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Title	Narrowing the gap: The educational achievements of the Malay community in Singapore
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Source	<i>Intercultural Education</i> , 18(1), 53-64. <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14675980601143710">http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14675980601143710</a>
Published by	Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Intercultural Education* on 01/03/2007, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14675980601143710>

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Citation: Tan, C. (2007). Narrowing the gap: The educational achievements of the Malay community in Singapore. *Intercultural Education*, 18(1), 53-64. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14675980601143710>

## **Narrowing the Gap: The Educational Achievements of the Malay Community in Singapore**

**Charlene Tan**

### **Abstract:**

This paper discusses the educational gap between the Malay community and other ethnic communities in Singapore. Using official statistics from 1980 to 2004, the paper compares the educational achievements of the Malay community with other ethnic communities in Singapore. The paper points out that while the Malay students have made significant improvements in their educational achievements over the years, they are still lagging behind the other ethnic communities in Singapore. Three key educational challenges faced by the Malay community and the responses to these challenges are discussed in this paper. The paper recommends that a framework should be introduced to the Malay students in Singapore to integrate secular and religious subjects within an Islamic conception of knowledge.

### **Introduction**

A number of writers have pointed out the educational disparity between the Malay community and other ethnic communities in Singapore (eg. see Tan, 1997; Rahim, 1998; Zoolhri, 1990; Tan and Ho, 2001). Using official statistics from 1980 to 2004, the paper compares the educational achievements of the Malay community with other ethnic communities in Singapore over the past two decades. The paper points out that while the Malay students have made significant improvements in their educational achievements over the years, they are still lagging behind the other ethnic communities in Singapore. While the Malay community has also narrowed the educational gap between themselves and other ethnic communities, it has not narrowed the gap in the number of students who obtained at least 5 GCE 'O' level passes, and in the number of students admitted to polytechnics and universities. Three key educational challenges faced by the Malay community and the responses to these challenges are discussed in this paper. The paper recommends that a framework should be introduced to the Malay students in Singapore to integrate secular and religious subjects within an Islamic conception of knowledge.

### **Singapore and its Educational System**

Some introductory information of Singapore and its education system is helpful before a discussion of the educational achievements of the Malay community in Singapore. With more than 4 million residents comprising Chinese (78%), Malays (14%), Indians (7%) and other races (1%), Singapore is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2000). The majority of the population are Buddhists (42.5%), followed by Muslims

(14.9%), Christians (14.6%), Taoists (8.5%), Hindus (4.0%), other religions (0.6%), and those who profess to have no religion (14.8%). Among the ethnic groups, the Malays are the most homogenous with 99.6 per cent of Malays who are Muslims. As almost all Malays are Muslims, this paper shall focus on Malay/Muslims, and use the two terms, “Malay” and “Muslims” synonymously. The ancestors of the Malays of Singapore arrived at the Malay Archipelago between 2,000 and 5,000 BC, and shared historical, cultural and linguistic ties with more than 200 million indigenous inhabitants in the region. When Singapore was under the British colonial rule from the nineteenth century, and became part of Malaya from 1963 to 1965, the Malay community in Singapore was the majority ethnic group. However, they became a minority when Singapore was separated from Malaya and became independent in 1965. The ruling party of Singapore, the People’s Action Party (PAP) officially adopts the guiding principles of multiracialism and meritocracy in an attempt to defuse any potential ethnic tensions. Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, the Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs, explains what these two principles mean in Singapore:

Multiracialism means all Singaporeans have room to practice their faith, and treat each other with respect. For Singapore to be strong and stable, all communities – big and small – must feel equally at home. The government runs the country impartially. Meritocracy means we recognize and reward people not because of who their parents are, or on account of their race or religion, but what they have to offer. But ours is not an extreme meritocracy, where the winners take all and the have-nots suffer in silence or worse still, slide down a vicious cycle. Ours is tempered with compassion so that those who need help get help, so that they too can progress as Singapore moves ahead (Ibrahim, 2006).

