

**Perceptions of Singaporean Malay-Muslim Youths Participating in  
Community Outreach Programmes:  
Capacity Building for Critical Thinking?**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis documents the researcher's exploratory investigation into the effectiveness of community learning programmes, run primarily by local social welfare organizations, in building up the critical thinking capacities of Malay-Muslim youths in Singapore. The premise is that a lack of critical thinking competencies among members of the Malay-Muslim community at large has contributed to the many problems that they are currently facing such as negative stereotyping, the lag in educational attainment and the inability to match the socio-economic progress achieved by the other ethnic groups in the country. Essentially, this research points to such issues as resulting from the prevalence of negative mental models within the Malay worldview. Underpinned by an eclectic research framework based on the theories of Freire, Giddens and Bourdieu, the study begins by seeking Malay-Muslim youths' perceptions of issues facing their community. However, what is more crucial is that it asks these youths to relate their personal experiences in participating in the activities conducted by these organisations and how they subsequently were, or were not, 'conscientised'. The research sees such effects as an indication of capacity building for critical thinking. Based on the participants' responses, this study has identified five experiential categories which, when encountered by the youths, played a role in conscientising and subsequently building up their capacities for thinking critically of themselves and their community. The findings of the research will now be shared with all relevant parties interested in such issues. Several recommendations have also been subsequently formulated.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

AFYS	-	Adopt a Family and Youth Scheme
AMP	-	Association of Muslim Professionals
aLIVE	-	Learning Islamic Values Everyday
CLF	-	Community Leaders' Forum
GCE	-	General Certificate Examinations
GDP	-	Gross Domestic Product
IBDP	-	International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme
IIU	-	International Islamic University
JC	-	Junior College
LSP	-	Learning Support Programme
MLDDS	-	Malay Literary Drama and Debating Society
MMO	-	Malay/Muslim Organisation
MMP	-	Malay/Muslim Member of Parliament
MOE	-	Ministry of Education
MUIS	-	Majlis Ugama Islam Singapore (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore)

MYIS	-	Muslim Youth Intelligentsia Series
NE	-	National Education
NGO	-	Non-Governmental Organisation
NUS	-	National University of Singapore
PM	-	Prime Minister
PSLE	-	Primary School Leaving Examination
SEL	-	Social Emotional Learning
TTFS	-	Tertiary Tuition Fee Subsidy
VWO	-	Volunteer Welfare Organisation





## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Context of the Study

This research project was initiated because of what I see as a current need in the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore. It is a timely and opportunistic endeavour as it comes about during a period declared by leaders of the ethnic minority group as a ‘community in crisis’.

Between 2006 and 2009, local newspapers reported a series of horrific deaths resulting from the abuse of very young Malay children and leading to a situation which has been described by these leaders as “an embarrassment” (Chen and Rasul, 2009) to the ethnic minority community in this small, multi-racial nation-state. The first incident involved two year-old Nur Asyura Mohamed Fauzi, better known as Nonoi, who died in 2006 after she was dunked repeatedly into a pail of water by her stepfather. Over the next three years, four similar cases of homicide were reported involving Malay parents or trusted guardians committing abuse on young children under their care. The perpetrators involved in each of these cases are currently facing trial or have already been sentenced for their crimes. Nonoi’s stepfather, for instance, was executed in 2009 after having exhausted all his appeals.

While it can be noted that the primary function of these tabloids is to sensationalise so as to boost sales of their printed products, the outsider however may not be aware of the effects that such reports will have in fuelling or sustaining the negative public perception of the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore. Macrae, Milne and Bodenhausen (1994) explain that once stereotypes are formed, social perceivers will continue to focus on them to form impressions

of and make judgements about others, even when processing capacity or relevant information is scarce (cited in Corcoran, Hundhammer and Mussweiler, 2009, pg. 1008).

Ignoring risks of further sensationalising the issue, Yaacob Ibrahim, the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs made the remark that when young married couples break up, it is their children who often become victims of abuse. He emphasised that if such problems involving members of the Malay community are not dealt with, an underclass might develop with problems “that will be more difficult for us to deal with later” (Chen and Rasul, 2009).

Other issues relating to what is perceived as the perennial ‘Malay Problem’ subsequently made their way into the national limelight. For instance, comments were made over the fact that in recent years, there have been more divorces and remarriages among young Malay couples between the ages of 20 to 24 years. It was highlighted that the Malays are encountering difficulties in keeping their marriages and families strong. Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, in his speech at the official launch of the National Family Week on 29 May 2005 sees this as a worrying trend as divorce, resulting in broken families, is in his view the root of social problems in the community. He pointed this out while emphasising the need to teach the younger generation the importance of building strong and stable family institutions. He warned that weak family values will lead to negative implications in the long run (‘Building Resilient Family Institutions’, 2005).

The most jarring issue that has become a hot topic of debate is the fact that the socio-economic progress of the Malay community has continuously remained statistically poorer when contrasted against the progress of the Chinese and Indian communities along the same range of indicators (Singh, 2010). Apart from impacting the family unit, this has been related

to other negative outcomes such as the lag in educational attainment as well as the rising levels of crime and deviance attributed to the ethnic group (Toh, 2010). An earlier article published in 2008 by the Monetary Authority of Singapore has advised that

“The Malay-Muslim community is finding it difficult to break-free from the low income trap. This breeds discontent. This is further aggravated by the fact that, instead of providing a helping hand, the government openly links Malays’ lag in economic and educational achievements to the ‘backwardness’ of the Malay culture which holds on to feudalistic values and lacks the spirit of hard work” (Dhamani, pg. 20).

Prominent leaders from within the community have begun to make clearer their demands to ensure progress for the ethnic group. For instance, in a question put forward to the Minister of Education during a parliament sitting, Mr. Zaqy Mohamed, a Malay Member of Parliament asked, “What more can be done to help Malay students progress at the same rate, if not better, compared to their peers from other race groups?”(Parliamentary Question by Zaqy Mohamed, 2010).

The sudden thrust in highlighting the issues faced by the Malays in effect led to a renewed sense of urgency in looking for possible ways to resolve the community’s woes. This has resulted in several organisations undertaking initiatives aimed towards achieving such objectives. For example, Mendaki (translated as ‘Ascend’), a Malay-Muslim based self-help group and the National University of Singapore (NUS) announced that they were embarking on a joint research project to understand better factors afflicting the Malay-Muslim community that can end up with the creation of dysfunctional families (Hussaini, 2009). A Malay-Muslim charity group, The Prophet Muhammad’s Birthday Memorial Scholarship

Fund Board (LBKM), on the other hand, took on a more novel approach. It organised a competition for university students to look into the problems faced by the Malay community and to offer solutions. The team with the best submission was awarded a cash prize of SGD 3,000. The competition, called the LBKM Socialive! Challenge, was open to all those in the tertiary institutions including non-Malays and Singaporeans studying overseas (Suhaimi, 2010).

In due course, these approaches will add to the available literature that delves into the possible factors which may explain the problem of underachievement and underdevelopment experienced by the Malay community as well as the various remedial actions undertaken to tackle them (see Mendaki Policy Digest 2007, 2008). Hapipi in his article *Changing Boundaries: Symbolic Power and Malay Community Empowerment* (2008, pg. 2-3) described these studies as encompassing several levels. For instance, he mentions that research looking into structural aspects examines the effects resulting from the Malays' heritage of colonial policies and the notions which they are based on (Alatas, S. H., 1972 and 1977; Li, 1989; Alatas, S.F., 2003; Noor Aisha, 2006), policies oriented towards ethnic differentiation or perceived cultural and biological deficits (Li, 1989; Lai, 1995; Suratman, 2004) and political and intellectual under-representation (Alatas, S.H. 1977; Clammer, 1981). At the more individual level, Hapipi cites studies which analyse factors such as the Malays' coping strategies in facing adversity (Zoothri, 1987; Stimpfl, 1997;), impact and adjustment due to post-Separation legacy (Li, 1989; Abdullah, 1992), contestation and bureaucratisation of religious and cultural practices (Chandra, M.,1998; Maaruf, 1999), identity struggles and negotiation (Hussin, 1987; Watson, 1996; Kadir, 2004), ambiguous leadership (Alatas, S.H., 1971, 1972 and 1977; Maaruf,1988), negotiations and issues relating to education policy

(Kassim, 1979; Lily, Z.R.,1999) and value orientation and life choices (Bedlington, 1971; Watson, 1996; Stimpfl, 1997; Sloane, 1999).

Apart from perhaps the last mentioned research theme, the literature indicates that there has been a lack of discussion on practical measures that deal with the aspect of enhancing the critical thinking capacities of members of the community. Detractors may argue that such issues fall under the auspices of public education and therefore events such as debates, forums and talks which have been frequently organised by Malay-Muslim organisations will have catered to these needs. However, upon closer analysis, it can be seen that the focus of these activities has been mainly geared towards knowledge transmission. As such, while these one-off events may have served to enhance the individual's level of intellectual awareness, they are not consistent or holistic enough to develop and sustain the people's ability to think in a more critical manner. It is thus hoped that the outcomes of this research will contribute to the literature on this particular aspect of the ethnic community's development.

Under these circumstances, the theme of this study is thus very much in tune with the perceptions of current community leaders. This has resulted in the enthusiastic support that this research has subsequently received.

## **1.2. Personal Context**

This doctoral research started off on an 'ethnically-neutral' tone. The objective then was to analyse the differences in learning outcomes between a pedagogy directed towards behavioural conditioning as opposed to a more purposeful strategy of inculcating moral values via the use of critical thinking processes against the backdrop of the Singapore education landscape. In this aspect, the hypothesis was that in the area of values education,

teachers in Singapore, perhaps falling back on our Asian culture, may be placing too much emphasis on physical and mental routines at the expense of developing the critical thinking abilities of our students.

Several experiences and incidents however have resulted in a shift on the focus of this research. The first was my participation in a series of Interfaith workshops and seminars organized by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) in 2007. In one of the breakout sessions, the following extract taken from a report in a local paper was surfaced to facilitate dialogue and discussion.

“A Muslim girl was accidentally scalded by a Chinese bak kut teh (pork ribs soup) seller. The situation deteriorated when in the confrontation which ensued, the stall holder was hurt in a scuffle with the girl's angry mother...” (Lin, 2007).

The consumption of pork or pork-based products is considered ‘haram’ or forbidden in Islam. In Singapore’s multi-ethnic, multi-faith society, such religious taboos are maintained, usually with relative discretion by most Muslims. In fact, many non-Muslim Singaporeans are also aware of such prohibitions practiced in Islam and take precautions to respect the beliefs of their Muslim friends through actions such as refraining from consuming pork-based dishes when having meals together. However, in the reported case, it culminated into a situation in which the child’s mother became distraught and violent due to what she perceived to be not only physical harm but more importantly spiritual ‘contamination’ inflicted upon her child. This probably resulted in her overly-aggressive and probably ‘unthinking’ response to the accident.

Recognizing the inherent danger of the incident escalating into an explosive racial divide, the report further stated that community leaders quickly intervened and, with gifts and comforting words, managed to appease both parties and quickly resolve the situation. At a public event following the incident, George Yeo, a government minister and the Member of Parliament overseeing the affected constituency, spoke on the need to promote racial harmony by citing the incident as showing that prejudices, when given the opportunity, can feed on one another: “Suddenly, all the established thinking we're used to evaporates” (Lin, 2007).

Though members of the interfaith discussion group, comprising adherents of the Islamic, Christian, Taoist and Sikh faiths, provided viewpoints which were guarded and politically correct, I could not help but ponder the extent of how particular mindsets may have served to inhibit the individual's ability to think critically and rationally.

The fact that I am a Malay, a Muslim and a parent of a young child - a role and identity I share with the mother of the little girl - made me wonder if this issue affects members of my community more than the others. Was the mother thinking independently or was she merely conforming to the current ‘groupthink’? (Mok and Morris, 2010).

Rudinow and Barry in their book *Invitation to Critical Thinking* (2008) mention several factors which can lead to lapses in the cognitive reasoning process. Among these, characteristics such as ethnocentrism, presuppositions, unexamined assumptions and self-deception can perhaps be singled out as playing a more significant role resulting in the unfortunate incident taking place. Other writers such as Greenwald and Banaji (1995) point to individuals' personal attitudes as the driving force behind their actions. However, they see a need to differentiate between explicit attitudes, which are depicted via traditional self-report

measures, to that of implicit attitudes, which are automatically activated by the mere presence (actual or symbolic) of the ‘attitude object’ and commonly function without a person's full awareness or control. Dovidio, Kawakami and Gaertner (2002) further explain that social problems arise as attitude, in the form of implicit prejudice, tends to influence difficult-to-control responses. These may then culminate in intergroup tension and discrimination.

Thus, the overriding concern is that Singaporean Malay-Muslims in general may be similarly predisposed to such lapses in critical thinking leading to unconstructive behaviour. Personally, as an educator in the midst of the uneasy geopolitical situation facing many followers of Islam today, I believe that embarking on a research project aimed at building up the critical thinking capacities of Malay-Muslims will not only benefit the ethnic group, but Singapore society at large.

My interest in focussing my intellectual energies specifically on Malay-Muslim youths however stems from a conversation that I had with several Malay-Muslim teacher colleagues on the issue of school discipline. Looking back on our teaching careers, many of us, especially those who had previously taught in neighbourhood schools, share the perception that a higher than proportionate number of disciplinary offences were committed by Malay-Muslim students. We questioned why this can be so especially since Islamic teachings, compared to those of the other faiths, are as rigid, if not more, in their instruction on positive character and actions. It does seem that values imparted to these students in their religious classes have somehow failed to translate themselves into their everyday decision-making processes. In the discussion, some Malay-Muslim teachers attribute the source of the phenomenon to the issue of ‘class’ and its associated mindsets and worldviews. I personally formed a hypothesis which factors in the behavioural conditioning processes and its tendency

to suppress the ability to think critically. It implies factors which go beyond class status. While such spontaneous discussions, from a scientific perspective, are hardly proof of actuality, they nevertheless opened my mind in wanting to embark on research which will investigate such a phenomenon.

One final impetus which triggered my motivation to embark on this research endeavour can be traced back to George Yeo's post-speech answer to a question relating to the concern over the rising income disparities among different ethnic groups. The Minister was reported to have said that this was inevitable because *some communities* respond more effectively to global opportunities. However, he urged those who have found success to help the less privileged. As he clearly pointed out, "The more we surge ahead, the more we must help those left behind" (Lin, 2007).

This may have been an innocent remark on the part of a government official. However, reflecting on myself as an example of a Malay-Muslim who has achieved a measure of academic success despite facing obstacles, I feel this to be a continuous and sometimes unfair generalization on the perceived shortcomings of my community.

For someone coming from my generation, I see myself as having made a breakthrough of sorts – the first among my line of relations to complete junior college education, and then the first to qualify and subsequently graduate from university, and again then continuing to further pursue postgraduate studies. Though several reasons may be accounted for in making possible these achievements, the most significant is, in my mind, the motivation inspired by the success of a graduate uncle, whom I saw as someone who rose above these stereotypes.

The journey to where I am today has also made me cross paths with many other Malay individuals who are also achievers in their own right. This has further inspired me to want to help others.

These personal experiences therefore tells me that negative perceptions directed at the Malay community still exist and so the search for a resolution must again be addressed.

### **1.3. Research Framework**

This thesis documents my exploratory investigation into the impact of community learning programmes conducted primarily by social welfare organisations in building-up the critical thinking capacities of Malay-Muslim youths in Singapore. It roots itself in the field of sociology but draws from the many fields of knowledge encompassing aspects of history, social psychology, anthropology, economics and political science. The premise of this investigation is that there is a lack of critical thinking competencies among members of the Malay-Muslim community at large and this has contributed to the many problems that they are currently facing such as the inability to attain equivalent levels of socio-economic progress when compared with the other ethnic communities in the country. The research discusses various theoretical reasons for this state of affairs, ranging from the highly controversial argument pointing to a deficient gene pool, to religious practices, to the cultural deficit thesis. However, in the final analysis, the study zooms in on issues relating to structural deficiencies which, in the context of this research, refer to both to the physical such as those relating to the administrative and procedural, and the cognitive which pertains to worldviews and mental models. In line with the nature of this research however, the ensuing investigation will focus on the latter theme.

Specifically, the arguments to be presented in this thesis will be in line with Anthony Giddens' hypothesis which attributes the cause of such problems to 'structures' and 'agency' that work in particular ways in a specific community. Added to this, Pierre Bourdieu highlights the weaknesses existing within the 'internal' structures of community life. From the perspective of the research, these theories will be evidenced by certain negative outcomes perceived to have stemmed from the Malays' culture, attitude and beliefs. Reinforced with external structures which are argued to be already disadvantageous, the research explains the situation as serving to create negative mental models which have 'conditioned' the Malays to 'accept' their status in mainstream society. The study then turns to Paulo Freire's framework of using emancipatory and transformatory education as an intervention programme to build up the Malay-Muslims' capacity for thinking more critically via the conscientisation process.

Based on Freire's concept of public education, the study rationalises that the way to mitigate negative mental models existing in the Singaporean Malay-Muslim worldview is by formulating curricula which engage them to develop a strong habit for thinking more critically of themselves and the status of their community. However, in the context of a national ideology which declares itself secular, meritocratic and ethnically non-partisan, Singapore national schools are seen as being unable to cater to such objectives due to this inherent, ethnic-specific approach. This is thus the reason why community welfare organisations, especially Malay/Muslim-based institutions, are now seen as entities which can make this approach possible. This thesis will pick up on this issue when it embarks on a discussion of the politics of education in Singapore as part of its evaluation of emancipatory and transformatory education as well as its analysis of the research data.

Though the study begins by seeking the Malay-Muslim youths' perceptions of issues facing their community, what is more important is that it gets these youths to also relate their personal experiences with the activities conducted by these organisations and how they personally felt the effects of conscientisation, if any. The research points to such effects as a step toward capacity building for critical thinking.

The study also seeks feedback from the respondents to understand how the programmes experienced by these youths can be improved. The findings of the research will then be shared with all relevant parties interested in such issues. Several recommendations will also be subsequently formulated.

In its essence, while the reader can look forward to the conceptual eclecticism making up this research framework, what is most important to note in this thesis is the emancipatory paradigm within which this study is situated.

#### **1.4. Organisation of the Thesis**

The thesis is organised into eight separate chapters. Chapter One reveals the context of the investigation as well as my personal motivations in wanting to conduct the study. It also provides an overview of the research framework as well as a description of how this thesis is structured. Chapter Two introduces the Malays as a minority ethnic group in mainstream Singapore society. It begins with a historical backdrop of the community and then provides data which describes the community's lack of progress. This is followed by a discussion of several factors which have been put forth as reasons explaining the situation. It concludes with an explanation for the presence of mental models which have been hindering the progress of the community. Chapter Three discusses the nature of Emancipatory and

Transformatory education. The chapter explains that the true objectives of the method will not be attainable so long as the approach is made to fit in to the existing curriculum of mainstream Singapore schools due to the lack of alignment with the current education model. It elaborates on how Emancipatory and Transformatory education contribute to the conscientisation of the individual which can then have the effect of kick starting the process of capacity building for critical thinking. The research paradigm and methodology is explained in Chapter Four. The chapter elaborates on the research framework through explanations of the research question, research design, the methods adopted for data collection and analysis as well as the precautions taken in adhering to the ethical guidelines laid down for the research.

Chapter Five serves to provide an overview of the organisations which are involved in the research. In doing so, it takes the opportunity of describing the political environment in which these organisations operate and the challenges they face in fulfilling their missions. Chapter Six functions to present the data which has been collected. The information is categorised based on the thematic content analysis framework where each group of responses is supported by relevant ad verbatim transcripts of the discussion sessions and reinforced by data collected using the other data collection methods, specifically the life history interviews and the participant observation exercises. Chapter Seven provides a further discussion of the groupings created in the previous chapter and subsequently transforms these into specific themes which are then finalised and presented as the five experiential categories that may result in capacity building for critical thinking. These experiential categories thus represent the main findings of this research. Chapter Eight serves as the conclusion chapter for this thesis. It begins with a summary of the research findings via a revisit of the Research Question before proceeding with a discussion of the possible limitations of the study and

recommending solutions based on the findings. Opportunities for further research are then deliberated. The concluding segment of this chapter discusses the invaluable experiences which I had gained in undertaking this study and how I look forward to developing myself further as a researcher.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE SINGAPORE MALAYS

#### 2.1. Introduction

This chapter provides an introduction to the minority Malay community in Singapore. It begins with a brief history of the people, their origins and their early migration patterns throughout the Southeast Asian region. It then highlights the overriding concerns and assumptions which will shape this research. This specifically points to evidence which suggests that there has been a lack of critical consciousness and a failure to undertake affirmative action by members of the Malay-Muslim community at large with regards to improving their current status quo. Subsequently, this has contributed to the overall lag in their socio-economic progress.

In this chapter, various reasons for this phenomenon are discussed. They range from the highly controversial debates relating to the issue of a deficient gene pool, to interpretations of religious doctrine, to the biological or cultural deficit thesis. However, at its conclusion, this chapter focuses on the existence of negative mental models acting as an inhibiting factor leading to the Malays' failure to develop a habit of thinking in a more critical mode during the conduct of their daily lives.

Anthony Giddens' argument attributing the cause of such concerns to the interaction of 'structures' and 'agency' that may be 'unfavourable' to a specific community is initially considered. However, Pierre Bourdieu's thesis points more to weaknesses existing in the 'internal' features of a community. In the context of Singaporean Malay life, this specifically points to 'faults' pertaining to the ethnic group's practice of their culture, attitude

and beliefs. Reinforced with already disadvantageous external structures, the chapter will then explain how this situation has served to create mental models which may have ‘conditioned’ the Malays to ‘accept’ their status in society. The chapter then turns its discussion to Paulo Freire who, in acknowledging the impact of these factors within his own social contexts, proposes an intervention programme by way of education to build up capacities for critical thinking. This, he proposes, will ultimately lead a community towards the process of change.

## **2.2. The Malays in Singapore**

The Malays in Singapore make up approximately 14 percent of the country’s total population. Today, a majority from the community is able to trace their origins to Java, Indonesia with an additional 15 to 20 percent from Bawean Island, situated in the Java Sea, north of the city of Surabaya (Aljunied, 2002). The Javanese settled down during the period of British colonial rule from the mid-nineteenth century to just after World War II as they were attracted both by urban wages promising a higher standard of living as well as the offer of freedom from the constraints of their native villages where they often occupied the lower rungs of the economic and social order. The official government census defines being Malay as any “persons of Malay or Indonesian origin, such as Javanese, Boyanese, Bugis, etc” (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010). This implies that, similar to the Chinese and the Indians, members of this ethnic group are also descendants of immigrants and thus share similar historical status. The difference however, lies with the fact that unlike the other ethnic groups in the nation-state, the Malays are recognized as the indigenous inhabitants of the land as their ancestors came from within the region, specifically peninsular Malaysia, Sumatra, Java, and the other islands of the Indonesian archipelago. This recognition is enshrined in Article 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Attorney-General Office of Singapore, 1965).

With further separation and segregation of the ethnic group brought about by decolonization and the creation of new nation-states, the Malays of today are now settled within geographical boundaries making up the dominant majority of the population in nations such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei and Malaysia. Others form minority groups and have become citizens of countries such as Singapore and Thailand.

Syed Hussein Alatas (1977) made the comment that in the past, the British colonialists had looked upon the Malays of Malaya, which then included Singapore, as simple farmers and fishermen with strong religious faith and a 'racial' tendency toward loyalty and deference.<sup>1</sup> They thus showed preference in recruiting the Malays for positions in the police and armed forces, and for unskilled positions in the public service. The official Singapore census conducted in 1931 reflected that 18 percent of Malay men and women at the time earned their living as fishermen and another 12 percent as farmers. The remaining 70 percent held jobs in the urban cash economy; either in low ranking public service positions or as gardeners, drivers, or small-scale artisans and retailers (Vlieland, 1932).

Three decades on, official records taken in 1961 recorded an increase to this figure with more than half of Singapore's Malays depending on employment in the public sector (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2009). Although the colonial stereotype of the Malays as rural people with rural attitudes persisted, the Malays in Singapore, unlike their Malaysian counterparts especially after the Separation<sup>2</sup>, were for the most part no more rural than any

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<sup>1</sup> Under the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, Singapore and Malaya share a common legacy of being colonies of the British in the Far East. The colony was dissolved in 1946 with Singapore becoming a separate Crown Colony still administered by the British while Malaya gained semi-independent status as the Malayan Union (a predecessor of modern-day Malaysia). Read Lau (2003) for more insight into the issue.

<sup>2</sup> In order to expedite its independence from the British, an agreement was made where Singapore was merged to become part of Malaysia which had already achieved full independence in 1957. However, the union lasted only for a short period of

other citizen of the newly independent nation-state (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2009). Malay identity however became increasingly couched in religious terms, with being Malay taken almost as a synonym for being Muslim, and with most Malay organizations then taking on a more religious facade (Lian, 2001).

Nevertheless, as pointed out by Imram Mohamed, Chairman of the Association of Muslim Professionals (2006), although they are presently very much a part of Singapore's modernizing society, it has become obvious that the Malays, as a minority ethnic group, are today seen by the others as occupying the bottom rungs of the country's socio-economic ladder.

### **2.3. The 1980 Census Results**

While initially discussed by government and community leaders in 'hushed' tones due to political sensitivities and in not wanting to emphasize the racial divide, the issue of the Malays being a 'less progressive' community began to be openly discussed after the 1980 census results were published. In a speech commending Mendaki on its achievements at the organisation's 25th Anniversary Dinner and Awards Presentation in 2007, Mr. Lee Hsien Loong, the country's Prime Minister reflected that the statistics then painted a gloomy picture:

- Only one in six Malay students were able to attain five 'O' level passes at the GCE 'O' examinations.
- Only 1.5 percent of all university graduates and 2.5 percent of students enrolled for higher education were Malays.

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two years (1963-1965). Due to political and ideological mismatches, both entities decided on a mutual separation where Singapore then declared its independence in August, 1965. This event is known as the Separation (Lau, 2003).

- Only eight percent were considered to be professional and technical workers (including school teachers).
- Only two percent of all administrative and managerial posts were held by Malays.
- Malays were dropping out of the competitive school system in large numbers while those who managed to continue past primary school were mainly concentrated in vocational education programs largely associated with underachievers.

In addition, Lapoer (1989) indicated that while 86 percent of the Malay work force was employed in the clerical, service, and production sectors at the time, these were basically low-skilled and low-salaried positions. For instance, in the production industry alone, 45 percent of all employed Malays only worked on assembly lines, mostly in foreign-owned electronics factories.

Government officials and even Malay intellectuals such as Syed Hussein Ali (1981) had by then begun to attribute the Malays' failure to achieve parity in economic status and educational underperformance to something inherent in the Malay personality or culture, or to their supposed 'rural' attitudes.

Realising the potential threat posed by the close association between Malay ethnicity and low educational achievement and occupational status, the Government in 1982 declared the Malays' educational 'difficulties' as a national problem which then justified government-backed action to improve their academic performance. These included moves to encourage the formation of ethnic-based self-help groups like Mendaki and AMP (Association of Muslim Professionals) which then set up tuition and social welfare centres in an attempt to arrest the disappointing statistics. For instance, although the privileges of free secondary and

higher education for the Malays in Singapore were taken away by the government after 1991, fees were generally kept low and free education at the primary level is still accorded to the ethnic group.

#### **2.4. The Malays Today**

Thirty years on, it can be said that the Malays of today have measurably improved their plight. Success in education has been translated into raised socio-economic status of the Malay-Muslim community<sup>3</sup>. An article in September 2007 in *The Straits Times*, a local national newspaper, proclaimed that there is a growing Malay middle class with increasing purchasing power. Malay-Muslims are holding higher skilled and better-paying jobs. Incomes have correspondingly increased. More Malay-Muslim households have upgraded to better housing. The vast majority (93 percent) legally possess their own homes. The proportion living in Housing Development Board (HDB) four-room or larger flats and private properties has increased by more than six times (from 11 percent in 1980 to 71 percent in 2005). There has also been a steady increase in ownership of high-end consumer durables, including cars, air-conditioners, personal computers and mobile phones. Collectively, these indicators reflect a community enjoying higher living standards and a better quality of life ('Progress and prosperity for Malays, the Singapore way', pg. 20).

The realist however, cannot deny the fact that these indicators of 'success' do not really paint a true picture of the level of achievement of the Malays when compared to the progress of the other ethnic groups in the country. In October 2007, Mendaki, in its annually published *Policy*

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<sup>3</sup> It needs to be noted that the label Malay/Muslim refers to the notion of Malay **AND/OR** Muslim while the tag Malay-Muslim refers to the concept of Malay **AND** Muslim. While individuals and organisations specified in this research may be part of the former, the focus in this study is however specifically on the latter.

*Digest 2006* published statistics which reflect the underachievement of the Malays both at the education and socio-economic fronts.

The Digest stated that 5.6 percent of Malay students who sat for their Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) in 2005 failed to get the required grades to be eligible for secondary school. This figure is more than double the national figure of 2.2 percent for the same year. It becomes an issue of greater concern as it had been noted that the number of less-academically inclined students finding difficulties in passing the PSLE for the second and third time acts as a multiplier effect to the yearly figure. It was highlighted that out of the 1100 who failed the PSLE in 2005, about 130 of them (or 12 percent) failed the examination for the third time.

These figures also reveal that annually, about 300 Malay students form a significant portion of the 0.7 percent who drop out of school during the transition from primary to secondary school. Studies such as those conducted by Choi and Lo (2002) indicate that such individuals will be less likely to find sustainable employment and are in fact more likely to exhibit juvenile delinquent behaviour. Choi and Lo's study on local juvenile offenders shows that about 25 percent of juvenile offenders had only primary school qualifications and that 12 percent were unemployed at the time of the arrest. While the Singapore Government does not make it a practice to release statistics of offenders based on ethnic composition ('Rebutted', 2009, pg. 4-5), one can nevertheless deduce that a large proportion is probably from the Malay community as it was already mentioned that they form a majority of those who do not continue their education after the primary level.

In addition, Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE) statistics for the year 2006 indicate that the performance of Malay students in PSLE Mathematics has only improved slightly

since the drop in 2001-2002. In 2005, the percentage of PSLE students who scored grades A\* to C for the subject was 59.7 percent. However, since 2001, Malay students have yet to cross over the 60 percent mark and regain the position where they were in a decade ago. Consequently, the performance gap between the Malay students and 'Aggregate' students widened further from 22.0 percent in 1996 to 24.2 percent in 2005. The question arises as to the factors which could have possibly impeded these Malay students' performance in their studies.

There is also a high proportion of Malay students in the Learning Support Programmes (LSP). These are supplementary lessons offered to students in Primary One and Two who face learning deficits in English and Mathematics. Again, based on MOE statistics for 2006, about 32 percent of pupils in LSP were Malays. Bearing in mind that the Malays comprise only 14 percent of the total population (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2009), this over-representation indicates that a substantial percentage of Malay students was not school-ready by the time they entered Primary One. Ahmad (2007) explains that this can also be deduced from MOE figures which showed that every year, an estimated 5 percent (or at least 2000 children) did not attend preschool prior to their entry into Primary One and it is believed that a majority of them were Malay students. Ahmad cites a previous study in 2003<sup>4</sup> which indicated that Malay children who did not attend preschool education were shown to be at a definite disadvantage and were never able to completely catch up with their peers at the same

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<sup>4</sup> Although unpublished, the author cites statistics taken from Mendaki's outreach efforts from August to November 2003. (Primary One education in Singapore begins at age seven and the new academic year begins in January.) The scheme enrolled fifty-nine children aged six years who had not previously attended pre-school. They were registered into preschool centres for an intensive 2-month bridging programme. At the end of the programme, post-test scores indicated a 1-year gain in terms of the children's foundation skills. Nevertheless, despite their encouraging results, these children would still have entered Primary One with a learning deficit, albeit by a narrower margin.

level. Reasons cited by parents for not sending their children to kindergarten were mainly financial despite the availability of several preschool subsidies for low income families.

A large gulf can also be detected in the admission of Malays into higher education. While there is a noticeable increase in the percentage of each Primary One Malay cohort being accepted into local publicly-funded tertiary institutions (universities and polytechnics), specifically from 18 percent in 1995 to 33 percent in 2005, this is still a far cry from to the national admission rate of 60.6 percent. Of significance to note also is the fact that Malay university entrants into the local universities represent only 5.4 percent of the same cohort (Sulaiman, 2007).

Also, while the problem of drug abuse associated with the community seems to be on its way to being addressed, the issue of breakdown in the family unit has yet to be tackled. This problem manifests itself in many ways: the rising divorce rates, the growing number of single-parent households and the unacceptably disproportionate number of teenage births and early marriages (Hussein, 2008). It has also been reported that a third of abortions by teens under 19 and almost half of 600 teenagers infected by sexually transmitted diseases were Malay (Duffy, 2006). Though a large segment of the community is said to be making steady progress, this group is lagging behind. Dysfunctional families are seen as a major stumbling block affecting the educational performance of the Malay-Muslim community due to their lack of supportive home environments. The multiplicity and interconnections of issues relating to the obstacles faced by the Malays in transforming their lives have led to many observers attaching an overarching label to the phenomena – *The Malay Problem* (Ali, 1981).

## **2.5. Explanations of the ‘Malay Problem’**

This section provides an overview of the main reasons forwarded as explanations for the ‘Malay Problem’. It ranges from the controversial argument pointing to a deficient gene pool, to interpretations of religious doctrine, to notions of cultural deficits. However, the idea of structural deficiencies is concluded to have the greatest explanatory power.

### **2.5.1 Genetic Deficiency Thesis**

Epitomised by the barbaric extermination of the Jews in favour of the Aryan race during Nazi Germany’s Holocaust years, early theorists in the field of eugenics promoted the idea that the human species not only could, but should, be subject to improvement by selective breeding practices. Beginning with thinkers such as Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin, it was rationalised at the time that since animals could be selectively bred to enforce certain behavioural patterns, there was little reason not to believe that humans would, in principle, be any different (Clark, 2004). These developments in the early days of human genetics had enormous social and cultural implications in the days to come.

For example, based on such theories, former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in his book, *The Malay Dilemma* (1971), concluded that one of the reasons why the Malays were lagging in their progress compared to the other ethnic groups in the country lies due to a deficiency in their gene pool resulting in a lack of aggregate intelligence in the community.

“The absence of inter-racial marriages in the rural areas resulted in purebred Malays. This was further aggravated by the habit of family inbreeding. Malays, especially rural Malays, prefer to marry relatives. First cousin marriages were and still are frequent, and the result is the propagation of the poorer characteristics, whether dominant or

recessive, originally found in the brothers or sisters who were parents of the married couple” (Mohamad, 1970 cited in Ong, 2005).

