of Development for a detailed review on the efforts made by these organizations.
negligible,\textsuperscript{171} the Malay organisations remained obsessed with remedial classes. It seemed that that was the only short term activity the Malay community could undertake.

The effectiveness of the activities organised by the various civic organisations came under the scrutiny of the Malay leaders when the Census of Population Report revealed the poor socio-economic status of the Malay community, particularly the low academic achievements of the Malay students. For example, in 1980 there was only 4.9 percent Malays in the professional, technical and related occupations. As for educational performance, of the Malay students aged five and above, only 36.39 percent received primary education, 8.95 percent obtained secondary education, 1.8 percent completed upper secondary education and only 0.17 percent had tertiary education.\textsuperscript{172}

Alarmed with the above findings, the Malay Members of Parliament (MPs) held several discussions to find ways to rectify the Malays’ predicament. They saw the need to combine and pool resources of the various civic organisations together for a more systematic, co-ordinated and a consolidated effort. This was followed by a meeting between Malay MPs and thirteen Malay community leaders representing the various Malay organisations. The religious organisations were also included in the meeting since it was felt that there was a need to provide an environment that enabled every Malay/Muslim to attain the highest possible level of education in both the secular and spiritual dimensions.

\textsuperscript{171} In his article, Jason Tan notes: “If Mendaki’s impact is measured in terms of improving Malay academic achievement the available evidence is meager. Malay pass rates in national-level terminal examinations have improved over the past decade, but so have overall pass rates. The Ministry of Education has announced that Malays who attended Mendaki tuition classes in English language, mathematics and science performed between 11 and 22 percentage points better than the average Malay scores in national-level terminal examinations at the primary and secondary levels in 1991 (\textit{Sunday Time}, 1992). See Jason Tan, “Joint Government – Malay Community Efforts to Improve Malay Educational Achievement in Singapore,” in \textit{Comparative Education}, Volume 31, No. 3, 1995, p348.

\textsuperscript{172} See \textit{Census of Population, Singapore} as quoted in Wan Hussin Zoohri, \textit{Singapore Malay Dilemma}, p 34.
Thus, the Council on Education for Muslim Children or Majlis Pendidikan Anak-anak Islam (Mendaki) was launched in October 1981. It is the first major collaboration between the Government, Malay/Muslim MPs and the community’s non-political leaders to improve the educational status of the Malay/Muslim children. The involvement of the government showed the intensity and seriousness of the problems facing the Malay/Muslim.

The aim of setting up Mendaki is to act as ‘the social catalyst or the yeast on creating the growth of a healthy and dynamic educational environment’\(^\text{173}\). Furthermore, with the formation of Mendaki, the Malay problem, once a communal problem, was elevated to a ‘national problem’ since it was now a national concern as articulated by Lee Kuan Yew, then Singapore’s Prime Minister, in his key-note address during Mendaki’s Congress on the Muslim Children in May 1982:

‘This (Malay) problem is of concern to all Singaporeans and not just to Malay Singaporeans. It is in the interests of all to have Malay Singaporeans better educated and better qualified and to increase their contribution to Singapore’s development’\(^\text{174}\)

With the solid mandate given by the Malay/Muslim, coupled with the approval of government, Mendaki was registered with the Registrar of Societies on October, 10, 1982 as the Council on Education for Muslim Children\(^\text{175}\). The setting up of Mendaki was a first consolidated effort undertaken by the Malay community in their attempt to improve the educational performance in the long run.

The rationale for the setting up of Mendaki was very basic – no ethnic group should be disadvantaged in their pursuit to have a fair share of the economic and social pie due to their


\(^{174}\) See Lee Kuan Yew, Mendaki Address, 28 May 1982 as quoted in Wan Hussin Zoohri, Singapore Malay Dilemma p 43

\(^{175}\) ibid, p 106
educational underachievement. It was feared that any dissatisfaction would lead to the weakening of racial peace and harmony. It was also intended to reach out and guide the entire community to be aware that education is important, since it was perceived that the community was rather indifferent towards education.

In addition, through a total, systematic, professional and comprehensive programme involving each and every Malay/Muslim, Mendaki hopes that these students and their parents will be better equipped with the necessary skills to perform well in their studies. Furthermore, the Malay leaders felt that the benefits that could accrue from a better-educated and better qualified Malay/Muslim community would also be of advantage not only to the community itself but also to the whole of Singapore.

In 1991, in response to a call by the community for a grassroots body that was not politically linked to the Government and to provide healthy competition to Mendaki, the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) was created. This new organisation provided opportunities for professionals who did not wish to work within Mendaki for the benefit of the Malay/Muslim community, especially in the field of education.

Many of the programmes and strategies put forth by both Mendaki and AMP have the primary aim of improving the academic performance of the Malay/Muslim. Among their

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176 AMP was formed to provide an organization parallel to Mendaki but without government involvement. As noted by Jason Tan, “A small group of Muslim professionals had been meeting informally since late 1989 to discuss what they perceived as the growing sense of frustration and alienation in the Malay community amid the string of controversies enveloping the community. The group organized a convention of Muslim professionals in October 1990, during which they put forward two extremely contentious proposals. Firstly,...a restructuring of Malay community leadership was therefore suggested, in which no community organization, including Mendaki, would be led by politicians from any political party...Secondly, the group suggested forming an association of Malay/Muslim professionals to serve as an articulatory channel on major issues affecting the community” see Jason Tan, “Joint Government – Malay Community Efforts to Improve Malay Educational Achievement in Singapore,” in Comparative Education, Volume 31, No. 3, 1995, p 349.
programmes include the various tuition schemes, computer courses, a network of pre-school and child-care centres, parental education and family support programmes, reading workshops, holiday camps, awards and scholarships and interest-free loans for tertiary study.\footnote{For other activities conducted by Mendaki, see Mendaki’s website, \url{www.mendaki.com.sg}}.

**Interventive Measures to Tackle Educational Problems**

(a) *Weekend Tuition Schemes*

Both Mendaki and AMP continue to follow the trend of focussing on conducting tuition classes as an answer to the under-achievement of the Malay students. As a result, the bulk of the programmes to uplift the educational performance of the Malay students involved conducting tuition classes, with the main aim of helping the students to cope with their studies. These tuition programmes cater to students of all levels from the primary and secondary schools to the post-secondary institutions. The various tuition programmes hope to boost the results of the Malay students in their examinations, especially in the critical examinations. Unfortunately, although there has been some improvement in the results of these students who attended these tuition programmes, the improvement has not been satisfactory. Thus, in their attempt to achieve more outstanding results, these organisations have enhanced and refined their tuition and enrichment programmes.\footnote{One of the reasons put forth for the marginal improvement achieved by students receiving tuition conducted by Mendaki WTS is the way these lessons are conducted. Also, the tutors recruited may not be trained in suitable pedagogies to create and stimulate interest of these students in the subjects. As mentioned by Aishah Kassim, “Tuition classes are only a blanket-approach to this problem, as they do not directly attend to the factors that contribute to underachievement. They may be beneficial for the few who are already interested in school work. Pupils who already face learning difficulties in school would not likely wanting to attend such programme since what will be taught will presumably be the same as that taught in school. Thus, their learning problems are not dealt with.” AishahMohamad Kassim, *Education of the Malays: A Review of Underachievement of a Minority Community in Singapore*, M.Ed. Thesis, University of Glasgow, June 1989. p 85-86}
Initially, Mendaki started off their Weekend Tuition Scheme for students sitting for crucial examinations i.e. PSLE, GCE ‘O’ and GCE ‘A’ levels with the core subjects of English Language and Mathematics. It later widened and revamped its tuition programme at the secondary level to include more subjects, such as Combined Science and Physics. More programmes were introduced, such as educational clinics in subjects like History and Geography, on-line tuition and lessons in basic literacy skills from primary 1 to 4.\textsuperscript{179}

To prepare the students early for their national examinations, Mendaki extended its tuition scheme to students in Secondary One, Two and Three, and Primary Five and Pre-University One.\textsuperscript{180} Mendaki also tried out differentiated tuition to cater to the different learning capabilities of Malay/Muslim students that were admitted to tuition classes, for example enrichment classes for more intelligent pupils like those who were in the Top 10\% of the PSLE, remedial classes for weaker pupils and supplementary classes for those between these two categories.\textsuperscript{181}

Similarly, AMP’s tuition programme also focused on the three fundamental subjects – Science, Mathematics and English, with the primary aim of getting the students into the streams meant for academically brighter students in schools. To meet with the demands of a knowledge-based and globalised economy, AMP initiated the \textit{Mercu Pendidikan} - Pinnacle of Education – a programme to raise the number of students scoring at least five O-level credits, with the objective that more Malay students qualify for post-secondary institutions. This is in line with AMP’s goal of encouraging Malay students to pursue their education right up to polytechnics and universities and not be contented with mere secondary education. In addition, efforts were made to increase the number of students with at least three O-level

\textsuperscript{179} Straits Times, 5 Oct 1998, Mendaki scheme to be revamped
\textsuperscript{180} 10 years Mendaki, p 110
\textsuperscript{181} ibid, p 113
passes so that they can acquire some technical education at Institute of (Technical) Education.\textsuperscript{182}

Besides concentrating on tuition programmes to push up the educational achievement of the Malay students, the two self-help groups tried to deal with the alleged attitudinal problems among these students. It was observed that many Malay students who performed well at primary school level could not achieve the same standard in secondary school. Lack of guidance from the family, pressures from peer groups whose activities were socially-oriented, and the general weakness of Malay students in the English Language, Mathematics and Science\textsuperscript{183} were deemed to be the main causes for this underachievement.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, the desire to excel is very important to drive the students to work hard and achieve their aspirations. With this as its main focus, Mendaki conducted two workshops for school-going children. The \textit{A1 Programme}, aimed at primary school pupils, taught them to aspire to be number one in their studies. The \textit{A Star (Action Students Training to Achieve Results) Programme}, especially for secondary school students, besides teaching the participants effective study techniques and instilling a positive study attitude, it also helped them to identify their life goals. It is hoped that the students involved in the above two programmes, being equipped with effective study techniques, together with a positive study attitude and high aspirations to excel in their studies, are capable of meeting the challenges and yield excellent results in school.