In terms of education, Malay/Muslim children could choose to receive full-time education at a national secular school or a “madrasah” (Islamic religious school). About one-third of Malay students in Singapore receive full-time education at madrasahs. Under the Compulsory Education Act enforced from 2003, all children must complete the mandatory six years of primary education in national secular schools which are under the Ministry of Education (MOE). All children will sit for the terminal examination known as Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) set by MOE at the end of six years. Madrasahs are not national schools and Malay children attending madrasahs are exempted from this Act. While Malay children could remain in madrasahs and not be forced to attend national schools, they must still meet the minimum standard set by the government. By 2008, all students in madrasahs must score at least 175 of a maximum of 300 points at the PSLE; otherwise they will be posted to another madrasah that meets the PSLE benchmark, or be transferred to a secular national school. Both religious subjects such as Islamic Education and Arabic language, and secular subjects such as English and Mathematics are taught in the madrasah. In most cases, students enrolled in these madrasahs sit for two examinations: internal examinations set by the madrasahs and national terminal exams - the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) for primary students, and the Cambridge Board General Certificate of Education (GCE) examinations for secondary and pre-university students. The GCE examinations are external examinations set by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) and they have been adopted by the Singapore government to check the educational quality provided by secondary schools, junior colleges and centralized institutes in Singapore. Full-time students at the madrasahs usually apply for

admission to overseas Islamic universities, although a small number who obtain good academic grades at the GCE'A' Level examinations choose to go to secular universities in Singapore. On the other hand, mosque madrasahs only offer basic religious subjects since its students are already attending full-time national secular schools and taking the national examinations as part of the requirements by MOE.

## **Educational Achievements of the Malay Community from 1980 to Early 2000s**

### ***Marginality and Relative Deprivation***

The persistent gap between the academic performance of the Malay community and other ethnic communities has led some writers to assert that the Malays in Singapore are living on the margins or periphery of society. For example, Lily Zubaidah Rahim (1998) argues that the Malay community is in a state of "marginality". Using statistics, she shows that the socio-economic and educational standing of the Malay community relative to other ethnic communities has weakened between 1957 and 1990. Rahim makes an important distinction between absolute gains and relative deprivation. She acknowledges that the Malays in Singapore have made absolute socio-economic and educational gains since the nation's independence in 1965. However, there is relative deprivation as the Malays "have not made significant gains in narrowing the socio-economic and educational gap with the non-Malay communities" (1998, p. 24). Making the same claim about the "marginality" of the Malay community, another writer, Wan Hussin Zoohri avers as follows:

Springing from their poor educational level, the Singapore Malays are unable to climb the socio-economic ladder as fast as the non-Malays. They stand on the periphery of Singapore's national development. As such their marginality in the total social dynamics of a multi-racial Singapore is of growing concern not only to themselves but also to the leadership (Zoohri, 1990, p. 66).

This definition of marginality as relative deprivation is important for our discussion as it means that a community may be prospering socially, economically and educationally, and still be in a state of marginality if it is not as prosperous as other ethnic communities in the country. It is important to distinguish this definition from the understanding of "marginality" as not making any absolute progress. The latter definition was used by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong when he commented on Rahim's book in 2001. On Rahim's claim about the marginality and marginalisation of the Malay community in Singapore, he said:

The answer lies in whether the Malay community has made significant progress over the years. If the Malay community has kept up progress with the other communities, it cannot be said to be marginalised. It is marginalised only if it is stuck in a stagnant pool, and their lives have not improved whilst others have (quoted in Ministry of Information and The Arts, 2001, p. 2).

Rahim (1998) rightfully points out that the statistics on the educational performance of the Malay community since Singapore's independence till 1990s show that the gap between the Malay community and other ethnic groups has not been significantly narrowed. She acknowledges that the educational gap has narrowed for Malay PSLE pass rate from 1991 to

1992, as there is a 6.5 per cent increase in pass rate for Malay students, as compared to 0.4 per cent for the Chinese, and 5 per cent for the Indians. (p. 200). However, she maintains that this in itself is not substantial enough to lift the Malay community out of the state of marginality. She explains:

Thus, to assert that the educational gap between the Malays and non-Malays was narrowing, just on the basis of the PSLE pass rates of Malays in the last few years, is a misrepresentation of the generally weak overall educational performance of Malays relative to non-Malays. Malay gains at the PSLE need to be similarly replicated at least at the ‘O’ level examinations (particularly 5 ‘O’ level passes) and ‘A’ level examinations before incipient signs of a narrowing in the educational gap are to have any qualitative meaning (Rahim, 1998, p. 202).

