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## **Educational aspirations of Malay youths from low-income families in Singapore**

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Education is important for the production of human capital and also as a means of social mobility. This paper examines the educational aspirations of Malay youths in comparison with other youths in Singapore. Descriptive analysis and ordinal regression analysis were applied to data from the 2010 National Youth Survey. The findings reveal that Malay youths have lower educational aspirations than youths from other ethnicities. The findings have important implications for social work and social policy, especially since the Malays' educationally and socioeconomically marginal position has been identified as an area of national concern.

**Keywords:** educational aspirations; Singapore; Malays; education; youths

### **Introduction**

Even though Malays in Singapore have made significant progress over the years, their low socioeconomic status still remains a problem. Pass rates of Malay students are lower than the other ethnicities at all levels, from primary leaving to secondary leaving; Malay students are under-represented in post-secondary institutions; and Malay families are over-represented among financial assistance recipients (Han, Rothwell, & Lin, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2011a). Singapore Malay leaders have expressed strong belief that the plight of the Malay/Muslim<sup>1</sup> community lies in education (Hafsah Binte Mohammad Kassim, 2006).

### **Literature review**

According to the human capital theory, human capital, the proxy of which is educational attainment, provides the platform for raising the skill level of workers which ultimately leads to higher aggregate economic output (Conrad, 2009), and correspondingly, long-run economic growth (Sharp, Register, & Grimes, 2010). Furthermore, Douglass (2010) notes that higher education, which contributes to the formation of human capital, brings about both private and public benefits that are important to the economy.

Besides contributing to the nation's human capital, education also promotes upward social economic mobility (Douglass, 2010). Education is widely viewed as the means by which individuals from economically or socially disadvantaged backgrounds can build skills and credentials needed for successful adult roles in mainstream life (National Research Council, 1993). For the Singapore government, education has been and will remain as one of the means through which one can move up the social ladder. As expressed

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by Minister for Education, Dr Ng Eng Hen, 'enabling social mobility will continue to be a hallmark of [the government's] education system' (Ministry of Education, 2011b). However, Ng (2007) has also found that education is also a means through which parents transmit their economic status to their children.

The term 'educational aspiration', which refers to the highest level of education one aspires towards, can be applied to something as broad as that which typifies the grandest and boldest of dreams to something slightly more ambitious than expectation (Young, 2004, as cited in Vaisey, 2010). It has also been simplified to mean plans for the future (Kao & Tienda, 1998) and goals with some sense of how to realize them (Young, 2004, as cited in Vaisey, 2010).

Studies have shown that educational aspirations have an influence on educational attainment. For instance, a longitudinal study conducted by Beal and Crockett (2010) found that adolescents' educational aspirations predicted adult educational attainment eight years later. They suggest that future-oriented cognitions, including aspirations, motivate behaviours related to the realization of preferred outcomes. Similarly, other scholars (e.g. Kao & Tienda, 1998; Qian & Blair, 1999; Wilson & Wilson, 1992) assert that educational aspirations are among the most significant predictors of eventual educational attainment, although one study suggests that for certain groups including economically disadvantaged young people and those from ethnic minorities, the gap between aspirations and higher educational attainment is wider (Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, 2008). That is, youths from low-income or ethnic minority backgrounds attain lower than their aspiration, and that gap is wider than their counterparts. However, the correlation between aspiration and attainment is still strong.

The impact of socioeconomic status on educational aspirations has been extensively analysed in the literature. Tyler (1977), for instance, says that parents' patterns of earnings may be the basis of the cultural variables associated with achievement and aspiration. Similarly, Bourdieu's (as cited in Vaisey, 2010) notion of cultural capital also suggests that the poor will have lower socioeconomic aspirations than the non-poor. Wilson and Wilson (1992) also point at how researchers generally agree that socioeconomic status seems to exert some influence on adolescents' educational aspirations. This could be due to the fact that families have unequal resources, which means that the extent to which parents invest in their children differs (Parcel, Dufur, & Zito, 2010). As a result, low parental earnings are a risk factor for children (Parcel et al., 2010), which might in turn, have an effect on their educational aspirations later on in life. However, Kao and Tienda (1998) suggest that income level alone is not the determinant of educational aspirations; rather, it is parental investment that shapes educational aspirations above and beyond what one would expect on the basis of income level alone.