To ensure that the top 10 percent Malay/Muslim pupils in PSLE continue to sustain their outstanding performance at secondary level and beyond, Mendaki initiated the \textit{Big

\textsuperscript{182} Straits Times, 11 Oct 1999, Five-year Plan for Malay Community
\textsuperscript{183} 10 years of Mendaki, p 98
Brother Scheme in 1991\textsuperscript{184}. Professionals and business people were assigned as mentors to students to help and inspire them to reach greater heights. In this context, Mendaki supported the belief that motivation is a crucial factor to continued exceptional educational achievement among these high achievers.

It was observed that the academically weak students usually had low self-esteem and were rather distracted and not keen in their studies. Thus a typical tuition programme would not be able to sustain their interest and would be a futile effort. So AMP tried out a special programme that attempted to change the attitude of these students toward their studies. The Upper Primary Programme for Primary 5 students, promoted activities that first aimed at enhancing their low self-image and poor self-worth so that they would be more positive about themselves and have better self-esteem. Once the problem of attitude is dealt with, they were then introduced to the academic component of the programme. This was to help boost their confidence and encourage them to stay in the education system. With this renewed confidence, it was hoped that they would then proceed to the Normal Academic or Technical streams in secondary schools instead of dropping out of school at an early stage of their education.

To enhance the effectiveness of the programme, parents were also roped in. Through parenting seminars and special workshops conducted by schools, parents were also encouraged to play an active role in making their children more interested in their studies and remain in the education system for a longer period of time, at least up to Institute of Technical Education (ITE) level. Feedback given by schools was most encouraging. Besides academic

\textsuperscript{184} ibid, p 125
improvement, it was observed that the pupils who went through the programme had ‘undergone positive changes in their personality and attitude towards work.’

Another major concern is the high rate of attrition among the Malay students. To take the problem at hand, counselling programmes were conducted for these youngsters who were referred to Mendaki, to persuade them to return to school. The self-help group’s programme to get school drop-outs and chronic truants to continue their studies is chalking up some success. According to a Straits Times report, the self-help group managed to convince 41 youngsters back to school, out of the 111 referred to it last year. This 40 per cent success rate is a far cry from the 15 per cent or so that Mendaki managed when it launched the programme in 1993. To ensure that the tuition programmes reap positive returns, it is vital that the parents play an active role in their children’s education too. Realising the importance of parental support, both organisations have also included the parents in their numerous programmes.

(b) Preparing Parents with Parental Skills

As mentioned in the previous chapters, parents play an important role in motivating their children to achieve academic excellence. To be able to do so, the two self-help groups believe that the parents must be equipped with skills to help their children in any academic matters. In Mendaki’s Educational Congress held in 1982, this mission of educating parents was clearly stated:

‘The total approach philosophy requires that the parents undertake actions at two levels. At the vertical plane the parents prepare and support the children’s educational growth from the conception stage till the children attain adulthood. At the horizontal level the parents ensure that the input from the school is further

185 Chanbasha, Abdul Razak, Helping the Slow Learners, Karyawan, February 1996, p 12-13
186 Straits Times, 4 Jul 1999, Mendaki hauls more drop-out back to school,
strengthened at home making the home-school efforts mutually self-reinforcing.\textsuperscript{187}

As such both Mendaki and AMP realise that the problem of academic underachievement, has to be confronted on several fronts. Based on their sociological studies, AMP identified lack of parental supervision and family environment that was not conducive to learning, as some of the core causes that led to this underachievement among the Malay/Muslim students. Focus is now shifted to the parents as both organizations believe that a more ‘holistic approach’ to education is seen as necessary and it became a trend to educate parents with the knowledge of child upbringing.\textsuperscript{188}

One of the reasons put forth was that these parents, the bulk of whom come from the lower income group, may not be equipped with the necessary skills to coach their children in their studies. Although weaker students could be coached in tuition classes through supervised homework groups and remedial lessons, both self-help groups feel that parents need to be armed with knowledge and skills to help their children at home. They realise that parents hold the key to a child’s motivation, therefore it is important to get the parents more involved in their children’s education.

As a result, many Malay/Muslim organisations, especially both Mendaki and AMP, engage parents in their programmes, with the hope that by educating these parents, they can help provide for their children a home environment that is conducive to a culture of learning and study. These programmes also aim at helping parents acquire skills on how to motivate their children and help them cope with their studies. In addition, it also helps to update parents to be better informed on national policies and the education system in Singapore.

\textsuperscript{187} see Kongres Pembangunan Masyarakat Melayu-Islam Singapura (1982) p17
\textsuperscript{188} Factors Affecting Malay/Muslim Performance in Education (1994)
Besides lacking in skills, Malay parents are observed by Malay leaders are rather indifferent to their children’s education. The latter believe that there is a need to change this supposedly negative attitude among the Malay parents to ensure that any efforts put forth to uplift the Malay/Muslim community will reap positive returns. Calls for parents to be more pro-active and to play a greater role in their children’s education are frequently heard in the many seminars, speeches and conferences conducted by the Malay/Muslim organisations.

In the Education Congress in 1982, Dr Ahmad Mattar, then Minister in-charge of Muslim Affairs, called attention to the importance of the correct attitudes and dedication of every family, every individual and every student to ensure the success for the Malay/Muslim community in their effort to upgrade themselves. He stressed that:

‘..all three components – ‘The Trio’ as Dr Ahmad Mattar called it – Mendaki/government, students and parents, must play their part and co-operate to ensure that all their efforts in attempting to uplift the Malays will be successful and produce results.  

Mendaki has an important task to address the primal problem of the Malay/Muslims’ attitude towards their children’s education. The Malay/Muslim, they allege, do not place sufficient emphasis on their children’s schooling and Mendaki is asked to help persuade parents to regard child-rearing as a long-term process, and education as an investment for a better future for their children. Amongst the programmes to reach out to parents are dialogue sessions with parents and newly-weds, to explain to them the importance of education for their children and to urge them to show an interest in their children’s education. This was the Malay/Muslim community’s first and systematic programme to delineate the role of parents in education.

\(^{189}\) ibid, p 103
Mendaki’s first attempt to coach parents on the importance of education was by meeting up with 300 Malay/Muslim parents at the official launching of the PSLE Weekend Tuition Scheme in March 1982 at two Mendaki study centres Al-Muttaqin and Al-Ansar mosques. The need to provide a suitable learning environment and to instil discipline in their children’s studies was addressed. In addition, parents were urged to regard their children’s education as a form of family investment, to which they should dedicate their time and energies. It was noted that at that time, secular education was looked upon suspiciously by the Malay/Muslim families because of the worry that it might somehow erode the foundations of their faith and traditions.

To increase parental involvement in the education of young children, Mendaki formed the Child and Family Development Department, or CFDD, by the end of 1987. The primary objective of CFDD was to prepare adults to be effective parents by equipping them with important parenting skills, something that the Malay/Muslim community had not given serious attention before. The fact is that courses such as the A-plus or Action- Parent Learning Useful Strategies project and Program Anak Cerdas (The Intelligent Child Programme) for parents with children of primary school age were very well received.

Mendaki intensified its campaign to educate the parents by conducting a one-day conference for 800 parents in February 1989. Besides presenting a theme paper entitled ‘The Family as the Main Factor in Developing a Child’s Potential’ a panel of experts shared the latest parenting knowledge with participants, and parenting workshops were held at mosques all over Singapore as part of the programme.

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190 taken from 10 years Mendaki, p 93
191 10 years Mendaki, p 118
192 ibid, p 120
Another project towards early parental education was the *Early Childhood and Family Education Programme* that aimed at nurturing a ‘generation of Muslim parents who are equipped with the ‘technology’ and values to raise Malay/Muslim children of excellence and prepare them for life in 21st century Singapore*\(^\text{193}\) This was seen in the light that the Muslim couples must start early in their preparation as parents, even before their child is born.

When AMP was formed in 1991, it had the same belief that parental involvement in their children’s education plays a crucial role, and thus many of its programmes were aimed at promoting parental education*\(^\text{194}\). One of their ambitious programmes was conducting workshops for parents, which were compulsory for parents who placed their children in AMP’s pre-school programme. Parents were taught common problems in Mathematics and Science and problem-solving skills, among others. By allowing parents to educate their children and placing the responsibility on the shoulders of the Malay/Muslim parents, the association hoped that parents take ownership of their children’s education. By working together with the self-help group, the community’s educational underperformance problem hopefully would be diminished.*\(^\text{195}\)

The Malay/Muslim community has also responded to ministerial statements of underachievement in mathematics by setting up the *Mathematics Task Force* to combat the poor performance in mathematics. Mathematics as a subject is important, not just because a good pass in the subject will boost the students’ overall performance in the crucial examinations such as PSLE, ‘O’ and ‘A’ levels, but more so as a foundation for further

\(^{193}\) ibid, p 119

\(^{194}\) 2nd National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professional- Vision 2010: Setting the Community Agenda in 21st Century Singapore

\(^{195}\) Straits Times, 13 May 1999, AMP aim: Education Pinnacle
learning as the child goes higher up the educational ladder, especially in an innovation-based world,

Moreover, key findings revealed that since the primary level, Malay/Muslim students have been performing poorly in mathematics. This has resulted in many students experiencing high anxiety in the subject and soon becoming disinterested due to the consistent low grade in it. Furthermore, research found a lack of quality home support in mathematics learning to be the root cause of the problem.

Realising this shortcoming, Malay/Muslim organisations conducted a number of programmes, with Mathematics as the focal point. For example, in an attempt to generate Malay pupils’ interest in Mathematics and improve their performance in the subject, MOE and Mendaki (MMJC) initiated the publication of a regular Mathematics column in the only Malay newspaper in Singapore, Berita Harian in 1989. However, it is not clearly known how effective this approach was in generating interest amongst the Malay students in the subject. No follow up action was done to determine the benefits accrued of such a programme.

