

**EDUCATION AND SINGAPORE
MALAY SOCIETY:
PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES**

SIDEK BIN SANIFF

No 4

Academic Session 1990/91

ISBN 9971-62-266-1

**Department of Malay Studies
National University of Singapore**

EDUCATION AND SINGAPORE MALAY SOCIETY: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

SIDEK BIN SANIFF

Let me begin by sharing with you my vision for the future of Malay-Muslims in Singapore as we progress towards the 21st century. Mendaki I (1981) is the "process of consolidation". The essence of Mendaki II (1988) is continuity: "Continuum towards higher order". Therefore our mission should be as follows:

- . An establishment of a total, systematic, professional and comprehensive programme involving each and every Malay-Muslim and support of others;

- . Strive and provide an environment so that every Malay-Muslim child and person *attains the highest possible level of education in both the secular and spiritual dimensions*. Education is still the best means for social mobility;

- . In the final analysis: the Malay-Muslim becomes not only an active participant and contributor but *more importantly a "leading edge" resource in the effort of making Singapore a more dynamic and vibrant multi-racial society*.

The Malay community, on the whole, has realized that education is a vehicle for social mobility, especially so in an open and competitive society like Singapore. Education can help uplift the community's standard of living and enable its members to climb up the ladder of success in the economy. Education is an investment. More and more Malay-Muslim organisations are actively involved in organising educational activities to help improve the level of academic attainment of Malay-Muslim pupils.

There are signs that the Malays are making progress in the academic field. Some improvements over the last ten years are noted. There is an increasing number of Malay pupils excelling in the school examinations and are among the cream in the cohorts. The number of Malay-Muslim students who get admitted into tertiary institutions is also increasing. We are very proud of the achievement of Mohamad Farid bin Harunal Rashid who topped the 1990 PSLE. There should be more Farids at every level: PSLE, 'O', 'A' and President's Scholars. We need more thinkers and reformists in our midst.

Overall, however, the Malays as a group are still lagging behind the other ethnic groups in academic achievement. Therefore much more need to be done to help the Malay pupils improve their level of attainment in academic pursuit. Mendaki, Taman Bacaan, PPIS, 4PM, Jamiyah, Pergas, Pertapis, Muhammadiyah and many other Malay-Muslim organisations have conducted tuition classes. This is commendable. 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 organisations.

MENDAKI-MOE Joint Committee

The setting up of the MENDAKI-MOE Joint Committee (MMJC) in September '89 is significant in that it reflects the collaborative effort between the Government (MOE) and a Malay-Muslim organization (Yayasan Mendaki) to examine ways to upgrade the academic performance of the community. It serves as a forum for consultation, discussion and feedback on matters relevant to MOE's policy formulations which may, directly or indirectly, affect the educational interest, achievement or prospect of the Singapore Malay-Muslim community in particular.

In looking into the problem of education of the Malay-Muslims, MMJC identifies various factors, such as socio-economic, attitudinal and familial, affecting their achievements. A total and consolidated approach needs to be taken to raise their standard of academic performance. Basically, there is a need to strengthen the pupils' foundation in the 3 core subjects, viz English Language, Mathematics and Science in the primary schools, especially the first two: English Language and Mathematics, which require urgent attention. Inculcation of the importance of education and values must begin earlier, preferably from the age of 6 months-6 years, followed with the above and climaxing at another vital age of 10-16 years.

To generate Malay pupils' interest in Mathematics and improve their performance in the subject, MMJC initiated the publication of a regular Maths column in Berita

Harian. The CDIS officers conducted training courses for tutors teaching Mendaki's and Taman Bacaan's tutorial classes on how to use the SPEMS materials (for teaching of English, Mathematics and Science in primary schools) produced by CDIS. A series of workshops has also been conducted by MOE for Mendaki's tutors in January '91. MMJC has helped to pilot computer-assisted instructions of Mathematics at community centres. This computer-based learning project by Mendaki is essentially for primary school pupils doing remedial or supplementary lessons in the subject. We can later expand the computer-based learning project to involve Mendaki's institutional members and other interested parties sharing the same aspiration.