However, in the literature, the association between ethnicity and level of educational aspiration is not as evident or consistent. Portes and Wilson (1976, as cited in Ballantine, 2001) found that African American students have high aspirations while Kao and Tienda (1998) discovered that Hispanic and African American youths have high, albeit less concrete, educational aspirations. That is, their aspirations are less rooted on their real-life experiences. Thus the discrepancy in educational attainment is not so much a result of group differences in educational aspiration, but is suggested by these authors to be due to social-structural factors. However, the ethnicity of minority groups may have an impact on educational aspirations in that adolescents define their goals primarily in terms of the stereotypical images attached to their ethnic group (Kao, 2000). For instance, Kao (2000) found that group images, or stereotypes attached to a certain ethnic group, help to shape individual expectations by setting a minimum standard that they must surpass.

Based on the above Western literature, then, it appears that a minority status does not necessarily correlate with low educational aspirations. On the other hand, the link between socioeconomic status and educational aspiration appears to be stronger. What about in Singapore? Ho (2010) found that educational aspiration correlates with both parents' income and ethnicity in Singapore. Using data from the 2005 National Youth Survey, he found that teenage students whose parents have lower income and are less educated, who come from disrupted families and are ethnic minorities are more likely to have lower educational aspirations (Ho, 2010).

Malays form a statistical minority group in Singapore. While a minority status does not necessarily equate with a disadvantaged educational position, Malays have been portrayed as being worse off academically, as compared to other ethnic groups. A report from the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) shows that the percentage of Malay youths making it to the tertiary level of education is the lowest among all ethnic groups. Malays also make up a significant portion of the low-income bracket, with their median monthly income being the lowest among the other ethnic groups (MCYS, 2005). More recently, the percentage of Malays aged 15 and above attaining at least post-secondary qualifications increased from 18% to 36% in 2010. However, if compared to the Chinese and Indians, the percentage for the Malays is considered the lowest (Census of Population, 2011a). Recent data also portray Malays in general as having the lowest socioeconomic status among the different ethnicities. There is no reported data on income distribution by ethnicity. Thus, using household type as a socioeconomic indicator, only 2.8% of Malay households occupy condominiums, private flats or landed housing (housing types for the more well-to-do), the lowest percentage among the different ethnicities (Census of Population, 2011b). These statistics indicate a lower socioeconomic status for Malays.

The present study seeks to answer these questions:

- (1) Do Malay youths have lower educational aspiration compared to youths of other ethnicities?
- (2) Do youths from low-income families have lower educational aspiration compared to other youths?

Using data from the National Youth Survey 2010, the study provides a comparative analysis against the findings by Ho (2011) from the National Youth Survey 2005 and findings in other countries. The rest of the article proceeds as follows. The methodology is described next, followed by a report of the results by descriptive comparisons and ordinal regression analysis. Finally, the findings are discussed from the angle of social work interventions.

### **Data and methods**

The data for this study was obtained from the 2010 National Youth Council Youth Survey. The analysis is restricted to a total of 283 youths from 15 to 19 years old. The first step of analysis involves descriptive statistics, where the dependent variable – educational aspiration – is cross-tabulated against parents' income and education, ethnicity, and other demographic variables. The descriptive statistics were also done for only the Malay youths, using the same variables. Next, an ordinal regression was used to model the relationship between educational aspiration and the predictor variables, controlled for demographic characteristics that were available in the data.