In May 1989, a new body, Mendaki-Ministry Joint Committee (MMJC), was jointly established by the Ministry of Education and Mendaki to come up with ways to improve the educational achievements of Malay/Muslim students. Its main tasks were to implement school-based and community-based programmes in education. One of its projects was to focus on Mathematics whereby MMJC piloted computer-assisted instructions on primary Mathematics at community centres. This computer-based learning project by Mendaki was essentially for pupils doing remedial or supplementary lessons in the subject.
In April 2005, Mendaki launched the *Cahaya M* project, an extension of the earlier *Tiga M* or *Maju Minda Matematika* programme. Once more, parental involvement became the focus of this recent project. With *Cahaya M*, parents became active partners and were very much involved in their children’s education. They were invited to attend workshops and sharing sessions so as to familiarise them with the mathematical concepts and reading skills that they could use to engage their children in learning and thinking.

AMP has also developed *Mathematics@Home Learning Kit*\(^{196}\) in its effort to raise achievement level among the Malay students in the subject. This learning kit was the outcome of AMP's research project, which had identified the possible factors affecting Malay/Muslim students' performance in Mathematics. Through activities the parents can do with their children, parent-child learning is again encouraged and emphasized here.

In its effort to reach more Malay parents, Mendaki collaborated with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and other organisations in several of its projects. So far, more than 80 schools have been collaborating with Mendaki in one way or another. Another recent initiative by Mendaki was to help families of students in the *Learning Support Programme* (LSP) in Primary One and Two. The families sometimes include younger siblings. Mendaki’s *Students’ Siblings Scheme* aims to proactively approach parents so as to assist these younger siblings before they enter school. MOE supports this initiative. It seeks to tackle problems early, when children develop their inquisitiveness and an eagerness to learn.

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\(^{196}\) Speech By Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Minister For Education, At The Association Of Muslim Professionals (Amp)'S Launch Of Mathematics @ Home Learning Kit For Parents On Saturday, 19 February 2005, 12.00 Pm At Amp@Pasir Ris Auditorium
Greenridge Primary and New Town Primary are two schools that have worked with Mendaki on this Students’ Siblings Scheme. Apart from opening applications to Malay/Muslim students, the schools also advised parents on the value of education and the need to take the younger siblings’ pre-school education seriously. Mendaki has already identified several of such younger siblings by working with the schools and have helped their parents put them in pre-school. It is a valuable intervention that will better prepare the children for school.\(^{197}\)

An interesting product of Mendaki’s education policy is its collaboration with the National Productivity Board to help Malay/Muslim workers who had left school before mastering Primary Six Mathematics. Those who enrol in the programme are upgraded from Primary Four Mathematics to Primary Six in a fast-track course, called *Fast Forward Easy Mathematics*, which puts them in reach of higher skills training in the workplace.\(^{198}\)

Another prime example of beneficial cooperation with official or semi-official bodies was the April 1991 meeting between Mendaki and People’s Association (PA) to discuss ways in which the PA could help Mendaki, especially in its youth programmes. The PA’s support for Mendaki’s Primary Six classes took the form of a jointly-run Intensive Mathematics course for ‘borderline’ students preparing for their PSLE exams.\(^{199}\)

In 1991, government introduced a dollar-for-dollar matching grant for funds raised by the Malay community for worthwhile projects, up to two million dollars per year for five years. As of end-August 1995, a total of 6.3 million in government grants have been

\(^{197}\) Speech By Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Minister For Education, At The Launch Of Cahaya M On Saturday, 2 April 2005, At 10.00 Am At Wisma Mendaki
\(^{198}\) Mendaki, 10 yrs pp 125
\(^{199}\) ibid, pp 126
disbursed to Mendaki and AMP. Mendaki has set up a Head Start programme in collaboration with eight organisations, to ensure quality education for pre-schoolers. As its name suggests, the scheme aims to give children a boost before they begin formal schooling\textsuperscript{200}. Other Muslim bodies like the Muslim Religious Council (MUIS) support Mendaki by propagating the importance of education to the Malay masses. One example is the use of Friday sermons during Friday prayers to drive home the importance of education and development.

Looking at all the programmes put forth by the various Malay/Muslim organisations, it is interesting to note that a bulk of the programmes is still focussing on coping with studies in school. Thus a major part of the resources is allotted by the organisations to provide tuition and remediation programmes. Although there have been attempts to redirect their focus to parental education, this is still a small part of the programmes of these organisations. The focus on tuition programmes for the last three decades indicates that it is a feasible way to deal with the underachievement among the Malay students. However, there seems to be a neglect of the motivation factor, which is an important component, but which is not incorporated in the tuition programmes.

**Effectiveness of Programmes Implemented**

Both Mendaki and AMP have launched a spread of programmes to address the specific needs of the Malay/Muslim community, from skills training and welfare services to counselling. But the crucial yardstick of their success has always been how well the Malay/Muslim students fare in school.

\textsuperscript{200} Ref: Mendaki offers pre-schoolers a head start, ST 6 Dec 1998
(a) **Overall Improvement in Education of Malay/Muslim**

The first major improvement that the community can be proud of is that nine in ten (93.5%) Malay primary school students made it past primary six in 2003. This was compared to an average of an 80-percent (87.6%) pass rate in 1990s. There are other signs that the Malay/Muslim are making progress. Over the last twenty years, there has been an increasing number of Malay pupils excelling in the school examinations and being among the cream in their cohorts. The number of Malay/Muslim students who get admitted into tertiary institutions is also increasing.\(^{201}\)

Over the last 17 years, the Malay students have made significant improvements in education. The percentage of passes at the PSLE, GCE ‘O’ and GCE ‘A’ examinations has generally gone up since 1980, so have the percentages of Malays who have graduated from the university and those studying in universities\(^{202}\).

Malay students have made progress in education. 35% of the Malay/Muslim now have secondary or higher qualifications compared with only 15% in 1980. The percentage of Malay pupils with at least three GCE ‘O’ level passes has exceeded 80% for the last years, and the percentage of Malay pupils with at least five GCE ‘O’ level passes reached its highest at 59.3% last year compared to only 39% in 1987\(^{203}\).

One of the broadest indicators of progress is the increase in the number of Malay students entering post-secondary institutions such as pre-University centres, polytechnics and Institutes of Technical Education (ITEs). This indicates that the Malay community has made an improvement in their performance in education. Last year, 75 per cent of the Malay cohort

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\(^{202}\) Ref: Abdullah Tarmugi – Mendaki Programmes: Boost to Educational Performance (Speeches, Vol 19, No 1) – Mendaki’s Session with Top 10% PSLE students and Parents, 28 January 1995

who had originally enrolled in Primary 1 went on to study in post-secondary institutions after completing their secondary education successfully. This is an improvement of 30 per cent, compared to only 45 per cent that were admitted in 1994, just ten years ago\textsuperscript{204}.

(b) \textit{Improvement in Mathematics}

In 1991, Malay primary students were still struggling to hit beyond what former chairman of AMP, Mohammed Alami Musa, calls the ‘50 percent psychological barrier’. Only 47 percent of the Malay students passed Mathematics in 1991. Fortunately, they broke the barrier the following year and have streaked ahead since, settling at the pass rate of 68 percent in 2004.

There is also robust data on how well our Malay students are faring against international benchmarks. In the Third International Mathematics and Science Study conducted in 1999 among secondary two students of 33 developed and developing countries they were ranked sixth and seventh in Mathematics and between 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} in Science. These rankings for Malay students are well above international averages\textsuperscript{205}.

Again in 1998, an international study of Mathematics and Science results showed that Singapore nine and 10-year-olds topped the list for Mathematics beating students from countries such as Japan, Hong Kong and United States. What is also impressive is that when the scores of the Malay students from Singapore were isolated and compared with those of children in the other countries, they emerged among the top fifth or sixth in the world. For Secondary One and Two students, Singapore again topped the list for Mathematics with Singapore Malays ranking fourth or fifth\textsuperscript{206}.

\textsuperscript{204} ibid., p 78
\textsuperscript{205} ibid, p 78
\textsuperscript{206} Ref: Malays here ‘can rise up to global challenge’ ST, 1 Nov 1998
In December 2003, Singapore emerged first in both Mathematics and Science, amongst students of Primary Four and Secondary Two age, in a 49-country study conducted in 2002-03. The study, known as the *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study*, or TIMSS, was administered by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), which is an international authority on the study of educational standards.

The Ministry of Education took a look at the performance of Malay students in this latest study. Malay students, in both Primary Four and Secondary Two, have performed very well. They ranked well above the International Average for both Math and Science. For example, in Mathematics, our Secondary Two Malay students performed as well (in fact a little better on average) as students in Netherlands and Belgium, who were the top performing European countries in the study. They also performed significantly better in Mathematics than students in the United States, Australia, Sweden and Israel.

What is more encouraging was that the number of Malay students who made it to the Top 10% has been increasing over the years. In 2001, a total of 221 Malay/Muslim students made it into the Top 10% cohort. This is an increase of 29 students or 15% from the previous year’s cohort. It shows an upward improvement and a trend that we must continue to maintain and improve in the coming years.