English Language Exposure Time

It has been noted that the Malay-Muslim children have to be well-equipped for formal primary school education. Generally, Malay children are sufficiently exposed to Malay Language at home, Malay being their mother tongue. This must continue. In order to avoid learning deficit, however, greater attention should be given to strengthening their foundation in English, the working language in Singapore. This could be done by providing 70-80% English exposure time to the 4-5 year old children. The acquisition of English Language skills at this early stage will help compensate for their lack of exposure to the language³ at home and give them a headstart when they start formal schooling.

Maths and English Results

We can see the importance of Maths and English by scrutinising the data on the performance of Malay pupils at PSLE from 1986-1990.

Over the past five years, the performance of Malay pupils in the PSLE has improved significantly - from 69% passing in 1986 to 74% in 1990. There is also an improvement in the quality of the performance as seen by the improvements in English, Mathematics and Science (Table 1).

**Table 1. Performance of Malay Pupils
1986-1990 PSLE**

Year	Overall	EL1	ML2	Maths	Science
1986	69%	78%	100%	39%	71%
1987	71%	81%	100%	40%	75%
1988	71%	82%	100%	40%	75%
1989	74%	85%	100%	45%	76%
1990	74%	86%	100%	45%	78%

These improvements are the result of the efforts put in by pupils, parents, teachers and the Malay community. It shows that if concerted efforts are made by all concerned, improvements in the educational achievements of Malay pupils are possible.

While these improvements are encouraging, we should focus on the performance of Malay pupils who have not done well to see what more could be done to upgrade the achievement level of these pupils.

Table 2 shows the results of Malay pupils who fail the PSLE. Of these, the three largest groups (Group 1, 2, 3) fail PSLE because they did not pass EL1, Maths and/or Science.

**Table 2. Subject Results of Malay Pupils
Who Fails PSLE**

Group	SUBJECT RESULTS				No. & %	
	EL1	ML2	Maths	Science		
1	Pass	Pass	Fail	Fail	614	(12%)
2	Fail	Pass	Fail	Pass	235	(5%)
3	Fail	Pass	Fail	Fail	390	(8%)
4	Fail	Pass	Pass	Pass	47	(1%)
5	Fail	Pass	Pass	Fail	12	(0.2%)
6	Pass	Fail	Fail	Pass	3	(0.1%)
7	Fail	Fail	Fail	Fail	1	(0.0%)

If all pupils in Group 1 could be helped to pass either Mathematics or Science, there would be an improvement of 12% in the pass rate. Likewise, another 5% could pass PSLE if they passed EL1 (Group 2). Taken together, if more Malay pupils passed English, Maths and Science, the *overall* pass rate at PSLE could go up to 90%. These statistics suggest that there is considerable room for improving the performance of Malay pupils at PSLE. It would be prudent for us to study thoroughly the background of these students.

The Mendaki Scholarship

The Mendaki Scholarship, instituted in 1989, is to reward the cream of secondary one Malay-Muslim pupils who have performed well academically, based on their PSLE results, and have shown leadership potential. The scholarship enables the awardees to study in well-established secondary schools, including independent schools. By highlighting their achievements, these pupils will become role-models for others to

emulate and better themselves. MOE even agreed to let the schools offer ML1 if there is demand from the pupils. I am looking forward to see the pupils continue to be successful and be given the scholarships at tertiary level and beyond the first degree: Masters and Doctorate. Thus culminating in the creation of "Mendaki Scholars" in the true sense of the word.

Tertiary Fee

I am indeed happy to note that our community has finally settled this emotive issue. Our decision puts us on a high moral ground. Mendaki has put aside \$3 million dollars in the proposed Amanah Saham Mendaki. This is a good move. The balance of the savings generated from the scheme should be used for developing educational programmes aimed at raising the performance of Malay students especially those at tertiary level. By letting Yayasan Mendaki administer the scheme, it reflects the recognition of the ability of the organisation as well as the community. It further demonstrates the will of the community to be more self-reliant. It also proves that we fully understand the difference between enabling clause and mandatory clause enshrined in a constitution, including ours, especially so the said Clause 152.