Although Mahathir retracted these statements in the later editions of his book, the science of Eugenics and the notion of the deficient gene pool are nevertheless very much alive in the minds of some of today’s scientists and government officials. For instance, Steven Pinker (2002, pg. 102) argues that

“Neuroscience is showing that the brain's basic architecture develops under genetic control. Brain systems show signs of innate specialization and cannot arbitrarily substitute for one another”.

In 1983, Lee Kuan Yew, the then Prime Minister of Singapore went so far as to introduce the Graduate Mother Scheme during his National Day Rally speech. The Scheme was underpinned by the rationale that the country was facing the problem of a diminishing fertility rate resulting in the need to increase the population figures and while at it, provide an assurance that only genetically superior babies are produced. Critics from the Think Centre, a locally-based independent non-governmental organisation (NGO) branded such initiatives by the nation’s leaders as deliberate acts of social engineering as the proposed changes clearly promoted class differentiation in a supposedly liberal country (Hewlitt, 2003).

What was even more surprising was the open declaration by the government that graduates produce better quality babies and are more likely to be proficient at parenting given their scholastic merits. It justified the scheme which granted financial and qualitative care privileges to children of these graduate mothers (Yap, 1995).

On the other hand, lesser favoured fellow countrymen who fall into the less-educated, low-income bracket and are under 30 years of age were offered a \$10,000 'reward' if they had themselves sterilised after their first or second child. The scheme however went unheeded and was eventually abandoned shortly after its introduction (Yew, 2004).

In 2008, the elderly Lee Kuan Yew, who has since stepped down from his premiership but held on to a specially created portfolio of Minister Mentor, again defended his belief in 'assortative mating' during a forum,

“That is the way the world is. I have explained this. I think I lost votes after I explained the awful truth. Nobody believed it, but slowly it dawned on them – especially the graduates – that yes, you marry a non-graduate, then you worry about whether or not your son or daughter is going to make it to the university!”(Lee, 2008).

On the other extreme, Marxist ideology taught that many human characteristics were caused entirely by environmental factors, contradicting what was initially thought to be inherited through genetics. For example, the Stalinist era of the Soviet Union tried to twist eugenics to conform to Marxist dogma and denied any fact pointing towards facets of genetic inheritance. The teaching of genetics was banned by Stalin because it contradicted Communist doctrine. Marxist belief was grounded on John Locke's theory of the *Tabula Rasa*, a blank slate hypothesis which provided the basis for egalitarianism. In his endeavour to propagate this belief, Stalin appointed a self-proclaimed scientist, T.D Lysenko, to promote this idea while genuine scientists like Vavilov who pointed out the scientific flaws of Lysenko's theory were immediately sentenced to the gulag (Soyfer et al., 1994).

Nevertheless, arguments or counter-arguments pertaining to the genetic deficiency thesis as an explanation for the problems affecting the Malays per se are inherently flawed if they point to a blanket genetic view of intelligence. Current research emphasises that racial groups are not necessarily more genetically homogeneous in any significant way. In fact, broad racial classifications serve only to mask great genetic diversity within them (Rose and Rose, 2005). Individual differences are highlighted as far more important criterion in deciding a person's future.

In what consequently boils down to the nature-nurture debate, arguments involving genetics and the environment have become very much interlinked. While it may be true that genetic factors predispose an individual with certain traits which are advantageous or disadvantageous to her or his life, the given environment must also be considered as serving to shape that trait. Conversely, one will also have to agree that the way an environment shapes a given trait will be determined by genetic factors endowed to the individual.

William Clark's conclusion with regards to the development of brain functions summarises the flaws brought about by the genetic deficiency argument

‘..it is important to note that when we speak of learning and memory, whether in worms or in human beings, what we really are talking about is the impact of the environment on the nervous system. It is here that genetics and the environment become inextricably entangled. Genetic modulation of the nervous system affects how information from the environment is perceived, and also how the organism responds to that information. But at the same time, when we speak of new neural connections and interactions generated as a result of learning, or when we speak of synaptic alterations emerging as a result of

experience, we are really talking about the impact of the environment on the nervous system, and ultimately the impact of the environment on behavior' (Clark, 2004, pg. 293).

### **2.5.2 Religion**

Some critics of the Singapore Malay community also point to Islam as a retarding force in the progress of the ethnic group. In the past, religious schooling was an issue as it was blamed for the mismatch in qualifications resulting in the inability of the Malays to fit into the secular economy. Madrasah education is seen as being incompatible with Singapore's modern, multiethnic society (Noor Aisha and Lai, 2006). With the eventual phasing out of most full-time madrasahs in favour of mainstream, secular educational institutions, the debate is now on the epistemological impact of the religion on its followers.

Mahathir Mohamad was one of the first to chastise the Malays for their excessive fatalism which he blames on the corruption imposed by the legacy of their ancestral animistic beliefs and misinterpretation of Islamic doctrine. By blindly indulging in their belief in the power of faith and fate, the community is seen as lacking in drive and determination to excel in modern society

'Malay-Muslims still have the present life to live and live it productively...Islam is not just (about) the hereafter...Malays should assume their rightful place in the modern world' (Mohamad, 1970, pg.78).

He stresses that the Malays have to acquire new ways of thinking and to adapt to a new system of values. Ultimately, they have to adjust their thinking to the new realities. This is in line with Anthony Giddens' *Consequences of Modernity* (1991) where he highlights that

nations today are facing an onslaught of tensions brought about by the forces of Secularism, Capitalism and Nationalism. He surfaces the idea that individuals need to understand the importance of balancing the divide between religious identities and national identities.

Hamoudi (2009) opines that the ideology behind the teaching of Islam in this present day has failed to appreciate the value of modern knowledge vis-à-vis issues of faith. He blames the overemphasis on the concepts of Fiqh (principles of Islamic jurisprudence through the observance of rituals and social legislation) as unfortunately ushering in the development of a socially enforced prohibition on the questioning of basic assumptions of the religion. Irshad Manji in her book *The Trouble with Islam Today: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith* (2005), accuses adherents of degenerating themselves into reflexive defenders of the faith and failing to see the need for them to develop into reflective thinkers of the religion. She is especially critical of religious leaders, who, in their quest to elevate their self-importance, have downgraded the faith from its intended status as a medium of education and enlightenment to a mere tool of indoctrination.

These arguments support my viewpoint that the uncritical interpretation of Islamic doctrines and tradition have resulted in blind obedience and dogmatism among its followers. Many have become ignorant of the fact that such an attitude goes against the true doctrines of Islam which encourages 'ijtihad' (independent reasoning) via practices such as 'shura' (enquiry-based discussions or consultations). In the case of the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore, this self-imposed 'taboo' against genuine dialogue, as Giddens' theory on modernity suggests, may have resulted in the community lacking in creativity, motivation or critical thinking. As a consequence, through the practice of 'Taklid' (imitation), blind submission was given to the authority of revered *asatizahs* and *ulamas* (religious teachers and clerics) who, according to

Ibrahim (2006), are themselves the products of an outdated pedagogy which trains these individuals through mnemonic methods of learning that freezes the mind, stunts creativity and places limits on the freedom of articulation of ideas.

In this aspect, Karen Armstrong (2001) sees the practice of Islam as being increasingly divided into praxy (practice) and doxy (theology). In voicing her opinions during an interview, she compliments the adherents of Islam by citing examples from where Christians might wish to draw lessons from the Muslim focus on praxy rather than doxy. She does, on the other hand however suggest that Muslims could learn from the enthusiasm and methodology of Christian evangelicalism. She concludes that for all parties to benefit from effective pluralistic dialogues, people must be open to the possibility of discovering beauty and truth in religions other than their own (Mohtar, 2007).

Syed Husin Ali in his book, *The Malays: Their Problems and Future* (1981) sees the practice of Islam among the Malays as comprising three dimensions – rituals, functionaries and doctrines. Similar to Mahathir, he views problems associated with the religion as being rooted in the corruption of rituals due to throwbacks of the animistic beliefs of Malay ancestry. This is evidenced by elaborate rituals such as those practiced by farmers in providing offerings for a successful planting of seedlings and the requests for the blessings of the '*pawang*'(sorcerer) or '*dukun*'(shaman) in times of personal distress. I am however, more inclined to the view that the problem lies mainly with the functionaries of the religion. In the context of this discussion, the term denotes not only clerics, but also stakeholders such as heads of formal and informal social groups whose status and prestige hinges on the community's perception and practice of the religion. For instance, the mark of an individual who has achieved the

status of community leader is when he<sup>5</sup> becomes the ‘by default’ person to be invited to lead a communal prayer session. However, in these times of competing interests, those who aspire for such a status quo will only continue to be seen as credible by his followers and the ethnic community in general if he is able to establish an aura of ‘godliness’ which is projected via a ‘holier-than-thou’ persona. Unfortunately, from my experience, these individuals are the ones who sustain inaccuracies by promoting unquestioning and unthinking reactions among their circle of followers. Additionally, in listening to the thunderous voice of a charismatic Imam who appeals emotionally but not so much intellectually, one wonders if the problem stems from an issue of honest and righteous leadership or a personal need to gain popularity and prestige.

Scholars such as Syed Hussein Alatas (2008) however try to dispel any blanket notion which accuses all functionaries of Islam as being incapable of providing enlightened leadership by providing the example of positive authority demonstrated by Indonesian clerics during the crisis of World War II. Nevertheless, similar appointment holders in Singapore today are sometimes criticized for their refusal or inability to lead the community towards the path of being faith-abiding Muslims with a foothold in a modern, multicultural nation-state (Ibrahim, 2006). For the mainstream Malays in Singapore for instance, dissemination of Islamic knowledge has been focused mostly on acts of worship and thereby distancing the masses from philosophical debates leading to enlightened Islamic thought. Unfortunately, the resulting traditionalism dictates merely the necessity of believing rather than questioning what is believed. The blind recitation of the Quran, for example, brings honour and glory to the

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, within the sphere of religious practice, the Malay-Muslim community in general is still very much male-centric.

performer but destroys the spirit of enquiry which promotes reasoning and judgement (Noor Aisha and Ong, 2006).

In an attempt to sway the Malay-Muslim's approach to the practice of their religion, an editorial in the Malay daily newspaper even contradicted the current practice of 'Harfiah', which is the rigid translation of Islamic principles based on exoteric (that is, literal and in effect, simplified and comprehensible) interpretations of the Quran (Hussaini, 2009). The article drives home the message that readings from the Quran should instead lead to substantive, in-depth, thoughtful, esoteric, metaphoric, humanistic and contextual interpretations.

In the post 9/11 context, the Malay community in Singapore, as with most other Muslim communities around the world, is facing even greater setbacks due to the prejudice and suspicions faced by the followers of Islam. Any significant achievements made by the moderates in the community have been very much sidelined by the more-publicised activities of the few political and ideological zealots who found symbols of faith an easy currency to achieve their ends (Simkins, 2007). According to Khaled Abou El Fadl (2005), these Islamists are not interested in furthering the integrity or development of Islamic law or thought. Increasingly, their central interest became 'to augment the Islamic tradition's mass appeal by transforming it into a vehicle for displays of power symbolisms' (pg. 32). Riding on the much-referred to *Clash of Civilisations* thesis (Huntington, 1998), El Fadl elaborates that these individuals take advantage of such power symbolisms as these have

‘...become a means of expressing resistance to Western hegemony in the contemporary age, as well as a means of voicing national aspirations for political, social, and cultural independence throughout the Muslim world’ (pg. 43).

While the authorities act to clamp down on such negative sources of influence in the country, the onus, however, will be on members of the local Malay community to not only develop valid methods of interpreting information presented by the Holy Quran, but to also acquire and develop a capacity for explanation and analysis which connects the nature of God to reality. Such capabilities, once developed, will project an outlook that emphasises the human ethic of responsibility (Alatas, 2006). This notion falls very much in line with the study of critical thinking, a concept central to this thesis.

### **2.5.3 Notions of the Malay Character**

Even before he founded Singapore in 1819, Stamford Raffles was quoted as saying that he,

‘..cannot but consider the Melayu nation as one people, speaking one language, though spread over so wide a space, preserving their character and customs, in all the maritime states lying between Sulu Seas and the Southern Oceans’(Stamford Raffles, 1816, cited in <http://www.sabrizain.org/malaya/malays.htm>).

The character of the Malay people is said to be best described as an interplay of their biological dispositions resulting in their attitude towards life and their cultural traits. While neither is static, it is nevertheless an issue of contention with critics citing these elements as the precursor leading the community on a persistent cycle of negativity (Mohamed, 2007).

### **2.5.3.1 Biological Predispositions**

Syed Hussein Alatas debated at length on the issue of the strengths and weaknesses of the Malay character at length in his book *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1970). His arguments begins with a historical discourse to describe the Colonialists' increasingly negative impression of the Malay people over the course of several centuries. In doing so, Alatas established a link which correlates these foreign rulers' worsening perception of the community's deterioration in character with the length of period in which the latter were subjugated. Alatas' argument begins with his account of a report written by Tom Pires, a Portuguese who lived in Malacca after his country's conquest of the Sultanate in 1511. Pires mentioned that the Malays were a 'jealous nation' because the wives of the important people were never to be seen in public. When the wives did go out, they moved around in big numbers and were carried on covered sedan chairs. Nevertheless, Alatas was of the opinion that the tone of Pires' writing "is sober compared to many who wrote after him" (1977, pg. 24). To emphasise this, he provided examples of later writings where personalities such as Barbosa, Eredia, Careri, Valentyn and Guirreiro furnished descriptions of the same community during different time periods, specifically from 1512 until after 1874 which marked the start of full British control in the region. These writers were seen to be increasingly critical of the Malay community with the last mentioned individual expressing the general Portuguese view that "the Malays were barbarians" (ibid, pg. 37).

Alatas' description of the Malay character as perceived by their foreign rulers also included an account by Sir Stamford Raffles, the British official credited with the founding of Singapore in 1819. Raffles remarked that the failure of the Malays to achieve 'a high intellectual stage of development' at the time was due to the absence of a well-defined and

generally accepted system of law. This, according to Raffles, was the greatest cause of the deterioration of the Malay character. He attributed the absence of a general system of law not only to the conversion of the Malays to Islam, but also on the previous Hindu influence which had led to 'diversification' in the realm of Law.

“Such a situation opened the door to the caprice and tyranny of Malay rulers and a general insecurity both of person and property” (Raffles, 1835, cited in Alatas, 1977, pg. 131).

According to Raffles, the Malays were already 'degraded' when the British found them. Before the coming of Islam, the Malays had in general made considerable progress in civilization. However, the combined influence of Islam and the Arabs, the Dutch, and the Chinese led to their decline. In highlighting the foreign rulers' perception of the biological predispositions of the Malays, Alatas provides evidence by citing Raffles' opinion that

“...the historical and sociological circumstances affecting the Malays contributed to the emergence of certain generally perceived peculiarities such as the Malay inclinations to act on individual will and to express ferocious passion....Raffles also noted other negative traits of Malay character as he conceived them. He thought it tolerably correct to see the Malay as being so indolent that when he has rice nothing will induce him to work. Accustomed to bear arms from infancy and to rely on his own powers for safety, and to fear those of his associate, he becomes the most polite of all savages. Yet he is very sensitive to insult and is resentful of conformity imposed by others. Long nurtured grievances sometimes express themselves in retaliation against the innocent” (ibid, pg. 39).

While Alatas considers Raffles' analysis to be more intellectually credible compared to the previous historical reports, he nevertheless refutes all of these writers' over simplistic conclusions on the Malay character citing factors such as biased perceptions, lack of insight into the social sciences, loose reasoning, and their unfamiliarity with Malay culture and history. Although there seems to be the consensus among the Colonialists that the Malays were in general afflicted with the character of indolence manifested by their disinclination for toil and effort, the reasons given to explain such a negative trait range from the simplistic such as the existence of climactic conditions whose heat and humidity "inclines the body to ease and rest, the mind to dreamy contemplation rather than to strenuous and persistent toil" (ibid, pg. 45), to the belief in the inherent futility of amassing wealth due to the danger of local rulers confiscating what they 'declare' to be 'excessive' possessions.

Many of the early colonialists link these phenomena as a presenting condition for Social Darwinism which, to them, justifies the Malays' inability to adapt to what is seen as an 'acceleration' of their natural development. Critics, such as Yahya (2006), refute this and went so far as to present the idea of how Social Darwinism was instead used by the colonialists to provide a convenient excuse for their many acts of conquest and domination. According to the writer,

"a number of administrators of colonial states tried to justify their ruthless exploitation of native populations with Darwinist theses lacking any scientific validity or logical consistency. They claimed that 'inferior races' needed to be kept under the control of 'superior races' because this was a law of nature, and founded their policies on this so-called scientific basis" (pg. 27).

Alatas (1977), however, saw the label of indolence as somewhat inevitable with his introduction of the concept of Colonial Capitalist Ideology. He illustrates how such an ideology elevates the status of only those considered to have provided a direct functional role in the progress of British enterprise at the time. This included migrant workers specifically the Chinese and Indians who were conscripted under the Coolie system. Unfortunately unlike the Chinese and Indians working as indentured labour in the British-owned tin mines and rubber plantations, the local Malays were neither trusted nor encouraged by the Colonial masters to work in these industries. The rationale was that these workers may find the backbreaking labour too strenuous for their liking and proceeded to abandon the work and run back to their nearby villages. They were thus left to tend to the ‘unproductive’ areas of farming and fishery in the urban periphery. Nevertheless, this chain of events set the precedent for the stereotype to be cultivated and propagated until the present day.<sup>6</sup> Alatas’ Colonial Capitalist ideology will be further expounded in the forthcoming section which discusses the structural deficit thesis.

### **2.5.3.2 Cultural Traits**

The previous reports on the Malays had focused on the flaws of the community from the perspective of a biological or ‘racial’ deficiency. By the 1930’s however, anthropologists such as Franz Boas rejected arguments based on biological inferiority and began writing against the premise of evolutionism within the tenets of anthropology as it had become imbued with racist undertones. ‘Race’ was then displaced by the idea of ‘culture’ (Thomas, 1994).

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<sup>6</sup> Such a perception of the Malays can also be linked to the outdated concept of National Character which was perpetuated by Boaz, Benedict and to an extent Mead. It connotes the blanket application of specific behavioral patterns to citizens within a culture especially if they are citizens born and raised in a given society. Watch webcast of US Library of Congress’ Margaret Mead Symposium (2001) for more clarification.

Nevertheless, these arguments, when applied to the context of the Malays, served nothing more than to transplant ‘manifestations’ of the ethnic group’s deficiencies on to another level.

In 1971, a book in Malay entitled *Revolusi Mental* or ‘Mental Revolution’ (Abdul Rahman) was published by the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) which was then, and is still, the ruling party in Malaysia. It was a bold publication which discusses shortcomings in the attitudes, values and social philosophy practiced by the current Malay community. By highlighting such shortcomings, it proposes that the Malays undergo a ‘mental revolution’ in order to “adjust to the requirements of the age and drive them towards further effort to acquire progress in all fields of life” (ibid, pg. 23). As proof of the need for a ‘mental revolution’, the book attempts to show the weaknesses of Malay ‘thinking’ by providing, among others, examples of fatalistic Malay sayings such as *‘Janji Melayu’* (the Malay ‘Promise’) denoting the unreliability of the Malays in affirming and subsequently meeting deadlines, as well as *‘Hangat-hangat tahi ayam’* (Warm as a fowl’s droppings) implying that the industriousness of the Malays, just like the warmth of the droppings, tends to be shortlived!

Other commentators such as Mahathir Mohamed cited the norm of marrying early as another shortcoming of Malay culture. While the Malays in Singapore no longer fit into Mahathir’s assertion that ‘it was, and still is, common to see married couples of thirteen or fourteen’ (Mahathir, 1970, pg.55), marriages between Malay youths who are hardly out of their teens are nevertheless still frequent. In fact, in a move to accommodate this practice among the community, the Singapore government has put in place provisions which legalises marriages between Muslim couples who are two years below the set limit for the other ethnic groups (Hussein, 2008). Mahathir however discourages the idea of marrying young as in his view it

will only lead to negative consequences as reproduction takes place before full maturity of the parents.

“The effects on both parents and children are well-known. Perhaps the most deleterious effect is that the parents are not ready to take care of the children. The parents in fact remain dependent on their own parents who, exulting in their early attainment of the status of grandparents, happily undertake the care of their children’s children as well. In this sort of society, enterprise and independence are unknown. The upbringing of children is distorted by the well-known excessive indulgence of grandparents and the incapacity of the parents to take care of the children. The long term effect on community and race is disastrous” (Mahathir, 1970, pg.56).

A more recent article by Hapipi (2006) shows consensus to this notion when the writer laments over the fact that there have been more divorces and remarriages among young Malay couples in recent years.

M. Bakri Musa in his book *The Malay Dilemma Revisited* (1999), mentions what he terms as the ‘Sultan Syndrome’ in Malaysian society where a person of some stature gets carried away with a misplaced sense of self-importance and unjustifiably expects to be treated with the same protocol dispensed to members of the nobility during events where he or she is invited to. Bakri provided instances of officials insisting on being chaperoned with umbrellas over their heads during trouble free weather or being ‘fashionably’ late to public events while expecting the crowd to be servile while waiting for them to make their appearance as acts of ‘apeing the sultans’.

While these notions are centred on Malaysian society and no longer have a place in the multi-ethnic and meritocratic Singapore setting, a practice that is of the total opposite is nevertheless very much alive today. The culture of '*merendah diri*' (lowering one's stature) is seen as epitomizing the Malay character of modesty and humility by downplaying behaviours which exude snobbishness or frankness in discourse as these may cause offence. Taken to the extreme however, this 'quality' leads to a lack of 'openness' and paradoxically, may result in the perpetuation of ill-feelings as issues requiring a resolution is never surfaced. Inevitably, the act of '*merendah diri*' has a compounding effect leading to the community's lack of progress as the avoidance of surfacing individual flaws and consequent absence of personal feedback renders to either a loss in possible sources of inspiration or even a negation of any existing motivation to do well in life.

#### **2.5.4 Social, Political and Economic Marginalisation**

In a show of 'openness' as part of its National Day celebrations in August 2008, the local English daily, *The Straits Times* published articles written by journalists who shared their hopes and aspirations for the nation's future. One of the writers, Nur Dianah Suhaimi, a Malay, however, touched a raw nerve by the frankness of her article, *Feeling like the least favourite child* (Suhaimi, 2008, pg. 26). The article voices her frustrations at being made to feel that, as a member of a 'less favoured' ethnic group, she has had to '...work twice as hard to prove my worth.' She questions the functionality of legislations which 'pigeonholes' ethnicity by reflecting that

'Of my four late grandparents, two were Malay, one was Chinese and one was Indian.

This, I concluded, makes me a mix of all the main races in the country. But I later

realised that it was not what goes into my blood that matters, but what my identity card says under 'Race'(ibid).

The ethnic label meant that she was stigmatized for being a member of a group stereotyped as 'inherently lazy,' as well as having her sense of professionalism and patriotism constantly questioned. She concludes that if she does ever decide to establish her roots in another nation, it will not be because of any pull of affiliation but because of the push caused by the feeling of unacceptance meted out by her government and countrymen.

The article opened up a Pandora's box and for the next few weeks, became a source of public debate and discussion. While some respondents talked about the virtues of hard work and self-motivation regardless of a person's ethnic background, those from the dominant Chinese community seemed to be oblivious to the fact that such acts of marginalisation surfaced by the article exist in their everyday life. This lack of awareness can perhaps be linked to the unconscious acceptance and perpetuating belief in the Malays as being a culturally deficit group by the mainstream Singapore society. As explained by a critic of Singapore government policies, Lily Zubaidah Rahim in her book *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community* (1999), the 'cultural deficit thesis' has been silently acknowledged among government officials to be an affliction of the Malay community:

'The cultural deficit thesis is thus very much based on a discourse that racialises poverty and social inequality. The discourse allows socially marginal ethnic communities to be projected as being undeserving of assistance, lazy, dull, and suffering from an identity crisis. By pathologizing the problems confronting ethnic minorities, their disadvantaged

class position is obscured. 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 responsible for their socio-economic malaise, the onus is thus firmly on them to reform their 'deviant' and deficient ways. This logic absolves the state from actively assisting socially disadvantaged communities on the rationale that it would only create a welfare or crutch mentality, increase crime, single-parent families, and threaten the well-being of the free-market economy. The cultural deficit thesis has thus provided a convenient explanation for the continued socio-economic marginalization of the Malay community in Singapore. Moreover, it has provided the PAP government with the rationale for adopting a minimalist approach towards the Malay marginality, particularly in the decades of the 1960's and 1970's' (pg. 51).

In essence, Lily was criticizing the ruling government for what she termed as their 'culturalisation' of the socio-economic status of the Malays. And by refusing to dispel or end this belief, they have in fact created a 'socially blind' dominant majority.

In his *The Other America* (1997), Michael Harrington explains how the condition resulted in the failure of the US public to recognise that a fifth of the population, or approximately 40 million Americans, were living in poverty. He maintains that there is a 'social blindness' in American society that keeps this population invisible, and that the most familiar example of this blindness is the common opinion that 'the poor are that way because they are afraid of work.' Harrington further argues that most of the poor would never have a chance to work

their way out of the 'Other America' because "they are caught in a vicious circle" and "live in a culture of poverty" (pg. 89).

Another American example however showed that the image and stereotype of particular social groups etched in the public's mind are not impervious to change.

"When poverty became a national issue in the early 1960s, the image of America's poor still bore a resemblance to portraits of the Great Depression: grim-faced farmers, prematurely old women surrounded by children, elderly white folk, perhaps a dignified black or two. By the mid-1980s, the public's stereotype of the poor had undergone a radical change: It now featured unmarried black mothers, typically living in deteriorating urban slums, and having one baby after another in order to increase their welfare payments" (Franklin, 1997, pg. 187).

While a similar change in scenario remains a future possibility for the Malays, the existing ideology pointing to the ethnic group's 'cultural inferiority' in the meantime, has nevertheless led to the perpetuation of negative ethnic stereotypes and prejudices against its members. In the long run, such stereotypes and prejudices are likely to be a major contributor to the persisting political, social and economic marginality of the Malays.

### **2.5.5 The Structural Deficit Thesis**

While Lily paints a subtle picture of purposeful manipulation by the dominant group resulting in the ideology of social rejection and exclusion of the Malay community, it is not, in itself, a politically expedient notion as it does not take much into account the Malays' power of self-determination especially in a democratic system of rule that is presently Singapore. A

discussion on the structural deficit thesis may however provide the clearest explanation of the 'Malay Problem'.

#### **2.5.5.1 Colonial Capitalist Ideology**

The strand of this argument alludes to the fact that due to the early initiatives and policies instituted during the period of the Colonialists, logical explanations can be made as to why the socio-economic development of the Malays was initially retarded when compared to the other ethnic groups in Singapore. The Malays, by their own volition and with 'consent' from the British administrators, alienated themselves from the market economy by disengaging from the backbreaking labour made available through British-owned mines and plantations and were instead content to remain in their rural habitats while engaging in their traditional livelihoods of tilling their rice fields and harvesting what the sea has to offer. This option would also probably be the choice of the majority from the other two migrant communities had it been available in their own homelands. However, the uncertainties of survival in their native soil forced them to embark on the long journey to Malaya which consequently saddled them with huge debts to be repaid through work in the tin mines and rubber plantations. For instance, according to Ee (1961, pg. 40),

“Floods, droughts, famines and rebellions, even overpopulation were some of the push factors that explained why the Chinese emigrated from their homeland. The state of poverty in China caused the Chinese migrants to settle in any country where its economic development and capital investment were vigorous, because then, job opportunities would be greater. The presence of trade, industry and capital in Singapore attracted the migrants to settle.”

The misery of their plight thus provided them with the impetus to look for any kinds of avenues to climb up the economic ladder. Subsequently, while the Chinese and Indians toiled and laboured, and were mostly exploited along the way, they nevertheless gained valuable insights through their observations of and close association with British entrepreneurship. Thus with modernization and the rise of Singapore as a trading hub, added with the subsequent entrepreneurial vacuum created when independence was granted by the Colonialists, new opportunities became available to members of these ethnic groups. In terms of identity formation, it can be surmised that these ethnic groups, especially the Chinese, began to remodel the perception of their own identity from that of a community of migrants intending to work only for a number of years and eventually returning to their birthplace with their hard earned savings, to a thriving and industrious community of entrepreneurs calling Singapore their home (Frost, 2003).

The question then is what happened to the Malays while these changes were taking place? Was there not a similar evolution in the perception of their own identities to make them more productive and progressive after Independence? This can perhaps be explained using Giddens' concept of 'structure' and 'agency'.

#### **2.5.5.2 Structures and Agency**

Anthony Giddens (1991) formulated the concepts of 'agency' and 'structure' in order to understand the impact of modernity on human identity and subsequent human action. 'Agency', according to him, is the basis on which our human motivation and responses are shaped thus implying that we are not social or cultural 'dupes' or passive individuals, but that we act intentionally especially in constructing our identity. However, the self-identity which is formed cannot be seen as a mere set of traits or observable characteristics. It is the product

of a person's own reflexive understanding of his or her history. As a consequence, while self-identity cannot easily be changed at will, it is nevertheless fluid in nature and changes depending on the person's reflexive beliefs about her or his own biography (Giddens, 1991, pg. 53).

‘Structure’, in Giddens’ view, is a product of human action. “Society only has form, and that form has effects on people, in so far as structure is produced and reproduced in what people do” (Giddens and Pierson, 1999, pg. 77). Giddens’ idea of ‘structure’ therefore relates to a holistic model that incorporates social systems and rules, social order and social reproduction.

In applying these concepts onto the ‘Malay Problem’, we can understand how human ‘agency’ in the form of motives and actions of individuals who wield power in the country is manifested in the creation and recreation of new collective ‘structures’ which in turn directs how the rest in the community shape their identities. Giddens further utilizes this framework to explain the link between human action to the evolution of social structures. With human agency and social structure being seen as interactive and reciprocal, Giddens’ emphasizes the idea of 'duality of structures' where the interplay of these components result in social practices continually changing and evolving. According to Giddens, social order is an end result of pre-planned social actions. It is not an automatic evolutionary response. He notes the existence of a form of social cycle where once certain sociological conceptions are formed, they filter back into everyday world and change the way people think. In other words, as social actors, we continuously adapt our actions in line with our constantly evolving understandings of our world. This then creates new social structures that become the basis of a new cycle.

One of the sociological characteristics of modern society espoused by Giddens is the reliance on abstract systems ('disembedding mechanisms'). This entails putting trust in experts with knowledge of such systems to organize and supervise one's life although it leaves one at risk of unintended or undesirable consequences. Applied to the context of post-Independence Singapore, it can then be explained that the lack of progress experienced by the Malay community in the country can be attributed to a dearth of 'social actors' who wield power from WITHIN the community. As a result, 'structures' are created primarily by those who are not members from the ethnic community and are thus, not particularly favourable towards the socio-economic development of the Malays.

Chua Beng Huat (1995), for example, has written extensively on what he terms the 'Communitarian' approach adopted by the Chinese-dominated Singapore government. Communitarianism is based on what is perceived to be the 'shared value' which is embraced by all three major racial/cultural groups in the population and is considered the cultural essence of Asian societies. However, "in reality, the communitarian ideology is indubitably anti-liberal as collective interests are placed above individual ones" (pg. 29). What results is the 'forbearance of an interventionist state which justifies the interventions as pre-emptory good measures to ensure collective welfare" (ibid). Unfortunately, minority ethnic groups with very weak political representation such as the Malays become vulnerable to the whims and fancies of these 'collective interests' which, in most cases, end up representing the needs of only the dominant majority.

The limitations caused by inherent structural flaws in society can also be illustrated through Amartya Sen's (2000) concept of the 'capability set'. According to Sen, a person's capability

refers to the alternative combinations of ‘functionings’ that are feasible for him or her to achieve.

“Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations...For example, an affluent person who fasts may have the same functioning achievement in terms of eating or nourishment as a destitute person who is forced to starve, but the first person does have a different ‘capability set’ than the second (the first can choose to eat well and be well nourished in a way the second cannot” (Sen, 2000, pg. 75).

Similarly, take the case of two Singaporean primary school classmates who similarly obtained excellent grades in the exams to be promoted to the best class in their cohort for the following year. One however takes the Malay language as her second language subject following her mother tongue while the other, being Chinese, takes the language of the majority. Unfortunately, by virtue of their ethnicities and the fluke of the most viable allocation based on the availability of staff teaching the Mother Tongue languages, the unlucky Malay girl was only provided with a place in the second best class. To place salt on her wounds, she was announced as being among the top five in a cohort of over three hundred peers. This meant that more than three-quarters of the Chinese students who make up the rest of the enrolment in the ‘best’ class actually obtained grades lower than hers! <sup>7</sup>

Kuznia (2009) relates the much downplayed practice of ‘Institutional Racism’ in his article *Racism in Schools: Unintentional But No Less Damaging*. He describes institutional racism as “frequently subtle, unintentional and invisible, but always potent”. Institutional racism is

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<sup>7</sup> The unlucky Malay girl in this example happens to be my own daughter. Despite my appeal to their reason and intellect, the school management refused to budge citing timetabling difficulties. It will be instances such as these which, among potentially achieving Malays, create the belief that to be the best, a Malay should only be contented with being second best!

never an intended practice nor is it driven by personal malice. However, it becomes an issue especially if the cause is administrative convenience. Just as much as outright discrimination causes a retardation of development; institutional racism contributes just as much to the persistent achievement gap which has become the bane of minority communities. Inevitably, structural deficiencies such as these will have resulted in many Malays developing a 'fatalistic' identity which, according to Giddens (1991), can be depicted as "a refusal of modernity - a repudiation of a controlling orientation to the future in favour of an attitude which lets events come as they will" (pg. 302).

On a more positive note, Giddens also proposes that structures not only constrain, they can also do the reverse that is, enable. Applied to the Singapore context, this indicates that new structures can be introduced or the present structures be adapted to create a more level playing field for the Malays resulting in more positive identities and outcomes.

"With modernity, self-identity is a reflexive project. It is no longer inherited or static. There is a need to continually integrate with events in the external world to provide meaning to one's identity" (pg. 388).

### **2.5.5.3 Habitus**

Pierre Bourdieu's (Webb, 2002) work parallels Giddens' notion of structure by way of his assertion that the state 'constructs' the individual through its 'rites of institution' for example, the issuing of identity cards, requirements for legal names, signatures, etc. However, he argues that one must also see an alternative way of looking at one's life history.

Unlike Giddens' notion of the interplay of social actors, agencies and structure, Bourdieu conceptualized 'habitus' as the main premise of how identities and mindsets evolve. He

describes habitus as the way in which individuals internalise and express socially constituted behaviours and values. Habitus is seen as a means to social order through the articulation of social and mental structures. However, it can also be seen as a way of sustaining and reinforcing systems of power and domination through explicit (social) and implicit (cultural) controls.