(c) Educational Mobility/Literacy Level

Another aspect to the progress we have seen in the Malay educational performance is that the improved educational mobility that has been taking place within Malay families is no

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207 Abdullah Tarmugi : Closing Malays’ Performance Gap - Speech at the ‘Minister Meets Top 10% PSLE 2000 Pupils and Parents Session’, 3 March 2001 (Speeches)
less than what we have seen for other Singapore families. Amongst Malay youth who are 23 years old today (the Primary One cohort of 1989), almost three quarters (71%) have reached higher levels of education than their parents did. This is in fact a much higher rate of educational mobility than when compared a decade or so earlier, when just over half of Malay youth of the same age had gone further than their parents had in education. Educational mobility has actually increased. Malay students have surpassed what their parents achieved in education, and who will very likely surpass what their parents achieve in life.\(^{208}\)

In the area of education, the Malay/Muslims have attained a high level of literacy. In fact, the achievements in literacy surpass the national average. The Malay community has improved its educational profile. Of the Malay students who take PSLE, more now qualify for admission to secondary school. More Malay/Muslims in each cohort now complete secondary school. The improved secondary school completion rate has been accompanied by increased admission into university and polytechnic. The total number of Malay graduates has increased by more than 3.5 times.\(^{209}\) In particular, there were significant increases in the number of Malay graduates in the fields of engineering, medicine, dentistry and IT. The proportion of Malay Singaporeans holding higher level and skilled jobs has increased over the years. Thus it can be seen that Malay/Muslims have made tremendous progress in uplifting the general Malay community, in education, occupation, income and quality of life.\(^{210}\)

\(^{208}\) ibid, p 4

\(^{209}\) In a recent Mendaki publication, *Mendaki Policy Digest 2006*, new statistics are given: “the percentage of P1 Malay cohort admitted to post-secondary institutions has improved tremendously over the years. We have made an improvement of 31.7% from 49.8% in 1996 to 81.5% in 2005. However, there is still a gap of 8.5% that need to be narrowed over the next 5 years in order to achieve the 90% post-secondary target by 2010. (Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has set the target for the Malay community to attain 90% post-secondary education by 2010 in his 2000 National Day Speech), see Sitiurika Ahmad, “Embracing Education Without Borders,” in *Mendaki Policy Digest 2006*, Yayasan Mendaki, 2007, p. 23-24.

\(^{210}\) Asad Latif - A good report card but more needs to be done, ST 31 Aug 2000
**The Challenges Ahead for the Malay Community**

In order to succeed in the educational race, there is a need to continually improve the quality of passes at PSLE, ‘O’, and ‘A’ levels so that more Malay/Muslims can make it to the polytechnics and universities. We should not just monitor the pass rates and be contented with the increase in pass rates but should also monitor the grades of Malay students, especially in Mathematics and Science.

In the Second National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals, the community was called to re-evaluate the goals of its development and define benchmarks. It was felt that a new approach is needed to optimise the talent and abilities of every Malay/Muslim and eliminate wastage as each individual will be actively contributing to the society and be given many opportunities to be successful in his specialised field. This is in line with the vision to cultivate a model Muslim community in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and cosmopolitan society that is plugged into the global village.\(^{211}\)

The Malay/Muslim community is now in a position to aim at qualitative results. It is very crucial for the self-help group to complement parents’ effort in nurturing students of high calibre and providing them the best that the community can afford so that they will continue to remain on top. Highly successful students are ideal as role models in providing the impetus

\(^{211}\) Re:- 2nd National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professional- Vision 2010: Setting the Community Agenda in 21st Century Singapore. A recent study reports further improvement: “percentage of Malay students admitted to local universities (NUS, NTU, and SMU) has increased to 5% in 2005, compared to 3% in the last 10 years. Overall the percentage of P1 cohort enrolled to tertiary institutions is almost doubled during the same period, ie 18% in 1995 to 33% in 2005…Although our admission rate into higher education institutions is at 33% in 2005, it is still a far cry when compared to national admission rate of 60.6%...in 2005, only 5% of Malay students from primary one cohort were able to gain university admission. When compared to 22.2% nationally, A large gulf can be detected in the participations in higher education.” Quoted from Sitiurika Ahmad, “embracing Education Without Borders”, in Mendaki Policy Digest 2006. Yayasan Mendaki, 2007. p 24
for more Malay/Muslim to better themselves. These top performers project a positive image of the Malay/Muslim and have the potential for quality leadership.

The Problem of ‘Educationism’

The Malay/Muslim community is fully aware of the importance of education and has accorded much attention to their educational development. Education is viewed by the Malay community as a means of uplifting the community from the low socio-economic status. For more than three decades, the focus of Malay leaders on education has been used by the Malay/Muslim in Singapore as a tool not only to tackle their educational problems but also their social and economic problems. Education is perceived as instrumental to social mobility and economic advancement.

Both self-help groups, Mendaki and AMP, and other Malay/Muslim organisations, have conducted numerous and varied programmes and expended a lot of effort to raise and improve the quality of educational achievements of the Malay community. A big chunk of their resources has been utilized to sponsor educational programmes that these organisations feel important in helping to elevate the educational competitiveness of the Malay/Muslim students in their quest for academic excellence. Although both Mendaki and AMP have broadened their programmes to include the social, economic and cultural areas, education remains central to their mission.

As early as the 70s, Malay leaders have continuously reminded the Malays of the need to realise the importance of the education of their children. In the seminar on Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore in May 1970, Sha’ari Tadin, then the
Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Culture, emphasised the importance of education when he stated the following:

‘If education is the ladder which leads to progress, and has been and is being regarded by non-Malays as such, then education should be regarded by the Malays as a magic wand.’

The theme of education has been the main thrust of almost all seminars and conferences of the Malay organisations such as AMP’s first and second National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals held in 1990 and 2000 respectively and Mendaki’s Malay/Muslim Community Development Congress held in 1989. Education is to be regarded as an investment since it is believed that the interests of the community can be served best only by improving the educational performance of the Malay/Muslim.

Minister in-charge-of Muslim Affairs, Ya’acob Ibrahim, in his speech reiterates that education will still be an important focus for the Malay community and this will not change in the future. This is clearly stated as follows:

‘Education will remain an important focus for our community. The education system provides a good grounding in skills and knowledge necessary for our community to negotiate the new demands. But our focus on education must also take into account the new environment that we are in, changes within the community, and, more importantly the type of community that we want. In terms of education programmes, three areas deserve our attention. These are ensuring that our talented continue to receive opportunities to excel, encouraging higher educational achievement across the educational spectrum of our community, and levelling up educational attainment among the lower income group.

We also need to continue to move our community, as a whole, up the educational value chain...Educational upliftment has been the community’s focus for the past 20 years. This will not change in the future.’

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212 In his opening speech, Sha’ari Tadin claimed that the Malays have been pampered by the British for the last 140 years, and this has created the crutch mentality among the Malays in Singapore. For a detailed discussion refer to Sharom Ahmat & James Wong, *Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore.*

213 Speech by Assoc Prof Yaacob Ibrahim held on 18 April 2002 at National University of Singapore organised by the Malay Studies Department.
Education remains and will continue to be perceived as the answer to the economic progress of the Malay community. There seems to be a consensus among the Malay leaders that the other socio-economic problems of the community can only be tackled by means of educational achievement.

The argument goes that with better educational qualifications, the Malay/Muslim will be able to secure better jobs and thus higher incomes. This will inevitably translate into raising the socio-economic and occupational status of the Malay/Muslim. Education is regarded as the solution to most of the socio-economic problems that the Malay/Muslim are facing. However, Shaharudin Maaruf calls this trend of thinking highly simplistic and deserving of re-evaluation. He disagrees with this approach, which he terms educationism. This is evident in the following remarks:

‘There is a need to temper or balance a trend of thinking which I might term ‘educationism’. This trend of thinking denies the need or the value of recognising other socio-economic problems of the community, even as problems which might impede education. Educationism considers reflection on other socio-historical or socio-economic problems as irrelevant to the reform of the society, hair-splitting, or missing the issues. It holds in a dogmatic manner that all problems facing the community as tantamount to the ‘educational’, while the panacea of ‘education’ is prescribed for them. Needless to say this thinking is narrow, for the nature of socio-economic problems is that they are usually interrelated and never confined exclusively to particular fields like ‘education’ or otherwise. Likewise to insist that all problems and challenges facing the community would miraculously disappear with the panacea of education, is to say the least highly simplistic.’

This trend of thinking has been ingrained for too long in the minds of the Malay/Muslim leaders and there is a need to re-evaluate this thinking as soon as possible to enable the Malay/Muslim leaders to look beyond education in formulating reforms amongst the Malay/Muslim community. According to Shaharuddin:

214 This term is used by Shaharuddin Ma’aruf in his article The Deeper Roots of Educational Problems, Karyawan, February 1996. p 6-7
‘In the first place educational reforms itself necessitates reforms in other areas beside just the educational. Secondly, there are many socio-economic problems in the Malay/Muslim community which demand more than just arming Malay/Muslim with paper qualifications’

Indeed, the assumption that by improving performance in school, the occupational status of Malay/Muslims by default will improve, is uncertain since the correlation between the two variables has yet to be explored. Furthermore, it is indeed naive to believe that all problems and challenges facing the community would inexplicably vanish with the panacea of education. If Malay/Muslims hope that overcoming problems related to formal education will bring about a succession of reforms and solve all other socio-economic problems within the community, they will probably be frustrated since it is not certain that such a chain reaction will happen.

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215 Ibid, p 6
Chapter Five:

*Effects of Malay Value Orientations on Ideas of Education and the Clamour for Reforms*

In the preceding chapters we have noted that there are several factors such as structural, educational policies, socio-economic and historical background as impediments to the Malay/Muslim efforts to achieve educational achievement. We have discussed how, crippled with structural factors, Malay/Muslims in the lower rung of the economic ladder had to grapple with their economic backwardness. They have had little opportunity for educational advancement and are thus trapped in the vicious circle. We have also looked into the historical factors where conditions under the colonials hampered the Malay/Muslims’ educational advancement. Malay/Muslims received only basic primary education that limited and restricted their progress to secondary and tertiary education.

Moreover, Singapore’s education system has undergone robust and vigorous improvements and changes as Singapore experiences rapid industrial advancement. Unfortunately, Malay/Muslims, due to their slow head start, have been unable to cope with these fast-paced changes. Consequently, they fail to be on-par with the other communities in the educational field.

This chapter attempts to look at the possibility of a certain type of worldview and value orientation on the notion of knowledge that either impedes or undermines the efforts by the Malay/Muslim community in the field of education. As mentioned in the previous chapters, there is a need to uncover deep-rooted belief orientations that are not serving the community and reframe those orientations and outlook appropriately. We are not suggesting that the beliefs or values of Malay/Muslims need to be re-evaluated, but that their orientation or outlook of certain issues needs to be re-examined to help them in their quest for
advancement especially in the field of education. Furthermore, it is not my view that this educational underachievement amongst the Malay/Muslims is the result of their cultures or values per se – a view that some quarters seem to be steadfastly uphold.