I was asked by Yang Razali Kassim one of the Leader/Organizers of the Malay-Muslim Convention, October 1990 to give my views of the Convention and my vision. I obliged. And added the importance of the professionals, especially the lawyers, to scrutinise further the emotive clause so that laymen can be enlightened, emotions checked and fact and truth prevail.

Nurturing Outstanding Pupils

I am strongly of the view that Malay-Muslim pupils with potential must be nurtured and motivated to continue striving for academic excellence. Therefore, special attention should be given to the cream of our students. One positive way is to monitor closely the performance of pupils who are among the top 10% of the PSLE passes throughout their life in the educational institution. These pupils could be given a variety of enrichment activities to stretch them to develop their full potential. They have to be imbued with a sense of self-discipline and social responsibility to prepare them to take on leadership role in the future.

It is hoped that among the pupils whose academic performance is closely monitored especially with the help of parents and the schools, the community may produce President scholars, Merit scholars and SAF scholars. These scholars will certainly become role-models for others to emulate. They can play their role more significantly in national development.

The Malay-Muslim organisations can be involved in mounting programmes to produce Malay-Muslim scholars. "Adopted Child" scheme could also be introduced where successful Malay-Muslim professionals volunteer to be mentors and confidants to these high calibre pupils.

Pastoral Care and Counselling Service

The Malay-Muslim organizations could provide counselling service to these Malay pupils. Their emotion, social and financial needs must be catered for. Quick

intervention should be taken to assist pupils with personal problems. Perhaps full-time trained counsellors could be employed for this purpose. At an appropriate time Mendaki may wish to consider this seriously.

Malay pupils too need to be properly advised and guided on the choice of courses after completing their GCE 'O' Level. They must realize that VITB skill certificates and Polytechnic professional diplomas are better than weak GCE 'A' level certificates with which they are unable to go to University. With VITB and Polytechnic qualifications, the holders have good opportunity for career advancement and further upgrading. They must take full advantage of the opportunities provided by the nation's education system and maximise their potential. We are in the midst of the technological era and more and more graduates of VITB and Polytechnic are needed.

The community could look into the problem of children who are being left without adequate care and supervision at home. Perhaps the Malay-Muslim organizations can mount a programme to ensure such children make use of their time usefully when they are not in school.

Resource and Training Centre

Yayasan Mendaki could see to the setting up of a proper Resource and Training Centre which will be the focal point for providing supportive services/facilities to all its affiliates. Resource materials that need to be build up should include both software and hardware necessary for implementing programmes to upgrade academic performance effectively.

The Centre should be appropriately equipped and furnished to provide a conducive and stimulating atmosphere for personnel training. Courses such as leadership training, administrative and management training and counselling could be organised.

School Programmes

Schools are providing a lot of opportunities to pupils to strive for the best they can achieve in education. Besides innovative teaching approaches there are facilities in schools, such as libraries, language rooms, computer rooms, science rooms and eco-gardens, that can interest the pupils. Teachers have also introduced practical and thought-provoking lessons to teach pupils higher order thinking. Enrichment activities as well as remedial lessons are conducted to cater to the needs of the pupils. Some schools have mounted a programme to identify lower primary children with average or above average ability who are performing lower than that expected for their potential. Teachers assess and determine the causes of their underachievement before taking action to remediate. There may be underlying causes that lead to the pupils' difficulties in learning, such as social and cultural deprivation or specific learning disabilities. Early detection and remediation will certainly help pupils from accumulating *learning deficit*.

Role of Parents

We have the vision that more Malay-Muslims who are highly qualified and well-trained making their mark and contributing significantly towards national development. With members of the community putting in concerted effort to upgrade the academic performance of the Malay-Muslims, and the pupils themselves taking

full advantage of the available educational opportunities, the gap in the level of academic attainment between the Malays and the other ethnic groups should be able to narrow.

However, the role of parents cannot be under-rated. Their response to the community's efforts to ensure its programmes success matters a great deal. Parenting skill is important indeed. Children must be instilled with the value of education and self discipline. Provision of conducive home environment for learning will help to motivate them to work conscientiously and achieve good results. Parents must prepare themselves so that they are able to supervise their children and provide the necessary support in the children's schooling. There are public talks, seminars and courses on general education and good parenting that they can attend. If children were to succeed in life, they must be nurtured long before they enter school.