In elaborating the effects of habitus on the human psyche, Bourdieu describes the extent to which the phenomenon impacts the preconscious nature of emotions by creating dispositions that instigate the formation of various 'states of mind' which extends beyond the conscious control of the individual. In this sense, Bourdieu's 'habitus' has a major impact on the formation of group and self-identity by way of 'shaping' the subjectivity of the individual. According to Bourdieu, we are not autonomous individuals. Rather, we are each products of collective history. The individual is ultimately a mere social agent under the influence of his or her social position (with all its accompanying 'cultural' capital, values and resources) in the choices he or she makes in life - from educational and career decisions to that of choosing a suitable marriage partner. These choices are not wholly conscious decisions or calculated strategies but rather products of habitus - embodied feelings and thoughts connected to common sense understandings of the world and arising from particular social status which comprise the dimensions of class, gender, nationality and ethnicity. It becomes "a chain of chance, of more or less fortuitous encounters, happy or unhappy" (Webb, 2002, pg. 59).

Bourdieu argued for the view of life as a "series of positions successfully occupied by the same agent (or same group) in a space which is itself in flux and undergoing incessant transformations" (Reed-Danahay, 2005, pg. 62). Applied to the socio-economic development of the Malays, one begins to understand how Bourdieu's 'habitus' provides an explanation of

cultural stimuli and inhibitors which in turn condition and shape the mindsets of the Malays and thus hindering the progress of the community. These stimuli and inhibitors can be seen in the form of taboos, superstitions, etiquette and even discourse which is inherent, for example, in the '*adat*', the customary laws of the Malays. Bourdieu implies that in time, many in such communities will acknowledge these stimuli and inhibitors as being increasingly outdated by today's circumstances. However, he warns that it will take some time before this 'flux' and their subsequent transformations lead the community to occupy a 'new position' in the mainstream society. In the meantime, the community proceeds with what can be seen as only 'minute incremental changes' until the process of transformation occurs.

#### **2.5.6 The Mental Model Hypothesis**

While Giddens' arguments on 'structure' and 'agency' and Bourdieu's emphasis on 'habitus' seem to emphasise different aspects of explaining the 'Malay problem', the outcome of the two perspectives can nevertheless be synthesized and translated into the Mental Model Theory. First introduced by Kenneth Craik in 1943 (Johnson-Laird, 1983) and further explored by psychologists such as like Ruth Byrne, the theory suggests that the human mind constructs 'small scale models' of everyday reality which it then uses not only to explain but to anticipate events. These 'models' are constructed from information received either through perception, imagination or the comprehension of discourse. While they are usually triggered by visual images, mental models may also be formed by the abstract, representing situations that cannot be visualized. What is unique about mental models is that once formed, they are 'overgeneralised' in a sense that the model of one specific domain becomes accepted as an analogy for another. As such, the theory proposes that while mental models represent only ONE possibility; capturing what is common to all the different ways in which that possibility

may occur in a situation; to the uncritical mind, it nevertheless becomes the ONLY foregone conclusion in the interpretation of events. This may develop into a serious flaw especially since mental models easily attach themselves to a particular state of emotion.

For instance, dysfunctional families are often caught up in a vicious cycle because they do not have the same resources as other families to break out of the cycle. The cycle usually begins with a crisis, such as teenage pregnancy or substance abuse, which well-to-do families can resolve because structurally, they have ready access to the needed resources. Poorer families, however, have far fewer options. The 'unsolvable' crisis tends to lead to a fatalistic mindset which, due to structural circumstances such as not having access to an effective financial and emotional support network, no longer values long term commitments such as those associated with educational achievements or enhanced life-skills as these are no longer seen as 'attainable' investments. The pressures of a continued mismatch between their belief in the prevailing values of society and the 'futility of life' they are trapped in activates a form of 'coping mechanism' that leads to the creation of mental models based on an easier-to-accept culture and ideology of poverty which in turn exposes these families to further risks of impoverishment and lowered educational opportunities. Fatalistic clichés such as 'it's fated', 'it's God's will' or 'what will be, will be' becomes a cherished albeit substituted notion. Unfortunately this cycle, if deprived of assistance in the form social intervention, tends to run over generations.

Bourdieu and Giddens however, agree that education is the catalyst for change in any community (Reed-Danahay, 2005 and Giddens, 1997). Scholastic reasoning, which is the outcome of education, introduces 'logic' in initiating change. Despite his reservations that education has a tendency to reproduce social class, Bourdieu is of the opinion that should the

proper forms and channels of education be negotiated, it will serve as a mode to ‘balance’ the effects of habitus.

## **2.6 The Promise of Emancipatory Education**

This leads us to a discussion of Paulo Freire and his concept of emancipatory education. In his classic book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire envisions an educational programme which will liberate his Brazilian peasant society from a mindset of blindly accepting a life of deference and submission to the ruling class. In his effort to change the status quo, Freire formulated what is now recognized as transformational or emancipatory education. He bases the approach on the concept of ‘dialogue’ as opposed to the traditional ‘banking’ pedagogy<sup>8</sup>. While the lag in the socio-economic development of the Malays is not exactly the result of an overtly oppressive society, there are nevertheless oppressive structures at work and these can be said to result in a community remaining ‘unconscious’ of the nature of their condition causing them to fatalistically ‘accept’ their status quo.

A local example is revealed by Velayutham (2006) in his chapter on *Everyday Racism in Singapore*. In emphasising multiracialism and multilingualism as fundamental principles of the nation-state, the leaders of Singapore aimed to inculcate in the various ethnic groups an overriding sense of commitment to the country and to the necessity of their existence in racial harmony. This concept of Singapore’s multiracialism is fostered through every conceivable means — in all forms of official cultural representations, celebrations, schools, the media, national holidays and tourism. “It is made to become such an imperative that the government

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<sup>8</sup>Freire refers to the ‘banking’ concept of education as one where students are treated like empty vessels to be filled with knowledge, similar to a piggybank. However, he argues for a pedagogy where the learner is treated as a co-creator of knowledge via the technique of using dialogue.

in Singapore began to control all instruments and centres of power and did not allow for the growth of political pluralism”<sup>9</sup> (Vasil, 2000, cited in Velayutham 2006, pg. 2).

Combining Bourdieu’s concept of ‘Habitus’ as well as Giddens’ ideas of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’, it can then be concluded that as a community, certain ‘mental models’ have evolved in the Malay worldview causing them to uncritically ‘accept’ their status in Singapore society. Freire’s experience using the emancipatory education approach suggests that if the Malay community can be made to be more aware of their situation and a continuous dialogue facilitated, a sense of critical consciousness will be made to permeate to all levels of the community and that a community-wide transformation can be effectively initiated.

For his Brazilian community, Freire embarked on a curriculum which he calls ‘Problem-posed education’. Based on this approach, he advocated the need to instill in the oppressed an ability to think critically and to reason. Only in this way can they be spurred to intervene positively in the negative situation which surrounds them. According to Freire, thinking critically enables one to perceive reality as a series of continually changing processes and transformations rather than as a static entity. However, ‘authentic thinking’ - thinking that is concerned about reality - cannot take place in ‘ivory towers’, but only through communication and dialogue.

It can thus be proposed that the way to resolve the situation discussed by Giddens and Bourdieu, with regards to the development of the Malay community, is to follow the example of Freire by first formulating a community education programme which will engage its participants to embark on a continuous process of critical reflection. However, it must be

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<sup>9</sup> The classical Marxist concept of Repressive State Apparatus and Ideological State Apparatus can actually be applied here. Read Althusser (1970).

highlighted that unlike the mostly illiterate peasant community of Freire's time, the Malays in present day Singapore are living in a more urban society and are privy to a higher level of educational opportunities. Freire's model, if applied, must therefore be adapted accordingly.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the socio-economic status of the Malays has been steadily improving since the days of Stamford Raffles. What is of concern here is the inability of this rate of development to match those of the other ethnic groups. To use a simple metaphor, what is present seems to be a situation of keeping afloat and letting the tide push the Malays to the direction of where mainstream society is going rather than 'enabling' the community to garner its energies and putting in collective effort to physically 'swim' to the intended destination and to eventually determine what form it should take.

Giddens, in his arguments relating to communities sharing similar contexts, pinpoint the cause of such problems to existing 'agency' and the consequent creation of 'structures' which are 'unfavourable' to the community. Bourdieu's ideas, when applied to the Malays, points more towards internal structures – the cognitive predispositions of members in the community which, when reacting with the external structures, create negative consequences. Both these theoretical frameworks however, can be said to result in the same outcome based on the Mental Model Hypothesis. Freire, in acknowledging the impact of these factors, proposes that the initiation of an intervention programme to raise the level of critical thinking of the community can ultimately lead to the desired process of change.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE NATURE OF EMANCIPATORY AND TRANSFORMATORY EDUCATION**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter serves to clarify and elaborate on the role of emancipatory and transformatory education in the context of the Singapore education system. It begins with a detailed description of these two educational approaches followed by a discussion of their applicability and effectiveness in the formal school curriculum under the label of ‘Character Education’.

In attempting to establish Emancipatory and Transformatory elements as components of Character Education, an argument is made by taking in the perspective of several established thinkers. This is then linked to an assessment of the Singapore Ministry of Education’s approach to the teaching of Character Education in its schools.

The chapter proceeds to identify critical thinking as an essential component for an effective Character Education programme and provides a case study of a local school to support this. It argues eventually, that a genuine approach to fully adopt Emancipatory and Transformatory Education may assist in building up the students’ capacity for critical thinking. This point is made especially pertinent in light of this study’s focus on the needs of the Malay community.

It concludes with arguments justifying the need for organisations from the non-formal education sector to take up the challenge of providing emancipatory and transformatory education as a means of capacity building for critical thinking for youths of the Malay community in the country.

### **3.2 The Emancipatory Approach**

According to Merwe and Albertyn (2009), the emancipatory method of teaching and learning challenges educators to go beyond the mere transference of knowledge and skills by focussing instead on participation, dialogue, critical thinking and consciousness-raising. Participants are encouraged to share their experiences and work together in identifying and questioning any distorted assumptions which may have inadvertently placed limits on their progress. Distorted assumptions are described by Mezirow (1991, pg. 118) as those “that limits insight and openness to other ways of seeing themselves and other people”. He describes how such distorted assumptions result in a sense of powerlessness in various individuals, groups and communities as they perceive themselves to have lost the ability to make choices and are increasingly subjected to the external prescriptions of others. This ultimately has as a disempowering effect as it ends up preventing individuals and groups from seeking changes which will improve their lives.

The emancipatory approach is said to bear fruit when it becomes evident that empowerment has taken place. This is reflected when individuals begin to display the ability to set their own goals and to act collectively upon them as well as the ability to make their own choices (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). Other writers see empowerment as a process of helping people gain control over their own lives. For example, Adams (1996, pg.5) defines it as “the means by which individuals, groups and/or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their goals”.

In 2002, Albertyn, Kapp and Groenewald introduced the idea of a micro level of empowerment and clarified that since the micro level refers to empowerment related to individual feelings, attitudes and skills under his/her personal control, it can be taken to be the

‘baseline for empowerment’ and as an important starting point in any intervention programme. Alibertyn (2005) later attributed more levels of empowerment deriving from the emancipatory approach. Apart from the micro (personal) level, he also elaborated on the interface (interpersonal) level and the macro (socio-political) level. Kabeer (2005) and Laverack (2005) then both forward the argument that the process of empowerment, in fact, lies on a continuum as once the individual feels personal empowerment, he/she will be able to proceed to feelings of control at the interface and the macro level of empowerment.

Nevertheless, the stress is that these levels must be sustained in order for any community development intervention process to be effective. Both writers thus agree that empowerment is a process which should not occur as a once-off intervention. In addition, individuals need to consistently be made aware of and conscientized regarding the ways in which their empowerment, or lack thereof, impacts on the various aspects of their lives. They should consequently be exposed to tools which will enable them to reflect critically on their empowerment. Kabeer (2005) further elaborates that empowerment must begin from within. By creating opportunities that allow individuals to experience success with small immediate tasks, their self-esteem will be bolstered leading to further processes of emancipation and subsequent transformation.

To summarise, it can be seen from the current literature that the emancipatory approach is very much valued as it not only brings about positive changes, it also functions as a medium for the transmission of knowledge by virtue of the fact that individuals become motivated to question their assumptions and to reflect on their own circumstances. In so doing, the benefit of collective action is realised and action subsequently organised based on such platforms. In

essence, emancipatory education provides the individual with a powerful tool which ensures not only sustainable change, but the opportunity to embark on a process of lifelong learning.

### **3.3 The Transformatory Process**

Although the term ‘emancipatory and transformatory education’ has been widely applied in this research, it must be clarified that the label actually denotes two separate stages in the learning process. While the emancipatory approach facilitates critical reflection leading to the empowerment of individuals and community groups, the transformatory process represents the deeper level of learning and understanding that takes place resulting in participants’ changing their frame of reference and actively addressing power imbalances. Paulo Freire (1970) describes this as the development of critical consciousness whereby participants not only learn as a result of information that is imposed on them (i.e. by virtue of the emancipatory approach) but also the stage where they enter into deep enquiry by questioning their own knowledge and assumptions that might be distorted. Boychuk-Buchscer (1999) however provides the idea that critical thinking, self-reflection, dialogue and consciousness-raising which emerge from participatory circumstances facilitate the transformatory process when it goes beyond the stage of deep enquiry and instead empowers participants to take action based on newly-discovered awareness of issues that confront them on a daily basis.

The close connection between emancipatory and transformatory education can be seen more clearly if one is able to identify the former approach as having its foundations largely within the experiential category of self-reflection which is a component of the critical thinking process. In general, critical thinking involves skills such as observing, inferring, generalizing, reasoning, evaluating reasoning, carefully exploring situations with questions, thinking for oneself, viewing situations from multiple perspectives and discussing ideas in an organized

manner (Ennis, 1996). The component of self-reflection however, requires that the individual utilise these various ways of thinking to embark on a journey of self-examination as he/she is introduced to new choices. Seen from another perspective as the capacity for thinking about one's own thoughts, self-reflection specifically involves the act of introspection where one compares his/her own situation with other alternatives (Dimaggio et al., 2008). It is motivated by curiosity or epistemic interest in the self and is associated with openness to experiences (Takano and Tanno, 2009). These forms of thinking may finally lead to a change of one's own values, perspectives and assumptions based on the realisation of a new set of choices. This change in outlook thus marks the transition from the individual's experience of emancipatory education to that of transformatory education. Emancipatory and transformatory education are thus complementary processes when put to action. The higher the level of critical reflection, the more likely it is that individuals and groups will experience emancipation by way of empowerment and subsequent transformation.

Nevertheless, while the characteristics and positive outcomes of emancipatory and transformatory education have been made clear, the challenge is to see if it can be aligned to the curriculum and objectives of mainstream education in the context of the Singapore nation-state.

### **3.4 Evolution of the Singapore Education System: A Socio-Political Perspective**

British educational policy in this island-colony, beginning with the founding of the Singapore Institution in 1823, was seen as simply a convenient strategy towards creating a more structured (and therefore an easier-to-manage) society rather than involving any specific objectives aiming for the overall social progress of the local inhabitants (Ong, 2008). Historically, the nation's first fully-functioning academic establishment, The Singapore

Institution, was funded by the British government and provided free education for the local Malays in their native language. The English language was not taught in the village schools as the British deemed early training in the child's mother tongue an absolute necessity at the time. The main objective of the Malay-based education then was to make the natives better fishermen and peasants.

The Chinese and Indian schools were however, largely left to their own devices. These schools were entirely funded by private enterprises. The Chinese community, for instance, was largely responsible for setting up their own schools run by teachers who were mostly born in China and using textbooks imported from the Mainland. The Tamil medium Indian vernacular schools, just like the Malay and Chinese schools, were limited to the primary level. English medium schools however, were opened to all children on a fee-paying basis. These schools were supported by private enterprise but assisted by the government. Many of these publicly-funded, government-aided institutions were started by Christian missionaries and were free from government control until 1919. The education system in the early days of Singapore was therefore characterised by 'benign neglect, ad hoc policy making and indifference to consequences' (ibid). It was only in 1920 that the British government implemented the Registration of School Ordinance which subsequently underwent several amendments and revisions until it was re-enacted as the 1957 Education Ordinance.

The conclusion of World War II, specifically the Pacific War in 1945, had the effect of instilling a sense of belonging and patriotism among the local people and this resulted in a change of the existing education policy in Singapore. Challenged by the national fervour at the time, the British government then declared the new policy of providing free primary education to all races.

According to Ho and Gopinathan (1999), the foundations for the establishment of the current national education system for Singapore had been formulated even prior to 1965, the year in which the nation achieved its official independence. In 1956, the *All-Party Report on Chinese Education* produced by the then British-ruled Singapore government had included a proposal for an educational system which it perceived will meet the needs of the major ethnic groups in the country, specifically the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (Zhao and Liu, 2010). In 1959 Singapore was granted internal self-government where the People's Action Party was subsequently voted into power. The leading political party that was then, and still is to the present day, dominates the way in which the country was being governed subsequently issued its own policy statement where it made clear that the achievement of social cohesion and the development of a national identity through education will be its overriding priority in working against the colonial legacy of communalism and ethnic division. It began by introducing a Five-Year Plan which emphasises the equal treatment of the four streams of education. In recognising its historical foundations, Malay was made the National Language while emphasis was given to Science and Technical education (Tan, 2010).

When Singapore finally assumed complete political independence from the British in 1965, the re-elected PAP-led government made more concrete its plans to overhaul the system of education for the young nation. The Government began pursuing a tripartite system of academic, vocational and technical schools to support the country's basic economic policies. However, due to its diversified social make-up, the government also recognised that its educational objective must be to inculcate patriotism and national identity among the young students so as to achieve a peaceful and economically productive multiracial, multicultural and multilingual society. This was to be done by providing a uniform curriculum for all types

of schools, the use of locally-oriented textbooks and by giving schools a sense of common purpose and a common direction. In addition, the barrier of ethnic division was overcome with the introduction of the bilingual education policy in 1966. English was made the main medium of instruction while the pupil's mother tongue was declared a second language which was made examinable and compulsory at the primary and secondary levels.

By the 1980's, the planners of the Singapore education system began to acknowledge that there has been an overemphasis in the connection between educational provision and the economy and thus began acceding to the demands for a broadening of the diversity of the educational landscape in the country. Today, apart from Music and Art Elective programmes taught in mainstream schools, the country also boasts of specialised government-run institutions such as the Singapore Sports School (SSS) and School of The Arts (SOTA).

### **3.5 Conflict with the Emancipatory and Transformatory Approach**

While the benefits of Emancipatory and Transformatory Education have been discussed earlier in this chapter, it can be foreseen that in the eyes of the nation's leaders, there will be constraints in incorporating the approach into the formal school curriculum as it may end up contradicting the country's national education policy.

Education in Singapore is managed by the country's Ministry of Education (MOE). The government body directs the formulation and implementation of policies related to education in Singapore. It controls the development and administration of state schools or otherwise known as government schools. In return, these institutions receive direct government funding. While private schools may also receive some means of funding, they are not directly controlled by the government. These schools retain the right to select their students via their

admission policies and are funded in whole or in part by charging their students tuition fees rather than relying on public funding. MOE nevertheless takes on an advisory and supervisory role in ensuring their proper conduct. Furthermore, being business entities, regulation of such academic institutions takes effect by way of official government licensing and registration practices (Singapore Education, 2010).

The country's historical experience have convinced Singapore government leaders that an educational system comprising differentiated school systems will end up being divisive and politicised. An incident which occurred while Singapore was still under British rule has often been used as an example: On 23 April 1955, the Hock Lee bus strike was initiated by workers protesting against poor working conditions, long work hours and low pay. During the strike, large numbers of dismissed bus workers locked themselves in the Hock Lee garages and picketed at the gates. On 10 May, the pickets began rioting when the police tried to forcibly remove them from the premises and a stand-off was created. Two days later, on 12 May, the workers were joined by several lorry loads of ethnic Chinese school students from the Chinese High School, Chung Cheng High School and the Chung Hwa, Nanyang and Nan Chiau Girls' High Schools. These students were sympathetic to the pro-communist cause of the bus workers and entertained them with songs and folk dances to sustain their morale. Unfortunately, the violence escalated later in the day resulting in injury to 31 people and the death of two police officers, a journalist and a student. On 13 May, the government subsequently closed down three Chinese schools for a week and ordered the expulsion of some of the ringleaders. On 14 May, the Hock Lee bus strike was settled by government arbitration on terms generally favourable to the strikers (Tan, 1997).

Incidences such as these have resulted in the current school policy as outlined by Aline Wong, Senior Minister of State for Education (2000),

“From the start, the independent government recognized that education is not just a means to train a workforce, it is also a most effective means to build social stability and a sense of national identity among the diverse population. In the 1960s and 70s, a series of educational reforms was undertaken to unify the standards, and set up a common education system.”

Over the years, the government nevertheless has shown some flexibility in allowing for the curriculum to be reviewed “to allow for differentiation to meet the needs of students with different talents and abilities” (Hodge, 2007). Despite this however, the view towards maintaining a core set of common knowledge, competencies and especially values has remained uncompromising. It was with pride that current PM Lee declared in his National Day speech that

“The Singapore spirit is not based on a common race, language or religion. It is based on deeper things that we share: shared values like multi-racialism, meritocracy, or respect for every talent; shared loyalty and commitment to Singapore; shared responsibility for each other and pride in what we have done together; shared memories as well as dreams and aspirations” (Lee, 2010).

However, as mentioned earlier in this research, the stress on ‘commonality’ has resulted in the government adopting a communitarian approach which demands that collective interests be placed above individual needs (Chua, 1995). This has resulted in a growing tension due to the disempowering effects felt by the minority communities as they gradually become

sidelined by the needs of the dominant majority in the country. This is especially so in the case of the ethnic Malay community.

Based on the earlier discussion in this chapter however, this rising tension can perhaps be neutralised through emancipatory and transformatory education whereby the Malays could undergo a process of empowerment and subsequently be allowed to undertake responsible action. This will result in their commitment to “understand how structural oppression in its various forms impacts upon them as individuals and to enable them thereby to take back some control in their lives” (Wise, 1995, pg. 108). Taylor (1998 cited in Percy, 2005) highlights that the emancipatory and transformatory approach will actually benefit the general public as once individuals develop the necessary openness and confidence to deal with learning at the affective level, it will become much easier for them to build trusting relationships. This is echoed by Cranton (2004) who describes an enabling environment for transformative learning as one where there exists trust, empathy, sharing, openness and receptivity. This will be evident especially if dialogue is employed in the application of the emancipatory approach. In the overall spirit of nation-building, it can thus be argued that that the emancipatory and transformatory approach will empower all its learners to initiate “a commitment to challenging and combating injustice and oppression” (Ward and Mullender, 1991, pg.22) hence moving closer towards creating a progressive yet conciliatory society.

Nevertheless, under the discerning eye of the Singapore MOE and based on the beliefs that the government operates on, one should expect that a full commitment to transformatory and emancipatory education cannot be attained since the approach cannot be reconciled with the maintenance of the nation’s ‘shared values’. This negative stance develops as the pedagogy can be viewed as one which ‘forcefully’ emphasises benefits favouring a specific ethnic group.

This perception is evident in the current sentiments of the country's office bearers. For instance, in warning the country against the rise of ethnic tensions and the subsequent threat to the nation's peace and stability, the former PM and now Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew had insisted,

“First, prevent it from happening, and if despite all our efforts it still happens, prevent it from damaging our society, fracturing our racial harmony, pulling us apart, making us fight each other and destroy the whole country” (Lee, 2009).

Notwithstanding their perceptions of the negative elements associated with emancipatory and transformatory education, the MOE however, seems to inadvertently acknowledge that there can be benefits in operationalising the concept. This is evident as I am able to identify many aspects of the approach in the Character Education programme which is part of the curriculum in the country's national schools – at least, at the rhetorical level. However, I am inclined to the opinion that the programme currently in place in our local institutions is one which depicts a not-so-satisfactory and somewhat contradictory mix of elements encompassing critical thinking skills that has been largely tempered by a directive, state-oriented agenda. A discussion on the conduct of the subject in Singapore schools is therefore necessary in the next section.

### **3.5.1. Character Education as a Compromise**

The label of character education in the Singapore context has always been interchangeable with that of civic, moral and values education. In contrast to the curriculum for the subject in countries such as the UK which sees character education as “ the explicit delivery of mediated learning experiences designed to promote prosocial attitudes and behavior (i.e. prosociality)

that support the development of social competence and a cooperative disposition” (White and Warfa, 2011), the approach adopted by the Singapore Ministry of Education, though less centred on the individual, is nevertheless, in its eyes, more pragmatic in being mainly directed towards the country’s economic development.

“The unique socio-political framework is seen as the key to moral education in Singapore; it is a situation of considerable complexity – a high degree of pluralism coupled with rapid urbanization and industrialization. The government seeing its task as one of managing diversity while promoting economic growth uses ethnic pride and Asian cultural tradition as a mobilizing force” (Gopinathan, 1980, pg. 171).

Gopinathan elaborates that Singapore’s programmes for character education should at best be understood in the context of her unique political and social framework. While virtues such as respect, tolerance, honesty, patriotism, respect for law and order are similarly advocated in character education programmes elsewhere, the case in Singapore is said to be different because of the issues and dilemmas involved in bringing about social integration and consensus in a potentially divisive society. Despite having established a successful bilingual school policy with English as the main medium of instruction and enjoying continuing economic progress, Singapore is still perceived by its leaders as a nation lacking in unity due to differences in race, language and religion. The government therefore takes an almost completely utilitarian view of moral education in its schools. Prime importance is placed on how useful a set of prescribed values are to the well being of the nation as well as how the country’s citizens can practise these values to be useful members of their society. The overarching concern is how adherence to these values guarantees survival for the Singapore society and nation.

Wei and Chin (2004, pg. 601) reflect that

“The slant towards ‘statecraft’ becomes very decided in the secondary school Civics and Moral Education (*i.e. Character Education*)...The values to be taught are here explicitly stated as only those ‘essential to the well-being of our nation’. Pupils are to ‘know the people and the events of our nation’s past, and their links with the present, the factors that contribute to nation-building, our nation's constraints and vulnerabilities, and how to overcome these constraints, our system of government, the impact and issues of a fast changing world on our nation's survival and success’....There is no attempt to teach a critical awareness of democratic values with which to help pupils appraise the actual system of governance being practised in Singapore.”

In effect, the problems and complexities that would have been posed by the introduction of such issues have been avoided by emphasising only on ‘safe generalities’.

#### **3.5.1.1. Features of Character Education**

Under his Taxonomy of Learning, Bloom (1964) would have placed character education within the Affective domain as the category is allocated for pedagogy which involves the manner on how we deal with feelings or emotions and underscores qualities such as motivations and attitudes. Under the Affective domain, the taxonomy lists five major learning categories beginning from the simplest behaviour which are easily acquired to those which are most complex and therefore more difficult to develop. Sequentially, these skills are broadly labelled as receiving, responding, valuing, organising and characterising (Krathwohl et al., 1973, see appendix1).

Matthew Lipman (1994) goes a step further by isolating a specific component which, to him, is crucial for character education – that of Caring Thinking. Oscar Brenifier in his article *Caring Thinking About Thinking* (2008), summarises the concept by stating that “emotions are a form of thinking, since they produce judgments”. He clarifies further with a quote taken from the *auctoritas*:

“Is it possible to teach children to consider the appropriateness of having the emotions they have? The answer seems fairly obvious: in their upbringing of their children, parents and siblings constantly contribute to the shaping of the young child’s emotional outlook. By reward and reproof, they let the child know which emotional expressions are deemed appropriate in a given context and which are not. (Their rationales may be fairly idiosyncratic: laughing at funerals is often reproofed, but not crying at weddings.) But if there can be an education of the emotions in the home, there can be an education of the emotions in the school and, indeed, there already is... Consequently, if we can temper the antisocial emotions, we are likely to be able to temper the antisocial conduct.”

The concept of ‘Caring Thinking’, in essence, acknowledges that some emotions are naturally more desirable than others. Emotions are seen to be able to provoke reactions leading to specific social consequences. Our choice of emotions, in other words, is akin to expressing judgments made within a given situation. As such, like any other form of thinking, emotions have to be educated, taking into account their arbitrariness which is more often than not, socially determined. Character education in this sense, sees wisdom in the personal management and control of one’s own emotions.

More current writers such as Taylor (2006, pg.115) however, place character-building under the umbrella of values education which then includes other elements such as spiritual, moral, social and cultural education; religious education; multicultural/antiracist education and cross-cultural themes relating to citizenship, environment and health. She further emphasizes that for an effective values education programme to take place, important characteristics such as unity and clarity of purpose as well as the creation of a moral climate for the reinforcement of values to be cultivated must be present.

### **3.5.1.2. The Conduct of Character Education in Singaporean Schools**

Currently, the Singapore school curriculum does not distinctly recognise emancipatory and transformatory education as an approach to its character education programme. Character education is delivered through the Ministry of Education's (MOE) Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and National Education (NE) frameworks (Ministry Of Education, 2010). SEL is an umbrella term that refers to students' acquisition of skills to 'recognise and manage emotions, develop care and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively'. The objective is to ensure that students are equipped to manage their own self, relate positively to others and make effective decisions. Taught under subject labels such as Civics and Moral Education (CME) and Pastoral Care and Career Guidance (PCCG), the MOE's Social and Emotional Learning initiative touches on themes such as Counselling, Discipline, Pastoral Care and Sexuality Education.

The National Education programme was introduced in 1997 to develop in students the spirit for national cohesion, the instinct for survival, and confidence in the nation's future. The Committee on National Education (NE) had by then recommended ways to further strengthen

the ‘heartware’ and rootedness of the country’s young which will then provide them with the encouragement to shape the character and life of the society they will inherit.

The overarching objective of NE is to prepare young Singaporeans to seize the opportunities presented by the globalised world. ‘With each new generation we have to renew and strengthen the bonds between Singaporeans of different backgrounds and races. We must therefore nurture in our young both a deep sense of belonging to the country, and the global orientation that will keep Singapore strong and vibrant in a new world’ (MOE, 2010).

### **3.5.1.3. Social Emotional Learning (SEL)**

According to the MOE website, research has shown that SEL has impact on two main areas of pupil development – character and citizenship. Character Education is seen to be effective when an individual manifests positive values in her or his life by displaying the appropriate social and emotional competencies. For example, to demonstrate the value of responsibility, the person needs to be inculcated with the social emotional skills of self-management such as impulse control and responsible decision making.

Thus, in fulfilling the criteria of character education, SEL takes on the task of inculcating social and emotional competencies in pupils who, in turn, translate these into appropriate displays of good citizenship by contributing positively to civic life. Thus by allowing for the development of self and social awareness, the MOE programmes are intended to provide opportunities for students to develop a greater ability for empathy, perspective taking, recognising strengths, needs and values, appreciating diversity and respecting others. The overarching objective of the SEL programme is thus to get students to be more personally and

socially responsible in their behaviour. This will then reduce interpersonal conflicts that can result in negative outcomes.

#### **3.5.1.4. National Education (NE)**

Rather than presenting itself as a subject-specific programme, National Education in Singapore is infused in both the formal and informal curriculum for primary and secondary schools, junior colleges and centralised institutes. Through the formal curriculum, co-curricular programmes and other activities such as Learning Journeys, commemorations marking important historical events such as Total Defence Day (the day Singapore surrendered to the Japanese), Racial Harmony Day (the 1964 racial riots) as well as celebrations during International Friendship Day (to commemorate the good relationship Singapore has with its neighbours) and National Day, students will have developed a holistic knowledge of Singapore - the challenges it faces and the opportunities that are available – and learn the values and attitudes of responsible citizenship. In addition, group-based activities such as the Community Involvement Programme develop strong social conscience and promote a sense of belonging to the community and nation. NE is also infused into the academic curriculum, with nation-building messages built into not just academic subjects like Civics and Moral Education, History and Social Studies, but also in subjects such as Mathematics and the Sciences.

#### **3.5.2.A Working Compromise?**

Nevertheless, based on the discussion of concepts earlier on in this chapter, one cannot help but come to the realisation that the current approach lacks the humanizing effect of creating self-fulfilled and ‘liberated’ individuals. In emphasising the true essence of character education, Niblett (1963, pg. 30) speaks of an ideal where there is “a greater encouragement

of initiative and of taking of responsibility” – an impact which is missing in the Singapore curriculum. This assertion is supported by critics who claim that the educational framework established for the country has been effective only in fostering social cohesion which is merely superficial when compared to the desired transformatory and emancipatory outcome where students genuinely learn and discover about values such as morality, truth, justice and mercy.

Chew (1998, pg. 510) for example opined that

“Whether the units are on marriage, responsible parenthood, civil defence, national campaigns or responding to global issues, the thrust of the written curriculum is to impart the knowledge, skills and attitudes considered as pertinent for good citizenship in Singapore.”

According to Tan and Chew (2004), such a pragmatist approach undertaken by the government serves only to compromise the content and quality of the educational experience for the student. Students are made to unquestionably accept given truths in NE, and are not encouraged to discuss controversial elements. As a result, there has been a growing perception among both teachers and students that NE is ‘nothing but propaganda’. My experience as a secondary school teacher teaching Social Studies unfortunately leads me to agree with such sentiments. While the declared learning agenda has been for NE to develop thinking, the glaring contradiction is that the very same curriculum fails to provide opportunities for students to practice critical thinking by disagreeing with certain elements of the syllabus. The irony is that the situation has resulted in a common complaint by government officials that students in the country have become increasingly apathetic and disinterested in political issues. One of the main criticisms is that traditional methods of getting students to unquestioningly

accept values from authority, however sophisticated the form, has become obsolete in an era where access to information has become exceedingly borderless (ibid).

Currently, in the other areas of education, Tan and Gopinathan (2000) have observed that the practice now is to prepare students for a more globalized economy by introducing a greater amount of critical thinking into the education system. Initiatives such as Thinking Schools Learning Nation (TSLN)<sup>10</sup> have been launched to reflect this change in ideology of education. The curriculum has been adjusted such that students are given sufficient space and freedom to think critically about issues relating to specific taught subjects.

Given the right framework and motivation, critical thinking in Character Education in Singapore schools should logically be given the same emphasis. Unfortunately, this has yet to occur.

### **3.6 The Persisting Gaps in Character Education**

According to Arun Kapur in his work *Transforming Schools – Empowering Children* (2007), a great school is one which develops the learning abilities of its students by providing a secure environment for the learning process to take place. Schools should “ensure a protected environment where students are nurtured and gradually exposed to the real world in order to make them strong enough, and when the time comes, to stay ahead in the real world” (pg 9). The rationale is for schools to gradually lower the ‘fences’ surrounding its students as they grow strong enough to manage on their own. However, in the case of many schools around

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<sup>10</sup> The vision of Thinking Schools, Learning Nation (TSLN) was launched in 1997 by the Singapore Ministry of Education in an effort to develop a total learning environment in the country and to revolutionise teaching and learning in all schools. The framework includes concepts such as ability-driven education, innovation and enterprise, and national education. The ‘Teach Less, Learn More’ philosophy for instance shifts the focus from “quantity” to “quality” in education. “More quality” in terms of classroom interaction, opportunities for expression, the learning of life-long skills and the building of character through innovative and effective teaching approaches and strategies. “Less quantity” in terms of rote-learning, repetitive tests, and following prescribed answers and set formulae.

the world, these ‘fences’ remain upright such that students often ‘fail to connect their inner self with the outside world.’ Schools in Singapore seem to be no different.