**Traditionalism and the Malay/Muslim**

In any society, there is no monolithic culture or monolithic understanding of religion. The same holds true for the Malay/Muslims in Singapore. As such, there is no single value system but more frequently, there exists competing value systems that hamper the practice of progressive Islam. On the same note, there is no one unified orientation in the understanding of Islam among the Muslims.216

In many societies or communities, religion and traditions directly influence their culture and language. Consequently, this will reflect the way they observe their faith and cultural practices. Both their faith and traditions form the main tenets of the Malay life. In the Malay community, Islam shapes the basis of their spiritual psyche and customs governing their social life. Also, consciousness of tradition influences the Malay/Muslim’s worldview in many aspects of their life. When we talk about traditionism, we are talking about the levels of religious orientations. As such, value orientations are crucial in moulding the Malay/Muslim’s perception and world not just in the present situation but also in the future. According to Shaharudin:

“What is meant by Malay consciousness of tradition here is well beyond the pragmatic or political expediency of coping with social problems like anomie, cultural alienation, negative social atomization or the combating of external or foreign threats. The writer considers it as a basic and integral feature of Malay thought and world-view. It is rooted in the consciousness as a living force in their inner or spiritual life. To the Malays, consciousness of tradition as well as the

216 Syed Hussein Alatas highlighted how the difference in religious orientations between the Malay Muslims and Indian Muslims, such as the Chellias. Certain understanding of the religious orientations will determine certain values either promoting or impeding the idea of education and educational underachievement.
emotional and philosophical attachment to it, is an existential problem and not merely a surface feature. It is this single fact which has gone a long way in moulding their culture, thought and character, and in conditioning their response to the challenges of social change, development and modernization.”  

The Malay/Muslim consciousness and clinging to traditions is sometimes blamed for the backwardness among them. As mentioned in the previous chapters, many colonials claimed that the Malay cultures encourage Malay/Muslim to be complacent and they lack motivation to succeed in life. Shaharuddin begs to differ from this stereotyping. He dismisses these claims as misleading:

“... there has been a lot of misunderstanding towards the Malays due to a lack of appreciation that is a living force in moulding the world-view of the Malays. Most of the misleading generalizations about the Malays stem from the failure to see the dynamics of tradition in relation to social change and modernization. Some examples of such misleading generalizations are the suggestions, explicit or implicit, that the cultural tradition of the Malays is essentially other-worldly, against material affluence, anti-science, resistant towards change, lacking universalism, in conflict with modernization and not harmonious with it, lacking rationalism or the rational orientation of life, lacking the ideal of excellence and all the other values necessary for the modernization process. It has even been suggested that Malays do not care for money and worldly success...most of these allegations are made by those unfamiliar with Malay culture and tradition. Anyone with some familiarity with it can easily come up with a wealth of materials to the contrary. It is no exaggeration to say that most of such allegations border on the imagination and the phenomenon alleged exists only in the minds of the scholars or researchers concerned.”

According to Shaharuddin, there are many benefits that arise from this strong consciousness amongst the Malay/Muslim:

“Firstly...at the crossroads of many cultures and civilizations, the Malay culture of Southeast Asia has benefited from and blended with its own the cultural influences of the West, the Middle East, Asia and the Far East, in some cases for thousands of years...Secondly, tradition can be a valuable cultural ballast against the negative and imitative Westernization...I am referring to the kind of negative

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218 Ibid, p. 9
Westernization which leads to cultural alienation, loss of identity, destruction and fragmentation of personality, cultural and social disintegration, a deep sense of cultural inferiority, irrational assimilation of Western styles of living and models of development, negative individualism, negative democratization and a general levelling down of culture, philosophical relativism, anomie, etc. Thirdly, tradition can ease or smooth the transition from the traditional feudal social, economic and political structure to the modern and rational type of structure in the post-independence era...Without the moderating effect of tradition, the social and cultural transformations and adjustments would be very painful.” 219

As such, Shaharuddin believes that traditions and cultures, instead of obstructing and getting in the way for the Malay/Muslim to accept changes and innovations are the main catalyst for change. He reiterates:

“...it acts a the cultural core which continually innovates and rejuvenates itself, thereby creatively and dynamically stimulating and regulating social change. Thus, far from being necessarily an impediment to change, tradition can itself be the main generator or the cause of it. The dynamism of tradition arises out of the fact that very often, in order to maintain itself and avoid obsolescence; it has to make itself relevant and an integral aspect of positive social change.” 220

Unfortunately, what hinders the Malay/Muslim from innovation and modernization is the existence of conflict between feudal culture and Islamic traditions. It is this misunderstanding and confusion among the Malay community, where cultural beliefs and practices, including superstitions are sometimes accepted and justified as religious decrees. Shaharuddin acknowledges this misinterpretation when he says:

“Concerning the modernization of the Malays, the conflict between feudal culture, which to a great extent shows the influence of animistic beliefs and elements of divine kingship as evolved by Southeast Asian Hinduism, and Islam is significant...by Islam I am referring not to recent interests and drive of missionary works with all its religious symbolism but to the older and deep-rooted Southeast Asian Islamic tradition. By ‘feudalism’ I refer to the value system and worldview associated with the feudal structure of the past which is still quite influential on the thinking of the Malays. Though the feudal structure has collapsed in Southeast Asia, feudal values and outlook continue to influence the psychology of certain segments of the Malay population of Southeast Asia. This is mainly

219 Ibid, p. 13-14
because this feudal structure caved in as a result of the external pressure of colonialism and not due to an internal revolution or social change.” 221

It is this clinging to feudal values and attitudes amongst the Malays that inhibits their drive to achieve modernization and accept changes more readily, especially with the advent of industrialization and globalisation that the world is experiencing. In Singapore’s response to this rapid economic transformation, its educational system has also experienced robust and vigourous modifications. As a consequence, Malay/Muslim are not quick to respond to these changes to reap the benefits accrued from them. Shaharudin acknowledges that there are many Malay feudal values and attitudes that do not honour modernization and thus become the stumbling block to the Malay community in achieving modernization:

“In general, there are many Malay feudal values and attitudes which impeded the modernization of the Malays in SEA. Some of these attitudes and values are as follows: (1) servility before authority and the acceptance of arbitrary notions of power; (2) the undermining of positive individualism and the lack of respect for human personality; (3) the lack of respect for the rule of law; (4) the non-distinction between public domain and personal domain of life; (5) the emphasis on grandeur and opulence; (6) the indifference to and lack of concern for social justice; (7) the acceptance of unfair privileges for those in position and power; (8) the obsession with power, authority and privileges for its own sake; (9) the downgrading of the philosophical spirit, rationalism and, the encouragement of myths which serve the interests of those in power; (10) the emphasis on entertainment, leisure and indulgence of the senses and the downgrading of labour and work.

Modernization of Southeast Asia has been adversely affected by the above elements. The overall impact of these attitudes and values is to prevent the kind of social, psychological and emotional atmosphere favourable to the spread of rationalism and the rational orientation of living which underlies modernization.” 222

The very notion of secular knowledge as import of the West is laden with ideas that such knowledge is supposedly talk about atheism, secularism, Darwinism. This creates unnecessary anxiety and confusion especially among Malay parents who are not well-

221 Ibid, p15-16
222 Ibid, p. 16.
informed about such knowledge but are, unfortunately, very much exposed by this negative connotation. Shaharuddin sees this hostility towards the West as a hindrance to the Malay/Muslim in their quest for excellence:

“Another significant issue concerning tradition and modernization among the Malays is the response and attitude towards the West. Malay attitudes or responses range from hostility against the West as a civilization to blind imitation of it. Anti-West attitudes partly originated in the colonial experience, but mainly due to that kind of religious orthodoxy associated with recent missionary movements, influenced by the Middle East and Indian Sub-continent. Among the adherents of such movements the West is seen as a civilization which encourages promiscuity, sensuality, materialism, atheism, overemphasis on science and over-rationalism. As such, the whole of Western civilization is pronounced as poison for non-Western societies.

On the other side of the balance, there are others who are imitative of the West, who believe that Westernization and the abandonment of tradition are synonymous with progress or modernization. Fanon considers such elite groups as the spoilt-children of colonialism who have stepped into the shoes of former colonials. As for the man in the street that is imitative of the West, sociologists have offered the explanation that a subjugated community normally wants to imitate the dominant group subjugating it. Colonial heritage definitely has much to do with this tendency.”

With the increasing so-called resurgence of Islam since 1970s, the growth of madrasah as an alternative education system, coupled with minute examples of madrasah students going to universities reported in the press, many Malay/Muslim have begun to accept and cite madrasah education as the best educational system that can be opted by the Malay/Muslim. In this context, some Malay/Muslim are very concerned that provision of wearing the tudung and scheduled time for their children to observe the obligatory prayers are not a priority in government schools. As such, some members of the Malay community affirm the idea that the educational system Singapore provides is less Islamic if not totally unIslamic. This notion of the education system has nothing to do with Islam but is a certain outlook which affects Malay ideas of progress. As noted by Azhar Ibrahim:

223 Ibid, p. 18
“Apparently the traditionalists see modern or Western knowledge as profane sciences and invariably devoid of ‘Islamic spirit’, which is inimical to religion or the tauhid (the belief in the oneness of God) of the Muslims. The reformists, noting the limitations of the traditionalist’s distinction between secular and religious sciences remind that such distinction has no religious basis whatsoever.”

Essentialist and culturalist position to explain Malay economic and educational underachievement is reductionist in nature and marred by ahistorical and asociological perspective. Since Malay culture is not totally monolithic, it is justified to see what shapes Malay worldview and orientation. As already mentioned earlier, Malay historical experience explains Malay value orientations:

“There are several reasons why consciousness of tradition and attachment to it is prevalent among the Malays of Southeast Asia. One obvious reason is that they are indigenous to Southeast Asia and therefore their tradition is rooted in the history of the region...Secondly, the cultural history of Southeast Asia has always been more evolutionary than revolutionary. ...In Southeast Asia there had been rebellions and political revolutions but not the type accompanied by major change of philosophy, values or world-view. The evolutionary type of cultural and social change is more favourable towards the survival of tradition and the consciousness of it. Historical and cultural continuities are strong and their roots are deeply entrenched in the past. Thirdly, there has never been in Southeast Asia an equivalence of industrialization as in the West. The history of industrialization in the West involved major changes in society and social structure. All in all, there was a loosening of tradition and the shattering of the world-view associated with it ....In Southeast Asia, there was no industrialization in this sense in the feudal, colonial, as well as in the post-independence era.”