### ***Has the Educational Gap been Narrowed?***

As Rahim (1998) and Hussin (1990) use comparative statistics up to 1990s, it is useful to track the progress of the educational achievements of the Malay community vis-à-vis other ethnic communities from 1980 to 2004. In terms of the percentage of PSLE pupils eligible for secondary school, Table 1 shows that the Malays have made the greatest improvement, with 22 per cent increase from 1980 to 2004, compared with 13 per cent increase for the Chinese and 15 per cent increase for the Indians. The educational gap between the Malays and other ethnic groups has also been significantly narrowed. In 1980, the gap between the Malays and Chinese is 14 per cent; this has been reduced to 5 per cent in 2004. Likewise, the gap between the Malays and Indians is 9 per cent in 1980, and 2 per cent in 2004.

**Table 1: Percentage of PSLE Pupils Eligible for Secondary School**

	1980	1990	1999	2004
Malay	72	74	91	94
Chinese	86	91	98	99
Indian	81	80	94	96
Overall	84	88	96	97

Source: Ministry of Education

The educational gap for the percentage of Primary 1 cohort who completed secondary school has also narrowed between 1980 and 1999 (2004 figures are not available). Table 2 shows that the Malays have the highest increase with 51 per cent between 1980 and 1999, compared to 31 per cent for the Chinese and 41 per cent for the Indians. The gap between the Malays and Chinese has also narrowed from 27 per cent in 1980 to 7 per cent in 1999, while that between the Malays and Indians was narrowed from 9 per cent to 1 per cent.

**Table 2: Percentage of Primary 1 Cohort Completed Secondary School  
(Sat either 'N' or 'O' Level Examination)**

	1980	1990	1999
Malay	37	61	88
Chinese	64	84	95
Indian	46	68	87
Overall	58	80	93

Source: Ministry of Education

The percentage of Primary 1 cohort admitted to post-secondary institutions has also increased. In Singapore, post-secondary institutions offer the course of study after secondary education which provides preparation for university studies or technical training for direct entry into the labour market (Ministry of Education, 2004). There are three post-secondary institutions available for Secondary 4 or 5 pupils for further education/training. The first type, junior colleges (two-year course) and centralised institutes (three-year course) are for pupils who are academically inclined and have the necessary GCE 'O' level qualifications. This course of studies leads to the GCE 'A' level examination and for those who perform well, to one of the universities in Singapore. The second type, polytechnics cater for pupils with technical and commercial inclinations. A variety of courses are offered at the polytechnics, such as engineering, business studies, accountancy, mass communications, nursing, and digital media design. A small per cent of polytechnic graduates with good grades could pursue further tertiary education at the universities. The third type is the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) which offers technical-vocational courses for students who are the weakest academically and who generally do not qualify for junior colleges, centralised institutes and polytechnics. A small number of ITE pupils who do well in these courses can proceed to the polytechnics for diploma programmes. Table 3 shows that the percentage of Primary 1 Malay cohort admitted to post-secondary institutions has increased by 45 per cent from 1980 to 1999, compared with 32 per cent for the Chinese and 39 per cent for the Indians. The educational gap between the Malays and the Chinese has also halved from 30 per cent in 1980 to 17 per cent in 1999. For the gap between the Malays and the Indians, it has narrowed from 4 to 2 per cent.

**Table 3: Percentage of Primary 1 Cohort Admitted to Post-Secondary Institutions**

	1980	1990	1999
Malay	32	36	77
Chinese	62	65	94
Indian	36	39	75
Overall	56	59	89

Note: Post-Secondary Institutions refer to junior colleges/centralised institutes, polytechnics and Institute of Technical Education.

Source: Ministry of Education

The Malays have also made notable improvements at the GCE 'A' Level examinations. Table 4 shows that the percentage of GCE'A' pupils with at least 2 'A' and 2 'AO' level passes including the General Paper has increased by 37 from 1980 to 2004, compared with 25 per cent for the Chinese and 28 per cent for the Indians. The educational gap between the Malays and the Chinese has also narrowed from 19 per cent in 1980 to 7 per cent in 2004. The same applies to the gap between the Malays and the Indians, from 16 per cent in 1980 to 7 per cent in 2004.