This paragraph analyses the twin phenomenon relating to the flaws in human reasoning and values conditioning in the formal school setting. In identifying these elements as obstacles to the character building process, the need for transformatory and emancipatory education can then be justified.

### **3.6.1. The Flaws in Human Reasoning**

According to Paul and Elder in their book *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life* (2005), the human psyche has three basic functions: thinking, feeling and desiring. These three functions can be guided or directed either by one’s innate egocentrism or by one’s potential rational capacities. Egocentric tendencies function automatically and unconsciously while rational tendencies are largely conscious but arise only from active self-development. Paul and Elder further clarified that humans are innately self-centred and this is reflected by their innate egoism, innate sociocentrism, innate wish fulfilment, innate self-validation and innate selfishness. Such self-centredness makes us flawed thinkers as we constantly fall into the trap of self-deception.

Nevertheless, such Hobbesian perspectives on the ‘state of nature’ should be viewed with a certain amount of skepticism as those who cite Locke’s ‘tabula rasa’ or Rousseau’s ‘social contract’ can readily offer counterarguments based on tenets such as encultured values, personal obligations and enlightened instinctual reasoning.

Trivers, on the other hand, provides a more psychological explanation by clarifying that human reasoning is hindered when the ‘Self’ is kept in the dark whenever the larger organism

preferentially keeps true information out of its consciousness thus misleading the functioning mind. Sometimes, this may involve activities of the conscious mind itself, for example, suppression of active memory resulting in the creation of mental states which are biased in a particular way. Usually, however, the processes are unconscious to the individual. In brief, self-deception takes place when true information is preferentially excluded from consciousness or, held in (varying degrees of) unconsciousness (Trivers, 2010).

Sen, on the other hand, provides a philosophical viewpoint which stresses that impartial or independent reasoning is impossible to achieve as humans live in a social world. “When the members of a society reason about fair and just rules of behaviour, they might decide to cooperate with each other on the assumption that others would reciprocate” (Osmani, 2010, pg. 602). In essence, humans may unconsciously temper their reasoning so as to fulfil their personal needs. In addition, Sen makes the argument that reasoning becomes flawed when there is no clear cognitive benchmarks or guidelines due to our diversity in culture and social situations. As such human reasoning may have its shortcomings as “individuals first subject their own values and views to critical and impartial scrutiny so that when they engage in public reasoning they can defend their views to others with reasons” (ibid, pg. 604).

Rudinow and Barry (2008) support this perspective as they attribute the lack of discipline in intellectual thinking to the flaws in the reasoning process. Instead of using intellectual standards, they reason that humans conveniently use self-centred psychological standards to determine what to believe and what to reject. Much of our thinking, as a result, becomes biased, distorted, partial, uninformed and prejudiced. The quality of our thoughts, in turn, affects decisions such as the friends we make, the careers that we choose and even the food that we eat. All these, in short, will impact the quality of our life.

In the opening lines of his book, *Knowledge and Critical Pedagogy*, Kincheloe (2010, pg. 3) provides us with one of the most current example of a disastrous outcome stemming from flawed human reasoning.

“We live in an era of disinformation – self-interested data distributed by those with the most power and resources. One need look no farther than the debate over how the US and Great Britain came to initiate the bloody, unnecessary, and geo-politically damaging Iraq War. Every few days a new book is published about the ‘bad information’ that was developed and then circulated by Anglo-American political operatives. From the testimony of those who were the most privy to the construction of this knowledge...we begin to learn quite amazing lessons about the production, validation, and deployment of knowledge...and the lessons are disconcerting and even frightening”.

It is thus maintained that individuals *can* develop a habit of thinking critically to counteract these human shortcomings. However, such skills do not come naturally and need to be cultivated. Proponents such as Paul and Elder (2004) have suggested that a critical thinking programme be made available especially to students in schools. Nevertheless, as the next paragraph will explain, the effectiveness of such measures within the school setting is questionable.

### **3.6.2. Character Education in Formal Schooling: Values Conditioning in-lieu of Critical Thinking**

It has been said that despite appeals for greater democratisation in classroom teaching, many schools today are still no more different from Freire’s critique of the ‘banking’ concept of education where learners accept knowledge passively and uncritically via top-down and one-

way communication. As summarised by Harber, such systems continue to exist as “the dominant values and beliefs in society are imparted through a process of indoctrination and socialisation based on authoritarian relationships between teachers and pupils” (Harber, 2004, pg. 24-25). Bain (2001) ascribes such scenarios to nations such as Russia where the situation is made even more convoluted as teachers themselves are targeted by different groups, organisations and individuals who seek to impose their needs and values on schools. As a consequence, subjective viewpoints may end up disguised as objective truths.

Furthermore, students in schools are taught to admire, imitate and obey their teachers who in turn are expected to act out the role of authoritarian adults demanding respect. Inevitably, authoritarianism in school and its emphasis on the automatic adherence to orders develops into a conditioning process where ultimately obedience to instructions can be used as a justification of violent actions. Davies (2008) supports this assertion in her book *Educating Against Extremism* where she identifies the trait of “unquestioning obedience to authority” as bearing the hallmark of extremism, especially one reinforced by “dependence on authoritarian structures”. This outcome becomes more likely so when driven by a faith centred on the “obedience to an external code or belief and conduct” leading to an outright refusal to consider alternative perspectives (pg. 44).

The main viewpoints guiding current work on character education have in fact, remained unchanged. As far back as the beginning of this century, writers such as Dewey, Piaget and Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1987) had insisted that the goal of moral education is the stimulation of the ‘natural’ development of the individual child’s own moral judgement and capacities, thus allowing the individual to use his or her own moral judgement to control his or her behaviour. However, any hoped-for character education stemming from the individual’s ability to think

critically is today compromised in many countries by a rigorous examination system that makes use of the resulting academic achievement as an instrument to sort people into social categories and classes (Galtung, 1975). From the perspective of values education, tests and exams normally conducted in schools are inappropriate as they “do not usually evaluate a state of mind but rather the level of acquired knowledge” (Bar-Tal, 2002, pg.34). Such a premise thus negates the emphasis on autonomy in the student’s moral reasoning process. One therefore has to come to the conclusion that the current curriculum in most schools constrains and disempowers rather than acting to motivate and enable positive character development.

This claim is supported by educationists such as Davies (2002) and Harber (2004) who argue that our present education systems bring about negative consequences as students come under intense pressure to excel academically at the expense of character education. Failure, or the perception of failure, causes stress, depression, falling self-confidence and low self-esteem leading to negative psychological consequences such as aggression, bullying and self-harm. Meece and Holt (1993) in fact, imply that a reverse conditioning process may result with many children developing low self-esteem and ending up learning to fail in school. Wadsworth and Butterworth (2006) agree and state that low self-esteem resulting from academic failure often causes young people to develop negative feelings such as guilt, shame, depression and anger. Part of the consequence can be attributed to youth crime in which these juveniles often show street smartness and defiance to compensate for their ‘sensed failure’ (or their experience of failure) in school. Schools, according to the authors, do not necessarily equip youths with skills and self-esteem. In fact, they are often in competition with the other parts of society that can do this though with deplorable consequences for the society. Darder provides the harshest criticism yet of the existing systems in our schools by accusing such

institutions as “serving nothing more than to create ‘seeds for resistance’ in the minds of the future” (Darder et. al, 2003, pg.6-7).

### **3.6.3. Consequences of the Failure to Institute Critical Thinking in Character Education: A Case Study**

As can be realised from the discussion so far, the conduct of values education can only be made a success when accompanied by elements of critical thinking. Objectives such as self-reflective knowledge and the subsequent awareness and understanding of human actions, for instance, will not be achievable without the conscious use of creative thinking, metacognition and ethical reasoning.

In an earlier research exercise, I conducted a minor ethnographic study on the effects of behavioural conditioning in the educational institution by observing how discipline is enforced in a local secondary school. The view to discipline among the Singaporean teaching fraternity then was to distance itself from the norm of inflicting pain as a means of punishment and to move towards a more pastoral approach to instil learning and understanding. The objective is to enhance the student’s ability for self-reflection and thereby increase their moral reasoning.

“Discipline is an educational process. Most importantly, it must help pupils to develop their powers toward social ends, and it must bring the individual and social values of our society to fruition. It must take place in a school where pupils feel valued and respected, where care and trust have replaced restrictions and threats, and where mindless compliance and control gives way to genuine understanding of and consideration for others” (MOE Teachers’ Guide, 1997).

However, this newly-promoted philosophy did not immediately catch on for some educators at the time. In an interview with the Discipline Master of a newly established secondary school in 2002, I was told that since the school was considered to be located in an ‘unhealthy’ neighbourhood where it had to compete against external forces such as negative peer pressure, gangster societies and dysfunctional families, the value of discipline must supercede all other priorities with regards to the functions of an educational institution, even those as critical as the formal instructional programme.

For this new school, corporal punishment in the form of caning, be it in front of the whole school or in the privacy of the principal’s office, became an everyday affair. Students were made to toe the line through shouts, threats, shaming, detentions and acts such as making them stand in the afternoon sun or run a few laps round the school field.

This strategy was most effective prior to public events like the school's Sports Day or the Speech and Investiture Day. The DM’s shouts during such ‘conditioning sessions’ would then be extra loud and the physical punishments extra hard. The idea, he said then, was to drain them of their ‘rebellious energy’ so that there will not be any unwarranted disciplinary actions on the day. Amazingly, this technique was so successful that guests have repeatedly complimented the school on the students’ excellent behaviour during such occasions.

Within a few months after it began operations, the school had attained the reputation as THE model educational institution for the district. Students greet their teachers respectfully. Shirts were always tucked in. No ‘unlawful’ fashion accessories were in sight. Compliments from the public poured in as a result of the impeccable conduct of the students.

Feedback from the nearby Neighbourhood Police Post however, told me of a different story:

An interview with a staff officer revealed that students from this school, when compared to others in the vicinity, had achieved the dubious distinction of attaining a higher than average crime rate for offences committed outside the school. These range from minor transgressions such as shoplifting to the more major ones such as assault and battery. More interestingly, the concentration of these cases occurred during the school holidays. This is perhaps explained by the fact that after a period of being away from school, the 'fear factor' projected by the disciplinarians was forgotten and the pressure to conform tends to wear off.

The case study illustrates the fallibility of the conditioning approach when it comes to character education in schools. Such weaknesses were discussed by Bandura (1978) in his concept of 'reciprocal determinism'. In his view, human dynamics such as thinking and motivation interact and influence each other in the process of learning. "The experiences generated by behaviour also partly determine what individuals think, expect, and can do, which in turn, affect their subsequent behaviour" (pg.345). The physical conditioning strategy adopted by the school, in not allowing for any critical thinking and genuine reflection to take place, may have compromised this interaction of forces leading to a less than balanced values education.

In the ensuing analysis, the case study has shown that the approach to character education should not merely involve the transmission of previously defined knowledge and skills (in this instance, the association between hurt and fear with good behaviour). Rather, it requires the effort towards developing the student's capacity for critical thinking and learning. Vygotsky (1978) himself had argued that development must be fortified 'from within' and not controlled 'from without.' Critical reflection is thus a powerful strategy for addressing the

persistent and complicated challenges one faces in life and, in the case of our youths, for attending to the demands for continuous educational improvement.

### **3.7 Rethinking Critical Thinking**

Despite the negative comments made regarding character education in schools, thinkers such as Kohlberg (1987) is still of the viewpoint that a high level of morality such as justice, equity and respect for the human personality can be stimulated by constantly asking questions and pointing the way, not by giving answers. To Mezirow (1985, pg.145), one learns to overcome “distorting cultural and psychological assumptions by bringing them into critical consciousness”. These aspects of positive character learning corresponds with the idea of critical thinking espoused by Paul and Elder (2006) who define it as a mode of thinking about any subject, content or problem in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skilfully taking charge of the structures inherent in the process and imposing intellectual standards upon them.

For instance, creative thinking is considered to be an element of critical thinking as it refers to the mental process whereby the individual finds, defines or discovers an idea or a problem which is not predetermined by the situation or task. Creative thinking, by its very nature, asks individuals to move out of their comfort zone, take intellectual risks and explore new ways of thinking in order to generate new ideas (Bull et al., 1995). As an element of critical thinking, creative thinking leads to productive thinking on the part of the individual.

Metacognition, another aspect of critical thinking, implies the act of ‘thinking about thinking’. Art Costa (Costa and Kallick 2009) refers to it as the ability of being aware of your own thoughts, feelings, and actions and their effects on others. It motivates individuals to

understand the origins and sources of their own ideas, viewpoints, attitudes and values. Critical thinking in this area is also applied when the individual tries to comprehend where the ideas and values of other's come from and in so doing, support, challenge or defend the reverse position.

Critical thinking also involves effective problem-solving. When faced with an issue which requires a resolution, the exercise requires that the individual identify what is known and what needs to be known, plan a course of action, monitor execution of the plan and change accordingly. The problem-solving activity concludes with an evaluation of the success of the exercise.

Richard Paul (2006) however, insists that ethical reasoning is one of the most important component of critical thinking. This is primarily due to the awareness that our behaviour has consequences on the welfare of others. Critical thinking based on ethical reasoning provides us with tools to determine whether we should embark on a certain course of action and the extent to which a past action should continue. Accompanied with the use of metacognition, the individual is made to rationalise his choices in relation to his values, his purpose and his ethical standpoint.

According to Paul, by cultivating a habit of critical thinking, we will be able to counter negative outcomes resulting from actions based on natural thinking. This will result in a reasoning process which reflects standards of clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance and fairness.

In the context of character building, critical thinkers will thus develop traits which can then transform them into individuals who possess intellectual autonomy, intellectual humility,

intellectual integrity, fairmindedness, intellectual perseverance, intellectual courage, confidence in reason and intellectual empathy.

Nevertheless, the focus of this thesis lies not so much in conceptions of critical thinking aimed towards personal development via a release of psychological constraints. Rather, the notions of critical thinking under scrutiny in this study are those associated with ideas stemming from Freire and the Frankfurt School critical theorists which involve a more profound critique of societal structures. In line with the study's theme of emancipatory and transformatory education, a further distinction must now be drawn between discussions of approaches that impose intellectual standards upon individual thinking, and those related to critical pedagogy which come under the more political dimension concerning the deliverance of a community from oppression.

bell hooks, the African-American feminist, expresses how educational approaches have failed to address the connection between what pupils are learning and their overall life experiences. Recalling her days as a student during the American Civil Rights era, "most of us were taught in classrooms where styles of teachings reflected the notion of a single norm of thought and experience, which we were encouraged to believe was universal" (1994, pg. 19). Supported by the writings of prominent theorists such as Mill, Arnold and Dewey, Stevenson (2011) asserts that such flaws in the school curriculum will continue to exist as a result of the need to conform to capitalistic market forces or what he terms as 'market liberalism'. Amsler (2011, pg. 48) adds that since "formal education could not resolve the contradictions of capitalism or stresses of trying to be human in dehumanising conditions of life, it aimed instead to help people become adaptable; to conquer the problem of 'unhappy consciousness' and cultivate

affirmative, productive and positive subjectivities”. Unfortunately, such practices tend to be carried out in ways that “prohibited the development of critical social consciousness” (ibid).

Shor (1993, pg. 2) criticises school curriculums which “cut off the students’ development as critical thinkers about their world”. He warns that “if the students’ task is to memorize rules and existing knowledge, without questioning the subject-matter or the learning process, their potential for critical thought and action will be restricted” (ibid). Emphasizing that traditional methods such as teacher-talk, rote learning and skills drills will achieve nothing more than to drain the students’ enthusiasm for intellectual life, he warns that such approaches will negatively result in a process of ‘endullment’. Burbules and Berk (1999, cited in Amsler, 2011, pg. 53) stress that education must not only enable students to recognise and explain injustice through critical analysis, it must also help them develop critical affectivities through which they become sufficiently ‘moved to change it’.

However, Mejia (2004, pg. 65), in his article which discusses Paulo Freire’s critical systems thinking asserts that

“those in the dominant positions of society, who can also decide on the curriculum in formal education, might deliberately choose to indoctrinate the students in more explicit or more subtle ways...hence directly helping maintain the oppression. But if education can be used in that way, someone might instead use it with the opposite purpose of liberation, as Freire explicitly intends to do, thus choosing to address contents which directly help unveil the oppressive relations and which actively advocate more just ones”.

Freire (1973) himself advocates an approach to education which will result in ‘conscientisation’, a term he adopts to describe the development of this particular kind of critical consciousness. The objective is for students to reach the highest of three levels of critical consciousness. Individuals at the first level are deemed to be in *semi-transitive consciousness* where they understand the social world as one which is fixed and static and where they do not possess the ability or power to create any kind of transformation. They accept their status as one that is fated. The second level, *naïve transivity*, is a state of naïve understanding where the individual sees the oppressor as a role model, and have subsequently internalized his or her image. Similarly, the individual accepts his or her status as a matter of fate. *Critical transitivity* is, to Freire, the highest level of understanding which students should attain. At this stage, the oppressed is not only able to critically distance his or herself from the oppressor, he or she now recognize the latter as the source producing the situation of oppression. The individual who successfully develops critical consciousness will thus be able to see holistically the true causes of oppression in societal terms. This, in turn, will enable her/him to effectively act in the real world to transform it.

Similarly, according to Giroux and McLaren (1986, pg. 229), the imperative of critical pedagogy is “to create conditions for student self-empowerment and self-constitution”. The authors use the term ‘empowerment’ to refer to “the process whereby students acquire the means to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside of their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live” (ibid). They advocate an approach which encourages students to display their ‘voices’ while adhering to the principles of dialogue.

Critical thinking, instilled through critical pedagogy and liberatory education, therefore inspires youths to recognise value in themselves. By providing them with tools to identify and question the validity of forms of knowledge and social structures, it empowers and allows them to assume responsibility for the choices that they make. In hook's (1994) words, "without the capability to think critically about ourselves and our lives, none of us would be able to move forward, to change, to grow" (pg. 202).

### **3.8 The Role of Emancipatory and Transformatory Education in Building Capacities for Critical Thinking**

In discussing effective approaches in teaching character education, one should therefore touch on the significant role which can be played by emancipatory and transformatory education in building up the learner's capacity for critical thinking. MacIsaac (1996), in explaining Jurgen Habermas' vision of emancipatory and transformatory education, elaborates that the approach is one which encourages the development of self-reflective knowledge involving the awareness and understanding of human actions. The success of such an approach is indicated when individuals begin to increasingly question and challenge the seemingly obvious, natural, immediate, and simple world around them, and, in particular, of what they are increasingly able to perceive through their senses and subsequently understand through their powers of reason. Jurgen Habermas depicts this in his formulation of Critical Theory that operates within the emancipatory domain and driven by elements of self-knowledge and/or self-reflection. It involves self-awareness of how one's history and biography expresses itself through one's self-perception, roles and social expectations. Habermas sees emancipation as freedom gained from the instinctual, institutional or environmental forces which place limits on an individual's options and takes away rational control over his/her lives. This is

something which he believes we have taken for granted as being beyond human control. He concludes that insights gained through critical self-awareness are emancipatory and hence capacity-building in the sense that one can now critically assess and consequently recognize the real reasons for his or her problems. Knowledge leading to self-emancipation is then achieved through reflection resulting in a transformed consciousness or ‘perspective transformation’.

This is aligned to Marx and Engel’s (1969, pg. 96) argument that “...one must become conscious of how an ideology reflects and distorts ... reality ... and what factors ... influence and sustain the *false consciousness* which it represents...” As clarified by Jost (1995, pg. 397), Marx and Engel’s idea of false consciousness pertains to “the holding of false beliefs that are contrary to one’s social interest and which thereby contribute to the disadvantaged position of the self or the group”. Though their arguments are largely confined within the domain of socio-economic change, they nevertheless see a need for the masses to build up their awareness of the structural contradictions within capitalism and the reasons for such a system to give way to socialism. “The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable” (Marx and Engel, 1970, pg. 47).

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the US civil rights leader of the 1950’s, echoed similar beliefs pertaining to the way in which emancipatory and transformatory approach will be able to build up the American public’s capacity for thinking critically by advocating the need for moral reflection among the masses so as to provoke legal reforms within the then American society. In his letter entitled *Civil Disobedience in Defense of God-Given Rights*, he calls for

the American nation to live up to the ideal it professes but “imperfectly realizes”. “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed... There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair... Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured...” (Cohen, 1996, pg.629). Like most emancipatory and transformatory approaches, the plea was for the use of human reasoning and moral conscience in order to create a more just society.

### **3.9 Paulo Freire’s Success With Emancipatory and Transformatory Education**

The nation-wide impact of emancipatory and transformatory education and the way in which it is able to build up the critical thinking abilities of the public is well-documented on Paulo Freire’s Brazilian peasant society and is seen to be the catalyst leading to the publication of his first book *Education as the Practice of Freedom* in 1967, followed by his classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970.

In 1946, as Director of the Pernambuco Department of Education and Culture of SESI (the Social Service of Industry), Freire began to place more emphasis on his work towards improving the literacy rate of the poor in his society. According to the national law at the time, a degree of literacy was a requirement in order for adults to be eligible to vote during the Brazilian presidential elections. However, about 90 percent of the peasants representing a majority of the population were illiterate. Such a system served to ensure that they remain enslaved by an archaic, authoritarian and discriminatory tradition imposed by the elites ruling

the country. Known as a progressive educator, Freire epitomised the belief that such a tradition needs to be broken down through an educational approach which has its foundation in the consciousness of the day-to-day situations lived by the learners. Educational work towards democracy, according to Freire, can only be achieved if the 'literacy process was not about or for man, but with man'. Very much involved in movements for popular education by the 1960's, Freire saw the first application of his theory in 1962 where, in just 45 days, 300 sugarcane workers were taught to read and write as part of the 'Bare feet can also learn to read' campaign. The success of the experiment marked the beginning of a national literacy campaign intended to make five million adults literate and politically progressive within the first year. To facilitate the programme, the Brazilian government under President Joao Belchior Goulart approved the creation of thousands of 'cultural circles' across the country. For the first time, the hegemonic oligarchy comprising the land owners was threatened by the possibility of the peasants becoming literate and organising themselves into leagues which may alter the voting outcomes leading to a loss of their political power.

The Goulart government was however deposed as a result of a coup d'etat on March 31, 1964. The new military-backed government obviously saw Freire as a threat and he was subsequently imprisoned for over two months before receiving political asylum in Chile. During his period away from Brazil, Freire travelled much to spread his ideas and experiences on emancipatory education especially to the revolutionary governments in Africa, Central America and the Caribbean. Sixteen years later, after much requests and negotiations, Paulo Freire was finally allowed to return to his native Brazil. By 1988, Freire successfully implemented educational programmes both for children and adults, based on his

methodological concepts before handing over the reins of his leadership and returning to full-time academia until his eventual demise in 1997.

According to Ira Shor (1993), Freire's conception of emancipatory education is founded on his account of human distinctiveness. Freire distinguishes humans as possessing consciousness which results in them as 'beings of praxis'. He uses the term 'praxis' to indicate their ability to act and reflect on their actions. As such, the objective of emancipatory and transformatory education is for humans to find meaning to their lives by actively engaging in enquiry and contributing to the creative transformation of the world around them. Shor also shares Freire's notion that humans will be able to transform their lives once they are conscious of the fact that they are the cumulative products of their own heritage and legacies ('historical beings').

As alluded to in Chapter Two, Freire despised the traditional 'banking' concept of education where "narrating teachers deposit information into the minds of passive receiving students". This approach consequently degrades humans as mere 'manageable beings' (1972, pg. 260). Freire sees dialogue as an existential necessity as critical consciousness takes place only in dialogue and from dialogue consequently stems the ability for reflection. Facione (2010) attests to this and muses that "we humans learn better when we stop frequently to reflect, rather than just plowing along from the top of the page to the bottom without coming up for air." In fact, "those who answer too quickly may have not thought well" (Facione, 2008, pg. 2).

Lipman (2003) emphasizes that emancipatory and transformatory education can only take place when democratic learning supercedes authority-dependent education. In addition, such

processes should be accompanied by an increasing awareness of power dynamics through the conscious use of critical thinking skills. There is also the need for the individual to allow a certain sense of desocialisation to take place so as to keep a critical distance from the issues of concern. Lipman also mentions the need to create a ‘community of inquiry’ (pg.20) so as to facilitate dialogue and reflection.

### **3.10 The Emancipatory and Transformatory Education Approach in Action**

To illustrate and clarify the impact of emancipatory and transformatory education in the current social context, this paragraph will describe two individual programmes currently being conducted by different international Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). The first will feature the *Reflect Programme* conducted by ActionAid in a third world country still recovering from the impact of a natural disaster while the other is a *Women’s Empowerment Programme* which is managed by Oxfam in Sri Lanka. These reports are based on self-evaluations by the NGOs involved.

#### **3.10.1. The Reflect Programme**

ActionAid International (AAI) is an organisation whose mission is to work with poor and excluded people to eradicate poverty and injustice globally. The NGO structures itself as an international organization of affiliates with an established presence in 43 countries situated in Africa, Asia, the Americas and Europe. Over the last five years, ActionAid in Africa finds itself developing an advocacy role which is increasingly focused on building and empowering African-led institutions and emergent movements of poor people.

Based on the concept of emancipatory and transformatory education, ActionAid’s Reflect programme is a highly innovative approach to adult literacy and social change, where groups are made to construct their own learning materials by using drama, story-telling and songs. It

has been conducted in El Salvador, Bangladesh and Uganda and is now used by 350 different organisations in 60 countries.

Reflect is an approach aimed at facilitating community empowerment. In Reflect, poor and marginalised people are brought together in a participatory forum, which is referred to as a 'Reflect circle'. In the circle, an ActionAid-trained local facilitator, or 'fellow', initiates inclusive, participatory processes using various tools such as social mapping, timelines and problem trees which enable participants to critically analyse their situation. As a result the Reflect participants identify their priority issues, the possible solutions and plan the actions they can undertake to bring about the change they desire.

There is also a constant process of reflection on past and current activities that result in proactive responses to changes arising in the broader context. Through their experience of initiating activities and seeing that they have the possibility of bringing about tangible change in some aspect of their situation, the Reflect approach has empowered and inspired people to envisage a better future. It has enabled participants to seek access to equity and justice and to take collective action based on their ideas and hopes.

Through the Reflect approach, an emancipatory and transformatory effect takes place in which communities are moved to bring about substantial changes in their own situation. They are engaged with government and non-government actors towards mobilising the resources they need to improve their lives. At the same time, such exchanges generate a better understanding of the people's situation and this, in turn, has led various actors to be more responsive.

For instance, ActionAid has been adapting the Reflect programme to support local initiatives in Myanmar since 2000. Following the destruction caused by cyclone Nargis in May 2008, ActionAid established an office in Myanmar and subsequently commenced operations in the Ayeyarwaddy Delta to assist cyclone affected communities with their recovery. Further ActionAid activities took place in Kachin, Kayah and Rakhine States and the Ayeyarwaddy Division. An example of how the emancipatory and transformatory process had taken place can be provided by a narration of how an issue of access to education in a village in the Kachin State was resolved.

Through the Reflect circle, participants came together and decided they wanted to rebuild the village school which was in a state of disrepair. To raise funds for the school construction, they organised an inter-village football tournament in which tickets were sold to spectators. The event was a success as all from the nearby villages actively participated and enjoyed themselves in the get-together. It was then realised that the positive effects became far reaching as it served to connect nearby communities and created a network beyond just the Reflect circle.

In fact, after more discussions, the village representatives decided to approach the Township Level Education Officer and other non-state actors to further discuss the issue and come to a consensus on how it could be better resolved. The Township Education Officer, convinced after hearing of the efforts made by the village community, approached the State Level Education Office regarding the possibility of making a contribution from the state's budget. The eventual outcome was positive. Through their collective efforts, the community was successful in rebuilding their school (<http://www.actionaid.org.uk/>).

### **3.10.1.1. Results of the Reflect Programme in Other Communities**

Similarly, Reflect circles established in other communities such as those in Ethiopia, Zambia and South Africa have resulted in a range of community driven activities which are as varied as the communities themselves. These include the establishment of women's savings groups, repairing damaged roads, dams and toilets, better access to markets, clean water, sanitation, irrigation as well as improving school buildings and encouraging the government to ensure there are adequate teachers for such institutions.

### **3.10.2. Women's Empowerment in Oxfam Australia's Sri Lanka Programme**

Oxfam is an international confederation of 14 organizations working together in 98 countries. With partners and allies around the world, the NGO's mission is to find lasting solutions to poverty and injustice inflicting individuals and societies. With a strong belief in respect for human rights, Oxfam works directly with communities and seeks to empower the needy so as to ensure that these individuals can improve their lives and livelihoods by having a say in decisions that affect them (<http://www.oxfam.org/en/about>).

Oxfam Australia's Sri Lanka program has been at the forefront of the agency's global efforts to develop projects which promote gender equality. In the early 1990s, a conscious effort was made in the program to focus on empowering women and promoting gender equality, specifically those who are most marginalised and vulnerable. These strategies include a combination of group meetings, education of and support for women's rights and equality. For the most marginalised and vulnerable women - those who had been abandoned, those subjected to the most severe forms of domestic violence and abuse, and those who had been traumatised by violence or conflict - personalised contact and approaches by field staff were critical to enabling them to take the first step towards attending meetings or trainings.

Discussion and sharing of experiences in group meetings and one-to-one contact with staff provided ongoing support, and also helped to deepen women's awareness and understanding of their rights. The emancipatory and transformatory approach undertaken by the NGO also includes the provision of practical knowledge and skills, for example, home gardening, small scale cultivation, financial management, or of managing their entitlements to services from government and other agencies.

Results have indicated that these women have experienced internal empowerment as a result of these activities. This is indicated by positive changes in their lives leading to successes such as increased income as well as ownership of property. Others who already attained full ownership of their houses or who are now earning a small income said that the approach had empowered them in various ways such as to be able to tell a violent husband to leave.

Therefore, it can be said that emancipatory and transformatory education initiated by Oxfam has led to the empowerment of women thus enhancing their capacity and confidence to take collective action. In addition, participants have demonstrated their leadership and capacity to solve community problems, and are acting as 'agents of change' in areas that had previously been dominated by men. Achieving results through their collective actions have provided a further boost to these women's self-esteem, self-confidence and feelings of internal power (Hunt, 2009).

These two examples show that by committing to a common goal, people from different groups within the same community or from different communities are able to work together and overcome their differences. Other positive outcomes of such emancipatory and

transformatory approaches are reflected in improved relationships, enhanced social cohesion and peaceful relations between people of different religions, ethnicities or cultural norms.

### **3.11 Adopting the Emancipatory and Transformatory Approach in Non-Formal Education**

The previous examples of emancipatory and transformatory education, with their emphasis on reflective thinking, have been shown to be an effective strategy to induce and enhance individuals' critical thinking abilities. The pedagogy first entails that participants practice self-reflection and subsequently raise vital questions and problems relating to a social issue after deliberating on them clearly and precisely. The process requires that participants gather and assess all relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret them effectively before coming to a well-reasoned conclusion and solution after further testing them against the relevant criteria and standards. As Freire (1970) emphasises, true knowledge emerges only “through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (pg.53). Accordingly, these actions will motivate participants to develop skills in thinking open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, while at the same time, recognising and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications and practical consequences of any outcomes which they undertake (Paul and Elder, 2004).

Accompanied with the use of dialogue which is seen to be an essential component of the emancipatory and transformatory education approach, these individuals can then communicate their ideas and viewpoints effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems. Emancipatory and transformatory education thus serves to build the individual's capacity for critical thinking in that it promotes reasoning which is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored and self-correcting.

However, as I had argued with regards to the context of Singapore education, any attempts at fully incorporating elements of emancipatory and transformatory education within the formal curriculum will be futile as it will not be seen to be congruent to the government's ideals. In the context of the Singapore education system, the approach undertaken has been to merely teach skills and to convey knowledge whereas a truly genuine approach will be to go beyond the teaching of skills and knowledge and facilitating a sustained enquiry where participants' distorted assumptions are exposed and challenged. Joshi and Moore (2000) argue that empowerment fails when the educator's expectations (in this case the Singapore MOE) does not correlate with the approaches employed in facilitating learning.

Nevertheless, as previously depicted in the example of programmes initiated by ActionAid and Oxfam, organisations involved in the provision of social services can make a big impact by embarking on an emancipatory and transformatory approach. Payne (2000) argues that social work practice can, and often does, go beyond its bureaucratic confines. Adams (1996, pg. 2) has also clarified that empowerment "could be, if it has not already become, the central emerging feature of social work". He stresses that in the present context, "empowering is almost a mandatory feature of social work". Cruikshank (1993, pg. 333) also notes that "empowerment is almost mandatory in mission statements" of social welfare agencies while Bairstow (1994/5, pg. 40) maintains that it "is at the heart of professional legitimacy".

We should therefore not neglect the important role of the social services sector and the significant contribution it can make in shaping community practices and discourses. In Singapore, it has been more so in organisations which features a predominantly voluntary make-up that such participative approaches are to be found, with perhaps a greater emphasis on collective action.

### **3.12 Social Movements**

It is hoped that capacity building in critical thinking among the Malays could eventually lead to the creation of social movements in the community and the country. Research has shown that community welfare agencies are the mostly the ones at the forefront of these social movements (see Payne, 2002). The objective of this section thus is to make the link between the concept of social movements and the work of these organisations.

In its basic sense, social movements are a form of collective resistance in pursuit of social justice. For instance, Marx and McAdam (1994, pg. 3) defines social movements as “organised efforts to promote or resist change in society that rely, at least in part, on non-institutionalised forms of political action”. Rather than defining social movements as expressions of extremism, violence, and deprivation, Tarrow (2011, pg. 9) asserts that they are better defined as “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities”. This is in line with Della Porta and Diani’s (2006) argument that social movements must be distinguished from formal campaigning organizations. They stress that social movements are not formalised organizations as they do not possess specific organizational characteristics or patterns of behaviour. They, however, exist as interactions between different actors which may, or may not, include formal organizations, depending on shifting circumstances. It is this separation from institutionalized political structures that gives social movements their fluidity and subsequent potency as they can have the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and seek to influence change without being held back by the constraints of a formalized organization with its inbuilt rigidities of institutionalization.

Habermas views social movements as being concerned with specific cultural objectives to do with quality of life such as ‘equality, self-realisation, participation and human rights’ (Hewitt, 1996, pg. 207). Social movements can therefore be seen as an alternative to party politics as a means of attempting to influence policy in relation to particular areas (Byrne, 1997). In this respect, they constitute a form of political pressure which is part of neither mainstream party politics nor recognized pressure groups.