Shaharuddin realises the importance of historical influences that shape the orientations of the Malay/Muslim. This point is further elaborated by Alatas when he talks about the subject of value orientation. These orientations are shaped by other factors especially the kind of leadership at the helm of the dominant ideology. As purported by Shaharudin:

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“The nature of the cultural, intellectual and political elite among the Malays of Southeast Asia is also influential in entrenching tradition in their consciousness and value systems. In the cultural, social and political history of Southeast Asia, there has never been the emergence of an elite which promotes an influential philosophy or ethics which is in essence opposed to, or in conflict with tradition. ..In general, it can be said that there has never been an open and violent philosophical confrontation between the forces of tradition and anti-tradition. Philosophical nihilism and relativism which developed in nineteenth century Russia and Europe did not take root in Southeast Asia...It should be noted that in the cultural and intellectual history of the Malays, the competition of ideas and the struggle for legitimacy was never between traditional and anti-traditional forces but within tradition itself.” 226

Such is the present circumstance that the Malay/Muslim are facing. When we speak about value orientations, we are not condemning the values systems or accusing the Malay/Muslim to be innately unprogressive or unable to adjust to accommodate present circumstances. These ideas, though not believed by all, are floated. 227 The increasing resurgence of Islam, and a trend in increasing interest in madrasah education prove that the Malay/Muslim community acknowledge the importance of knowledge. However, the problem here is that the madrasah itself is grappling with the problem of producing good students. This failure to produce good students aggravates the problem of Malay educational backwardness at present and in future. 228 I am not of the view that madrasah education is innately backward. However, this idea that religious education is supposedly the superior knowledge proves to be very problematic. 229 to the Malay/Muslim when we talk about Malay/Muslim educational achievement.

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226 Ibid, p 12-13
227 As mentioned by Alatas: “whatever is the condition of society; whatever are the problems it faces, in whatever time and place, the historical ideal of those wielding decisive power exerts a great influence. This ideal may not be articulated, or only vaguely conceived, but it is there”, Syed Hussein Alatas, “The Problem of Corruption”, in Kernial Singh Sandu (ed), Management of Success: the Mounding of Modern Singapore, ISEAS, 1990) p.996
228 In chapter 4, we talked about high attrition rate in madrasah. Although there are students who made it to local universities, the rate of madrasah students in tertiary education is very marginal. See also Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Lai Ah Eng, Secular and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore . (Singapore : Institute of Policy Studies : Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2006) for a detailed discussion on issues pertaining to madrasah education in Singapore.
229 This is the common view when religious knowledge is compared to secular knowledge: “From the perspective of Islam, a ‘worldview’ is not merely the mind’s view of the physical world and of man’s historical,
Dualistic attitude among Malay/Muslim and its effects on education

The low educational performance of the Malay/Muslim has been attributed partly to the lack of aspirations among them. Again this can be derived from the conflict or confusion in the Malay/Muslim understanding of their religion. Islam’s attitude towards knowledge is best summarised in the saying by the Prophet: “Knowledge is like the lost treasure of a Believer; he should seek it even if it be in China.” 230

Islam emphasises the need to seek knowledge and to do well in life. There are many verses in the Qu’ran that inspire its followers to acquire knowledge. Unfortunately, many Malay/Muslims generally understand the words ‘knowledge’ and ‘wisdom’ mentioned in the Qur’an to relate to religious knowledge and religious wisdom only, and that they are not used in their generic sense, although it can be seen from context, the words corresponding signify secular knowledge as well.” 231.

Shaharuddin argues that there are many other ideas of theological origins which may have an adverse effect on education among the Malay/Muslim. He criticizes this religious outlook that ignores the world and only legitimizes the world after as more important:

“Worldly success is only meant to mislead those without faith; secular knowledge poses a threat to faith; secular knowledge is unreliable and inferior.

social, political and cultural involvement in it. The worldview of Islam is not based upon philosophical speculation formulated mainly from observation of the data of sensible experience, of what is visible to the eye; nor is it restricted to the world of sensible experience, the world of created things. Islam does not concede to the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane; the worldview of Islam encompasses both al-dunya and al-akhirah, in which the duniya-aspect must be related in a profound and inseparable way to the akhirah-aspect, in which the akhirah-aspect has the ultimate and final significance. The duniya aspect is seen as a preparation for the akhirah-aspect. Everything in Islam is ultimately focused on the akhirah-aspect without thereby implying any attitude of neglect or being unmindful of the duniya-aspect. What is meant by ‘worldview’, according to the perspective of Islam, is then the vision of reality and truth that appears before our mind’s eye revealing what existence is all about; for it is the world of existence in its totality that Islam is projecting. (Syed Muhammad Naqib al-Attas, Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam) Kuala Lumpur:ISTAC, 1995) p. 1

230 Cited in Arsalan, p 91
231 ibid, pp 91-92
to religious knowledge; the concern for progress in the secular sense is not a legitimate ideal in the eyes of God. The overall implication of these ideas is to draw philosophically, psychologically or emotionally an antithesis between the religion or the world and the hereafter, where the followers were expected to choose one or the other. In reality, however, most followers never make a clear choice between one of the other, for the dictates of life make it impossible.”\textsuperscript{232}

Traits such as self-confidence, motivation, desire for achievement, competitive spirit, inquisitiveness etc, are needed to push the community to achieve educational excellence. Shaharuddin continues to argue that:

“Educational excellence and the progress of any community depends also on its humanism, or in other words its conception of the human personality and its capacity for self determinism. There must be respect for the human will to take charge of his life and the existential conditions. Sometimes a community denies itself of dynamism when out of a misplaced piety or religiosity, it undermines the human personality or confidence in it…Piety and religiosity seem to be equated with the insistence on image of man as helpless, limited and incapable.”\textsuperscript{233}

Arsalan identifies the obstacles and the obstructions posed by the conservatives towards education. In his analysis, Amir Shakib Arsalan identifies the possible causes for the Muslims’ underachievement. He criticises the position of the conservatives:

“It is the conservatives who declared war on natural science, mathematics and all creative arts, condemned them as the practices of infidels, and thereby deprived the Muslims of the fruits of science. They cast the future generations of Muslims into abyss of poverty, and rendered them unfit to go out in search of the treasures of science.

Those among the Muslims fight against all branches of human knowledge other than the traditional science they are accustomed too. They have forgotten then that natural sciences, geometry, maths, astronomy, medicine, chemistry, geology, and all other sciences beneficial to man are religious sciences. Although they are not directly derived from religion itself they are religious by considering their results.”\textsuperscript{234}

\textsuperscript{232} Shaharudin Maaruf, The Deeper Roots of Educational Problems, \textit{Karyawan}, February 1996. p 7
\textsuperscript{233} \textit{ibid}, p 7
\textsuperscript{234} \textit{ibid} p 75
With this negative attitude of conservatives towards secular knowledge, they certainly would not see the need to strive hard to achieve progress in any worldly activities, including education. This dualistic attitude towards religion sees this world and the other-world as two separate distinct categories. The impact of this is deep in the world-view of the Malay community.

Secular knowledge is regarded as inferior to religious knowledge and it is not important to seek such knowledge. Good grades are considered a bonus, but poor grades are not scorned at. What is worse is if it is considered to be something that is fated. Religious knowledge, on the other hand, is seen to be more essential in life to procure a good life both in this world and the hereafter. One should not wonder why the community is lagging behind in the education arena when such an attitude towards secular knowledge is ingrained in the minds of the people in the community. Excellence in secular education has yet to be valued by the community. Shaharuddin cites this negative orientation or attitude towards religion as one possible problem that might impinge on the education of the Malay/Muslim community. According to him:

‘…what is referred to here is not so much religion as such but how it comes to be seen or interpreted by its followers. A religious orientation which sees the world and secular endeavours as unworthy and evil cannot feed the progress of any community in any field of human endeavour, including education. this negative or ambivalent orientation towards the world may not be explicitly or directly defined as such but may be disguised in various philosophical formulations. For instance, piously criticizing or censuring what is seen as materialism (kebendaan), worldliness (keduniiaan) or secularism, may have the effect of casting doubts or a slur on the world.’

235 Acquiring wealth is not the ultimate aim in life since life in this world is only temporary; life in the hereafter is eternal. Their ‘mission’ in this world is to acquire as much

good deeds as these will guarantee them a much better life in the hereafter.\footnote{It is not uncommon to read articles in newspapers and magazines on this idea of dunia and akhirat. The local Malay newspapers, Berita Harian, has a section on Syiar every Friday to discuss religious issues. The above topic is common, e.g. an article Ujian ke atas Nafsu Manusia in Berita Harian, 18 May 2007, discusses on the Day of Judgement.} They are more preoccupied with the matters of the other-world, often ignoring life in this world. Certainly, concerns of this world, including acquiring a good education to secure good jobs and a better life are not their main concern in life. It is these dogmatists who lead others to think that the teachings of Islam is a religion of mere other-worldly preoccupations and accuse Islam as the cause of the Malay/Muslim’ under-achievement in education and their low economic status. This is the problem identified by Shaharudin:

“Another trait of religious traditionalism in contemporary Malay society is the preoccupation with the life hereafter. In the traditionalist religious discourse it is not uncommon for us to notice the popularity of the theme of life-after-death, including the recurrent reminder of the Last Day (kiamat/akhirat).…thus the traditionalists see the ‘worldly’ concern as a form of irreligiosity. Their preoccupation of the hereafter is clearly reflected when they criticise and doubt the reformist’s call of balancing this life and the next..”