The monthly parental income categories are collapsed from nine categories into four categories using the 2010 Income Trends report as a guide. The report found that the

average monthly household income for 2010 was S\$2681 for the 20th percentile, S\$10,095 for the 80th percentile, and S\$5888 for the 50th percentile (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2011). Thus, for this study, the following income categories are used: ‘S\$2000 and below’ to represent the lowest income category among the study participants; S\$2001–5000 and S\$5001–10,000 to represent the middle income categories; and ‘S\$10,000 and above’ to represent the highest income category. There are 101 missing data from the ‘parents’ monthly income’ variable. The question ‘What is the highest level of education you think you can achieve?’ was used as a measure of educational aspiration, the dependent variable. The variable is collapsed into the following categories: (1) ‘N’/‘O’/‘A’ Level or Institute of Technical Education (ITE)/Vocational Institute, (2) polytechnic diploma, (3) university graduate, and (4) postgraduate.

Besides looking at ethnicity and parents’ income as independent variables, variables that could act as possible confounding variables, such as age, gender, father’s educational attainment, mother’s educational attainment and parents’ marital status were also analysed. These variables are similar to the ones used in a study by Qian and Blair (1999), which also examined ethnic differences in educational aspirations of youths. Mother’s educational attainment was analysed as a variable in the descriptive statistics but was not included in the ordinal regression analysis. Fathers’ educational status, which has been found to be more likely than mothers’ educational status to be transmitted to their children (Ng & Ho, 2006), is used as the only proxy for parental education.

For the ordinal regression analysis, dummy variables are created for variables that have nominal categories. Father’s education is specified as whether the father has low education, where having a highest qualification of ‘N/O/A Level or ITE or Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and below’ are assigned the value ‘1’, leaving fathers with higher education as the base category. For gender, the value ‘1’ was assigned to the female category, and ‘0’ to the male category. For parents’ marital status, a married status is assigned the value ‘1’, and other marital status including single, divorced and separated are grouped and assigned a value of ‘0’. For ethnicity, Chinese, who form the majority ethnicity of the population, are used as the base category, against which the other ethnicity categories are assessed. The other categories, namely Malay, Indian and Others, are separately assigned the value ‘1’.

## **Findings**

### *Descriptive statistics*

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of variables used in the analysis for each level of educational aspiration. The Malays, one of the main minority groups in Singapore, represent 9.5% of the sample. Most respondents are in the monthly income category S\$2001–5000.

Among all the youths sampled, educational aspirations are generally high, with 60.4% of them aspiring to attain a degree and above. However, there are differences within each variable. For instance, among the different ethnicities, Malay youths have lower educational aspirations in comparison to the youths from other ethnicities. The majority of Malay youths (60.3%) aspire to attain only a polytechnic diploma. Conversely, only 3.4% of these youths aspire to reach the postgraduate level. In comparison, up to 33.3% of Indian youths aspire to attain a postgraduate certificate. Similarly, the majority of Chinese youths aspire to reach the university level. These statistically significant results (by Chi-square tests) show that Malay youths have lower educational aspirations than youths from other ethnicities.

Even though the differences in educational aspirations by parental monthly income are not as pronounced, they are still apparent: 44.2% of youths from the lowest income group

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for variables used in the analysis by educational aspiration.