What can be concluded from this paragraph is that there can be a strong correlation between the work of organisations in the community services sector and the creation of social movements. For instance, in the West, the phrase ‘Grey Power’ has been used by elderly people’s organisations to express their collective resistance to ageist stereotypes of dependence and social redundancy and to assert the continuity of human agency into later life (Thompson, 2002). Similarly, the ‘Black Power’ movement in the 1960s was a significant part of history as it created a great impact in raising awareness of racial inequalities and placed the eradication of racism firmly on the political agenda. First initiated by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the United States in 1966, the fight against racism owes much to the movement and has since gone far beyond it (ibid).

These arguments again point to the potentially significant role of social welfare organisations in fulfilling the aspirations of the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore.

### **3.13 Conclusion**

Based on the discussion in this chapter, one has to come to the conclusion that in the case of Singapore, the commitment of formal education towards the ‘national agenda’ has created obstacles for an effective character education programme comprising elements of critical

thinking to take place. The government's implied consensus for aspects of the Character Education programme to take the shape of emancipatory and transformatory education is not deemed to be successful as it has failed to inculcate in the students the capacity for critical thinking. In the case of the Malay-Muslims in Singapore, the emancipatory and transformatory approach is deemed especially necessary in light of the need to mitigate the negative mental models currently affecting the community. As the Singapore Ministry of Education's policy towards the teaching of character education in mainstream schools is expected to remain unchanged due to the position and perception of the current leadership, it is now pertinent that relevant agencies involved in the provision of non-formal education roll out programmes aligned to the emancipatory and transformatory approach to cater to youths from the Malay community.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides the reader with an overview of the rationale and methodology that underpin the research design and which subsequently shape the data gathering process. It begins with an introduction of the Interpretive Paradigm functioning as the theoretical framework governing the conduct of the research. This is followed by an explanation of the concepts of Critical Theory, Constructivism and De-Constructive Pedagogy which are essential for developing an understanding of the research direction.

As part of the discussion on the research question, the reader is provided with a description of the research design as well as the tools and techniques that had been instituted for the data collection exercise. To ensure that there is multiplicity in the methods of data collection so that triangulation can be made possible, it had subsequently been decided that the approaches to be undertaken will be composed of Circle Conversations, Focus Group Discussions, Participant-Observations and Life History Interviews.

Finally, a commentary is made on the ethical issues involved. This pertains to the assurance of confidentiality via the use of consent and declaration forms, as well as the protocols imposed during the conduct of the data collection exercises.

#### **4.2 The Research Paradigm**

Sarantakos (2005, pg. 31-32) clarifies that a paradigm “is a set of propositions that explain how the world is perceived; it contains a world view, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world”. In the context of undertaking research, it provides social scientists with a

framework for understanding “how the world can be explained, handled, approached or studied” (ibid). This section will also explain why, despite an interpretive approach, elements of Critical Theory will still apply in the research paradigm.

#### **4.2.1 The Interpretive Approach**

According to Jurgen Habermas in his work *Towards a Rational Society* (1971), different forms of knowledge will apply according to different types of ‘interests’. For instance, in the area of technical interest, knowledge that applies will be in the empirical and analytical form. In the sphere of practical interest, what applies will be knowledge in its interpretive form. Subsequently, in the area of cognitive interest, what should be applicable is knowledge in its critical form. In its present context, this research falls within the area of practical human interest and founds itself on a research paradigm which is interpretive in nature by exploring human outcomes that are both emancipatory and transformatory. This is explained by the fact that the study attempts to identify aspects of current community outreach programmes which can be translated as having made an impact in ‘conscientising’ its Malay-Muslim participants on issues pertaining to their community. These can then be taken to be evidence of capacity-building for critical thinking. Following the paradigm adopted for this research, indications of this phenomenon had been taken note of by interpreting the responses and reactions of the participants during the course of discussions, interviews as well as observations of their activities.

Paul Ernest (1994, pg. 25) explains that application of the interpretive paradigm enables the researcher to build up rich descriptions of the cases in a study.

“Since these typically concern human beings and their inter-relationships and contexts, these rich descriptions allow a reader to understand the case through identification, empathy, or a sense of entry into the lived reality of the case.”

According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), the interpretive approach is usually seen to be in contrast to the normative approach. While the normative paradigm sees human behaviour to be essentially rule-governed and to be investigated using the tools of natural science, the interpretive paradigm is characterized by the need to understand the subjective world of human experience. The authors stress that in order to retain the integrity of the phenomena being investigated, efforts must be made to ‘get inside’ the person and to understand from within. To this extent, they believe that the imposition of ‘artificial’ external interventions by way of tests and measurements should be totally resisted. The interpretive approach is thus seen to be anti-positivist in outlook.

Nevertheless, research work adopting the interpretive paradigm should not simply accept the way members of a social group interpret the world around them. Bryman (2008, pg. 17) comments that “the social scientist should aim to locate the interpretations that have been elicited into a social scientific frame”. He emphasises the necessity for multiple levels of interpretations by clarifying that the researcher needs to not only provide an interpretation of the actions and perceptions of others, he or she should further interpret these in terms of the concepts, theories and literature linked to a discipline of study.

#### **4.2.2 Critical Theory within the Interpretive Paradigm**

Research paradigms can usually be exclusively categorised as Positivist (or Normative), Interpretive and Critical (see Sarantakos, pg. 33). However, Habermas’ Critical Theory which typically forms the basis for the last paradigm mentioned, in the case of Social Science

research, has played a uniquely significant role within the interpretive framework of this research. In its essence, Critical Theory seeks to uncover dominant interests at work in particular situations and to question the legitimacy of those interests. It functions to identify the extent to which the existing status quo is legitimate in its show of equality and democracy. It calls for the realisation that human actions may have negative impacts on certain groups of people within society as these actions work only to increase human entrapment in systems of domination or dependence. In line with the emancipatory and transformatory interest at work in this research, knowledge of Critical Theory had allowed the researcher to identify and understand the ways in which the respondents perceive their scope of human autonomy expanding and how the scope of domination had subsequently been narrowed as a result of them being conscientised.

Specifically, this research had identified increasing ‘conscientisation’ as an indication of capacity building for critical thinking. Therefore, the understanding of how Critical Theory applies itself in such situations had thus significantly assisted the researcher in helping to interpret the Malay-Muslim participants’ reactions, questions and challenges to a world which, to them, may have become increasingly less ‘natural’. Adopting the critical perspective is thus seen as complementary to the interpretive structure of this research.

### **4.2.3 Constructivism**

The earlier discussion of the ‘Malay Problem’ and its consequent impact on the Malay worldview can be aligned to the concept of Constructivism in knowledge building which, at the community level, explains the collective ‘thinking structures’ of the Malays. Lynn Segal, in his book *The Dream of Reality: Heinz von Foerster’s Constructivism* (2001) describes how the Austrian thinker sees Knowledge as a ‘construction’ of the Knower. He labels it as

cognitive ‘invention’ which may not necessarily be a true representation of reality. In supporting this perspective, Sherman (1995) declares that knowledge stems not from what the world is ‘about’, but rather what one believes it to be ‘constitutive’ of. Similarly, he views knowledge not in terms of absolute truths but as ‘constructs’ formulated by individuals through his or her own experiences and interactions in everyday life. Learning in consequence, becomes an active assimilation or accommodation of the perceived reality (Antal and Friedman, 2008). This process is determined by, among other factors, the success of the cognitive process in making sense of the human experience.

Similarly, Habermas (1971), based on his notion of the ‘Rational Society’, sees knowledge as being dependent on the individual’s level of exposure to alternative social systems as well as her or his life experiences, heritage and background. In the context of the research, this provided the basis for analyzing the overarching psyche of the Malay community in Singapore. It also provided the rationale as to why the research endeavoured to explore and consequently understand the impact of outreach programmes by specifically focusing to see if they enhanced the critical thinking capacities of their Malay-Muslim participants.

#### **4.2.4 De-Constructive Pedagogy**

Using Hegelian dialectics (see Trejo, 1993), outreach programmes which conscientise and induce critical thinking can be construed to be ‘de-constructive’ in nature as they are seen to play the role of antithesis to the ‘conditioned’ mind. Whereas ‘culturally-established’ knowledge has always been accepted without question, de-constructive pedagogy demands that information be reevaluated, context addressed and distortions highlighted.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The meaning of de-constructive pedagogy in this thesis should not be mistaken with the label of ‘Deconstruction’ attached to the post-structuralist literary theory of Jacques Derrida (see Derrida and Caputo, 2004).

Based on this rationale, community programmes such as the ones organized by Malay/Muslim-based organisations which adopt platforms of open dialogue and frank discussions on conflicting perspectives and competing ideologies can thus be seen as playing a crucial role in facilitating the deconstructive process and providing avenues for critical thinking to take place. These programmes would serve to develop the critical thinking capacities of participants by not only exposing them to alternative perspectives, but to also attempt to alter their worldviews by introducing them to new mental paradigms.

For example, in an email interview with a Mendaki Club Executive Committee member, I was told that the organization had recently concluded a workplan meeting for the upcoming year where it had been agreed that there is a need to enhance the critical thinking capabilities of the community's Malay youths. Therefore, the new approach to be implemented will emphasise the organisation's focus on positive role modelling for critical thinking actions as well as character and personality development. However, instead of imparting these skills through specific workshops following their previous practices, they had agreed that an 'Art-of-Questioning' mode of response will be modeled and subsequently introduced in future organized activities. This entails not only encouraging the participants "to play the role of devil's advocate. It is also to instill in them the understanding that there is a time and place for such responses, when it is helpful and when it becomes counterproductive". It will be a curriculum based on practicality as "the focus is on transferrable life skills that individuals can take wherever they go - in school, work or in their personal life."

Such responses indicate the fact that organisations catering to the progress and development of the Malay-Muslim community are striving to formulate programmes and activities to raise the profile of the ethnic group. These thus strengthened my view that this research, in

attempting to identify and subsequently make suggestions to enhance good pedagogy, will have practical justification and value.

#### **4.2.5 The Insider-Outsider Approach**

In embarking on this doctoral study, I realised that there is an important need to reflect on my status as a researcher conducting a study on my own ethnic community. Having spent my whole life as part of the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore, my current standing may be seen as somewhat problematic as “it is often difficult to gain critical purchase on a context from within the context itself” (Hirschmann, 1998, pg. 362). Maguire (1987) emphasises that objectivity in traditional research requires that the subject of knowledge be separated from the object of knowledge. Critics even insist that greater familiarity may make insiders more likely to take things for granted, develop myopia, and assume their own perspective is far more widespread than it actually is (Mercer, 2007).

Nevertheless, an argument can also be made that by possessing an insider’s perspective, I have advantageously positioned myself as a researcher because of my knowledge of the insights, inner meanings, and subjective dimensions existing within the Singaporean Malay-Muslim community. I was able to understand the context from which the participant comes while at the same time to comprehend the relevant patterns of social interaction required for gaining access and making meaning of their worldviews. In contrast, Mercer (2007) points out that informants are more likely to present outsiders with a distorted image which may mislead researchers into seeking to confirm the stereotypes. According to Hajdukowski-Ahmed (1998), accessing local knowledge requires that the researcher emphatically understand the community from within, using their language and symbol systems (cited in Hamdan, 2009). I am able to attest to this as in the course of the sharing sessions, I was able

to detect meaning in the participants' pauses, inflections, emphases, unfinished sentences, and short periods of silence. In other words, my insider status enabled me to better understand the implicit and explicit meanings of the participants' spoken words.

Overall however, it was very fortunate that I was able to experience the benefits of conducting this study as a doctoral student in a UK-based institution. My overseas studies meant that I was able to play the role of a researcher occupying a double position - both as a member of the researched group and for the duration, as an outsider relative to that group. Taking the opportunity to immerse myself as much as possible in the culture of a foreign land, I was able to initiate reflexivity by continuously comparing and questioning the norms and practices of my community to the ones that I was able to participate in or observe in the UK. Being able to look from the outside in as well as from the inside out, I therefore placed myself in a position that enabled me to see from all angles. This, to me is a critical factor which ensured success in conducting the research.

### **4.3 Research Question**

The research objectives introduced in the previous paragraph can be made specific with the following general research questions followed by three related but more specific questions and accompanying sub-questions:

#### **4.3.1 General Research Questions**

What are the personal experiences of Malay-Muslim youths participating in community outreach programmes? Do these result in them being conscientised about the status of their ethnic group? Do such experiences serve to build up their capacity for thinking more critically of themselves and their role in the Malay-Muslim community?

### **4.3.2 Specific Questions**

1. How do Malay-Muslim youths perceive their community and their places in it?
  - To what extent are there feelings of pride, frustration, disappointment or disdain shown by the respondents?
  
2. What changes did the youths see in themselves as a result of their participation in the programmes?
  - To what extent was there rejection or refusal of prevailing ideas, beliefs and concepts?  
or
  - To what extent has there been receptivity and accommodation of new ideas, beliefs and concepts?
  
3. How were new ideas, beliefs and concepts presented during these sessions experienced, interpreted and rationalized by these participants?
  - What was the environment in which the exchange of ideas took place?
  - Did active communication take place?
  - Did the subsequent decision-making process take place in an open and well-informed manner?
  
4. How were the programmes enacted?
  - Was the approach taken perceived by the participants as appropriate for building capacities for critical thinking?
  - What can participants suggest as improvements to these programmes?

### **4.4 Qualitative Research**

In its simplest terms, research methodology is often divided into two contrasting traditions - positivist and interpretive (Niglas, 2001). The positivist framework, based largely on quantitative investigation, is applied by using a mode of inquiry to develop reliable ways of

collecting ‘facts’ in which the rules of quantitative method require that the researcher adopt a position of scientific indifference (Gilbert, 2001).

Unlike positivism however, the interpretive structure involves qualitative inquiry which can be characterised as evolutionary and open. ‘Evolutionary’ implies that the problem statement, design and even the interpretations develop and change as the research progresses and information becomes available. The openness of qualitative inquiry means that the researcher focuses on the complexity of social interaction, respects it and gives good reasons for such complexity (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). This latter approach thus fits very well with the exploratory nature of this research in its attempt to seek a deeper understanding of the personal experiences of the participants.

Maykut (1994) argues that human phenomena are the result of multiple causes which often escape enquiry via traditional quantitative methods. This is reinforced by Warren (2002) who emphasises that qualitative research enables researchers to really understand the meaning of their respondents’ lives and experiences. Such endeavours would therefore have not been workable if the research was to be based on the positivist framework and its associated quantitative approach.

#### **4.5 Research Design**

This research took the approach of exploring the effects of community learning programmes primarily initiated by Malay/Muslim self-help groups such as Mendaki and the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP); and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) which is a government statutory body that manages the religious affairs of the Islamic community in the country. For many of these organizations, capacity-building for critical thinking had never

been a declared learning agenda. Apart from after-school academic enrichment programmes for students, the focus had been more towards the development of life skills leading to financial stability and independence (see [www.ainsociety.org.sg](http://www.ainsociety.org.sg)). Nevertheless, it can be inferred that many of these programmes had been imbued with ‘enablers’ that result in conscientised feelings such as the opportunity for dialogue and critical reflection. These were seen as prerequisites which would then provide the impetus for the capacity-building process to take place. Another point that needed to be clarified is that while this research sought to investigate and isolate instances where capacity building for critical thinking had taken place during the course of these community education programmes, it did not aim to make any direct comparisons between the content of the programmes in themselves nor the organization which conducted them. A win-win situation however, will be presented when I share my findings of the best practices based on the responses of the participants to all interested parties.

#### **4.6 Data Collection Methods**

Having determined the research question and formulated a research design, the next step taken in this endeavour was to identify methods which would be appropriate and effective in gathering data to answer the research question. Data collection is an important aspect of any type of research study as an inaccurate collection can impact the findings and ultimately lead to invalid results. This section, as such, begins by narrating the important milestones leading to the data collection exercise. It then provides descriptions of the different data collection methods and examines each method in detail, focusing on how they work in practice and why their use in this research is deemed appropriate.

#### **4.6.1 The Contact**

It was fortunate that at the start of this research endeavour, I was already friends with several individuals who are members of institutions catering to the needs of the Malay-Muslim community. For example, when I first embarked on this PhD journey, I had applied for, and was successful, in obtaining a small study grant from MUIS, one of the organisations which I intend to involve in this research. Thus, by making acquaintance with several key personnel whom I had liaised with, the opportunity became available for my first contact with the organisation. On another occasion, a colleague who was a member of one of Mendaki's sub-committees invited me to one of the organisation's events. This again enabled me to establish my contact with their appointment holders who were present. Subsequently, I was invited to participate in more of the organisation's activities, including one jointly organized with AMP. This again, opened the door for me to establish contact with another organization. Similar networking efforts enabled me to establish contact with the rest of the organizations involved in this research project.

Subsequently, I contacted the key appointment holders of these organisations via email. In the email, I requested the organisations' assistance in disseminating an attached document to their members. The document introduces myself as a doctoral candidate, outlined my proposed research and its objectives, provided a brief description of the methodology and invited volunteers from among their members to participate in the research. It also listed a set of criteria specifying the type of respondents required and a section requiring them to indicate their consent should they be interested in taking part in the study.

This email was favourably received with one or two of these organizations even inviting me to attend one of their board meetings so that I could present them my research proposal. These

presentations were followed-up with a question-and-answer session where several clarifications were sought out. For instance, there was a query reflecting concern that the research could possibly result in a competing assessment of the programmes organized by each participating organisation. I made it clear that the research only aims to investigate the lived experiences and subsequent meaning of the programmes for its participants rather than to attempt a direct comparison of the different approaches. I emphasized, instead, how the findings may benefit the individual organisations should they be looking out for areas for improvements in the way to conduct their programmes. With these concerns laid aside, approval was then granted and subsequent assistance meted out.

The youth arm of AMP – the Young AMP - subsequently attached the soft copy of my letter to its email distribution group thus reflecting its support for the research and encouraging its members which fit the criteria to participate in the study. It went a step further by providing a recommended list of participants for me to contact personally after the initial group email was released. Similarly, Mendaki Club, an affiliate institution of Mendaki catering specifically for youths, sent out an email with my invitation letter as its attachment. MUIS, on the other hand, had its staff approach several individuals which fit the criteria to encourage them to volunteer for the research. At the end of a four-week period, I had collected a sufficient number of respondents to begin conducting the discussion sessions.

#### **4.6.2 Use of Interviews**

In line with the qualitative approach, a decision was made earlier to gather data using interviews as a primary method of collection. According to Fontana and Frey (2005), the interview is a widely used qualitative research tool to access people's experiences, inner perceptions, attitudes, and feelings of reality. In its clinical sense, an interview is a process

comprising a set of predefined questions which are asked in the same order for all respondents. While interviews are similar to conducting questionnaires albeit administered verbally rather than in writing, the difference in results is brought about by the added dimension of social interaction between the researcher and informant whose information he or she is eliciting. Interviews enable the researcher to better understand the complex behaviour of people as compared to the more impersonal nature of surveys and questionnaires. As such, while the latter methods may enable me to access a wider pool of respondents within a shorter period of time, the accuracy and depth of the information obtained is none comparable to those accessed through face-to-face interviews.

Depending on the degree of structuring which in turn determines the amount of flexibility accorded to the process, interviews can be divided into three main categories: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. The structured interview is the most inflexible as it comprises a set of predefined questions which are asked in the same order for all respondents (Sarantakos, 2005). This strict procedure is enforced in order to minimize any unintended effects due to the invasive use of methodology as well as the presence of interviewers.

The semi-structured interview is more widely used in flexible designs either as a sole method or in combination with others. Although interviewers will want to get responses from the topics already listed in their agenda, they practice considerable freedom in the sequencing of questions, manipulation of wordings as well as managing the amount of time and attention given to the different topics (Robson, 2007). For instance, the interviewer will begin with an initial topic but may then deviate by exploring new themes. The extent and direction of such deviations will, however, be guided by the interviewee's responses to the succeeding sequence of topics.

At the other extreme, the unstructured interview is a technique which has its origins in anthropology and sociology and functions as a method to elicit people's social realities. Within the domain of academic research, the term is interchangeably associated with informal conversational interviews, in-depth interviews, non-standardized interviews and ethnographic interviews. Minichiello et al. (1990) defines unstructured interviews as sessions in which neither the question nor the answer categories are predetermined. Patton (1990) explains that the unstructured interview relies entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction. Punch (2002) further describes the unstructured interview as a way to understand the complex behavior of people without imposing any a priori categorization which might limit the field of inquiry.

Essentially, these definitions point to a strategy where researchers come to the interview with no predefined theoretical framework and thus have not yet formulated any hypotheses about the social realities that they are interested in. Rather, they have conversations with interviewees and in response to the interviewees' narration, generate more questions within the flow of discussion. As a consequence, each unstructured interview might generate data with different structures and patterns. The intention of unstructured interviews, therefore, is to expose researchers to unanticipated themes so as to better understand the social realities as seen in the eyes of their interviewees.

#### **4.6.2.1 Limitations**

Nevertheless, according to Madriz in her article *Focus Groups in Feminist Research* (2000), depending on the theme of the research, individuals who are subjects of interviews may find one-to-one, face-to-face interaction 'scary' or 'intimidating'. I found this very true when I first tried to initiate this strategy on volunteers in a previous research project. The first string

of words that appeared in the replies to my email invitations were, “I’m interested in participating in the project but...

- Is it just me that you are interviewing?
- Can we just do it over the phone instead of meeting up?
- Do I need to give you my contact details apart from my email address which you already have?
- How many others have responded to your invitation?”

It dawned on me that while there may be interest on the issue being investigated, potential respondents might similarly be hesitant in talking to a complete stranger and thus may not be as cooperative.

To overcome this obstacle, I decided to adopt a different form of interview – the focus group interview. As Denzin, Frey and Fontana (1996, pg. 36) summed up,

“..focus groups emphasize the collective, rather than the individual, they foster free expression of ideas, encouraging the members of the group to speak up”.

Nevertheless, while this seemed to be a valid approach at the time, I realized sometime later that it was not to be so! Reflecting on the methodology after a pilot session with a group of seventeen year-old Malay-Muslim students, I began to notice an epistemological flaw in the way the data was gathered. The emancipatory spirit which underlies the nature of the research requires that participants be provided with sufficient ease of mind and opportunity for them to express themselves fully. However, the mechanics of focus group discussions which required me to play the role of an authority figure to facilitate the session was, in fact, contrary to the philosophy underpinning the research. Instead of providing the participants with the environment in which they could fully and freely express themselves, I realised that I may

have, in my attempts at ‘encouraging’ them to open up, inadvertently exerted undue pressure which may have lead to distortions in their responses. This perception was validated in the viewpoints shared by the same set of respondents in the subsequent session that they attended.

### **4.6.3 The Circle Process**

It was at this juncture that the background reading introduced me to the concept of Circle Processes. Circle Processes use

“..structure to create possibilities for freedom: freedom to speak our truth, freedom to drop masks and protections, freedom to be present as a whole human being, freedom to reveal our deepest longings, freedom to acknowledge mistakes and fears, freedom to act in accord with our core values” (Pranis, 2005, pg. 11).

Identified by various labels such as Peacemaking Circles, Conversation Circles and Restorative Circles, the approach is seen as a way of bringing people together in which

- Everyone is respected
- Everyone gets a chance to talk without interruption (and they can opt not to talk when and if they wish so.)
- Participants explain themselves by telling their stories
- Everyone is equal – no person is more important than anyone else
- Spiritual and emotional aspects of individual experience are welcomed

(ibid, pg. 8).

Based on this concept, I then conducted another pilot session with the same group of 17-year old Malay-Muslim students to test the viability of the approach. The participants were seated on chairs which encircled a low table on top of which objects which may have meaning to the

group were placed. These objects served as a focal point to remind participants of their shared values and commonalities. Following the circle format, I began the session by explaining the purpose as well as the procedure in which they are about to embark on. This included introducing the 'talking piece' and the rule that the individual in possession of the piece should not be interrupted when she or he is talking.

I then requested that they clear their minds of the worries of the day and encouraged a one-minute period of silent contemplation. The 'check-in' exercise followed where I asked everyone to introduce themselves by stating their name, their class as well as the latest memorable moment in their lives. The 'talking piece' was then placed on the first participant's palm as a signal for his moment to talk. The piece was subsequently passed on to the other individuals in the circle until the series of responses had made its full round. I introduced several other 'trial' questions during the subsequent rounds:

- What identifies me as a typical Malay, yet what is it that makes me unique?
- Which one of these objects (referring to the items on the table) represents your hopes and aspirations for your community? Why?
- What aspects of Malay culture or practices would you wish to discard? Why?
- What do you think is your role as a member of the Community 10 years from now?

I must clarify that these participants were actually students that I teach and were not from any of the list provided by the three organisations. Neither was the questions asked meant for them to specifically relate their experiences of participating in any programme conducted by any of the organisations involved in this research. The idea, after all, was to test the feasibility of the approach and not to exhaust my list of respondents. (In the case that I need to act upon

a contingency plan of organising an actual data collection session with them should I run short of valid respondents.) Fortunately, this research never came upon such dire moments.

Based on the feedback given at the end of the session, the students felt that they were more at ease with the circle session as compared to the previous focus group discussion. One respondent however, said that she felt a little stifled as she had wanted to spontaneously respond to some of the issues mentioned by one or two participants but was not able to as the ‘talking piece’ was not in her possession. The others however, felt that they might not have spoken as freely if their thoughts were ‘interrupted’ by these responses. Another participant who knew me better personally felt that he could have given more effective responses if it was a one-to-one interview. Nevertheless, it was unanimously felt that group discussion sessions using the Circle Process provided a more conducive environment and yielded better outcomes when compared to the previous strategy of using focus group discussion. By the end of the data gathering process, ten circle sharing sessions involving more than 65 youths representing various educational and socio-economic backgrounds had been conducted (see Appendix 2).

Conceptually, the Circle Process falls under the framework of semi-structured interviews. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher uses her or his prerogative in controlling the flexibility of the interview process. According to Wengraf (2001, pg.6), this will enable the researcher

“to get a sense of how the apparently straightforward is actually more complicated, of how the ‘surface appearances’ may be quite misleading about ‘depth realities’”.

For the research, this entailed that predefined queries, usually in the form of open-ended questions, be prepared prior to the sharing sessions. In the course of the sharing sessions however, I applied initiative in adjusting the sequence of the questions to be asked and to add questions based on the flow of the conversation. These criteria were successfully exercised during the pilot circle session.

#### **4.6.4 Participant-Observation**

As a complement to the circle interviews, I decided to reinforce the data collected using a strategy of participant-observation during the conduct of several selected programmes. Fontana and Frey (2000) argue that naturalistic observation via participant-observation does not interfere with the people or activities under the research scrutiny. As clarified by Mac an Ghail (1996), the participant-observer collects data by participating in the activity of those he or she is studying. However, I need to clarify that the extent of my role as participant in some of these activities had been dependent on the nature of the programmes. For instance, it was not suitable for me to be involved as a participant in a 'teen-only' event. Neither was it appropriate for me to act as a facilitator leading the discussion or shaping the accompanying thinking processes conducted during any one of the outreach sessions as this will clash with my role as an observer of 'natural' behaviour.

Nevertheless, through this method of data collection, I was able to furnish myself with a more coherent picture of the changes in the participants' perspectives via a first hand observation of their actions, reactions and interactions during the programmes. This, in effect, meant that information gathered on the participants' social experiences had been more real and meaningful.

Using my connections with some of the participating organisations already established, I subsequently sought out their permission to participate in several of their activities with the intention of observing the behaviour of the participants during these occasions. In due course, I managed to observe activities which included several interfaith dialogue sessions, modules of a youth-at-risk intervention programme and even an overseas visit to witness a retreat organised by a neighbouring country designed to motivate a group of their Malay citizens who are recipients of the state government's financial assistance. The data collected was then used to corroborate those gathered using the other methods.

#### **4.6.5 Life History Interview**

The final method adopted for data collection in this research was a series of life history interviews with selected individuals. From this data collection strategy, information was gathered in the form of running accounts, narratives of events, and descriptions of emotions, personalities and situations. Goldman et al. (2003, pg. 566) explains that life history interviews allow researchers to “delve deeply into a subject and explore new avenues of inquiry as they (the data) were generated by interviewees' responses”. The method will thus provide greater insight into the influence of social context on the respondent. Richie (2001) reveals in her article on the *Challenges Incarcerated Women Face as They Return to Their Communities* that the use of life history interviews has enabled her to incorporate the analysis of their accounts into her “evaluation of the gender-related culturally specific issues that arise from considerations of the broader social and institutional context” (pg. 368).

Typically, life history interviews use open-ended questions but are semi-structured in form as the interviewer is also supplemented with a script or ‘aide memoire’ comprising question ‘probes’ in order to elicit responses which are genuine and reflexive. For instance, in their

article focusing on palliative patient care, Ingleton et al. (2009) describes how they used a thematic aide memoire “to guide questioning about available services and the participants’ experiences and perceptions of the services, including access and barriers to appropriate end-of-life care” (pg. 725). Data gathered from life history interviews therefore stems from the assumption that social reality is created through social interaction. Since the social interaction is situated in particular contexts and histories, the data is arrived at through the analysis of the perceptions and experiences of the individual.

The use of ‘probes’ is therefore necessary to encourage interviewees to discuss not only what they do and what their opinions are but also their perceptions of the reasons for their actions and opinions. The method presents its data via the interviewer’s narration of his or her diverse experiences, encounters, relationships, observations, and conversations. The researcher’s task is to identify and describe these phenomena before attempting to analyse and theorise.

In wanting to conduct life history interviews, I began by identifying key informants relevant to the study. A total of four participants were recruited for this data gathering method. Two of these informants were selected from among the participants of the discussion sessions. The first was Rahman, a 25 year-old youth activist who was part of the group of three individuals which presented themselves as being the most conscientised during our sharing session. The other, Azlan, is also 25 years old and volunteers his time with Clubilya, a non-governmental organisation. The remaining two comprised of Ery, a female Indonesian-Chinese scholarship recipient studying in a local institution and Yang, a well-established veteran Malay community activist who is the co-founder of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP). Primarily however, these individuals were chosen because of their diversity of age, gender, academic achievement, vocation and ethnic background. The one-and-a half hour interviews

took place at the respondents' requested venues as it is thought that being in their familiar surroundings may help them to contextually situate their 'stories' so that their 'life journeys' following the programmes in which they participated in can be traced and analysed. For instance, my interview with an active youth volunteer took place in one of the venues where he had attended a programme in his younger days. This enabled me to gain more insight on the factors, determinants and effects relating to the nature of these programmes. A positive effect of these programmes, for example became apparent with the individual declaring himself presently very much involved in the sphere of civic engagement.

#### **4.6.6 The Issue of Language**

Given its racial and cultural diversity, the language policy practiced in Singapore aims at cultivating amongst its citizens bilingual proficiency in the English language and a mother tongue that has been officially assigned to specific ethnic communities (Rappa and Wee 2006, cited in Wee, 2009). Malay is recognised as the official mother tongue of the Malay community. Similarly, Mandarin is assigned to the Chinese community and Tamil to the Indian community. This is given due emphasis in the education system where academic progress is made dependent on the pupils' ability to display mastery of the required languages in the school examinations.

What unfortunately results however, is the appearance of significant disparity between the official goal of achieving international intelligibility with Standard (Singaporean) English and the reality of life for the average Singaporean, especially those described as belonging to the linguistic working class (Chng, 2003). It arises as Singlish, Singapore's brand of colloquial English, has become accepted by some as an essential marker of Singaporean identity despite being deplored by others as a variant of English that puts Singapore and Singaporeans at a

disadvantage due to its lack of coherence with the global community. As evidenced during the conduct of this research, the proficiency and preference for the use of the English language as a means of communication corresponds to the individual's level of education. Fortunately, I was able to accommodate such preferences by conversing with the respondents exclusively in either Malay or English, or a mixture of both, following their lead.

However, what becomes a significant issue in this research was the fact that I needed to both translate and transcribe the recorded talk. Hammersley (2010) reiterates the fact that transcription is a process of construction rather than simply a matter of writing down what is said. Apart from the transcriber's linguistic abilities, there is also the unavoidable use of his or her cultural knowledge and skills to interpret and represent what is going on. Associated with this is the issue of whether the researcher should attempt to specifically capture distinctive forms of language such as the level of vocabulary and the use of slang. These issues are important as transcripts provide a permanent record of research that "can be searched, re-interpreted, collected and shared with other researchers in a more meaningful way and with much greater efficiency than any other medium" (Fogg and Wightman, 2000, cited in Grundy et al., 2003, pg. 28). As most of the participants spoke using various mixtures of Malay, English and Singlish, I decided to reflect these 'flavours' of communication by retaining the non-English words in the transcription and adding the equivalent English translations in accompanying brackets. What has been unsuccessful however was to reflect the 'flavour' of spoken communication by those who preferred to speak predominantly in the Malay language as it would have been pointless to retain these full Malay sentences for a foreign readership. I was only left with the option of reflecting their sentiments after having them fully translated and transcribed into English. Although such respondents represent a very small percentage of

the research participants, I nevertheless consider it a loss that this study was unable to fully show appreciation of the dynamics in the responses during the sharing sessions.

#### **4.7 Triangulation**

Triangulation is a practice in social research where a combination of methods for data collection is adopted to ensure the accuracy of findings. According to Sarantakos (2005, pg. 169), using multiple methods will allow the researcher to:

- Obtain a variety of information on the same issue
- Use the strengths of each method to overcome the deficiencies of the other;
- Achieve a higher degree of validity and reliability; and
- Overcome the deficiencies of single-method studies.

Nee and Taylor (2000) established the effectiveness of triangulation in their research on burglars' target selection where they mentioned their strategy of using both prison-based and 'natural environment' interviews with burglars and then drawing comparisons from the information obtained based on each interview setting.

Denzin (1989) introduced a four-triangulation classification schema comprising Observer Triangulation, Methodological Triangulation, Theory Triangulation and Data Triangulation. Based on the criteria presented, it can be distinguished that this particular research undertaking fits into the 'Data Triangulation' structure. Data Triangulation involves the use of more than one method of data collection. For this study, the methods utilised comprise focus group or circle sharing interview, participant observation and life history interview. In addition, when required, further support for the data collected was achieved through follow-up emails and telephone calls. As will be discussed in the next section on Validity and

Reliability, triangulation ensures that the uncertainty concerning data interpretation is greatly reduced.

#### **4.8 Validity and Reliability**

Bryman (2008, pg. 543) defines the concept of validity in social research as concerns relating to the “integrity of the conclusions that are generated from the study”. In the context of this research however, it is probably more appropriate for the meaning of the term to be associated with the question of generalizability: “To what populations, settings, treatment variables, and measurement variables can an observed effect be generalized?” (Cram et al., 2009, pg. 479). The implication of these statements is that strength of validity attached to a piece of research becomes dependent on the extent to which the data that is collected gives a true measurement or description of the ‘social reality’.