The same problem is identified by Azhar as one of the impediments in the Malay/Muslim community quest for excellence, not just in educational field but also in other aspects of their life:

“Another aspect of religious traditionalism amongst the Malays is the primacy given to the spiritual attainment in which the goal for the eternal hereafter is deemed as the only meaningful goal...on the contrary, the reformists appeal for a more balanced emphasis amongst Malays in their social life, reminding them that religion is not solely concerned with spirituality or rituals. The practice of Islam, according to one reformists writer, cannot be confined merely to devotion for one’s own salvation, for religion equally affirms that it is important for man to secure his wellbeing and that of his community.”\footnote{Azhar Ibrahim Alwee, ‘Intelligentsias and Community”, in Mendaki Policy Digest 2006, Research and Policy Department, Yayasan Mendaki, Singapore, 2007, p. 139}
**Striking a Balance: Is it necessary?**

At present there is much discussion of the need for the Muslims to balance between this world and the other-world. One unique characteristic of Islam, after all, is that it is equally concerned with life here as it is with the hereafter. However, Shaharuddin believes that an unclear understanding of a balance to strike a balance between these two concerns may ultimately be counter productive. He goes on to say:

“There are always spiritualists, who denounce the alleged imbalance towards secularism, materialism, pragmatism, rationalism, science and technology. On the other hand, there are always the secularists, who denounce the spiritual basis of life as being of no value or relevance to the modern times. Each group demands that the opposite stand be curtailed for fear of imbalance or distemper in their world view. As the respective denounce each other’s viewpoint under the mistaken idea of striking a balance, the community ends up neither spiritually accomplished nor materially successful. We have to be mindful of this danger and guard ourselves against it.”

Thus to campaign for a balance between the secular and spiritual concerns will not be the most appropriate approach to meet the global challenges in our present conditions. Shaharuddin advocates *Critical Thinking* to prepare the Malay/Muslim to meet future challenges. He continues to elaborate:

“Such an approach sees secular progress as a form of spiritual upliftment that will enhance Muslim capabilities to compete and cooperate with others in an interdependent world. It would be reflected in the following ways: more pragmatic and dynamic philosophy of life which synthesises effectively the spiritual values with secular concerns; a sustained attempt to put into practice the basic values of teachings of Islam in the face of future realities which go beyond pious pronouncements; the ability to experiment with new ways of doing things while retaining the essence of Islam…the avoidance of preoccupation with forms to the neglect of the essence of Islam and the translation of the values and ideals of Islam into a living philosophy.”

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239 ibid, p 20
240 ibid, p 20
Basic values of the teachings of Islam that are congruent to progress and enhance the capabilities of the Malay/Muslim to compete and cooperate with others in an interdependent world must be put to practice. There is also a need to be experimental in doing things and not to hold on to the old hackneyed ways of the past in handling future challenges. The challenge is to address the Malay problems of negative attitude and outlook on life as a whole. Islam is the answer to the Malay problems, not the cause of them.

Furthermore, according to Alatas, Islam does not condone indolence or inactivity among its followers. On the contrary, Islam encourages its followers to lead a life of intense activity and to continually work hard to achieve progress. Amir Shakib Arsalan disagrees strongly the allegations that Islam encourages fatalism:

‘The best way to show the sheer absurdity of these delusions, there is no testimony more authentic than the Qur’an itself. It is replete with verses that inspire man to a life of action, awaken his intellectual faculties, stir-up his spirit and teach him that good and evil, success and failure, follow in accordance with his actions… But it is clear from the verses quoted that Islam is not a religion that inculcates faith in an inexorable fate. ..The quintessence of Islamic teaching is that man should make proper use of his intellect which God has given him as a guiding light to help him think for himself. And, having done everything in his power, he should resign himself to the Will of God (tawakkul).’

Islam states that whether an individual realizes his dreams or meets with failure in his life is determined by his actions. Unfortunately, the Malay understanding of the term is inconsistent with its proper meaning in Islam. Some Malay/Muslim interpreted tawakkul to mean blind faith and total submission to Fate. As such, if they achieve success, it is considered a bonus, but should they fail, they are not disappointed and use Fate as an excuse.

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241 In a second edition of a brochure published by the Council of Islam and Malay Custom, Kelantan, entitled *Semangat Kehidupan* (The Spirit of Living), a great deal of emphasis “on labour, on hard work, and on the proper use of time and energy. Inaction was condemned. A man who did no work was considered a stone pillar. ‘Man’s duty to work is because work is the best means of purifying him from weak and evil habits. Is not work the cause of bringing man towards a situation of trial and effort leading to a true existence?’..the whole 46 page booklet, is an attempt to establish the value of work and the evils of indolence.” Ibid, p. 140-141.

242 ibid, pp 64-70
for their failure. This leads to a sense of hopelessness, disorganisation and surrender to Fate. Shaharuddin advocates that the following reforms are necessary amongst the Malay/Muslim, if they are to achieve success:

“The following are the possible areas of necessary reform, among many others: (1) the correction of disproportionate emphasis on the ritualistic aspects of the religion to the neglect of the ethical and moral aspects; (2) the striking of a balance between the mystical, magical and esoteric interests in religion with interests in the philosophical, rational and intellectual aspects of it; (3) the integration of otherworldly concerns with concrete historical problems of life on earth; (4) the correction of disproportionate emphasis on individual and personal salvation to the neglect of social philosophy and concern for social problems; (5) greater emphasis on the absolute and eternal aspects of the teachings and not on the dogmas which were the products of specific historical conditions of the past; (6) the synthesis of basic values with modern scientific knowledge in keeping with modern requirements (what is entailed here is not compromise but creative adaptation and assimilation); (7) the emphasis on the universal and humanistic aspect of its teachings, common to all great religions of the world, which acknowledge the universal brotherhood of man; (8) the weeding out of ideologies and irrational ideas serving to justify the vested interests of certain social groups, which in the process leads to fanaticism, dogmatism and religious intolerance.”

He also proposes that the Muslims must have a more positive attitude towards the West. Consequently, to achieve success, be it in the educational field or other sectors of the economy, Muslims must be able to exercise:

“... creative assimilation and adaptation of valuable aspects of Western history and civilization into the recipient culture. Those entirely hostile to the West are not capable of assimilating modern scientific knowledge and modern social techniques from the West as they have determined that they have nothing to learn from the West. Neither can the imitative Westerners live up to the task as they are not capable of selecting and sorting out the valuable and the useful universal aspects of Western civilization form those element which are peculiar to Western culture and are not essential to modernization as such. The success of the task, then, depends on the emergence of a type of elite conversant with both Malay and Western traditions, and capable of rational selection and synthesis between the two.”

243 Shaharuddin Maaruf, Some Theoretical Problems, p. 17-18
244 Ibid. p 18-19
The Future: The emergence of ‘Melayu Baru’ and ‘Masyarakat Cemerlang’

The elites or the intelligentsia in each community are responsible for leading the masses to achieve excellence in all spheres of their life. In the case of the Malay community, we have seen that there is, to date, very little evidence of a functioning elite group capable of leading their community effectively. In fact, Shaharuddin blames the backwardness of the Malay/Muslim to the type of elites among them:

“In terms of historical causation, however, we cannot place equal responsibility or blame for this on the Malay masses. As producers of ideas and those who condition the thinking of their society, it is the Malay elite who are responsible for the prevalence of these negative values in society...in the whole network of causes influencing development or modernization of a community, the nature of the elite dominating the society is significant and decisive. It is the standpoint of the writer that the modernization of the Malays in Southeast Asia is largely obstructed by the kind of elite which has always dominated Malay society.”

According to Alatas, intelligentsia or the elites must fulfil four cardinal responsibilities:

(1) the ability to pose problem of their society; (2) defining the problems encountered; (3) analysing the problems and (4) finding solution to the problem. The intelligentsia’s duty is to make these representations for the public, in the name of preserving rights, truth, ethical integrity and justice.

In addition to the four points as Alatas deliberated, Azhar feels that there is a need for the functioning intellectuals/intelligentsias to be infused with or embracing the following:

1) Appreciation and rootedness to his community’s traditions, that reforms advocated take into consideration cultural settings, the people’s aspirations and needs, and the historical experiences which could explain the present conditions.
2) Empathy of the problems and challenges that his community is facing. In this case, he is to be clear on whose ‘side’ he should best represent, be it the underprivileged who need help and representation, in at the privileged groups who monopolise resources and influences in society.
3) Incorporating pedagogical perspectives and approaches in their reformist clamour. This involves the critical analysis of the present situation upon analytic diagnosis; the next step is to creatively provide some ways out of the predicament.
4) Communicative in pursuing community development, not armchair, hermetic deliberation, yet without succumbing to anti-intellectualism. This means the ability to articulate progressive ideas to various groups in society, explaining and clarifying

245 On the roles an importance of the elites see Syed Hussein Alatas, Intellectuals in Developing Societies, London, Frank Cass, 1977
246 Shaharuddin Maaruf, Some Theoretical Problems, p. 16-17
pertinent issues, inviting others to ponder on issues critically and being always active in providing creative and insightful views for the public and the state. Building up the avenues/platforms in which ideas can be discussed, debated and deliberated.  
5) Projecting vision and hope for the efficacy in (re)planning the path for development and progress. This means confidence in finding ways to overcome the present predicaments. It also means a conviction in empowering the people themselves that it is their well being and right to be part of the developmental process.”

In the case of the present Malay community, many of its leaders have touched on the achievement of excellence for the community. In his speech to address the ‘Malay Problem’ upon his appointment as the Minister-in-charge-of the Malay community in 2002, Associate Professor Ya’acob Ibrahim revealed his vision for the Malay community to become a Community of Excellence. He highlighted that his vision requires the emergence of Melayu Baru which is literally translated to ‘New Malay’:

This term ‘New Malay’ is not something new. Professor Alatas has written about the ‘New Malay’ as early as 1968 and has discussed the term with a group of community leaders in 1972. Alatas points out that the emergence of the ‘New Malay’ requires ‘a change of outlook, a mental revolution.’ Alatas defines the ‘New Malay’ as follows:

‘The ‘New Malay’ does not mean new in terms of age. We do not mean to say that the ‘New Malay’ is young Malay. It is not a generation concept but a typology. It has nothing to do with age groups but with types of personality. We call this type of personality new simply because more and more of such types are emerging at this time and more people are aware of it. This mentality, however, had existed in the past. There were such personalities who possessed this type of mentality but it was not pervasive and did not dominate Malay society then’.