Variables	'N'/'O'/'A'				
	Level or ITE	Polytechnic diploma	University graduate	Postgraduate	Total
Total sample (%)	17 (6)	95 (33.6)	136 (48.1)	35 (12.4)	283
Ethnicity (%)*					
Chinese	12 (6.2)	54 (28)	103 (53.4)	24 (12.4)	193
Malay	4 (6.9)	35 (60.3)	17 (29.3)	2 (3.4)	58
Indian	1 (3.7)	4 (14.8)	13 (48.1)	9 (33.3)	27
Others	0 (0)	2 (40)	3 (60)	0 (0)	5
Gender (%)*					
Male	9 (7.6)	53 (44.5)	43 (36.1)	14 (11.8)	119
Female	8 (4.9)	42 (25.6)	93 (56.7)	21 (12.8)	164
Parents' monthly income (%)*					
S\$2000 or below	7 (10.3)	31 (45.6)	22 (32.4)	8 (11.8)	68
S\$2001–5000	3 (3.6)	31 (37.3)	41 (49.4)	8 (9.6)	83
S\$5001–10,000	1 (3.1)	11 (34.4)	15 (46.9)	5 (15.6)	32
S\$10,000 and above	0 (0)	0 (0)	9 (75)	3 (25)	12
Father's educational attainment (%)*					
PSLE and below	10 (16.4)	23 (37.7)	23 (37.7)	5 (8.2)	61
'N'/'O'/'A' Level or ITE	5 (3.7)	52 (38.5)	58 (43)	20 (14.8)	135
Polytechnic diploma	1 (3.6)	12 (42.9)	15 (53.6)	0 (0)	28
University graduate	0 (0)	0 (0)	22 (84.6)	4 (15.4)	26
Postgraduate	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (66.7)	2 (33.3)	6
Mother's educational attainment (%)*					
PSLE and below	7 (10.6)	30 (45.5)	19 (28.8)	10 (15.2)	66
'N'/'O'/'A' Level or ITE	8 (5.3)	49 (32.5)	75 (49.7)	19 (12.6)	151
Polytechnic diploma	1 (4.5)	9 (40.9)	10 (45.5)	2 (9.1)	22
University graduate	0 (0)	1 (4.8)	17 (81)	3 (14.3)	21
Postgraduate	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (66.7)	1 (33.3)	3
Parents' marital status					
Single	0 (0)	1 (100)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1
Married	15 (5.9)	82 (32.4)	123 (48.6)	33 (13)	253
Divorced	1 (5.3)	9 (47.4)	7 (36.8)	2 (10.5)	19
Separated	1 (33.3)	0 (0)	2 (66.7)	0 (0)	3
Widowed	0 (0)	1 (25)	3 (75)	0 (0)	4
Age (%)					
15	4 (5.7)	23 (32.9)	37 (52.9)	6 (8.6)	70
16	5 (6.2)	38 (46.9)	27 (33.3)	11 (13.6)	81
17	3 (6.4)	9 (19.1)	30 (63.8)	5 (10.6)	47
18	3 (6.3)	17 (35.4)	20 (41.7)	8 (16.7)	48
19	2 (5.9)	7 (20.6)	20 (58.8)	5 (14.7)	34

\* $p < 0.05$  (Chi-square tests).

aspire to the university level and above, compared to 62.5% of youths from the S\$5001–10,000 income category. These results suggest that the probability of being Malay and having parents who belong to the lowest income category may lead to even lower educational aspirations. This will be discussed later on in this section.

The analysis also reveals a correlation between father's educational attainment and educational aspirations. In general, youths whose parents have higher educational qualifications tend to have high educational aspirations, and vice versa. However, the effect of mother's educational attainment is not as evident among this sample of youths. For instance, 15.2% of youths whose mothers attained only a PSLE certificate or below

Table 2. Educational aspiration of Malay youths by parents' monthly income.

Variables	'N'/'O'/'A'				Total
	Level or ITE	Polytechnic diploma	University graduate	Postgraduate	
Total sample (%)	4 (6.9)	35 (60.3)	17 (29.3)	2 (3.4)	58
Parents' monthly income (%)*					
S\$2000 or below	2 (9.5)	12 (57.1)	6 (28.6)	1 (4.8)	21
S\$2001–5000	1 (5.9)	12 (70.6)	4 (23.5)	0 (0)	17
S\$5001–10,000	0 (0)	4 (80)	1 (20)	0 (0)	5
S\$10,000 and above	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (100)	1

\* $p < 0.05$  (Chi-square tests).

aspire to reach the postgraduate level, whereas only 8.2% of youths whose fathers have the similar educational attainment aspire to be a postgraduate. These statistically significant results show that father's educational attainments have a more salient effect on youths' educational aspirations. This finding affirms what has been found by Ho and Ng (in Ho, 2010), that is, educational status is more likely to be transmitted from fathers to their children, rather than from mothers. Hence, for the ordinal regression, only father's education will be used as the measure of parental human capital. The effect of parents' marital status and age are not as significant as the effect of the variables mentioned above, and will only be discussed in the findings of the ordinal regression analysis.