Reliability, on the other hand, refers “to the degree to which a measure of a concept is stable” Bryman (2008, pg. 545). The extent of reliability in social research findings becomes dependent on the consistency of the data collected as well as the degree to which the study can be replicated. Kimberlin and Winterstein (2008) links reliability to the stability of measures administered at different times to the same individuals or the equivalence in the sets of items resulting from the same test performed by different observers.

Issues regarding the validity and reliability of this research may arise due to concerns over the sampling group from which the data has been collected. For instance, as these respondents are all volunteers, individuals with strong viewpoints may have been more inclined to come forward than others. As such, the data collected may lead to an over-representation of specific perceptions and opinions leading to flaws in the findings. Similarly, as a researcher

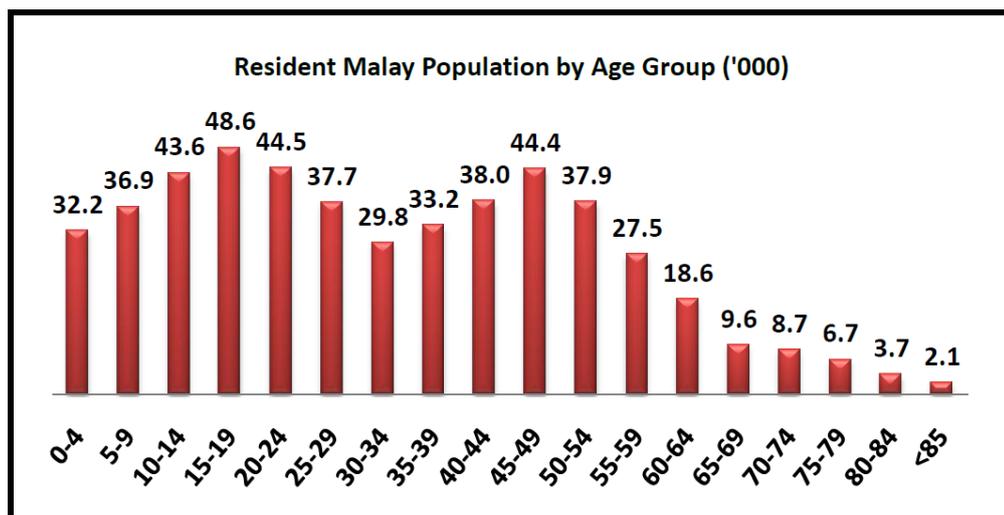
undertaking this project, I needed to be constantly aware of any personal biases as well as to be critically reflexive when extracting and interpreting the data obtained. Other issues which presented themselves as possible limitations to the research included the 'halo' effect where participants become predisposed to only positive or negative perceptions due to the 'brand' name of the organization (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977). These concerns are addressed in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

A few other areas of concern had also been looked into. Among others, there was a need to ensure a diversity in the range of organisations under the purview of this research so as to ensure greater representativeness of the data collected, the inherent interplay of power and status between individuals resulting in a possible stifling of responses as well as the necessity to take into account the respondents' youthful exuberance and willingness to please.

As such, triangulation of the three methods of data collection as discussed in the previous section had been crucial as it served as a means of cross-checking to ensure validity and reliability of the research.

#### **4.9 Sampling Profile**

According to the latest census report, the demographic age pyramid of the Malays depicts its broadest base at ages 15-19 years (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010).



The rationale then is that the best way to effect changes which will impact the community most will be by focusing on the largest group which makes up its members. An argument can also be forwarded that since our youths are our leaders of tomorrow, the need is to adopt an effective strategy to mould these young individuals into confident, capable and responsible adults who can then be the positive force driving the community forward. Furthermore, most persons in this age group are still in the process of receiving their education and are not tied down with work or family commitments. As such, their participation in the programmes conducted by the organisations involved can be expected to be more consistent as compared to individuals who are already more established in their career and/or married lives.

Accordingly, the research aimed to seek out participants who fit the following profile:

*i. A Malay-Muslim background*

It must be noted that the term ‘Malay-Muslim background’ should not be made to correspond only to an individual who falls under the official category of Malay-Muslim by birth. Malay identity has yet to be clearly interpreted and has been contextual and dependent on a national as well as community definition. In Southeast Asia, such an identity has been contextual due

to the different interpretations which coincide with the political realities of its constituent countries. For example, while a Javanese in Singapore is officially categorized as 'Malay' (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010), the case is not the same in Indonesia where the two ethnic groups are differentiated. I therefore realised that there was a need to make this distinction especially after analyzing the profiles of several respondents.

For example, among the volunteers was a pair of eighteen year-old twin sisters who were educated in a local madrasah. Looking and acting Malay in every sense of the word, they were nevertheless, the products of a Chinese mother and an Indian father. Their Malay tradition and culture however, came from the fact that their mother was adopted and raised by a Malay family. During other circle sharing sessions, I also came across respondents who declared themselves as Malays but were reflected as 'Indian', 'Chinese' or 'Others' in their identity cards. Again, these are the products of mixed parentage that fell victim to a government policy which labels their ethnicity based only on their father's lineage. Therefore, in discussing issues to do with being 'Malay' and 'Malayness', it becomes evident that Malay identity and Malayness in the Singapore context are terms which have become socially ambivalent yet politically definitive depending on aspects which border on familial, legal, constitutional, religious and chronological factors.

Due to the fluid and contextual nature of being Malay, this research is thus more inclined to adopt Hall's (1996) preference for the use of the term 'identification', rather than 'identity' which refers only to biological linkages. According to Hall (2000, pg. 26),

“‘identification’ reflects ‘a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with some other person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established in this foundation’”.

More convincingly, Hall’s choice of the concept of ‘identification’ over that of ‘identity’ lies in his assertion that,

“‘identification’ can be won or lost, sustained or abandoned...identification is in the end conditional, lodged in contingency” (ibid).

As a result, the notion of identity is contextual and fluid, subject to changes effected by time and circumstance. In the context of this research, the ultimate criteria for determining the ‘Malayness’ of the respondents lies with the fact that *they* define themselves as being Malay!

*ii. Seventeen to thirty years old (either gender)*

While the census data indicates that the largest group of Malay-Muslims are those in the fifteen to nineteen year age category, I had decided, however, to expand the sampling profile to target individuals who are within the seventeen to thirty year age range. This is to reflect that fact that post-secondary education in Singapore begins at seventeen years while the average graduate receives her or his first degree and enters the workforce at twenty-five years of age (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2009). Nevertheless, I also received responses to the invitation from individuals in the twenty-five to thirty year age category. As these are individuals who are relatively new entrants to the job market and are regular participants to the programmes, I felt that that they deserved to be included in the study.

*iii. Had undergone programmes which exposed them to a multiplicity of ideas, experiences, beliefs and perspectives such as interfaith programmes or forums on conflicts involving Muslims around the world.*

In line with the need to identify and interpret the lived experiences of the respondents, the prerogative was, however, left for them to identify the programmes which they felt have led to changes in their critical thinking mindsets. With the participants from the Harmony Centre for example, there was mention of their involvement in the organisation's series of Interfaith Programmes during the sharing sessions.

The MClub has several programmes catering to youths of different age groups, specifically the Young Mind's Club (YMC), Talent Development (TD), the Undergraduate Services, the Professional Outreach and the Networking Programme. The YMC however, would not have been alluded to in the discussions as they were specific skills-building programmes targeted at students at the secondary school level. Some of the respondents who are members of the organization will have also experienced participating in the Conversations and the Contemporary Muslim Thought Series which came under the purview of the Professional Outreach Programme. Local and foreign experts representing many different fields will have been invited via this channel to deliver their opinions and have them clarified or challenged in the subsequent Question-and-Answer session.

Y-AMP on the other hand, does not segregate their programmes according to age categories. Meant to cater to young and upcoming professionals, as well as 'potential professionals' in the institutes of higher learning, their programmes are constituted by the 'Series' label and falls under the general theme of Integration, Intelligentsia, International Affairs, Current Affairs, Personal Development and Leadership Engagement (Mendaki Club, 2009). The feedback provided by participants who are members of this organization thus reflected activities which stemmed from these programmes. These organizations will be introduced at length in Chapter Six.

#### **4.10 Data analysis**

Subject to the consent of all participants, arrangements were made for audio recordings of every circle and interview session to be conducted. Detailed notes were made based on what I witnessed during the participant-observation sessions. However, the primary data supporting the theoretical foundations of this research was obtained from the discussion sessions as this is where most of the information was gathered. In this respect, the study utilised an adapted version of Wengraf's (2001) interview structure. In his book, *Qualitative Research Interviewing*, Wengraf describes what he calls the Pyramid Model of interview research. In such a framework, the Central Research Question (CRQ) is cascaded into a number of Theory Questions (TQ) which is then differentiated into specific Interview Questions (IQ) and/or non-verbal Interview Interventions (II).

My application of the model however, came with several adjustments. In my discussion sessions with the respondents, the semi-structured interview framework was designed around six basic questions, each built upon the other. However, rather than adhering to Wengraf's design of having the interview questions linked to a theory question, the structure used for this research connected each interview question to a specific underlying objective. Following Wengraf's model however, these questions and objectives were grounded by the general research question. The list of six interview questions and their underlying objectives were as follows:

##### **Interview Question 1:**

What makes you a TYPICAL Malay and what makes you a UNIQUE or SPECIAL Malay?

Underlying objective:

To create ‘critical distance’ between the respondents and the subject matter so as to overcome prejudice and bias in their answers.

**Interview Question 2:**

What makes you a SAD Malay and what makes you a GLAD Malay?

Underlying Objective:

To provide an opportunity for respondents to share their personal insights into the problems or issues pertaining to the subject matter.

**Interview Question 3:**

Pick an item from the top of the table: Which ones would you associate with a problem experienced by the Malays?

Underlying Objective:

To ensure clarity and specificity in the respondents’ feedback regarding their perceptions and experiences through the use of object association as well as to facilitate open discussion.

**Interview Question 4:**

Pick an item from the top of the table: Which ones would you associate with a solution to the problems faced by the Malays?

Underlying Objective:

To ensure clarity and specificity in the respondents’ feedback regarding their perceptions and experiences through the use of object association as well as to facilitate open discussion. (This is similar to Question 3.)

**Interview Question 5:**

Can you recall instances during any of the activities that you've attended which created a 'moment of insight' into the problems and needs of your community and 'energized' you into wanting to do something about it?

Underlying Objective:

To enable respondents to surface elements that can be associated with the process of being conscientised.

**Interview Question 6:**

How do you see yourself as part of the solution?

Underlying Objective:

To enable respondents to surface elements that can be associated with the process of being activated.

Open-ended questions in the semi-structured interview format came into play during moments such as when members of the group were asked to choose one of the objects on the table which they think represents their hopes and aspirations for the Community. This coincidentally, fits into Wengraf's idea of the Interview Intervention (II). Based on their choice, the participants were then asked to explain further the significance of the item that they chose. As such, without any direct questions being asked, the youths were provided with an opportunity to be as honest, original and creative as they could be with their answers.

Another aspect which needs to be discussed regarding how qualitative data was processed in this research is the use of thematic content analysis. Leech and Onwuegbuzie's (2008) *Compendium of techniques for qualitative data analysis* listed a number of approaches such

as Narrative Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Conversation Analysis, Semiotics and Keywords-in-Context (KWIC). However, in taking account the research design, it was decided that the thematic content analysis approach will be the most suitable for processing data collected in this study. Krippendorff (1980) describes content analysis as a research method for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context with the purpose of providing new knowledge, insights, factual representations and practical guides to actions. This is clarified further by Cavanagh (1997) who states that content analysis allows the researcher to test theoretical issues to enhance understanding of the data. Through content analysis, it is possible to distil words into fewer content-related categories. It is assumed that when classified into the same categories, words, phrases and the like share the same meaning. As an extension to content analysis, the thematic approach involves the identification of themes through “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice and Ezzy, 1999, pg 258, cited in Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006, pg. 80). “It is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis” (ibid). Marks and Yardley (2004, pg.57) clarify that while thematic analysis shares many of the principles and procedures of content analysis, a theme “refers to a specific pattern found in the data in which one is interested.”

Burnard et al. (2008) summarize the thematic content analysis approach by dividing the process into three main operational stages. The first stage involves transcribing all interviews verbatim and then exploring, discovering and identifying themes and categories that emerge from the data. The researcher keeps a look out and creates notes in the margins, taking specific notice of any words, theories or short phrases that sum up what is being said in the context. This process is known as ‘open coding’. In the second stage, the researcher collects

all the words and phrases which had been jotted down and transfers them onto a clean set of pages. Duplications are then crossed out resulting in a considerable reduction in the number of 'categories' being created. The researcher subsequently looks out for overlapping or similar categories and tries to cross these out as well. The final stage is to allocate each of the categories its own coloured markings followed by another working through of each transcript so that the data is appropriately identified and highlighted with the associated colour indicating their fit under a particular category. In this particular study, once the portions of each transcript fitting under a particular category were identified, the softcopy version was then copied and transferred into a marked file. In this way, further analysis of the findings was made easier and the report could be clearly written.

Elo and Kyngas (2007) elaborate that content analysis actually comprises a hybrid of both the inductive and deductive approaches. The inductive approach points to the effort of the researcher at formulating categories by coming to a decision, through interpretation, as to which elements to put in the same category. The deductive content analysis however, is used in cases where the researcher wishes to retest existing data in a new context. The use of both these approaches is illustrated in the Data Presentation chapter of this thesis where, for example, the deductive approach can be inferred as having played a major role in contextualising the well-established effects of dialogue and reflection within the confines of the research.

In conclusion, the use of this data analysis framework enabled me to gather the required information which could then be processed so as to evaluate if as well as how the experiences of Malay-Muslim youths participating in community outreach programmes have changed their perceptions of themselves and their community. Though the results will be presented at

length in the subsequent Discussion chapter of this thesis, briefly however, based on what the responses were and how the answers were interpreted, the findings have shown that the respondents were, or were not

- under the influence of specific mental models
- affected by the mental models that exist in their psyche
- motivated to go against the existing mental models

#### **4.11 Ethical issues<sup>12</sup>**

This research followed very closely the ethical guidelines provided by the British Educational Research Association (British Education Research Association [BERA], 2004). For instance, since the theme of the research is on the emancipatory value of outreach programmes, discussions may broach on topics which were controversial in nature, such as subjects pertaining to policies on ethnicity and religion. As such, I pre-empted concerns regarding confidentiality by omitting the actual names of my respondents in the final report and instead identified these participants via the use of pseudonyms. It was also initially thought that these volunteers may not wish for their photographs or any kinds of video recording be taken during the data collection sessions. The protocol was thus set that I must seek the participants' permission to audio record the entire session for transcription purposes. However, if there were objections, I had to refrain from exercising this option. However, these concerns proved unnecessary as the respondents displayed no qualms over the use of such devices.

Apart from a brief description of the objectives of the research, the information in the flyer stated very clearly that it is an invitation seeking respondents to participate in the group

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<sup>12</sup> The Form EC2 for PostGraduate Research (PGR) Students which is part of the document on Research Ethics Protocol for Staff, Postgraduate and Undergraduate Students had been submitted and approval subsequently granted.

discussion sessions. As such, there was no element of compulsion and that participation was purely on a voluntary basis. Nevertheless as a token of appreciation, a light meal was provided prior to the actual sessions. This also served as an opportunity for me to create rapport with the participants. The flyer had also stated that should a person be genuinely interested in taking part in the discussion, he or she was to email the researcher at a stated address, attaching with the mail a completed template, which among other basic information such as a preferred time slot, begins with a sentence in bold which states “I wish to participate in the Focus Group Discussions” indicating informed consent in participating in the study.

Prior to the start of the group discussion, participants were also informed that he or she had the right to withdraw anytime during the discussions should he or she feel uncomfortable with the situation. Finally, particulars of all respondents as well as hardcopies of the transcriptions of the sessions and other sensitive notes were kept under lock and key. Softcopies of relevant information were password protected.

In addition, as much as the participants were encouraged to be open with their feelings during the discussion sessions, they were also strictly reminded that whatever issues surfaced in the circle, ‘stays in the circle’ regardless even if issues pertaining to unethical behavior were revealed. This included a total ban on any mention of the issues discussed in blogs as well as social networking websites. Of course, the exception would have been situations where the risk of physical danger is very much apparent. Fortunately, no such situations arose.

In conclusion, as required for any research endeavour to be a success, open communication and the steadfast maintenance of trust had been the crucial factor in getting these volunteers to reveal their true views and feelings ensuring the reliability and validity of the data collected.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED IN THE RESEARCH

#### 5.1 Introduction

The main objective of this chapter is to provide the reader with an overview of the organisations which furnished resources by way of information, facilities and especially respondents for this research. This is deemed necessary in order for the reader to understand the lived experiences of these individuals and therefore be in a better position to evaluate their responses. It begins with a detailed discussion of the forms and functions of these organisations, especially since they fit into very different functional categories: MUIS is a statutory board under the purview of the government; Mendaki, AMP, Clubilya and the Ain Society are all Non-Governmental Organisations; while Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) is a mainstream educational institution. The organisations belonging to the first two categories are, by nature, entrusted to play a large role in providing outreach programmes catering to the public. The last, however, is a national school catering to thirteen to eighteen year-old youths. As such, apart from events organised for parents or guardians of students, the school does not generally conduct outreach programmes. Nevertheless, since quite a number of youths participating in the circle sessions are currently pupils of the school, an introduction to this particular institution is seen to be appropriate.

This chapter will begin with an overview of the political environment of the country. The objective is for the reader to better comprehend the ‘boundaries’ imposed on the work of these organisations. This will be followed by a discussion of the main types of activities organised by these organisations and the sections of Malay-Muslim society towards which their

programmes are generally targeted. Where appropriate, the chapter will provide a narrative of controversies involving conflicts between the actions of such organisations and their ‘designated’ role as perceived by the ruling PAP-led government.

## **5.2 The Political Environment**

Ever since Singapore proclaimed its independence on 9 August 1965, the system of government for the country has best been described as one that is modeled after the Westminsterian parliamentary democracy<sup>13</sup>. The Westminster system allows for Members of Parliament to be voted in by the electorate at the General Elections. The leader of the political party that secures the most seats in Parliament then becomes the Prime Minister (PM). Subsequently, the PM will choose her or his Ministers from among the elected MPs to form the Cabinet. According to the Singapore constitution, each elected Parliament is to serve a maximum term of five years after which a fresh election is mandated. The last General Election was conducted in May 2011 (Singapore Elections Department, 2011). Nevertheless, from the day of its official inception, politics in the tiny nation-state has always been dominated by the People’s Action Party (PAP). In the recent General Elections for instance, the PAP won 82 out of the 87 seats contested for the nation’s Parliament.

As Singapore’s ruling political party, the PAP has been described by analysts as having developed a distinct political culture – one that is based on ‘soft authoritarianism’ and driven by political pragmatism (Ooi, 2009). The PAP government’s power structure is highly centralized and characterized by a top-down bureaucracy. Unlike conventional democracies, it features a series of official appointments rather than elections to most government offices.

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<sup>13</sup> This was the natural result of her colonial legacy as Singapore had been under British rule from 1879 until 1959 when it was granted self-government but not yet amounting to full independence. Full sovereignty was achieved only in 1965.

Economic growth and political stability are maintained by the paternal guidance of the PAP. Thus, it has been said that Singapore is not administered by politicians, but by bureaucrats, in a system of meritocracy where power is gained through educational achievement, skill, performance, and loyalty to the nation and its policies (<http://www.guidemesingapore.com>, 2011).

Fukuyama (1992) distinguishes Singapore's 'soft authoritarianism' as one that has been successful in creating a modern, technologically based society by its promotion of a highly disciplined and educated workforce which is nevertheless free to pursue their individual aspirations. He differentiates it from earlier communist dictatorships practiced by the USSR, China and Vietnam where a lack of motivation had become the major stumbling block preventing each nation from achieving economic success. The pre-reformist ideology of these countries then prescribed that their citizens be assigned with fixed jobs, given limited consumer choices and fed with revolutionary communist propaganda.<sup>14</sup> The PAP-led government on the other hand encourages healthy competition for jobs among its citizens resulting in a thriving economic environment with an intelligent and productive work force.

This is seen in Singapore's rapid transformation during the last forty-five years. From an entrepot driven by commerce and services in the mid-1960s, it is now an established economy specialising in high value manufacturing activities as well as a successful regional financial hub for business services in East Asia. Between 1995 and 2001, the country's highly competitive economy was ranked second in national competitiveness by the Swiss International Institute for Management Development (Siddiqui, 2010). From 1960 to 2000,

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<sup>14</sup> The era of Perestroika and Glasnost beginning in 1985 marked the period where reform policies and ideas to improve the communist system were put in place. However, this proved to have had wider implications than just innovations in Soviet political practice as it led to the eventual fall of the Soviet bloc in 1989 (Kangaspuro, Nikula and Stodolsky, 2010).

the city-state experienced the highest national-income growth in the world. In 1997, for instance, Singapore's GDP per capita (GDPpc) was ranked eighth in the world. Although its rankings have dipped since then, in 2006 it was still accorded a very respectable thirty-first position in the World Bank's rankings (Verweij and Pelizzo, 2009). Given the country's modest starting point, this growth record is nevertheless impressive.

However, in its attempt to ensure that citizens constantly place society before self, critics have charged that the authorities tend to emphasise too much on regulation and the policing of its citizens' private lives. For instance, heavy summonses - with some accompanied by jail time - are imposed on seemingly minor infringements such as jay-walking, spitting in public and not flushing of public toilets after use resulting in the rather unflattering tagline of Singapore being a 'fine' city (Bhasin, 2007). Such supervision extends to controls over the mass media and industrial relations in the private sector leading to these two entities being overly compliant to the government's nuances. As such, critics of the government have condemned the authorities for its use of unfair tactics in restricting political freedom in the country (Gomez, 2002). As can be seen later in this chapter, regulatory strategies instituted by the government include state cooption of organisations directly involved in potentially divisive areas as seen with the creation of MUIS as part of the government body, as well as the use of legalistic frameworks to monitor and regulate the activities of NGOs.

### **5.3 The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS)**

The Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) was introduced as a component of the secular-based Singapore legislative system two years after the country separated from Malaysia in 1964. The Act serves to provide the legislative umbrella for policies administering the various aspects of Muslim life, including marriages, divorce and inheritance

matters. Subsequently, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore was formed in 1968 as a government statutory body to manage the religious and social welfare of Muslims in Singapore. Publicly known by the acronym 'MUIS' which is based on its Malay label 'Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura', the Act endows the Council with the power to advise the President of Singapore on all matters relating to Islam in the country (Kassim, 2009).

Headed by a government minister appointed with a secondary portfolio of Minister in-charge of Muslim Affairs, the primary role of MUIS is to see that the many and varied interests of Singapore's Muslim community are looked after. In effect, the Council is made responsible for the promotion of religious, social, educational, economic and cultural activities in accordance with the principles and traditions of Islam. This includes the task of broadening and deepening the Singaporean Muslim community's understanding and practice of Islam, while enhancing the well-being of the nation. As a government body, it sets the Islamic agenda with the objective of positively shaping religious life and forging the Singaporean Muslim Identity (MUIS, 2009).

### **5.3.1 The Singapore Islamic Education System**

Some of the respondents in this research are affiliated to MUIS by virtue of their participation in the Youth aLIVE (Learning Islamic Values Everyday) programme. Designed as a part-time curriculum so as to minimize the burdens of full-time schooling and other everyday commitments, the Kids, Tweens, Teens, Youth and Adult aL.I.V.E. Education modules are being developed in phases as part of a comprehensive, multi-platform Islamic Education System with specific programmes catering to the different age groups within the community (MUIS, 2007).

Being the latest curriculum developed for Islamic Education in Singapore, the aLIVE programmes are formulated to function as a national framework for all Islamic Education curriculums for young Muslim learners. The objective is to prepare Muslims to better understand, appreciate and practise Islam in light of the present and future challenges of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation through an approach that is ‘relevant, dynamic and full of significant learning opportunities’ (MUIS, 2011).

According to the objectives of its curriculum, the aL.I.V.E. programmes seek to inculcate values by providing opportunities for young Muslims to be personally engaged in the moral development process. The vision is for the programme to successfully create a Muslim community which

- Holds strongly to Islamic principles, yet is adaptable to change.
- Is morally and spiritually strengthened to face the challenges of life.
- Is enlightened about Islamic history and civilisation.
- Believes that a good Muslim is also a good citizen.
- Is well-adjusted in living out as active and responsible partners in the community.

([www.aLIVE.sg](http://www.aLIVE.sg))

For instance, under the component of Life Skills and Character Development of the Youth aLIVE module, the qualities of leadership, courage, empathy, endurance, imagination and citizenship are emphasized. This subject area focuses on instilling in the learners the necessary knowledge of Islamic *Adab* (mannerisms) and behaviours, imparting to them not only the core principles but also its application in current, modern day situations. It aims at having learners internalise these values so as to be model Muslims in society (MUIS, 2007).

### **5.3.2 The Harmony Centre**

Another group of respondents are affiliated to MUIS due to their involvement in activities organised by the Harmony Centre, one of the agencies under its purview. The Centre which was established in 2006 symbolises the Council's efforts at engendering a greater understanding of Islam and its followers from amongst the multi-racial population of Singapore. Based on a tagline of "Building Bonds of Humanity", the Centre aims to achieve three main objectives

- To promote a greater understanding of the teachings of Islam
- To promote inter-faith dialogue and engagement at all levels; leadership, community, grassroots, youths and students; through seminars, workshops, experiential learning journeys, visits, etc and
- To strengthen the social bonding amongst the different faith communities so as to build a more cohesive and resilient society (Harmony Centre, 2009).

Seen by the government as an avenue for positive engagement and community building, some of the activities organised by the Harmony Centre include interfaith training for community and youth leaders, as well as social activists. Such facilitator-oriented programmes aim to create 'agents of change' who are equipped with the knowledge and skills to facilitate interfaith dialogues, discussions and activities. The Harmony Centre also has a gallery containing Islamic exhibits, audio-visuals and artefacts. To strengthen the bonds and relationships among Singaporeans, the Centre appoints volunteer docents who conduct regular tours of its premises for visitors from schools, community organisations and the grassroots centres. In addition, the Harmony Centre conducts activities which champion the promotion of interfaith interaction and understanding. For instance, it initiated a series of

intimate sharing sessions called the Discovering Conversation Circles (DCC) where a close-knit community is created between participants of different ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs when they interact and share common issues of concern such as racial and religious harmony, climate change and youth development.

#### **5.4 Non-Governmental Organisations in Singapore**

According to Willetts (2010), the term, ‘non-governmental organization’ or NGO, came into use in 1945 because of the need for the United Nations to differentiate in its Charter between participation rights for intergovernmental specialized agencies and those for international private organizations. According to the UN, virtually all types of private bodies can be recognized as NGOs as long as they are independent from government control, are not seeking to challenge governments as a political party, are non-profit-making and are non-criminal in nature (Clarke, 1998).

The structures of NGOs vary considerably. They can take the shape of global hierarchies with a series of established centres operating on a transnational basis. Alternatively, they may only be active within the country operating from a single or several situated venues. The NGOs which participated in this research however, take the shape of the latter category as Mendaki, AMP, the Ain Society and Clubilya are locally-based entities.

##### **5.4.1 The Government’s Attitude to Civil Society**

Political analysts have pointed out that within the context of Singapore’s political culture, NGOs technically operate under the label of ‘civic society’. According to Tan (2001, pg. 115), the term ‘civic society’ is taken up by the Singapore government to “distinguish the people sector from the usual liberal conceptions of civil society which is that of an

associational space that is antagonistic towards a state”. In fact, not only does the government limit the operations of such NGOs to only non-political activities, these organisations are also expected to work in partnership or cooperation with the authorities. In other words, the scope of activities conducted by civil society in Singapore has been described as basically confined within ‘largely a state-sanctioned sphere of engagement’ (Lyons and Gomes, 2005, pg. 120). Nevertheless, Tan (2001) has been able to cite examples of local civic organizations which can be said to be effective and successful such as the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE). The organization which champions women’s rights, however, have had policy impact mainly because they have chosen to adopt a conciliatory or consensual approach to the government, lobbying mainly behind closed doors and offering transparent and well-researched recommendations.

To enforce the existing structure, the country’s government bodies such as the Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCDS) as well as regulatory agencies like the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) wield considerable leverage over the actions of NGOs primarily through licensing, funding and legalistic frameworks such as the Internal Security Act<sup>15</sup>. While such governmental supervision has had positive effects in ensuring the transparency of NGOs hence curbing mismanagement and corruption<sup>16</sup>, critics however see

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<sup>15</sup> The Internal Security Act (ISA) confers on the government the right to arrest and detain individuals without trial in certain defined circumstances. The legislation originated in the wake of World War II, when a number of countries around the world introduced legislation that severely curtailed the rights of known or suspected communists. While the ISA has not been invoked in recent years against political opponents, (as the government on most occasions preferring the ‘more convenient’ strategy of undertaking legal action by way of libel proceedings) the continued existence of ISA is perceived by observers as casting the shadow restricting political opposition and criticism of the government.

<sup>16</sup> The National Kidney Foundation scandal of 2005 is seen to be an example of this. Investigations of the multi-million dollar non-profit organisation had revealed false declarations of the charity’s reserves and its number of patients as well as the excessive income and allowances of its Chief Executive Officer. These led to his eventual dismissal and subsequent prosecution (Henson, 2007).

such bureaucratic control as a political smoke screen to ensure the cooperation and depoliticisation of these independent agencies (Jones, 2002).

For example, in 2002, government action was taken to shut down Fateha.com, an independently-run internet website which had been vocal on Muslim and Malay issues and was seen as gaining support from members of the community because of its harsh questioning of government policies. The controversy ended with the founder being forced to 'relocate' himself overseas for fear of government arrest and prosecution (Channelnewsasia, 2001). A more recent example can be made of the local internet portal, The Online Citizen, a website proclaiming itself as operating on a platform of 'advocacy journalism'. The PAP-led government, however, has declared the organization a political association thus coming under the purview of the Political Donations Act. The Act prohibits political parties, political associations, and candidates in parliamentary or presidential elections from accepting donations from foreign sources, and requires transparency on large donations received ('Online Citizen gazetted as political association', 2011). Since the organization has provided evidence that it is financially independent and has rejected any accusation of political affiliations or intent, such subtle mechanisms of state scrutiny is seen as heavy-handed government repression of civil liberties (Au Yong, 2011).

#### **5.4.2 Voluntary Welfare Organisations**

Civic organizations in Singapore also include voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) comprising charitable organisations, community associations, ethnically-based self-help groups and religious bodies. They function to provide basic welfare services such as care and support for the elderly and disabled, counselling for individuals and families in need or under duress, accommodation and support in kind for the destitute, and help for low income

families. VWOs are also involved in pre-school education and supervision for school children before and after school, counselling and activities for children and adolescents with behavioural problems, and therapy and rehabilitation for drug addicts (Vasoo, 2001). The NGOs involved in this research primarily function as VWOs although for AMP particularly, there have been occasions where the organisation's activities have inadvertently strayed into the political sphere creating backlash from the government.

### **5.4.3 Mendaki Club**

According to its website (<http://www.mendakiclub.org.sg>), the Mendaki Club or MClub is a registered society launched in 2000. Although an offshoot to the government-affiliated Malay/Muslim self-help group Yayasan Mendaki, MClub is an independent registered society whose overall direction and programmes are determined by an independent Executive Committee of volunteers. The organisation is made up of a community of Malay/Muslim young professionals and students who are engaged in affairs concerning the community, Singapore and the world. The activities and programmes of MClub are largely organised and run by volunteers who come from a wide range of professions and backgrounds. The organisation aims to engage in strategic youth development initiatives and to participate actively in discussions on current developments in the local and global arena. In the process, they also strive to build bridges within the Malay/Muslim community, and between the Malay/Muslim community and other communities so as to promote mutual understanding and cooperation.

MClub's activities centre on several key programmes such as the Young Minds Club, Talent Development Programme and The Young Professionals Outreach.

1. The Young Minds Club caters to facilitate the holistic development of Malay/Muslim secondary school students with the objective of enabling these youths to become confident individuals and competent leaders, both willing and able to contribute meaningfully to society.
2. The Talent Development Programme caters to students from the post-secondary level such as the junior colleges and madrasahs. It aims to develop the academic talent and life skills of these youths. The programme includes dialogues on topics such as Terrorism, career seminars as well as mock scholarship interview workshops to assist the more promising students in their quest to seek funding for their further education.
3. The Young Professionals Outreach programme entails that MClub conduct events with the objective of attracting and engaging young working professionals. The programme aims to create platforms where Malay/Muslim youths and professionals meet and network through activities such as large scale forums and a monthly discussion series called 'MClub Conversations' where a noted speaker from a specific field, for example social work, youth leadership and politics, speak to a small session of about 30 young adults and professionals. In another series of events, the Young Professionals Outreach partner with MUIS in organising a set of lectures and talks by invited contemporary Muslim scholars who then share their thoughts on a range of relevant topics.

The contributions of MClub nevertheless cannot be considered without an introduction of its Founder Member, the Malay/Muslim self-help group Yayasan Mendaki (YM). Yayasan Mendaki, which is Malay for Mendaki Foundation, provides a yearly grant from which

MClub has full autonomy to utilise in running its operations and activities though with the understanding that these will be aligned to those of YM's.

#### **5.4.4 Yayasan Mendaki**

Yayasan Mendaki is a self-help group dedicated to the empowerment of disadvantaged Malay/Muslims through excellence in education. It was set up in 1982 by Malay/Muslim community leaders in partnership with the government. Its declared mission is to navigate, empower and position the Malay/Muslim community at the forefront of excellence (Yayasan Mendaki, 2009).

To date, the Foundation has taken over some functions previously under the purview of government agencies, for example the Public Service Commission's administration of the 'Free Tuition for Malay Students' scheme. Prior to 1991, all Malay students studying in institutes of higher learning such as the polytechnics and the three local state universities are entitled for free education upon their application to the PSC. This is part of a set of agreements made prior to Singapore's independence in 1965. In 1989 however, the Malay community took bold steps in making a commitment towards a financial scheme aimed at helping the needy in the community. Goh Chok Tong who was then the first Deputy Prime Minister, first mooted the scheme and further suggested that the better-off Malay students pay their own fees while the subsidy that was originally accrued to them be redistributed to the needy. According to Goh,

“The adoption of the new financing scheme is a significant step forward for the Malay community. It is not easy to overcome psychological inhibitions, in order to stand up and be treated equally with other non-Malay Singaporeans. With the better-off Malays

helping the less well-off, I am confident that the entire community will make future progress” (Mendaki, 2011).

It was also proposed then that MENDAKI take up the role of administrators for this scheme. Under Mendaki, the scheme was subsequently renamed the Tertiary Tuition Fee Subsidy for Malays (TTFS).