**Table 4: Percentage of GCE 'A' Level Pupils with at least 2 'A' and 2 'AO' Level Passes, including General Paper**

	1980	1990	1999	2004
Malay	49	57	80	86
Chinese	68	78	87	93
Indian	65	71	89	93
Overall	67	77	87	92

Source: Ministry of Education

The above shows that in terms of academic performance at the primary, secondary and pre-university levels, the Malays have made substantial gains, and the educational gaps between the Malays and other ethnic groups have narrowed noticeably. Based on Rahim's definition of marginality as relative deprivation and her argument that any gains should be measured by the narrowing of educational gaps, the results from 1980 to 2004 shows that the Malay community has indeed narrowed the gaps significantly in the above areas.

However, it is important to note that the educational gap between the Malay community and other ethnic communities has not been narrowed in all areas. First, the Malays have not made relative gains for admission to polytechnics and universities. While Table 3 shows the high percentage of Primary 1 cohort admitted to post-secondary institutions, the figure includes pupils admitted to junior colleges/centralised institutes, polytechnics and Institute of Technical Education. As mentioned earlier, the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) caters for students who are the weakest academically and who generally do not qualify for junior colleges, centralised institutes and polytechnics. Pupils who have performed better at the GCE 'O' or 'N' level examinations would prefer to go to the university via a junior college or centralised institute, or polytechnic. Table 5 shows that the Malays have improved in its percentage of Primary 1 cohort who are admitted to the polytechnic or university from 1.3 per cent in 1980 to 28 per cent in 1999. However, this 27 per cent improvement pales in comparison to the improvements made by the Chinese and Indians, and is also way below the national average. The educational gap between the Malay community and other ethnic communities, rather than narrowed, has widened from 11.7 per cent to 40 per cent in 1999.

**Table 5: Percentage of Primary 1 Cohort Admitted to Polytechnic/University**

	1980	1990	1999
Malay	1.3	13	28
Chinese	13	42	68
Indian	4.3	18	37
Overall	10	36	59

Source: Ministry of Education

The gap has also widened when we look at the percentage of Primary 1 cohort admitted to university. Table 6 shows that the gap between the Malays and Chinese has increased from 5.4 per cent in 1980 to 20.8 per cent in 1999. The percentage of 4.2 per cent for the Malays in 1999 is also way below the national average of 21 per cent.

**Table 6: Percentage of Primary 1 Cohort Admitted to University**

	1980	1990	1999
Malay	0.5	2.9	4.2
Chinese	5.9	17	25
Indian	3.5	8.0	10
Overall	4.9	15	21

Source: Ministry of Education

When we compare Tables 3, 5 and 6, a likely explanation is that a majority of the Primary 1 Malay pupils who completed secondary schools did not go to the polytechnics or universities but to the Institute of Education (ITE). This view is corroborated when we examine the quality of passes for pupils who completed secondary school. Table 7 shows that while the percentage of Malay pupils with at least 5 'O' level passes has improved from 45 per cent in 1991 to 59 per cent, the gap between the Malays and other ethnic communities has not narrowed. In fact, the gap has not changed much, from a 29 per cent gap between the percentage of Malays and Chinese in 1991, to a 28 per cent gap in 2004. For the academic performance between Malays and Indians, the gap between them has in fact increased from 10 per cent in 1991 to 15 per cent in 2004.

**Table 7: Percentage of Pupils with at least 5 'O' Level Passes**

	1991	1999	2004
Malay	45	49	59
Chinese	74	81	87
Indian	55	66	74
Overall	70	76	83



Note: Number refers to school candidates who sat for GCE 'O' Level examination

Source: Ministry of Education

According to Rahim, "Malay gains at the PSLE need to be similarly replicated at least at the 'O' level examinations (particularly 5 'O' level passes) and 'A' level examinations before incipient signs of a narrowing in the educational gap are to have any qualitative meaning" (1998, p. 202). By that yardstick, it appears that the Malays have narrowed the gaps for PSLE performance (see Table 1) and GCE 'A' level performance (see Table 4), but not for the GCE 'O' level performance (see Table 7). Taken together, it is fair to say that there are encouraging signs of a narrowing in the educational gap between the Malay community and other ethnic communities in Singapore over the past two decades.