Table 2 gives the educational aspirations for the Malay respondents only by parental income categories. In this sample, 79.2% of the Malay youths belong to the lower parental monthly income categories. This is in stark contrast to the sample that includes the youths from all the ethnicities, where those with parents that earn less than S\$2000 make up 24% of the sample. Thus within this sample of youths, there is a disproportionately higher percentage of Malays that belong to the lower parental monthly income category.

Out of the Malay youths in the lowest income category, up to 66.6% of them aspire to attain a polytechnic diploma or lower. Similarly, 76.5% of the Malay youths from the S\$2001–5000 income category aspire to that level. These figures are higher than the percentage of all youths in the lowest income category (55.9%) and the S\$2001–5000 category (40.9%) that aspires to attain a polytechnic diploma or lower. Only one youth from the lower income categories aspires to the highest educational level.

The analysis so far reveals that the Malay youths in this sample have the lowest educational aspiration compared to youths from other ethnic groups. In addition, being Malay and from the lowest income group lowers educational aspiration further. On a positive note, it is noteworthy that more than half of the Malay youths, or 60.3% of them, aspire to the polytechnic level, while 29.3% of them aspire to be university graduates. When viewed in absolute terms without comparison with other ethnicities, the educational aspirations of Malay youths might be considered of a reasonable level.

### *Ordinal regression analysis*

Do the lower educational aspirations of Malay youths and youths from low-income families continue to hold when controlled for confounding factors? The ordinal regression results in Table 3 show that independent of other factors, only being Malay is statistically significantly related to educational aspiration. Neither parents' income, father's education, nor other variables yield statistically significant results. While this article reports results

Table 3. Parameter estimates of ordinal regression.

Location	Estimate	SE	Significance
Ethnicity			
Malay	-1.336	0.435	0.002
Indian	0.198	0.546	0.717
Others	-0.128	1.168	0.913
Gender: female	0.581	0.364	0.110
Intact family	0.963	0.808	0.233
Age	0.175	0.130	0.178
Parents' monthly income	0.126	0.226	0.579
Low father's educational attainment	-0.484	0.422	0.251

from four categories of parents' income, analyses using different income cut-offs also yielded the same results.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to find out if Malay youths and youths from low-income families have lower aspirations than youths from other ethnicities and youths from non-low-income families. The results, which reveal that indeed Malay youths have lower educational aspirations when compared to youths of other ethnicities, mirror national statistics that show Malay youths underperforming academically in relation to their counterparts from other ethnic groups, even with other possibly confounding variables controlled for. Several attempts have been made to understand this phenomenon.

Among them, the cultural deficit thesis may appear to provide the most obvious explanation. Lily Zubaidah Rahim (1998) writes:

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 disadvantages. (p. 3)

However, this explanation only puts the blame on the Malays themselves for being in the position they are in. Since the cultural deficit thesis assumes that the problem lies within the Malay community, the onus is thus on them to change their supposed negative values and attitudes. Such a discourse ignores the state's responsibility in implementing structural changes and assisting the marginal community in order to narrow the socioeconomic and educational disparity between the ethnic communities (Lily Zubaidah Rahim, 1998). The cultural deficit theory also ignores historical factors that might have contributed to the Malay's educationally and socioeconomically marginal position within the society. As Wan Hussin Zohri (1990) pointed out, the 'genesis of the Malay problem in Singapore is to be found in an examination of critical events which occurred in the early decades of the nineteenth century' (p. 5). Most notably, negative cultural stereotypes promoted by colonial administrators and orientalist scholars is said to have contributed to the marginalization of the Malay community in socioeconomic and educational terms during colonial rule (Lily Zubaidah Rahim, 1998). Such marginalization has perpetuated the ideology of Malay inferiority and led to the adoption of a minimalist stance towards the socioeconomic and educational marginality of Malays by the current ruling government (Lily Zubaidah Rahim, 1998).