As a major organisation catering to the needs of the Malay community, Mendaki has also set up the MENDAKI Social Enterprise Network Singapore Pte Ltd (SENSE), a body which functions as its training arm to help those affected by the structural changes in the economy. Presently, MENDAKI SENSE provides services under three major support categories:

1. Continuing Education and Training so as to provide the Malay/Muslim workforce with the necessary skills training to prepare them for employment into the mainstream job market.
2. Employment Facilitation so as to assist individuals through job matching and counselling services.
3. Social Enterprises which creates or links up individuals with special needs or unique skills with specific business opportunities.

#### **5.4.5 Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP)**

In response to the call for a non-government affiliated organisation which is equivalent to Yayasan Mendaki, the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) was established on 10 October 1991. The formation was seen to be the outcome of an important resolution of the First National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals held on 6 and 7 October 1990. AMP was created with the objective of implementing and managing core programmes

in education, human resource development, social development and research. The organization espouses the mission of playing a leading and active role in the development and long term transformation of Malay/Muslim Singaporeans into a dynamic community taking its pride of place in the larger Singaporean society (AMP, 2009).

One of the major programmes initiated by AMP is their Ready for School Fund. Launched in October 2002, the main objective of the fund is to assist disadvantaged school-going children of all races especially those under the Adopt a Family and Youth Scheme (AFYS). The monies disbursed subsidise the students' school and tuition fees, sponsor their enrichment programmes and provide assistance with transportation expenses and other financial burdens.

The Adopt a Family and Youth Scheme is an all-encompassing scheme that represents a family-based approach in providing assistance to underprivileged families. In July 2007, AFYS established itself as a transitional scheme for disadvantaged families wishing themselves to be self-reliant within two to three years. Families under AFYS are assisted financially and through various economic empowerment and socio-educational programmes.

A student's performance in school is, at least partly, dependent upon his or her motivation to study. The Youth Education Programme (YEP) was established with the aim of enriching students' development through an approach which is both positive and holistic. Apart from providing tuition in English and Mathematics, the YEP provides motivation, encouragement and guidance so that students will persevere and continue with their journey towards higher education.

AMP also places a lot of importance on skills upgrading as well as entrepreneurial opportunities in its effort to assist members of the community overcome the challenges of

globalisation. Through the Micro Business Programmes, for instance, AMP offers an avenue for workers to start up a business in order to supplement their household income. The initiative which was introduced in 2005 is designed to assist individuals from low-income families to nurture their entrepreneurial spirit by equipping them with trade and business skills to start a home-based enterprise as an alternative source of income for the household. Grants have been awarded to those who have proven their willingness to undertake viable and sustainable home-based set-ups such as foot reflexology and small-time catering businesses.

Nevertheless, even the AMP has not been spared state intervention. Based on consensus reached during the Second National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals in 2001, the AMP led a proposal for the formation of a ‘collective leadership’ structure comprising Malay PAP Members of Parliament and a ‘non-political’ pillar comprising Malay leaders elected only by Malays to look into the cultural and socio-economic issues facing the community. The recommendation arose from the claim that Malay PAP Members of Parliament lack political legitimacy in the eyes of the community because they were selected by the ruling PAP-led government and elected by a multiethnic electorate. To ensure fair representation in decision making processes, the proposal also suggested implementing a quota to guarantee the Malays’ positions in various public offices. Nevertheless, perceived as an attack on PAP-government rule, the proposal was subsequently framed as a threat to the fundamental principle of multiracial government and a danger to the country’s national peace, stability and success (Osman, 2000; Rodan, 2009).

Despite continuing assurances that the call was merely for an apolitical collective leadership, the proposal was fiercely attacked by Goh Chok Tong, the Prime Minister at the time. In a subsequent dialogue session held as part of the AMP Convention, PM Goh warned that if

AMP continues with the plan for Collective Leadership for the Malays, the government will come in and “prove you wrong”(Shariff, 2000). A month after the proposal, a local newspaper further quoted Mr. Goh as saying, “The collective leadership proposal is dressed up in seductive, non-political terms. But essentially, it is about a Malay leadership to be elected by Malays only, to address Malay issues which Malay MPs are alleged to have failed to do” (‘PM Rejects AMP Proposal, Again’, 2000). Bowing under governmental pressure, AMP finally dropped the proposal. In a subsequent turn of events however, government funding initially promised for AMP’s relocation to its new premises was subsequently reduced resulting in the organisation having to cut down plans of moving its headquarters from an arranged six floors to the present two-and-a-half floors of its current site with the remaining space allocated for the setting up of a government polyclinic. In a question posed during a parliamentary sitting, it was asked by a Member of Parliament if the change was meant to be the PAP government’s way of penalizing the AMP for ‘trespassing’ into the political sphere. However, the then Minister for Community Development and Sports Abdullah Tarmugi, who was also Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, dismissed such claims citing a recent change in national policy as the cause (‘Police and AMP to share community club complex’, 1998; ‘Policy affected others, not just AMP’, 2001).

In 2003, as a means of satisfying the demand, an alternative to the Collective Leadership(CL) proposal was mooted and initiated after Malay Members of Parliament (MMPs), community leaders and activists participated in a series of focus group discussions (<http://www.clfprojects.org.sg/>). Mendaki was then assigned to take up the role of Secretariat to the newly formed joint entity – the Community Leaders Forum (CLF). Headed by the MMPs and comprising members from the Malay/Muslim Organisations (MMOs) and some

non-ethnic based VWOs, many activities have since been initiated to assist the Malay-Muslim community in its progress. Nevertheless, while the feedback has been largely positive especially with the more effective coordination seen between MMPs and MMOs, critics claim that the CLF has not lived up to the advocacy role that CL was meant to undertake, particularly in relation to state policies, independence of community welfare initiatives and encouraging the community to participate more in the social and political processes of the nation.

#### **5.4.6 Young AMP**

Similar to Mendaki Club, Young AMP was created as the youth wing division of AMP in 2004. It envisions itself as leading to create a model Muslim community which is educationally excellent, socially progressive, culturally vibrant, politically influential, religiously profound and economically dynamic (Young AMP, 2009).

One of the activities organised by the Young AMP is The Muslim Youth Intelligentsia Series (MYIS). The MYIS is seen as a vehicle for promoting thought leadership amongst Muslim youths in the country. With its mission of instilling within youths a critical awareness of societal and contemporary religious issues and to subsequently assist in developing and nurturing a positive mindset and a confident attitude, the MYIS gathers youths on a regular basis to ensure consistent engagement. These meetings culminate with the launch of the Muslim Youth Seminar later on in the year.

The Young AMP also conducts the International Affairs Series which aims to educate and raise awareness on socio-political challenges on a global level. The various dialogue sessions provide youths with opportunities to discuss issues such as the India-Pakistan conflict, US

global diplomacy, China-Taiwan relations, the Situation in Darfur, Sustainable Development and Climate Change.

The most recent programme rolled out by Young AMP is its collaboration with Mendaki Club on the PRAXIS initiative. This is a strategic merger of resources ‘to build a sustainable ecology of socially-conscious and empowered young people who are able to think, act and reflect critically on societal needs and issues’ (Young Mendaki, 2011). The collaboration will tap on the two organisations’ respective strengths to design and implement a rigorous programme that combines critical thinking with social innovation and action.

Targeted at Malay/Muslim Youths between the ages of 17-19 years and presently studying at the junior colleges, centralised institutes, polytechnics and other pre-university education institutions, the capacity-building initiative reaches out to individuals who are not already volunteering with or affiliated to existing Malay/Muslim organizations. The programme intends to engage and cultivate them to become self-driven individuals who pursue their passions in meaningful areas. The long-term aim is to identify and nurture future leaders from the Malay/Muslim community.

#### **5.4.7 The Ain Society**

As a voluntary welfare organization, the Ain Society was formed in October 2004 with the objective of addressing the issues of youths-at-risk and the development of disadvantaged individuals and families through skills and knowledge enhancement leading to eventual self-reliance. Seen by most practitioners in the field as having already carved its niche for providing welfare services to the Malay community, the Ain Society has several established programmes under its belt.

As part of its series of Preventive Programmes, the society offers a range of developmental initiatives targeted at mainstream youths between the ages of 10-18 years old. Activities are conducted with the aim of inculcating positive values in a fun-filled and interactive learning environment. In terms of its Remedial Programmes, Ain Society organizes activities in conjunction with the operations of its Bukit Batok East Gen-Y Youth Hub. This is a set-up jointly undertaken by Ain Society and the Bukit Batok East Grassroots Organisation, with the support of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS). The Hub's objective is to assist out-of-school and/or at-risk youths get reinstated back in schools while equipping them with social skills, vocational training and IT knowledge. Creative and performing arts such as graffiti, mural painting, music, dance and drama are also offered to provide an outlet based on their interests. Job opportunities have also been created for youths who are not eligible to be reinstated into schools.

In Jan 2008, Ain Society established a partnership with the Community Leaders Forum to run its Max-Out Programme. The programme targets youths who have dropped out of school at either the primary or secondary level. By providing classes on basic numeracy and literacy as well as vocational and life skills, these youths will then be able to better integrate into society. To date more than 240 out-of-school youths are registered for the programme.

Since 2003, Ain Society has been engaged by the Probation Services Branch of MCYS to conduct its mandatory rehabilitative programmes for probationers and their parents. More than 300 probationers and their parents have benefited from these programmes.

Other programmes conducted by Ain Society fall in the area of family development such as the Empowerment Partnership Scheme where it partners MUIS in providing various

programmes that encompass social, economic and religious components to effect individual change. Clients are empowered to better manage their problems and subsequently succeed in addressing their financial difficulties through greater work opportunities. In Project We Care, Ain Society helps the poor and needy families by providing temporary financial assistance such as transport allowance and the basic needs of school-going children of the families.

Ain Society has also set up a Skills Training Centre as part of a social enterprise project focusing at creating employability in the cottage industry for unemployed Malay/Muslim individuals or low income families. Besides courses such as tailoring, the centre also provides ad-hoc training in skills such as cake-making, industrial cooking and jewellery making. Acquiring skills such as these will increase opportunities for individuals and their families to engage in micro businesses or become home entrepreneurs (Ain Society, 2008).

#### **5.4.8 Clubilya**

Clubilya registered itself as a non-profit organisation with the Singapore Registrar of Societies in October 2004. Helmed by a group of professionals with experiences in youth and family services, law enforcement, rehabilitation and the judiciary, the society sees its core mission as that of providing a continuum for positive developmental and support services in the youth sector, focusing specifically on out-of-school youths and youths-on-the-brink-of-success (otherwise known as high-risk youths).

With such heavy responsibilities on their shoulders, the organisation sees its mission as one that influences and empowers youths, regardless of their ethnic, religious and social backgrounds in order to develop them into responsible, resilient and progressive adults. Despite its willingness to cater to youths of all race and creed, the institution is however seen

to have created a niche through its programmes focusing on Malay-Muslim youths (Tan, 2009). Clubilya's activities centre on equipping its charges with good values and life skills so as to enable them to navigate through life's adversities and challenges. The objective is to eventually enable youths to become economically independent and contributing members of society. Working on a philosophy of positive youth development and beginning with programmes focussing on good citizenship, the organisation hopes to provide these youths with opportunities for creating personal connections with their constituents and thereby turning them into stakeholders in society. Eventually, it is hoped that these measures will gradually transform them into advocates for the community. To enhance this possibility, Clubilya seeks to promote partnerships with the diverse youth populations and community groups which it gets in touch with (Clubilya, 2010).

My enquiries with Clubilya reveal that the organisation has several niche programmes under its purview such as the Giant Trampoline Project, the 'Juz Gurlz' programme and Project Reach. The 'Giant Trampoline' Programme hopes not only to make a difference to the lives of identified youths-on-the-brink-of-success, but also to motivate them to become individuals of excellence. As youths involved in the programme have been pre-selected by the Specialised Crime Expert Branch (SCEB) of the Singapore Police Force, the project thus focuses on assisting these young people trapped in real-life circumstances to overcome them through social, leadership and personal skills development.

'Juz Gurlz' is a gender specific preventive-developmental programme which targets girls from ages 10 to 14 years-old. It aims to empower and inspire these girls to be strong, smart and bold in making informed choices and in developing a vision during their teenage years. Through a range of individual activities and groupwork that looks into the needs and

challenges of being a girl, the 'Juz Gurlz' programme hopes to equip participants with the necessary skills for positive development through to their adulthood.

Clubilya has also embarked on two versions of Project Reach, a preventive-developmental programme intended for the primary and secondary levels. Project Reach (Primary) is a programme for pre-teens in Primary Five. It aims to identify presenting problems and provide appropriate intervention plans to equip clients with strategies that would help them in making informed choices. Project Reach (Secondary) is an activity-based Positive Youth Developmental programme that reaches out to pupils from the Lower Secondary Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) streams where they are exposed to workshops, groupwork and outdoor experiential learning activities.

Another activity worth mentioning is Clubilya's involvement in the Singapore edition of the Daniel Pearl World Music Days public concert jointly organized with the United States Embassy. Managed mostly by the youths of Clubilya, the yearly event held in memory of the slain Wall Street Journal reporter continues to be a successful showcase of youth expression and talent in the country.

### **5.5 Anglo-Chinese School (Independent)**

The last organisation which needs to be mentioned in this research is Anglo-Chinese School (Independent), a mainstream albeit Methodist-run educational institution in Singapore. While the mission school is neither a charitable institution nor Malay/Muslim in character, it nevertheless deserves a place in this chapter as several interview sessions were conducted with its students – both Malay-Muslims and otherwise. This was made possible as I hold a teaching position in this institution and was therefore able to muster a number of volunteers

from among the student body. I need to clarify however, that none of these students were in the classes that I taught. The Malay-Muslim participants were approached by me personally due to the relevance of their ethnicity in this research while the non-Malays were members of a student activity group in which I had supervised. Nevertheless, in order to better understand the responses of these students, one needs to consider the background and philosophy of their alma mater.

First established in 1886 by American missionary Reverend William Fitzjames Oldham, the present school campus now consists of eleven hectares of land and is lavishly endowed with air-conditioned classrooms and laboratories, a boarding school as well as sporting facilities including a running track, several playing fields, tennis and squash courts and a swimming pool.

The concept of independent schools in Singapore needs to be elaborated. The scheme was initiated in 1988 to provide the more successful government-aided schools with greater administrative and professional autonomy. The idea was for these schools, while still adhering to MOE's policy of bilingual education and a common national curriculum, to hire their own staff on improved salary scales and to explore innovative programmes and new ways of teaching. To date, inclusive of ACS (Independent), there are only three schools catering to a mixed-level student population stretching for six years of education beginning at secondary one.

Although each independent school continues to receive government funding in the form of grants, they are also given the leeway of setting their own fee structures. These are however, always considerably higher than those in government schools. The government nevertheless

has given the assurance that ‘no academically able pupil who wishes to attend an independent school is deprived of the opportunity to do so as a result of financial constraints’ (MOE, 2010). This is in reference to the Edusave scholarships and other forms of financial assistance which has been allocated to assist such students (Gopinathan and Morriss, 1996).

ACS (Independent) has been consistently ranked as one of the top schools in Singapore and offers two main routes of education - the Express Stream and Integrated Programme. The Express Stream programme is a four-year course leading to the GCE 'Ordinary' Level Examinations, while the Integrated Programme is a six-year course culminating in the International Baccalaureate Diploma. Not only is ACS(Independent) the only national school in Singapore to offer the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP), the yearly results since the inception of the programme has shown the institution to be within the top three best performing school in the world.

In sports, ACS(Independent) has also won the country's 'Top School in Sports (Boys)' award 13 times, starting with the first award in 1996 and winning thereafter every year till 2009, with the exception of 1999 (Anglo-Chinese School, 2010).

## **5.6 Conclusion**

In making clear the status quo of the country in terms of its political culture, it is hoped that the reader will develop an idea of the constraints faced by local institutions in conducting their activities, especially those which purposely or inadvertently intrude into the political sphere.

With regards to activities focussing on the well-being of the Malay community, the responses from the government has been mixed. Much assistance has been given to programmes which

are clearly social and welfare-oriented in nature – be it organised by government-related agencies such as MUIS or the other registered institutions.

However, the instant an activity is perceived to be a threat to the PAP government's authority, it is pronounced as a danger to national security and all legal measures are then construed, manipulated and imposed to eliminate the 'threat'. In organising its programmes focussing on the Malay community, the organisations involved in this research thus have to be very mindful of the responses from the government so as to alleviate any negative consequences. The same considerations will also have to be made when formulating any recommendations based on the findings of this research.

## CHAPTER SIX

### PRESENTING THE DATA

#### 6.1. Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the data collected for this research. This is extracted primarily from the participants' responses spanning more than 20 hours of focus group and circle discussion sessions involving a total of 74 individuals of various socio-economic and educational status (Appendix 2). In quite a number of occasions, these group sharing sessions were followed-up with personal emails or telephone calls for purposes of clarifications, verifications and validation of the notes taken down during the discussions. After the drafts of the relevant transcriptions were completed at a later stage, they were also sent to selected members of the discussion group for consensus of its contents.

All respondents, except for the group of all-Chinese students whose responses will be surfaced for comparison in the Discussion and Evaluation chapter, acknowledge themselves as possessing Malay-Muslim identities either by culture or descent. Following the need for triangulation as explained in the Methodology chapter, further data has been collected from several observation exercises as well as in depth life history interviews conducted with four respondents of various ethnicities, age groups and socio-economic background. However, this again will only be triangulated with the main body of the data in the subsequent Discussion chapter in this thesis.

This chapter begins by highlighting evidence to show that emotional 'disassociation' and 'critical distance' has been successfully created by discussing the participants' responses from the initial line of questioning. This is necessary so as to ensure that the respondents are

positioned in the correct frame of mind so that the follow-up series of questions would be answered reflexively.

The data to be presented following this introductory line of questioning include results pertaining to the respondents' perception of characteristics depicting the Malay community, their experiences undergoing community outreach programmes, responses relating to their feelings of conscientisation, their aspirations for the Malay community and their suggestions for improvements in the conduct of outreach programmes.

## **6.2. Participants' Perception of Self and his/her Membership in the Malay Community**

As a natural human response, emotional dissociation occurs when a person's rational belief about a certain proposition and the way he or she feels about that same proposition are no longer aligned (Stott, 2007). For example, Keltner and Bonanno's (1997) research on laughter during a time of bereavement suggests that the specific human reflex is indicative of the dissociation of distressing emotions arising from the death of a loved one. What can be implied from this study is that an emotional dissociation of the 'self' from the 'rest' in the community can result in the individual's ability to distance himself/herself from distressing issues in which he/she is personally involved. Dissociation is evidenced when the respondent is able to adopt a novel perspective on, or gains insight into, a distressing event (Ruch, 1993). In the context of this research, the strategy of creating emotional dissociation in the participants is a useful undertaking as it helps to ensure a measure of critical distance allowing the Malay respondents to navigate around any feelings of reluctance or ambivalence when registering their viewpoints on questions relating to their community.

As explained in the Conceptual Framework and Methodology chapter, opportunities to create a sense of emotional dissociation was made possible with the first set of questions, specifically,

*'What makes you a typical Malay?'*

*'And what makes you a unique or special Malay?'*

This line of questioning engages the respondent to identify himself/herself as a member of the community (via the first question) and yet provides an avenue for him/her to find ways of seeing himself/herself as being different (via the second question). This thus predisposes the individual into adopting a metacognitive mode of thinking when framing her or his answers hence ensuring a genuinely reflexive response.

For instance, by highlighting occasions where they share the same Muslim practices and celebrations, most respondents identify the Islamic faith as a factor making them members of the Malay community. Personal character traits on the other hand, received the highest mention as indicators which reflected a lack of association with the community.

For example, Ahmad announced that

“I’m...unique because I tend to take (a) longer time to mix around with new people, especially new Malay people because I find it difficult. This is assuming being Malay means being sociable...”

Affinity with the Malay community however, is not seen to be based only in positive terms. For example, out of those who cited personal attitude as a factor associating them with the community, a majority actually voiced it in a negative way.

This is an extract from Imran’s answer.

“I think what makes me a typical Malay is that I get very distracted easily and...I know what my goal is. It’s just that I choose not to make it sometimes...like out of my own free will. Not because of something stopping me but because I just don’t feel like it...like I don’t know, just a bit lazy,lah...like a typical Malay.”

Seen from a sociological perspective, such revelations provide us with initial glimpses of the kind of mental models affecting the community – one where individuals lack drive, focus and industry.

However, responses from several Malay-Muslim students studying the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme in Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) indicated how they see the role of the family as creating the difference between themselves and the rest in the community.

For example, Ima, a 17 year-old respondent from the group had this to say when asked on how she is unique.

“I think what makes me a unique Malay would be the environment that my parents brought me up in...Ok, I don’t mean to like, make hasty generalisations, but what I always see from Malay parents...they tell their kids like, ‘Don’t do that, *nanti jatuh* (you’ll fall)’. You know like as in they expect the worse to happen...like my grandma especially, she’ll go like oh ermm... ‘*nanti jatuh, ya...*’ like to all my baby cousins so like as in why would they expect that to happen? My parents don’t do that to me. Like they tell me, ‘Just don’t think about the negative. If you want something, just do it!’, you know? As in don’t even think about falling...So I don’t know...As in why prepare yourself to fall, you know? Like for example that time I was at *Pasir Ris* (a local beachside location). We were on the swings so like these little Malay girls came...We

had two swings, so I gave mine up to one of them...Then her dad was standing there and her dad was like discouraging her...As in she wanted to do it but then her father was like, 'Are you sure?'...Trying to make her doubt herself. So I think what makes me a unique Malay is my parents...and the environment that they brought me up in....They make me believe that I can do things rather than that I can't....”

### **6.3. Participants' Perception of Issues which are Detrimental to the Malay Community**

This section serves to present the participants' viewpoints relating to what they see as issues preventing the Malay community from achieving the desired level of socio-economic progress. In perceiving these issues as those exclusively affecting the minority ethnic community, an analysis can then be made of existing mental models that are entrenched in these participants and by association, the other members of the community. Furthermore, these issues can also be linked to the participants' responses relating to acts of conscientisation which will surface later in this chapter. These will subsequently be analysed as evidence indicating the extent of capacity building for critical thinking which had taken place.

#### **6.3.1. Attitude**

Many respondents cited issues which point towards the absence of a proactive attitude to life among members of the Malay community. This has been sub-divided into the following headings:

##### **6.3.1.1. Non-Involvement**

Two respondents gave feedback on what they see as an issue stemming from the Malays' reluctance to be involved in community-based activities. As a young social activist, Sabrina provided an account of her experience when manning an exhibition booth put up by the

mosque that she had volunteered with during a fair organised by the area's community centre. Seeing that only a 'handful of Muslims' had come to visit the public event, let alone stopping by to look at their booth, she related her colleague's lament

"You see, lah.. *kalau Melayu gini tak nak datang tapi kalau ada show yang ada penyanyi, baru nak datang* (if it's a Malay event like this, they will not come but if it's a concert featuring a pop singer, then they will come)."

Sabrina went on to say that she sees some truth in the comment.

"The problem lies in not involving yourself in the wider community leading to an isolationist attitude."

Ida supported this idea when she said that

"Generally as a Malay, I find (this to be) a problem in terms of attitude...I agree (that they are) lacking involvement in things like (public) discussions, even with MUIS events...and even fewer at the intellectual level."

### **6.3.1.2. Irrational Thinking**

Irrational thinking has also been reported as a problem which is attributed to the Malays. Relating an experience during her undergraduate days at the International Islamic University in Malaysia (IIU), Ida observed that Malays "...tend to be very emotional. Even when reason is required, emotions always came first." She remembers an event that she was involved in where something went wrong and the organiser which was then a committee made up of students of several nationalities subsequently received some flak. This resulted in a somewhat 'heated' post-event discussion. It was a tense situation for all but members who were from the

other nationalities managed to calm down after it was time to move on to the next item in the meeting's agenda.

“But the Malays who were criticised...got angry all the way. Instead of reflecting on their own shortcomings, these Malay individuals instead remained emotional and kept harping on who is to blame instead of focussing on what went wrong and emphasising on what can be done better for future events.”

Azah, in fact, accused the Malays in her community as going through life

“...as if it is just a gamble”, implying that they take actions and risks without understanding “if they can achieve or not....They just do things without thinking....”

Adli, on the other hand, mentioned that

“*Melayu suka dengar cakap orang* (Malays like to listen to what others say) ...and don't evaluate for themselves...”

When asked to associate an everyday object to what he saw as symbolising a problem linked to the Malays, Imran pointed up to the lights at the ceiling.

“See, it's off... I think that's the main problem. Because we do have potential like the light...but we just choose not to use it. It's not switched on. We just happily say... ‘Eh, but I got potential, what? So why bother?’ Like...‘*Mak aku ada duit, apa? Apasal aku kisah?*’ (My mother has money, what? Why should I care?). That kind of thing... So I think the root of the problem is mainly... our mindset. That's why I think we're stuck at the ‘potential’ mode (as opposed to the ‘actual’ mode)...It's just switched off at the moment. So, I think the root of the problem is we're just not using our brains. Or we're just using it for the wrong stuff, lah.”

### **6.3.1.3. Blind Followers**

When asked to mention an object which she saw as symbolising a problem with the ethnic group, Nora felt that Malays are like the traditional *congkak* (a specially designed board on which a Malay variation of the strategy-based ‘count-and-capture’ game is played). Nora specifically pointed out to the movement of the marbles used in the game. Just like the marbles which can only be moved sequentially on the board, the Malays were similarly seen as followers who are easily influenced by current trends.

In another session, Arman similarly highlighted this point when he suggested the current phenomenon of Malay youths wasting their money acquiring the latest mobile phones as an example of them following trends blindly. In fact, he was blunt by further saying

“...if a friend smokes...he follows...if a friend takes drugs, he will do it too!”

From this perspective, Namaz provided a condemning picture of a Malay street group – one where youths end up making the most noise and the most nuisances just because each group member follows the behaviour of the other.

“That’s why it’s a MALAY problem!”

### **6.3.1.4. Lack of Motivation**

Fatimah suggested that the Malays

“...have no vision. They don’t have anything to work towards...Like as in they just give up on life... They don’t try to advance in life...They’re just so satisfied with what they have...They don’t try to move forward...”

Malik described the Malays as remaining too much in their

“...comfort zone. I mean you have a lot of opportunities around you but you very seldom see a Malay-Muslim grabbing these opportunities...”

Zainal provided a contrast based on his perception that

“a Chinese will find ways to earn money even without working. Malays will ask their parents for money...”

The idea that Malays lack the motivation to improve their lives was echoed by Ahmad who stated that

“...the Malays possess the ‘keys’ to open ‘doors’ but they are just *malas* (lazy) to *timba ilmu* (seek and acquire knowledge) ...”

In this regards, Ali had this to say

“Ok, a typical Malay, right? I think the mindset is very ...how you say, ‘relaxed’ - *lepak*, you know, very *alah kadar* (literally meaning ‘mediocre’ but in this context, implying very lowly in expectations)... ‘I got what I want. My kids are ok. Umm...My kids are going to school. My wife’s at home. I’m earning just enough to feed them. I’m enjoying life.’ Like there’s no sense of urgency! There’s no sense of motivation...Like the condition is *merosot* (deteriorating) but they don’t seem to be doing anything about it.”

Ali, however, refuses to blame the situation as being caused by a lack of opportunities.

“That’s why I’m disappointed...like there’s no reason for them (the Malays) not to do that (i.e. do better for themselves). Everyone in Singapore is given the same opportunity...Like they want to say like, whatever it is, you can never go for this because you’re Malay...So what! Why let that affect you? There’s still other ways for you to actually help yourself. I’m just disappointed that they are not doing anything.

Like why must we continually keep on screwing ourselves over just because we're Malay?"

He felt that one of the reasons that the Malays are not motivated to keep on progressing is the fact that individual will has been suppressed by an overwhelming sense of community spirit.

"We stick together and we feel comfortable. I think that may be the reason why we are too comfortable. Why we are so ignorant. Why we are so *alah kadar* ('mediocre' and implying very lowly in expectations)."

#### **6.3.1.5. Inability To Prioritise**

During the discussion sessions, the recurring theme of the Malays' inability to prioritise came to light.

Rahman put forth that "the absence of seeking excellence in all that they do" has cumulatively resulted in the Malays not seeing real progress as a community. Although he balanced his statements by mentioning that there actually have been a few success stories in the Malay community, "for example like the PSLE girl"<sup>17</sup>, Rahman nevertheless maintained that "this is still not the general trend in our community."

Fatimah voiced her agreement on this issue when she mentioned that Malays take education for granted and will not even bother if "...say they can't get into a good school or something."

In another sharing session, Imran shared this viewpoint when he related his personal experience as a student preparing for a major examination.

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<sup>17</sup> In 2007, Natasha Nabilah Muhammad Nasir, a Malay girl, gained recognition not only as the student who obtained the highest score in the Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) for the year, but also as the student who attained a score which is an all-time high in the nation's history (Pantek, 2007).

“The sad thing is that Malays like so-called don’t see their priorities. Like I had this bunch of Secondary Four friends. I asked them to study for ‘O’ levels but they said ‘Later, lah, later.’ I mean, they have no sense of urgency! Like, what are their priorities in life? They just want to enjoy first and then, I don’t know, suffer later.”

Another way in which the Malays are seen as lacking in the ability to prioritise was provided by Mastura who related her experiences as a volunteer with an organisation that was providing welfare services to the needy. According to Mastura, the organisation was, at one time, contemplating issuing vouchers for a selection of food and grocery items instead of handing out fixed product items as had been the ongoing practice. A simple survey was then conducted by asking the beneficiaries for their preferences. These needy however asked for outright cash instead of the choice of vouchers or the product items. The assumption among the activists could only be that

“with cash, they can buy cigarettes or 4D (lottery tickets)! So not only are they *tak bersyukur* (not being thankful to God) but in fact are demanding!”

In providing similar feedback, Danial said that

“...fundamentally, the problem is they don’t plan long term, they plan short term...Like my Malay cousins told me that they get \$500 as their monthly pay. So they get paid on the 29<sup>th</sup>. On the 30<sup>th</sup>, they go spend it all on clothes, on cigarettes...On things that you could use for like five minutes...And then on the 1<sup>st</sup>, they run out of money...And then they go and steal some more. No, they either steal or they borrow.”

When asked to name an item which symbolises a problem with the Malay community, Danial in fact, chose the cigarette.

“Its a costly habit...And ya, the cigarette also symbolizes short term pleasure but long term damage...”

He summed up his thoughts by saying that he felt

“...sad for the Malay community cos we have potential but we’re not using it because we’ve been brought up...not brought up badly but (some of us) weren’t properly guided and end up prioritising badly”.

Ali’s choice of an item which he felt represents a problem with the Malay community was the pillow,

“...cos it symbolises comfort. So as Malays, we like the comfortable *melepak* (carefree and laid-back) life. So I guess that our desire for this is more than wanting to do anything else for ourselves. So though we desire for the material, we don’t really seek anything more relevant.”

### **6.3.2. Racial Discrimination**

Expectedly, the issue of racial discrimination cropped up during the discussion. Hamdan first provided a hint that such a problem exists when, during the session, he questioned comments that he often received whenever he interacted with individuals from the other ethnic groups.

“They would like say to me, ‘You are not like other Malay people...’ (implying that in their eyes, I am unlike the stereotypical Malay and thus undeserving of any biased reception).”

Fatima, a student from a premier school in Singapore, said this of her experiences.

“I think it’s more like everyone is against you. Like in my school, I find myself trying to prove myself so much more to my non-Malay peers. Like, you know, I’m in MUNs

(Model United Nations Conferences) and stuff and they were like ‘Wah! You’re in MUN!’ Like, they don’t say the same thing to the Chinese girl next to me.”

She added that she had been made the subject of ‘innocent’ jokes,

“like the *Mat* and *Mina* (somewhat derogatory labels denoting young, single Malay males and females) kind. I know they meant it in a harmless way but you know, the fact that they still think of the Malay society as that... Rather than look at how much we’ve changed. So we have to prove ourselves even more.”

Participating in a separate sharing session, Ima who is Fatima’s junior in the same school, also complained of feeling discriminated against.

“In my former secondary school, it was never like this. (Those who made the jokes) sounds like they’re kidding, like they’re not serious...but I’ve never even faced that in (my old school). But the fact that they can think of saying all those already shows (the prejudice). So even in jokes, you can actually feel it. In fact, some of them actually believe it. And they’re trying to see how you take it. So that’s why we seem not to bother... but maybe so successfully that people say that we don’t want to be seen as Malays.”

According to Norma, another student from the same school,

“What is sad about being a Malay is that the perception that one person already has about a certain Malay is imposed on everyone of us even if it does not necessarily relate to us. Like how people think that if you are a Malay, you must not be smart. You must not be rich. Your son will get a girl pregnant or something...People have that perception of me just because I’m Malay. Like I had this neighbour who just moved in. They had

come back after having migrated to Australia. And then, when she found out that I was 15 years old, her first question to me was, ‘Are you in Normal (Academic) or Normal (Technical)?’ Like why do you assume that my calibre is of that standard only just because I’m Malay? Just because I’m Malay, I must be in Normal (Tech) or Normal (Acad)? That I must go to ITE<sup>18</sup>? Why must you assume that ...That’s not true, right? Even if that is true for the majority (of the Malay community), there are still some people who are capable of doing better...Your race doesn’t determine the calibre or the skills or the outcome of your life. So I think that’s sad because, being Malay, you’re just imposed with that perception.”

Arman told the story of when he was in secondary two and had a Form Teacher who was a member of another ethnic group. On the first day of the new academic year, each student in the class was given a form for their parents to fill up and subsequently hand in the next day. However, the teacher sarcastically quipped,

“but the Malays, I know you will have problems handing it up on time....’

This led to him and his Malay friends confronting the teacher about the comment.

Ahmad, who had just completed his National Service and is about to begin his undergraduate studies provided an insight into his life in the army.

“When it comes to Friday prayers<sup>19</sup>, it is an open secret that there’s two types of Malay-Muslims: Those who do actually go for it and those who *slack* (a slang used by local

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<sup>18</sup> Singapore’s secondary school system is divided into 3 basic streams. In order of academic ability, they are the Express, Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) streams. Usually, students who were not able to qualify for these levels are channelled to the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) for a more vocationally-oriented education.

<sup>19</sup> It is a religious obligation among Muslim men to congregate at the mosque to perform their weekly Friday prayer. The affair involves listening to a sermon before taking part in the communal prayer itself. As the noon time event coincides with

youths deriving from the English word and its associated meaning though in this context implying individuals who refuse to put in effort into their tasks and responsibilities). My Warrant Officer will *besar-besarkan* (blow-up) this fact. It makes it look bad on all of us especially since he makes these cynical remarks to the ones who do go for the prayers but cannot help coming in late due to the distance (of the mosque) from the camp. This makes us feel guilty, like we're doing something wrong. He purposely makes us look bad by saying 'You are late, AS USUAL.' And he keeps harping on it. I could see that the rest were slowly getting affected by this..."