Alatas carries on to elaborate what he means by New Malay:

250 ibid, p 4
'A New Malay is not a Malay who is entirely different from the present day Malay. He is not a Malay who is alien to Malay culture but one who discards elements of Malay culture which are not consistent with Malay values and advanced philosophy...Therefore, when we talk about the New Malay, it is, in a way, a Malay with a new consciousness. This new consciousness of the Malays will be selective of positive and negative influences that have been left by the past. Such a selection must be done; otherwise, it will be very difficult to cope with the present...The New Malay has certain characteristics or traits. One of them is rationality. The New Malay views the world in a more rational manner. He reasons, calculates and plans. He does not subscribe to mere rationality but it is rationality combined with certain universality.'

Professor Ya’acob’s vision of a New Malay is very much in line with the above:

"The vision I have laid rests on the emergence of a ‘New Malay’...independence of mind, which is capable of giving rational responses to things around him...someone who is prepared to do things by himself...sense of pride that comes with being able to do things by oneself without the assistance of others. At the individual level, for Community of Excellence to take root, we need a new orientation, one which not only places a premium in everything that we do but also in the way we view ourselves in Singapore."  

As a minority community in Singapore, Malay/Muslims are encouraged to place a high priority on learning and always yearning for new knowledge. Most importantly, the community is called to be independent and self-reliant and not to depend on the government for hands outs. The community is encouraged to desire for excellence in anything and everything that they do. They are advised to reject mediocrity and uphold excellence. A good example to emulate will be Japan whose progress is a result of their desire for excellence and their competitive spirit.

A similar vision has been expounded by Abdullah Tarmugi earlier. His vision of “a knowledgeable, creative, and confident Malay/Muslim community characterises a community that places knowledge, creativity and learning at the centre of its focus. It is a community,

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251 ibid, p 6-7  
252 Speech by Assoc Prof Yaacob Ibrahim held on 18 April 2002 at National University of Singapore organised by the Malay Studies Department.
which is in love with knowledge and incessantly seeking it, a community constantly seeking out new ideas and innovations and places a great premium on excellence. It is a community imbued with a progressive philosophy of life that places achievement of high standards as a way of life.”

Note that excellence and constant seeking of knowledge are again stressed in this vision.

Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, Ya’acob Ibrahim, acknowledges the contribution and gives credit to the community for the growth of modern Singapore. He notes especially how the young have given Malay Members of Parliament a good reason to be optimistic about the community’s future. An example that led to this optimism is the ability of the community to meet its target of accumulating ten million dollars for its Education Trust Fund. It is evident that the Malay community is capable of being independent and self-confident and that they can overcome any problems that come their way.

For the Malay community to progress, an all-round development is crucial. Professor Ya’acob advocates independence and self-reliance in the Malay community’s effort to progress and not to be dependent on the government for help. There is this belief among the Malay leaders that given the Singapore set-up, there are not many obstacles to prevent the Malay/Muslim from career development. While they have attained success in the arts and sports, there are areas to improve in the field of education. There is no difference in human

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254 The Education Trust Fund (ETF) was first mooted by Prof Yaacob Ibrahim in 2002. “The Fund will be used to provide financial assistance for educational purposes to Malay/ Muslims in cases where existing financial assistance schemes are unable to provide. The Fund will also be used to provide additional funding to augment the amount provided by existing schemes which may not be sufficient. For phase 1, ETF will provide financial assistance for pre-school education to low-income families to encourage parents to send their children to childcare centres and kindergartens. Thus far, 400 children are benefitting from the above scheme.” Refer to Mendaki’s website on details of the fund, http://www.mendaki.org.sg
potentiality. However, this is rather simplistic since the low socio-economic status of some Malay/Muslims hinders their chances of upward mobility.\textsuperscript{255} As observed by Tham Seong Chee concerning the impact of social development:

‘In several studies done so far, there is some evidence to show that Malays of good socio-economic background are better able to make use of the facilities and support granted by the government to acquire quality education...The aforementioned situation would seem to strengthen an observation in educational studies – that socio-economic background bears directly on educational success.’\textsuperscript{256}

In summary, when a society is confronted by serious problems, the onus is on the leaders to try to tackle these problems before they escalate. In the case of the educational problems faced by the Malay community, there is a strong possibility that the Malay leaders identified the symptoms and not the root cause to this problem. As a result, the wrong approaches or intervention methods were adopted. As mentioned earlier, there is a need to uncover the deep-rooted beliefs that are not beneficial to the community. These beliefs need to be reframed appropriately. We have discussed that in the case of the Malay community, their dualistic attitude to knowledge, their religious orientations that propagate values that are not congruent to secular progress may be the possible impediments to the Malay/Muslim’ progress in education.

\textsuperscript{255} See chapter 3 for a detailed discussion on how the problem of structural factor affects Malays educational achievement

\textsuperscript{256} Tham Seong Chee, \textit{Malays and Modernization: A Sociological Interpretation}, (Singapore, Singapore University Press) p 160
CONCLUSION

The research attempts to discuss the current educational problems the Singapore Malay/Muslim are facing and various causes and impediments to this lack of achievement in education. Efforts were also made to explain the genesis of this educational underachievement problem – which is basically a socio-historical approach. The study has also attempted to demonstrate the salience of historical, structural and institutional factors as contributing factors to this problem.

This study begins with Chapter One which outlines the scope to be covered by the study. In discussing the educational problem facing the Malay/Muslim in Singapore, this study utilises some insights gained from Karl Mannheim’s perspective of sociology of knowledge, is also presented. An outline of the Singapore education system is also discussed. More importantly, this chapter highlights some of the real problems and concerns the Malay/Muslim are facing in the field of education, some of which are the less than satisfactory performance of the Malay/Muslim students in the national examinations, the problem of low performance in the core subjects, the high attrition rate among the Malay/Muslim students in school and the few number of Malay/Muslim students that made it to the tertiary institutions.

Some of the educational successes achieved by the Malay/Muslim community over the past four decades have been illustrated. This achievement, however, is thought by the Malay/Muslim leaders to be insufficient in closing the educational gap between the Malay/Muslims and the other ethnic communities, especially to the Chinese. The focus of the Malay/Muslim leaders in assessing the achievements of the Malay/Muslim comparative to the Chinese, is also questioned. The Malay/Muslim leaders’ approach in comparing the
Malay/Muslim achievement or lack of it in the educational field with the Chinese and to show the Malay/Muslim that they still do not have it to match the Chinese, is reminiscent of the cultural deficit perspective that was held by many Malay/Muslim leaders in trying to explain the underachievement of the Malay/Muslim.

Chapter Two begins with the discussion of the cultural deficit thesis that the colonials put forth to be one of the major factors for the Malay/Muslim underachievement. Unfortunately, this idea still lingers in the mind of many, Malays included, although we have gained independence for more than forty years. We have also highlighted two works that have exposed this cultural thesis as myths and putting the blame on the ‘victims’. It is important to include these two studies since they run parallel to the problem we have at hand, since in the attempts by the Malays to find a solution to the problem, the Malay parents and students are blamed for their ‘lack of motivation and interest’. Instead of looking at the other possible factors that impede the Malay/Muslim students’ educational underachievement, the onus is on them to change their alleged ‘negative attitude’. Unfortunately, there is no single reason to explain why the Malay/Muslim students are not performing well in their studies. As such, the community needs to diagnose the problem of educational underachievement in order to take on measures that will be effective in overcoming this problem.

In Chapter Three, we discussed the possible factors such as historical, structural, and institutional that contributed to the problem of educational underachievement of the Malay/Muslim community in education. This problem is said to have its genesis in the depressing and stifling educational environment from the period the Malays were under the feudal system and was further heightened and reinforced during the British occupation in Singapore in the 19th century. By bringing in the historical aspect, we hope to highlight that
this problem is deep-rooted. As a result, the Malays have difficulty in improving their educational achievement because of their poor headstart in the educational arena. Also, as have been noted in the preceding chapter, the negative cultural traits used to explain the educational lag of the Malays in Singapore are too simplistic since they downplay the impact of the structural and historical factors that contributed to the problem.

Chapter Four discusses the variety of approaches taken by the Malay/Muslims to eradicate the problem of educational underachievement, focussing on programmes conducted by the two self-help groups, Mendaki and Association of the Malay/Muslim Professionals (AMP) to uplift the educational achievement of the Malay/Muslim. The Malay/Muslims have put a great deal of hope in trying to change the community through education. The discussion shows that this in itself is not a clear premise. The solutions proposed seem to concentrate on providing extra tuition classes for the Malay/Muslim students to improve their grades in their studies. As such, tuition classes have become a replica of the school. Although, it is argued that the extra coaching will help students achieve better results in the way these tuition classes are implemented to move in parallel with schools to cope with schoolwork, it is still not effective in overcoming the educational underachievement among the Malay/Muslim students.

In Chapter Five, we have highlighted some aspects of the religious traditionalism and the dualistic orientations of the Malay/Muslim towards knowledge and education that either impede or undermine the Malay/Muslim. There is a need to uncover these deep-rooted belief orientations that are not serving the community and reframe those orientations appropriately. It is important to note that we are not suggesting that the beliefs or values of the Malay/Muslim need to be re-evaluated. It is the Malay/Muslim religious orientations or worldview that needs to be re-examined if the Malays are to succeed in their quest to achieve
excellence and success in the educational area. Again, it is never our intention to blame the cultures or values of the Malay/Muslim to be the cause for the underachievement of the Malay/Muslim students in education.

In conclusion, this thesis hopes that by understanding the variety of issues, aspirations, contradictions and struggles that the Malay/Muslim in Singapore are confronted with, Malay/Muslim leaders will come up with a proper diagnosis to overcome this problem of educational underachievement. To put the blame totally on the community for its underachievement is also seen as unjust since this problem is deep-rooted due to the structural, institutional and historical factors that have impeded their educational achievement.
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