Suriani Suratman (2004) points out how the government's portrayal of Malays lagging behind ignores the longitudinal educational progress of Malays. Even though Malays have

improved in overall educational achievement, the comparison that is made with the progress of students from other ethnic groups continues to put the performance of Malay students behind other students (Suriani Suratman, 2004). Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong pointed out in a speech that the Malays 'still lag behind other communities in a number of areas, because the others too have moved forward within this period' (Mendaki, 2007). In other words, the Malays would effectively still be portrayed as lagging behind and needing to catch up.

The portrayal of Malays as being a group that is less academically successful than other ethnic groups might translate into lower educational aspirations among its youths. The labelling theory posits that people who expect others to act in certain ways often encourage that very behaviour through the self-fulfilling prophecy (Macionis, 2007). In other words, when Malays are portrayed as not being able to match up academically to people from other ethnicities, the youths might internalize that expectation, which in turn translates into them having lower educational aspirations. As described in the Thomas Theorem, 'situations that are defined as real are real in their consequences' (Thomas, 1966, as cited in Macionis, 2007).

The idea of ethnicity shaping one's expectations was also brought out by Kao (2000). She states that adolescents define their goals primarily in terms of stereotypical images attached to their ethnic group, such that these images set a minimum standard that they must surpass (Kao, 2000). This is consistent with the views in the classic work of Allport (1954/1988), which outlines the complex multiple causes of prejudice arising from personality, group and societal forces, but which in the end posits the reinforcing effects of stereotyped behaviour among the majority ethnicities as well as the minority ethnicity being prejudiced against. In the case of the Malays, since the dominant group image is one that does not necessarily equate Malays with academic excellence, it is not surprising then, that the educational aspirations of Malay youths are lower, as compared to youths from other ethnic groups. The dominant group image is sustained through portrayals and society's perception of Malays.

Fadzli Bahrom Adzahar (2009) found that the peer associations of Malay youths within the neighbourhood play an important role in 'moulding the low educational aspirations and dismal perceptions of success among the working class Malay youths' (p. 51). This is especially salient since ethnic minorities are more likely to compare themselves to other, similar ethnics (Kao, 2000). Ray (2006, as cited in Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, 2008) also mentions how individuals have an aspirations window through which they view the possibilities that exist within their social sphere, which in this case may include peers as a means of comparisons. Combined with the effect of the largely negative portrayal of Malays at the national level, Malay youths who associate predominantly with other Malay youths of a similar socioeconomic level may find it more difficult for them to imagine themselves aspiring higher, especially when combined with the effect of the negative portrayal of Malays at the national level.

Besides looking at how the mesosystem may have an influence on the educational aspirations of Malay youths, we also have to examine the exosystem, which includes the government system. In Singapore, the government believes in an education-based meritocracy which emphasizes equality of educational opportunity, giving people who come from a disadvantaged background an equal chance to get ahead in life. As Sidek Saniff, a former Member of Parliament, puts it:

Meritocracy has hastened the sense of confidence and equal treatment of Singaporean Malays who feel they are not being stigmatized and can compete on a level playing field. (Zakir Hussain, 2010)

While the functionalist perspective essentially posits that education is a function of social mobility and is thus a cause of social class, the conflict perspective argues that education

can be an effect of social class (McNamee & Miller, 2009). This then questions whether the government's meritocracy ideology has the unintentional effect of promoting the social reproduction of inequalities rather than promoting social mobility.

In a supposed meritocracy, those who did badly would tend to be regarded by others – and might even come to regard themselves – as being not merely unfortunate but as in fact having deserved no better. Furthermore, a meritocratic social order might 'encourage the self-satisfaction of those who have done well for themselves and, worse, the demoralization of those who have not' (Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2008, p. 96). As Bourdieu (1974) emphasizes, social conditions determine aspirations by determining the extent to which they can be satisfied, thus the presence of the equality of educational opportunity might not be enough for people who start off from a lower position within society.