## **Key Educational Challenges, Responses and Recommendation**

### ***Key Educational Challenges***

There are three main challenges for the Malays in Singapore to close the educational gap between them and other ethnic communities. The first educational challenge is to reduce the relatively high attrition rate among the Malay students enrolled in national schools. Every year 500 Malay primary 1 students opted out of the national school system; this is five or six per cent of the Malay cohort, compared with 1.5 per cent and 4.6 per cent of the Chinese and Indian cohorts respectively (*The Straits Times*, 18 June 1999, quoted in Bakar, 2006, p. 37).

Related to the first challenge is the challenge to improve the number of passes and quality of grades at the GCE 'O' level examinations for the Malay students, and enable more Malay students to be admitted to the polytechnics and universities. To achieve this, it is important for the Malay students to set high academic aspirations for themselves. The correlation between the Malay students' performance in the secondary schools and post-secondary aspirations is pointed out in a study by Tan and Ho (2001). In their survey of 89 Malay students from pre-university centres and polytechnics in 1999, they found out that the Malay students are more likely to opt for a pre-university centre to sit for the GCE 'A' Level examinations, leading to an university degree if they have experienced success and confidence in their academic subjects in primary and secondary schools. This means that the key to increasing the number of Malay university graduates is through the improvement of Malay academic performance in primary and secondary schools (Tan and Ho, 2001). The Malay community needs to focus their efforts on helping the Malay students improve their grades especially in English, Mathematics and Science in primary and secondary schools. In particular, assistance is needed for Malay students who come from low-income families.

The third educational challenge concerns the unsatisfactory academic performance of students studying full-time at the madrasah. A number of writers have pointed out that compared to secular national schools, the madrasahs are not as well-equipped in terms of resources, facilities, qualified teachers and materials to help their students excel academically (see collection of essays in Rahman and Lai, 2006). This was a point underlined by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in his speech to the Malay leaders in 2001. He reminded them that the Malays must do well in English, the mathematics and science subjects - subjects that "have the most application and relevance for university and polytechnic education" (quoted in Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2001, p. 4). A worrying trend is that 50 to 60 per cent of each cohort of madrasah students do not make it to Secondary 4 (*The Straits*

*Times*, 1 March 1998; *Berita Harian*, 23 August 1999; both quoted in Bakar, 2006, p. 43). Then Prime Minister commented on the future of Malay children:

Do you want them to grow up all being religious teachers and religious preachers, or do you want them to be trained in IT, to be engineers, doctors, architects, professionals? If the *madrassahs* were training 100 or 200 students a year, I think we can live with that. But if you are training 400, 500, 1000, 2,000 in full-time *madrassahs* or in full-time religious education supplemented by some secular subjects, what will be the future of the Malay community? (quoted in [Aljunied and Hussin, 2005](#), pp. 257-258).

### ***Responses and Recommendation***

In response to these challenges, a Malay/Muslim self-help body, Yayasan Mendaki, and the government have introduced a number of measures to help the Malay community. Yayasan Mendaki (Council on Education of Muslim Children) is the organisation that is mainly responsible for the educational developments of the Malay community in Singapore. Established in 1982 with the support of the Singapore government, Mendaki has introduced a number of programmes to help Malay/Muslim students stay in mainstream schools and improve academically, especially in English, Mathematics and Science (Yeyasan Mendaki, 2002). Since 1992, Mendaki has been offering intensive English Language course annually for Malay/Muslim students weak in English (defined as those who score between 55% and 65% in exams). It offers Lower Primary Maths Programme (LPM) for primary school Malay/Muslim pupils, and SPEED Programme for Secondary 5 students to help them pass their English and Mathematics at the GCE 'O' Level examinations. Under the MENDAKI Tuition Scheme (MTS), Science classes for Primary 6 and Secondary 4 students will be introduced from 2006 to help improve the performance of Malays in Science at the PSLE and GCE 'O' level. What is noteworthy about Mendaki's programmes in recent years is its attempt to target at Malay/Muslim children from low-income families. For example, Mendaki has also set up an Education Trust Fund with over S\$8.5 million to provide financial assistance for pre-school education among the low-income families. This ensures that children from poor Malay/Muslim families are not deprived of a pre-school education due to financial difficulties and low socio-economic capital. To encourage more Malay/Muslim students from low income families to attend the Science classes, Mendaki will subsidise 50 per cent of the course fees for students with a household income of less than S\$2,000. Knowing the importance of reaching out to parents from the low income bracket, Mendaki has also launched "Cahaya M", a learning centre aimed at helping these parents with children aged between three and 12 years to teach Mathematics, English and thinking skills to their children. Time will tell if these programmes will lead to a narrowing of educational gap between the Malay community and other ethnic communities at the GCE 'O' level examination and in the number of students admitted to polytechnics and universities.