Parents should also establish close liaison with their children's schools. It is important that they understand what the schools are trying to do to educate the pupils. Improved communication between home and school will certainly help one to complement the other's effort in meeting the pupils' needs.

It is found that pupils perform better at school when their parents are seen to show an interest in their school work. I would even like to suggest that parents take more active part in school programmes by volunteering their services in activities they have the skill and expertise. Parents can, for example, be involved in reading programme, coaching and training pupils in games, teaching art and crafts and cultural dances.

Edusave

Financial difficulty should not be made an excuse for pupils' lack of interest in school and poor academic achievement. Besides the government, many social and cultural organisations are providing financial assistance to the needy. With Edusave, as proposed by the Prime Minister, funds will be made available for school children to pay for educational fees and courses to develop their special interest like music and the arts. Edusave is a means of providing a better life as it maximises and equalizes opportunities for Singaporeans irregardless of the SES background, to improve themselves with a more rounded education.

This is a laudable scheme which all Singaporeans should support. In the light of this I would like to make two proposals:

In additional to Edusave, parents should set up a separate bank account for each child and make conscious effort to contribute to it every month. Match the amount. For those who can afford it, set aside more. Even with a saving of \$10/- a month, the child would have saved \$120/- in a year. By the time he reaches Sec 4 or JC there should be a substantial amount in the bank to depend on, especially if one starts saving as early as when one receives the new child's birth certificate. If the savings are not touched at these crucial levels, more savings will be accrued when the child is in the university.

Conclusion

The importance of education has been systematically emphasised by many societies:

The Chinese by the creation of the "Mandarin" and the willingness of the rich to contribute generously to the institutions of learning. The pride of the Indians is measured by the educational performance of their sons and daughters. The Japanese, hundred years before the Meiji Dynasty, put supreme importance on the pursuit of knowledge. Muslims, even earlier. Since the revelation of the first surah "Iqra'" - READ which also means to comprehend, analyse and research, that finally benefitted the whole mankind.

The Prophet Muhammad (saw) urged Muslims to seek knowledge even as far as China.

Professor Fazhur Rahman in his book "Islam & Modernity: Transformation Of An Intellectual Tradition" said that Islam is a religion that respects highly the pursuit of knowledge. The Muslim searched for paper in China; refined numericals from India; pursued knowledge from Persia and Rome; had trust and confidence in non-Muslims, like Ishaq bin Hunain, a Nestorian Christian, and Masarjawaih, a Jew as leader and supervisor in the effort to translate books in the languages of Yunani, Aramaic, Pahlavi, Sanskrit, about stars and astronomy, philosophy, mathematics and of course medicine long before Ibn Sina gave the Muslim and the world that faculty.

It shows how "open" the Muslim is. We never succumb to "syncretism".

This history and the sense of urgency to keep pace with change must be inculcated in the hearts and minds of our children.

Thinkers and reformists chartered progress through two important basic cultures: Reading and Learning Cultures (Budaya Membaca dan Budaya Ilmu). The latter is even more vital because reading and writing do not guarantee intelligence, sensitivity or compassion. "Basic skills" does not solely mean reading, writing and maths. It goes beyond that, falling into the realm of the intangible such as cultural and religious awareness, information finding, the ability to teach oneself and "semangat perjuangan".

Finally, MMJC is conscious of the need to obtain views and suggestions from the community itself with regard to the issue. It has been able to understand more deeply the problems and concerns of Malay-Muslim pupils through dialogue sessions it organised with school principals, professionals, educationists and representatives of Malay-Muslim organisations, including tertiary student bodies.

The position taken by MMJC is that:

The Committee comes with an open mind and will welcome views, comments and suggestions, both written and oral, from all quarters, including from the non-Malay communities.

The Committee will not be constrained by whatever existing practices, beliefs and norms, be they cultural or social, in considering possible solutions to improve the performance of the Malay pupils.

The Committee will also look at the *strengths of the Malay students and not just their weaknesses, and how to make full use of these strengths.*