The lower educational attainment of Malays has often been attributed to their lower socioeconomic background. However, the significant relationship between being Malay and educational aspiration independent of parents' income found in this study as well as Ho (2010) suggests that beyond socioeconomic status, there is something about being Malay that influences aspirations and, in extension, later-life outcomes. The salience of the Malay effect is even more striking when comparing the findings here with the findings in Ho (2010): while Ho found a significant relationship between educational aspiration and both ethnicity and parents' income in the National Youth Survey 2005, only ethnicity significantly relates to educational aspiration in the present study. Between 2005 and 2010, the Malay effect has persisted while the effect of parents' income has become insignificant when being Malay is accounted for. The different specification of the regression model here from Ho might be a reason for the results, and further research will be required to study and understand the reasons for the results. However, some of the theories discussed above on society's portrayal of Malays, the internalization of societal expectations, Malay youths' peer associations and a meritocratic social order might be at play.

### **Social work and social policy implications**

The Singapore government has been concerned about the lower educational performance of the Malays, and has taken steps to remedy their educational gap with the other ethnic groups in Singapore. In 1981, the government collaborated with Malay/Muslim MPs and other Malay leaders to improve the educational status of Malay/Muslim children by launching the Council on Education for Muslim Children (Mendaki) (Hafsah Binte Mohammad Kassim, 2006). Soon after, in 1991, a grassroots body that was not politically linked to the government, the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), was set up (Hafsah Binte Mohammad Kassim, 2006). Like Mendaki, AMP aimed to improve the academic performance of the Malay/Muslim children.

Besides tuition programmes targeted at Malay families that cannot afford to send their school-going children for tuition, Mendaki and AMP have set up programmes aimed at helping Malay students aspire higher academically. For instance, AMP initiated *Mercu Pendidikan* or Pinnacle of Education, a programme with the aim of encouraging Malay students to qualify for post-secondary institutions, while Mendaki has programmes such as the A1 Programme, aimed at helping Primary 1 Malay students aspire to be number one in their studies (Hafsah Binte Mohammad Kassim, 2006). Despite these efforts, tuition programmes form the bulk of the intervention offered by Mendaki and AMP.

The educational performance of Malays has improved through the years, and our descriptive findings suggest that in absolute terms, the educational aspirations of the Malay youths in our sample look reasonable. It is in relative terms that the aspiration levels of

Malay youths reveal potential problems. The gap between the aspirations of Malay youths and youths of other ethnicities suggest that perceptions and relative disadvantage might be what interventions to close the gap need to target. In this light, remedial programmes like the ones described above might not be sufficient in motivating Malay youths to aspire to do better academically and attain higher levels of education. This is especially so, as the popular portrayal of Malay youths not being able to do well academically compared to other youths, coupled with strong peer socialization, makes it harder for them to even begin to think about achieving higher levels of education, let alone attaining them.

Social workers working with Malay low-income families can and should help Malay youths overcome some of the sociostructural factors to high educational aspirations that were mentioned in the earlier section. Besides social conditions, individuals' perceptions of themselves and their abilities also play a part in shaping aspirations (Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, 2008). The belief that one has the efficacy to accomplish a task successfully fosters aspirations to achieve, even in the face of difficulties and setbacks (Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, 2008). The fostering of this belief is in line with the strengths perspective often used in social work practice, where individual capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions and hopes are emphasized (Saleeby, 1996). Furthermore, utilizing the strengths perspective facilitates the inherent capacity of human beings for maximizing their autonomy and their interdependence, as well as the resourcefulness of diverse cultures for fostering survival and growth among their members (Dorfman, Meyer, & Morgan, 2004). In light of the negative portrayal and explanation of educational progress and aspirations of Malay youths, a strengths approach can be particularly powerful.