To improve the educational standards in *madrassahs*, the Singapore government has introduced reforms for full-time Islamic education since 2001. The goal is to prepare students at the *madrassahs* for the future as forward-thinking religious leaders or professionals in another field of their choice (Albakri, 2006). Special attention is devoted to the strengthening of the teaching of English, mathematics and science in *madrassahs* so as to equip Malay students with the life skills needed to get ahead in a competitive environment (*The Straits Times*, 10 March 2006). The reforms include the production of the syllabi, textbooks and

materials for 12 years of education from primary 1 to pre-university 2, involving 156 book and 72 teachers' guidebooks at a total cost of S\$7.3 million. These materials will be used by primary 1 students in madrasahs from 2008 although four madrasahs have started using the materials as part of the trial project. Instead of Arabic, the medium of instruction in the madrasahs will be English.

While the efforts by Mendaki and the Singapore government are relevant for the Malay community to improve its academic performance and narrow the gap, what is missing is a thorough review of Islamic education. There is a danger that the additional programmes offered by Mendaki and reforms at the madrasahs may be piece-meal in nature and do not address the root cause of the problem for the Malay community. A number of writers have observed that there is a lack of integration between the secular subjects and religious subjects learned by Malay students (e.g. see Hashim, 1996; Rahman, 2006; Alatas, 2006). As long as subjects such as Mathematics and Science are taught as "secular" subjects and unrelated to Islamic studies, it is difficult for Malay students to fully appreciate and learn these subjects well. Interestingly, Islamic scholars have pointed out that modern subjects such as Mathematics and Science are not antithetical to the Islamic conception of knowledge. For example, Hashim (1996), referring to the works of well-known Islamic writers such as Ibn Khaldun (1969), Seyyed Hossin Nasr (1978), Hassan Langgulong (1983), and Osman Bakar (1992), notes that Sciences and Mathematics have always featured prominently in Islam. Similarly, Alatas (2006) argues that the prevalent distinction between religious and secular education among Muslims is unhelpful as it tends to view "secular knowledge" such as physical, natural and social sciences negatively. He adds that Muslim scholars in the past have distinguished between traditional and intellectual sciences which is preferred as it suggests that all knowledge - either given directly by revelation or obtained through intellect or sense perception - is important. The long term solution to help Malay students improve academically in national schools and madrasahs is a framework devised and taught to them by their religious leaders so that the students can synthesise secular and religious knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that while the Malay community in Singapore has improved in its educational achievements, it is still trailing behind other ethnic communities particularly in the number of students admitted to polytechnics and universities. The need to help the Malay community in higher education and employment is given greater urgency when we look at the quest by many countries to prepare their pupils for a globalised and technology-driven world. The educational system in Singapore is based on the human capital and economic rationalist approach to education. Such a technocratic approach views education primarily as an economic resource to be utilised and invested for the economic development of the nation. A strong foundation in mathematics, sciences and languages, coupled with thinking skills, is crucial for Singapore to ride on the tide of economic boom in a knowledge economy (Tan, 2006). This means that all the ethnic communities need to progress and no ethnic community should persistently lag behind other ethnic communities. The educational disparity between the Malay community and other ethnic communities is not a "Malay problem"; it is a national concern that is connected to the social, economic, and political challenges confronting Singapore in a globalised world. The task for the Singapore government is to balance the need to promote multiracialism and meritocracy with the need to help the Malay community narrow the educational gap for post-secondary achievements (Tan, 1995). This balancing act

is especially crucial in a multi-ethnic country such as Singapore where inter-ethnic comparisons in socio-economic and educational achievements are sensitive yet unavoidable.

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