At the level of individual practice, social workers, teachers and youth workers can help Malay students recognize their strengths instead of emphasizing ethnic gaps. They could help facilitate the discovery of personal and cultural resources which in turn would motivate them to aspire and attain higher than they would have otherwise settled for. At the policy level, the strengths-based framework by Chapin (2011) is helpful, where intervention focuses on goals, opportunities and resources instead of the problem to be fixed. In addition, instead of leaving the Malay community to deal with the problem by itself, a strengths-approach allows national intervention with engagement of the target population without worrying that the target Malay community might feel looked down upon. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had asserted that 'it is much harder for the Government to intervene or for other voluntary welfare organizations to take action, without being misunderstood or triggering a defensive reaction', and that the Malay community self-help efforts are more critical (Mendaki, 2007). A strengths-approach might guard against such defensiveness. Therefore, in order to genuinely help the Malays achieve a level playing field within the Singapore context, more needs to be done by the government beyond what is already being done by Malay self-help groups. As discussed in the previous section, the government's meritocratic ideology might have a part to play in the contribution of lower educational aspirations among Malay youths. Thus, more should be done by the government to help the Malays capitalize on opportunities through committing resources in order to level the playing field. Ng (2007) suggested that the advent of streaming followed by independent and autonomous schools, which have led to more stratification in the quality of schools, might contribute to decreasing mobility and widening gaps in the relative mobility of different income groups. As pointed out by Lily Zubaidah Rahim (1998), the emphasis placed on excellence and competition by the independent school system is likely to make it more difficult for the socially disadvantaged but easier for socially privileged students to gain a place in the premier independent schools. Thus, instead of having a stratified

education system that would serve to benefit mostly those from higher-income families, a uniform education system with equal access to resources for all schools, neighbourhood or otherwise, might better uphold the ideal of meritocracy. Through this, it is hoped that students from low-income families are placed on a truly level playing field where they can begin to have higher aspirations in the absence of potential obstacles like the lack of financial resources to afford a better quality of education.

The suggestions to do more to help Malay youths level up will need to be balanced with not encouraging dependence on the government. For instance, Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education Masagos Zulkifli said in a speech, 'in helping the disadvantaged, we are reminded . . . to be cautious to avoid swinging to the other extreme, leading them to rely entirely on the Government, and taking away the motivation and will for them to strive for themselves' (People's Action Party, 2006). Furthermore, since the government regards equality of performance from students of all backgrounds as impossible, meritocracy has been and will remain a system that promotes equality of educational opportunity only in principle (Li, 1989).

### **Limitations and conclusion**

The main limitation of the study is related to the limitations of the National Youth Survey being a general cross-sectional study. Hence, the analysis has at its disposal a limited set of variables that can be used to establish correlation, but not causality. For one, merely looking at the educational aspirations as a means for social mobility does not give a conclusive and holistic picture. Further research and discussion is needed to ascertain what educational aspirations and thus, the findings of the study, mean in the Singapore context. As mentioned in the literature review, in the Singapore context, education may not have been an effective agent of mobility. Thus due to the limited scope of this study, the extent to which an improvement in educational performance equates to an improvement in economic status was not thoroughly examined, which might play a part in limiting the usefulness of the study.

Having said that, looking at the educational aspirations of Malay youths from low-income families in relation to youths from other ethnicities provides a starting point to see what more can be done to help the Malays improve their welfare. The biggest change that may be required to help Malay youths aspire higher could possibly be a change in mindset, not just among Malays themselves, but among society in general. The popular portrayal of Malays not being able to do as well as other students academically needs to be replaced with the belief that being Malay does not necessarily equate to poor performance in school. Mindset change is challenging, especially if we continue to see the need to compare academic performance among the different ethnic groups. The strengths-approach offers an alternative framework to set off such a mindset change, which will require micro-intervention with individual Malay youths and their families as well as macro-policy focus to help the Malay community tap into resources and opportunities.

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### **Note**

1. Most Malays are Muslims.

### Notes on contributors

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