### **6.3.3. Stereotyping**

Many respondents also perceived the self-reinforcing effects caused by the interplay of racial prejudice and negative stereotyping of the Malays.

Ahmad felt that Malays are harder to be accepted by the other races as they are thought of as "*malas untuk berfikir* (too lazy to think)."

Arman, who is in his final year of study in a local polytechnic admitted that in the Lecture Theatre, the Malay students tend to cluster and sit together.

"But when there's a bit of noise, all will look at the group as if we are the culprits."

Ali said that when he was in secondary one, he was chosen to be part of the school's athletic team. The training was tough but he was very committed to doing well every time. He revealed however,

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the lunchtime period, most organizations provide an additional 30mins to 1 hour of buffer time so that the male Muslim employees can take the opportunity to perform their religious duty.

“There was this non-Malay friend of mine. He just said, ‘Ali, just give up, lah. You’re *slack*, you’re Malay’. So at sec. one, I had a culture shock. I began to act dumb when it comes to these kinds of comments from then on.”

Danial added,

“...at one time, someone tried to engage me in a war of words - ‘You’re a Malay, you’re stupid, you’re not successful, you’re dumb’. The biggest irony was that my family is more successful than his. And I beat him recently in grades also. But they generally believe that cos you’re a Malay...yeah...you’re no-hopers.”

Ali pointed out that what is worse

“is that when we engage in insults with a non-Malay friend, we engage him with everything and when he loses, he ends up with ‘but you’re a Malay!’ So my reply is ‘So you’re Chinese...You’re big, lah...but I intended it as a joke.’”

He admitted that he does feel sad about the situation with the Malay community,

“I think ok, like there are problems. Like the high crime rates...But why?...Why Malays?...Like why classify them by race? Yes, they are Malays but that’s not the reason why they did what they did...”

Norma emphasised that your ethnicity

“doesn’t determine your calibre or anything. It’s just the exterior - just the skin colour. Because I’m Malay, it doesn’t mean ... that that’s the main cause of the problem.”

Hamdan remarked,

“There are Malay-Muslims and there ARE Malay-Muslims. Not all are the same. But people associate you as being all the same so when one doesn’t practice what he should,

the perception goes the same for you. But no one questions the Chinese if this happens?”

“What I’m sad about the Malay community,” according to Imran,

“is that people generalise, like *kita sampah masyarakat* (we are the rubbish of society). But I mean you can’t blame them, lah. You go to the Esplanade (a waterfront location) like every Saturday evening...The whole stretch is filled with *Mat Reps* and *YPs*<sup>20</sup>. With people like these...I don’t know?...I mean why must we be the bane of society? Ok, I cannot be saying the same thing about me, right? But Malays are 15 percent of the population with 50 percent of the problems! I mean we can’t run away from the fact we are the ones causing havoc.”

Ali contemplated on how stereotyping against the Malays could have arose.

“I don’t know how it started off...It is because of this that the discrimination takes place or is it because the discrimination is taking place causing the mindset to become stronger. Like there’s no hope anymore. Everyone hates us...Like the discrimination is so excessive!”

Rahman thought that the problem has to do with the attitudes and mindsets of the Malays.

“So many people I spoke to have that mindset. That people are against us. So I think that’s our problem.”

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<sup>20</sup> Mat Reps is short for Mat Reputations. This is the current slang being used by Malay youths to denote those among their cohort who are part of groups which are loud, coarse in their language and generally create nuisances. It also indicates a physical stereotype - Malay boys aged 15 to 19 years who typically don trucker caps. I am told by the respondents that “their fashion sense is constantly changing so the trucker caps may be less common nowadays. It’s a stereotype nevertheless...” YPs is an acronym for “Young Peoples”, indicating what it means.

#### **6.3.4. Role Incompatibilities**

One of the most important features of social life is the conduct of the individual's behaviour brought about by the social role that he or she plays out in society. The concept of social roles can be explained by presuming that each person as a member of her or his community possesses specific social positions that shapes expectations for his or her own behaviours as well as those of other persons (Biddle, 1986). According to Kuntsche, Knibbe and Gmel (2009), social roles define the social position of an individual within a given social system based on his/her enduring relations with other people and this provides him/her with both a sense of identity and behavioural guidance. A social role can thus be seen as a set of connected behaviours, rights and obligations as conceptualized by actors in a social situation. It is a pattern of behaviour that can either be one which is expected or continuously changing, and may attribute the individual with a given social status or social position. Durkheim (1951) asserts that holding a variety of social roles, such as in a partnership, parenthood or paid labour, provides the individual with an 'object' which gives 'meaning' to her or his life. Role conflicts, however, may occur if the role demands stemming from one domain such as work or family becomes incompatible with role demands stemming from another domain. (Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal, 1964 cited in Cynthia Thompson, 2003).

Based on these social concepts, and in the context of this research, the Malay-Muslim youth is thus expected to play the role of an obedient individual who keeps true to the values and practices of his or her community. This includes expected behaviour such as giving the highest respect to the youth's elders, honouring the name of his or her family and performing the requirements of the Islamic faith. Nevertheless, in the current social context, this is seen to be a source of contention and role conflict making it a problem faced by the Malays. As

individuals living in modern Singapore society, Malay-Muslim youths, already exposed to the influences of the mass media and the world wide web, are no longer bound by the limited knowledge which had previously confined the experiences of their predecessors. As such, tensions arise as they no longer feel obliged to carry out their social roles in the manner expected by the older generation.

Kamisah, whom I noted as possessing the most outgoing personality in one of the discussion groups, admitted as much to this.

“Precisely! We’re not as submissive as generation X. We’re just not. We want answers. Like based on logic.”

Nadiah added,

“Because nowadays, I mean...kids are getting more intellectual so they want more answers to questions. We can’t take it as it is anymore. We have to know what’s behind it...”

The respondents also perceived the presence of role conflicts caused by the social divide existing between those who are seen to be in the top rung of the Malay social hierarchy and those struggling at the bottom.

Hamdan clarified,

“The way I see it, the elites refuse to help the low ones cos they don’t want to be associated with them. One thing about the Malays: When they go high, they don’t want to be associated with those at the bottom. On the other hand, there are some who may want to help these people but these people will refuse to get help cos they’re too proud. But they’re proud of the wrong reasons...”

Fatima added,

“...if you are succeeding, you will try to disown the Malay identity...and if you’re not already succeeding you will just keep going through the vicious cycle.”

Ali accused his Malay community for being *bodoh-sombong* (arrogantly stupid). As a community,

“they recognise that they need to be helped but (as individuals) the Malays always first *fikir sendiri* (think for himself only). There is also no bonding between members and they easily give up. They don’t realise that in life, there are always problems...but they never think. ... just like the game of *congkak*, there are losers...but in real life, losers cannot give up, unlike the Malays...The winners on the other hand, become over-confident and don’t think about losing. But some of these Malays also look down on those who are not up to par with them.”

The tension between the Malay ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ seemed to be apparent in the eyes of these respondents. According to Namaz

“The less educated smoke and will borrow money from the more educated. The more educated ones will usually get jobs on the side (to add to their income) but the less educated ones will come out with lots of excuses to borrow money...and will still continue to smoke...”

These responses thus point to the perceived widening gap in compatibility between the expected and the actual performance of social roles carried out by Malay-Muslims.

### 6.3.5. Cultural Contradictions

Despite what has been earlier highlighted as social problems faced by the Malays such as the rise in crime rates and dysfunctional families, the Malays are customarily recognized for their kind and gentle nature adhering to a community spirit traditionally known as *Gotong Royong*<sup>21</sup>. However, some respondents reported that many of these positive qualities often associated with the Malay culture are no longer practiced resulting in barriers preventing their progress as a community.

Rahman observed that the Malays have become a judgemental group of people. He cited his experiences as a member of a Mosque Management Committee as an example: There had been suggestions that they work together with the volunteers of a nearby Indian-Muslim mosque in organizing a joint event. However, some committee members rejected the idea as they were hesitant about cooperating with Indian-Muslims.

“... *dia orang tak macam kita, kan?*(...they are not like us, right?).”

To Rahman, this reflected that as a community, the Malays have become so ‘enclosed’ that it is now difficult for them to break away from the ‘comfort zone’.

Hamdan showed his cynicism when he retorted,

“There’s a saying that Malays are born with PhD – ‘*Penyakit hasad dengki*’ (the disease of envy and hatred).”

Adli was disappointed as he perceived that the Malays

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<sup>21</sup> Gotong royong is a traditional Malay concept of community living where in the past, people residing in a kampung (village) willingly come forward to assist each other especially during social events. It is a show of goodwill and reciprocity, knowing that one can count on the support of one’s neighbours during times of need.

“*Suka mengata tapi diri sendiri tidak tengok* (Malays like to talk about other people but never for once, looked at their own selves).”

Zubaidah emphasised a similar point when she said that the Malays

“*Suka salahkan atau cakapkan orang lain* (like to find fault in others or talk bad about others...).”

This is especially so in the area of entrepreneurship where Malays who showed interest in setting up their own businesses will inevitably invite negative comments from those within the community. She explained that these comments look down on such pursuits and tended to perpetuate the negative impression from the other races causing more dislike for the Malays. Many Malays are also seen as “Action only but got no substance” (implying they do more talking rather than take up a more definite course of action). She added that there are many who are “*terpengaruh* and *mempengaruhi*” (influenced and will influence).

Arshad agreed that there are elements which can be identified as causing cultural contradictions in the Malay community. He felt that the Malays have created an environment where they “*matikan satu sama lain*” (kill each other off) with back-biting and refusal to help each other out. He commented that Malay thinking is often marked by “*semangat hanya seminit*” (determination which lasts for only a minute). To him, this explains why Malay businesses tend to go bust even if they started with much potential as they “*maju sikit*” (advance only a little bit) but then falls behind as there is no consistency in terms of effort. Arshad also lamented on the “*pengaruh rabak*” (bad influences) causing the Malays to be too ‘Westernised’ resulting in problems such as early marriages and ‘much-too-young’ families.

Thus in the case of the Malay community, “it’s too much when it comes to the negative parts, unlike the Chinese.”

Rahman, an experienced youth activist, listed gangsterism, premarital sex, teenage pregnancy, alcoholism and even underage smoking as problems faced by the Malay community.

“This is from my experience of doing youth development work. I don’t know the numbers but I have met people who are involved in these and I perceive a critical mass.”

Salbiah told of another aspect of cultural contradiction: She sometimes helps out her father who works as a butcher.

“Whenever I helped out my dad at his shop, there will be customers who ask, ‘So, which school are you studying in?’ Then I say, ‘Anderson Junior College’. The response is, ‘*Kalau sekolah tinggi-tinggi buat apa? Akhirnya dekat rumah jugak*’ (Whats the point of studying so much? You’ll still end up in the house). You know, they give me that kind of impression - That I’m still a girl and at the end of it, I still have to go back to ‘*rumah*’. So I’m quite taken aback given those kinds of responses. And it’s not like from one ‘*makcik*’ (literally ‘aunty’, but the term in this context refers to any elderly female), you know? Sometimes I come across two to three ‘*makciks*’ who say this. At least, what they could do is support me. You know, that kind of thing.”

In this sense, Sabrina saw a contradiction in the Malays’ sense of cultural and religious identity.

“The Malays today want to ‘break the law’ (an implied term meaning to commit religious transgressions), but they do not want to be identified as a non-Muslim. They still want to have the label...”

### **6.3.6. Religious Tensions**

In the aspect of religious beliefs and practices, some of the respondents agreed that the Malay community is currently facing problems because many have failed to follow the basic tenets of the Islamic faith.

Lila, a polytechnic student shared an incident in which her Chinese friends invited her to join them for lunch at a nearby Subway fast-food restaurant. Unfortunately, she explained that she was unable to eat at Subway as they did not serve *halal* (permissible in Islam) food. In response, they queried her on why they were able to see some Malays eating in the establishment.

“So sometimes, I don’t know what to say.”

Arman added,

“From what my friends and I realise, youths nowadays are more imbalanced towards the *dunia* (the material world). *Belajar agama* (learning religion) is like *kampung* (literally ‘village’ but in this context, the term implies being backward and old-fashioned). Some are even *sombong* (arrogant)... *pakai baju* (wearing outfits) that’s ‘cool’. But I actually feel *kesian* (pity) for them.”

Ahmad felt that Malay youths today see Islam as too “duty-bound as it carries with it more responsibilities compared to other religions...”

Namaz added what he thought is an example,

“...performing solat (daily prayers) seems like a burden...so like being a Muslim is like a burden.”

“Even in *ceramah* (sermons)”, according to Zainal, “the *ustadz*<sup>22</sup> fails to relate to the current culture of youths.”

As surmised by Mastura, if an *ustadz* does try to be different in the way he teaches the religion so as to ‘connect’ with the youths, he will probably “get shot down by the public. It always becomes an issue of ‘our way or no way’.”

Zainal drew this condemning comparison representing the state of affairs relating to the religion of the Malays.

“The Christians are proud to be Christians and will even try to convert you. But not the Muslims. They have become very shy or embarrassed of their religion.”

Fatima acknowledged that

“Nowadays, most Malays are Muslims cos their parents are Muslims. But they don’t know what the religion is all about.”

A large majority of the respondents in fact, brought up the issue of *syukur* (thankfulness to God) and the related concepts of *takdir* (fate), *pasrah* (leaving it to God’s will) and *nasib* (luck), for discussion. For instance, Hamdan, who is a religious teacher, presented the view that Malay-Muslims

“have the wrong understanding of the word *bersyukur* (being thankful to God)...When people ask them to work harder, they will say ‘Never mind, lah. *Bersyukur* with what you have. *Motor kapchai* (a small, cheap model of motorcycle) still can go around

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<sup>22</sup> Malay/Muslim term denoting an Islamic religious teacher.

Singapore.’ That kind of thing. Whereas the true meaning of *bersyukur* if we really study deeper is to use up all (the resources) which is given to us. Efforts first!”

Rahman, in echoing the same point in another session, believed that such concepts “need to be expanded in the current light...”

Similarly, Masturah noticed a form of religious contradiction in the way Muslims interpret the Malay term *pasrah* (leaving it to God’s will). She believed that by associating its meaning literally and exclusively to a religious tenet, a Malay mentality of ‘just let it be’ has developed.

This is in line with Ida’s viewpoint that the current interpretation of the concepts has caused to Malays to be

“not opportunistic enough to ‘seize the moment’...If it comes, we are thankful. But we are not progressing as we end up blaming fate rather than ourselves. We are resigned to fate...”

Hamdan thought that the way in which religious education is conducted has a role to play in creating such a situation.

“I realise that many *ustadz* and *ustazahs* (male and female religious teachers) teach the kids in madrasah...They only tell them ‘This is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong’...But they did not really explain in detail why this is so... And then when the question is asked ‘why?’ they will get angry or something like that.”

Almost all the respondents, however, agreed that the issue lies not with the faith but with the Malays’ ability to understand the requirements of Islam. Sabrina, an activist who is also a teacher in a local madrasah, stated that

“...the Quran may say certain things but it also continually tells you to think and think and think. Some people will just think they understand everything so it (i.e. the spirit of enquiry) stops right there and they end up displaying an attitude of ‘You don’t have the right to tell me!’”

Rahman added that “Citizens in the more progressive Muslim countries actually quote their religion as their force of motivation.” For him, this proved that “the problem is not with the religion but the teaching of the religion. He concluded that this is “maybe due to the perennial culture of the Malays.”

Ida emphasised that in the Malay culture,

“...if you try to argue, you’ll be labelled as *kurang ajar* (rude and unlearned). So there is this misplaced ethics. So we don’t foster a spirit of enquiry. This will lead to negative outcomes. We need to learn to agree to disagree. Even Muslim scholars do it...”

Based on these responses, the overall message appears to be that there is tension between the devout who insist that there already exists a definitive, well-known and comprehensive path established by the doctrines of the religion and Malay-Muslims who wish to accommodate the demands of modern Singapore society. In the next chapter, a more insightful discussion will be presented on the differing views on the role of Islamic education in the country.

### **6.3.7. Media Portrayal**

Portrayal of the Malay-Muslim community has also raised the ire of some respondents.

Salbiah voiced,

“I get frustrated with our Malay media. Like, they never recognise (what has been) successful or like stuff that actually works with the community. So, the idea that people have of Malays is that we have so many problems and ya, this is the stereotype and then it becomes sort of like this vicious cycle that’s so overwhelming with self-pity. We’re not exposed to enough role models. I’m pretty sure that there are a lot of successful Malays out there but what we hear of is just broken families. It’s like ok, we get it!”

She however, clarified,

“I think that the media is not really blowing things out of proportion because the problem is really there so that’s what they’re trying to highlight. The thing is why do they choose to draw only on the problems?”

Fatima however, did not agree and asserted that the media “tends to really sensationalise certain things. A small problem becomes a big problem.” This corresponded with Namaz’s viewpoint which thought that the media, as well as perhaps the other government bodies, is

“...magnifying the problem. Cos it’s not prevalent in just the Malay community. The Chinese also share the same problem. The media is only hyping it up when it comes to the Malay community.”

Ahmad specifically named a local afternoon tabloid as one where “all the cases...are attributed to Malay race and not so much the other races.” He even wondered if the newspaper agency is intent on targeting the Malay race. He admitted though, that the reports in the papers such as the Nonoi<sup>23</sup> murder case “make me feel ashamed to be Malay.”

Ima concurred and had this to say,

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<sup>23</sup> Nur Asyura Mohamed Fauzi, better known as **Nonoi**, died in 2006 after she was dunked repeatedly in a pail of water by her stepfather. She was only 2 years old (Chen and Rasul, 2009).

“You know in the papers... all the Malay papers...like everyday... I don’t read it every day but I know that there’s always some *remaja* (juvenile) case. They (i.e. the reports) always tell us, you know,... ermm show all the bad stuff, you know. So it’s very prevalent in society...That the problems that we face... is just horrible for me to read it.”

Fatima pointed to the Chinese dramas on television where there is always a portrayal of successful people hence providing the message that achievement in life is always possible. She wondered if similar kinds of dramas should be created for the local Malay television channel so that the same subliminal messages can be transmitted.

Hamdan however, had this reply

“There are actually Malay tv shows like that...but the plot inevitably is that for every successful person, there’s always somebody trying to pull him down. So this influences the mentality of the Malay person.”

#### **6.3.8.No Effect**

Surprisingly, during the discussions, two respondents had admitted that they were unaware of any specific social problems tagged to the Malay community.

Kamisah thought that she had been really lucky in not having been bogged down by concerns faced by her Malay community.

“Like I haven’t had anything (i.e. issues or problems) like that. In a way, it had contributed to my overwhelming faith in humanity in general. They (my parents) never really talked to me about social problems like social class...or problems to do with Malay society. So maybe in that way, I’ve been too sheltered. I do think about things but I don’t filter it to the Malay community. I only think about it as having to do with

the general community. So for the Malay community, I don't know what problems specifically they have... I'm also very lucky that the people I hang out with don't stereotype like that. So ya, I'm in this shell thing.”

In a separate session, Aminah also provided a similar revelation.

“I don't understand all these issues (i.e. relating to the problems faced by the Malay community). Maybe I'm protected and sheltered by my family. The Malays that I see are normal. To me, the problems mentioned are not so big that I don't even see any Malays working hard. So I see no real problem to be associated with the Malays...”

However, it must be noted that the perceptions of these two female respondents are more of the exception rather than the rule. At a relatively tender age of 17 years-old, it can be explained that both may have yet to come across significant obstacles which they can critically relate to as an aspect of the ‘Malay problem’. In addition, I took note that Kamisah displayed an extremely bubbly and outgoing personality. This may have resulted in an attitude of seeing things only in a positive light while choosing to ignore issues which bring about negative feelings. Aminah, however, belongs to the other extreme in projecting a more serious demeanour. However, later on in the session, she admitted to attributing any perceived shortcomings to be purely the result of defects in their Muslim ‘character’ and nothing to do with the Malay community or of being a Malay.

#### **6.4. Participants’ Experiences Undergoing Community Outreach Programmes**

This section looks at the respondents’ descriptions of their feelings and experiences when faced with certain events or when undergoing an activity which was conducted as part of their community outreach programme. In examining the effects of these events or activities on the

individual's critical thinking abilities, an evaluation can perhaps be made as to whether capacity-building had taken place.

#### **6.4.1. Developing Intersubjectivity**

In order to better understand the concept of 'intersubjectivity', the term 'subjectivity' must first be explained.

Trevarthen (1979, pg. 322) tells us that subjectivity refers to the ability of the individual to coordinate his or her actions in order to consciously regulate specific purposes. According to Biehl, Good and Kleinman (2007, pg. 14), subjectivity is a "product and agent of history; the site of experience, memory, storytelling and aesthetic judgement; an agent of knowing as much as of action; and the conflicted site for moral acts and gestures." Shaped by factors such as the vagaries of the state, family and community hierarchies, memories of colonial interventions and unresolvable traumas, subjectivity provides the ground for individuals "to think through their circumstances and to feel through their contradictions, and in so doing, to inwardly endure experiences..." (ibid).

Intersubjectivity thus implies the ability to mutually understand the subjectivities of others. Moghaddam argues that mutual understanding of one another's subjectivities or 'private experiences' can arise out of the cultural collective in which we are socialized. "The source of our understandings of others is 'out there' in the social world" (2010, pg. 465-475).

When properly developed and nurtured, intersubjectivity functions as the individual's overall frame for thinking and understanding the ways in which humans interpret, organize, and reproduce particular forms of social life and social cognition (Duranti, 2010).

The nurturing of intersubjectivity in any of the activities experienced by the participants can be evidenced from the feedback provided by some of the respondents.

Mashita revealed that “we went to an event organised by Onepeople.sg. where all people from all races talk about their ethnic groups. We understand each other better after that...”

Ahmad spoke of his time as a student in his junior college.

“When I was in Catholic Junior College, the number of Malays was very few - about 10. But among us 10 Malays, I was considered to be the one who is more knowledgeable of the religion. So whenever there was a religious query, for example during GP (General Paper) period, I was made to answer. Actually, there was a system where each class has a religious representative. So current affairs issues e.g. 9/11 and the Iraq war was discussed in greater detail. In fact, I recall that we discussed on issues to do with morality, inter-religious conflicts, the *tudung*<sup>24</sup> (headscarf) issue, on madrasah people exempted from National Service<sup>25</sup>, etc. This allows me to see the issues from their perspective, i.e. the Buddhist view, the Catholic view, etc. I saw these sharing sessions as very productive.”

#### **6.4.2. Developing Personal Insight**

Zubaidah, already in her third year as a Psychology major in a local university, mentioned her involvement in the annual Pre-University Seminar when she was at that level of studies.

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<sup>24</sup> The headline-making tudung (headscarf) incident of 2002 erupted when the parents of four Primary One girls insisted on their daughters wearing the headscarf to school, in violation of Education Ministry guidelines. The girls were subsequently suspended until they conformed. This led to feelings of unease among some in the Muslim community (Hussain, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Although never officially released as a government policy, it was nevertheless an open secret that until a few years ago, local madrasah graduates were exempted from performing National Service. The assumption was that they were a security risk and thus cannot be trusted to work in the country's uniformed services. The respondents tell me that the policy has been given some leeway and some madrasah graduates are now given an option to serve NS when they come of age.

“The seminar talked about current affairs. I met a lot of people but very few of them were Malays. However, the problems brought up during the discussion sessions were always those involving Malays. I recall at the time that I felt a bit *malu* (embarrassed) to be a Malay face around there...”

Ida realised that she was lucky to have been exposed to the cultures of the other communities in the country despite receiving her education from non-mainstream institutions.

“I realised that many (of my peers) had not really mixed with others who were not from their community...But I was lucky I had a chance. Though I went to a madrasah, I lived among Chinese neighbours. So every Saturday, I went to their house to play and see their gods and all that. So as the rest (of my friends) did not, they never realised the need for such exposure. So now I realise the need to get an (inter-cultural) network going...”

Sabrina also surfaced a similar viewpoint.

“Ya, so you don’t see a problem until you step out of your ‘comfort zone’. When I went to University Islam Antarabangsa (International Islamic University), I began to see all the challenges the Muslims are facing...What the Malays are facing. So the reflection starts.”

Arshad, presently an Ain Society intern, related to an occasion where he participated in an activity organised by Mendaki.

“It was *bulan puasa* (the Muslim fasting month), our job was to knock on the houses of the needy to offer them *bandung* (a kind of flavoured drink). But the needy that we saw

were mostly Malays. I felt sad. Why are Malays like that? The good thing is that we're helping them out but I keep asking, 'Why is it like that?'"

He narrated of another incident when he was involved in a similar activity but this time under Ain Society. He and a group of youths were tasked to again knock on doors to present packets of rice to the needy.

"We knocked on the houses and met up with people of many 'different' characters. In fact, some were very nonchalant when receiving the items. It made me question their attitude and about what we can do to change their mindsets."

"Once under Ain Society", said Azah,

"I was part of a group that scoured the beaches to look for homeless people. It was kind of a shock for me to discover that all of them were Malays. Maybe it was fear or pride, but some ran away when they saw us approaching. But when they realised that we were there to give them money and foodstuff, they immediately came forward. It was pitiful to see them but it was a good feeling as we felt appreciated."

Adli provided a personal insight on this issue by revealing that he knew of a friend who once had to live as a squatter by the beach. He saw it as a sad situation for his homeless friend. It had a happy ending though as his friend now has a roof over his head. To him, it was a lesson learnt which he will never forget.

#### **6.4.3. Consciousness And Awareness Created Through Dialogue**

Freire (1972), as mentioned earlier in this thesis, promotes dialogue between the oppressed and the oppressors as a means of establishing equal relationships and mutual trust. Dialogue underscores the critical thinking process which enables the individual to perceive 'reality as a

process of transformation, rather than as a static entity' (pg.64). His argument is that 'the oppressed cannot be denied of their right to speak their minds', and dialogue is therefore seen as a hallmark of the cooperative process. Dialogue, according to Freire (1972), serves to promote empowerment and participation of the oppressed in the process of constructing a more just society. To him, 'only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both the oppressed and the oppressors.'(pg.2) Resolution based on dialogue is seen as a peaceful means of changing the structure of society while at the same time, enabling the transformation of all those who are involved.

Ramsbotham et. al. (2005) argue that for serious conversation to be construed as dialogue, there should be no room for contradictions. "Mutual exploration of a question and a common search for shared meaning are attitudes that conflict resolvers want to encourage" (pg. 295). Dialogue is seen as the heart of conflict resolution as it contributes to the development of trust, understanding and a co-operative relationship.

Based on such a perspective, this section attempts to present responses from participants who felt that they have benefited from such forms of interaction in the activities that they had taken part in. It should be noted however, that the term 'dialogue' was never highlighted in the discussions indicating that perhaps, in minds of these participants, such interactions were natural and never consciously valued as a conceptual learning approach.

Ahmad was very enthusiastic in sharing about his experiences in the aLIVE programme.

"aLIVE relates to current issues like the environment; how it relates to our life; how maintaining the environment is our *amanah* - our responsibility. We were told to reflect on what Islam teaches that we can relate to as our responsibilities. This is different from

what I previously went through in the other madrasahs which focuses on *surahs* (chapters of the Quran), *hadiths* (narrations concerning the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad), etc, which was more theoretical. I feel more mature with the Youth aLIVE programme. And the Ustadz are younger and easier to get along with. In aLIVE, when you learn, you go ‘Ahhh... really?’”

Zaiton admitted that she did not enjoy the Teens aLIVE programme. But her interest was ignited when she moved up to the Youth aLIVE programme “...cos we learnt new things and I was able to absorb more especially with the discussions relating to how Islam affects your life. And I especially love the history part of it.”

What made the aLIVE programme so unique, according to Ahmad, was that there was a two-way interaction.

“You learn from each other’s experiences. Unlike my previous learning experiences, the aLIVE programme is not subject-based. But that is exactly the reason that it is getting back our interest. Unlike the previous curriculum where they really drill you through memorisation, etc, this programme isn’t as detailed but it forces you to do your own research. So it will spur you to gain more knowledge because it allows you to follow your own interest. There are a lot of case-studies with each theme...Basically it creates your own motivation and encouragement cos sometimes it isn’t covered (in the classroom) but you want to know more cos you’re interested.”

Rahman was convinced that he did not actually benefit directly from any of the programmes which he participated in. Instead, the change for him came about because of

“the people that I’ve met through the programmes. After these activities...some became my ‘mentors’ as they are people who I began to constantly converse with. I began to appreciate their role in society. Then I started to figure out for myself that I have something more to contribute to society. And that’s how I believe that I’m shaped as an activist today...or as the person who at least wants to make a change in the community or to get people together or to garner the collective efforts of many people.”

Rahman elaborated with several personal examples.

“I had the privilege of interacting with Brother Hilmi, currently Director of Mosques who was then the Sec-Gen of FMSA (Fellowship of Muslim Students Association). I had lunches with him where we sparred on intellectual thoughts. He always asked me, ‘Are you sure...about this and that?’ That helped. There was also an *usrah* (discussion group which promotes discourse on Islam) programme that I attended. We were made to memorise parts of a *surah* and then discuss its significance. So we were taught religion but not the rituals, that is, we were taught the Quranic verses so as to find its meaning in life. Because all these were organised by FMSA, the term ‘FMSA-trained’(denoting individuals who had undergone the same kind of experiences and therefore sharing the same mindset) came into being.”

Based on several responses shared by the Clubilya respondents, the effects of dialogue can also be implied. For instance, Salleh shared on an occasion where he participated in a simple barbecue organised by the VWO.

“Like it makes us ‘together’, lah....that time relax...talk about our opinions and all about life and all that. So we can see that actually we are all good people. Just need to know them better, lah.”

Arshad mentioned an activity which has become a regular feature with the Ain Society. 'Probe Night', according to him, is a group interaction session which lasts throughout the night. No one is allowed to fall asleep during these sessions and the objective is for all participants to surface all personal issues which they think require attention. It is an exhausting activity but to him, it is effective in getting everyone to 'empty their hearts'.

Imran, a first year International Baccalaureate student thought that

"TOK<sup>26</sup> is a damn good course! Cos it makes you think out of the box...Like it doesn't go the conventional way." In fact, he recommends that "Parents should take TOK...Not TOK per se, lah. But something related so THEY can think out of the box."

#### **6.4.4. Leadership Opportunities**

Some participants suggested that the activities they had taken part in had given them opportunities to develop as leaders. Rahman reflected,

"Me and Ida - what changed us was that we had seniors who were very irritating sometimes because they always questioned us, 'What's the objective? What's the long term plan? Why are all these important? But we couldn't dispute what they say as we had seen their achievements. What they had done. So today, we still make references to our seniors who paved the way for us to be activists. So for me, the idea of being a mentor is so important that I now play the role consciously. After every programme, you have participants who come up to you and start asking questions, asking for guidance. So I assume that role of listening to them. Asking for their options...Becoming their 'mentors'. So I learned that the human touch is important. And it's not just listening for one time, but a continual engagement."

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<sup>26</sup> TOK or Theory of Knowledge is an enquiry-based subject which challenges the students understanding of his or her sources of knowledge. It is primarily conducted through group discussions.

“But then the techniques of mentoring also contributes”, said Ida.

“Say, when you are proposing. The mentor will not just say no..or yes. They will make you think first...Are you sure? Or are there any other ways? They will question you so that you will feel that you need to justify every little thing that you do. It gets irritating but as a process, you learn to make sure that you don’t overlook things.”

Rashid, a Clubilya respondent, told of his leadership experience during a camp which had been conducted in his school where he was made a team leader. He admitted that he was able to do a credible job in his appointment as he had received positive support from their team instructor.

“*Kita kalah pun dia support kita* (He showed his support even on occasions when we lost). We had to organise a performance on the last night and when it was over, many teachers said our class was the best!”

#### **6.4.5. Empowerment and Ownership**

Rahman acknowledged that a major change came over him when he was made a member of the organising committee tasked to undertake the organisation of the nationwide MIQ Quiz which was under the auspices of FMSA. He explained that he started off as a student participant of the quiz.

“But it was only a year later that some of us were invited to be the organisers of the event. And then a year after that, we became Heads of Departments in the MIQ Quiz organisational structure. We ran the whole show. And we even expanded it to include other activities. The sense of empowerment felt when we started doing our own programmes. Imagine, JC students...peer-to-peer...organising an inter-JC quiz with a budget of what, ten thousand dollars?”

Ida interrupted, “So that whole empowerment idea...Allowing us space to do something grand made us realise that we can achieve even more.”

The Clubilya respondents also shared their experiences to do with empowerment and ownership during their circle session.

Sasha highlighted the group’s involvement in organising the Daniel Pearl public concert as a good example.

“We learnt how to organise things and communicate with people. Each of us were given different roles to do even though it’s a one-day event. Each of us was given different responsibilities. As for me, I was to invite and usher the guests in and hand them goodie bags.”

Murni added,

“I was doing backstage work. There was a point where there was a big group. And I needed to take care of their things and then clean up the place afterwards.”

Bibi however felt that she was most empowered after attending a motivational workshop conducted by a private agency engaged by her school.

“The programme talked about the sacrifices that our parents have done to us...About our studies also...We begin to realise what our parents have done for us.”

In another session, Danial mentioned a similar motivational course which he had attended when he was 15 years-old.

“The course I attended was not race specific or anything like that...But it empowers you...Like they tell you that first you must believe in yourself...That you can do it...Cos if you don’t believe in yourself, then you’re just going to fail. Like, if you feel that you

are not going to do it, then what's the point? Like, why try if I'm not going to make it? And that's half the thing about the Malays...That is, half of the reason is that they cannot get off their bums. The other half is that they feel that even if they do get up, it's so much of a hassle that they probably will not succeed. The course changed me. Like that time was quite a low point in my life as in I was in Sec. Two. Life wasn't going too good for me grades-wise, cca-wise, everything...So the course really helped me. Like first, it gets you thinking. The other is, it really gave me the confidence to do things I thought I couldn't do - things which I would never have attempted if I had not gone for the course."

Ida concluded, "I think it's really all about realisation and empowerment..."

#### **6.4.6. Transformatory Experiences**

Transformatory experiences have been defined earlier in this thesis as events or occasions which create changes in the individual's frame of reference. This subsequently translates to adjustments in her/his state of mind.

For example, Ida declared that before she started her undergraduate studies in the International Islamic University (IIU) in Malaysia, she had never really pondered about the state of her Malay community,

"I initially thought there wasn't really any problems cos I stayed (peacefully) with neighbours who are Chinese and Indians. So I never thought that there are problems being a Malay. Never! *Alhamdulillah* (Praise be to God), I never had that feeling either. But when I came to IIU, we often had discussions with the other foreign students like those from Sri Lanka and Palestine. So they asked like, 'Do we have problems in

Singapore?’ The first thing that came to my mind was ‘No!’ I just couldn’t think of any major problems. But then, as we started talking some more, I realised that ‘Hey, I think I haven’t done enough thinking. There’s a lot of things that I needed to do. I need to explore. That I cannot just stop here. I’ve seen how they (the other foreign students) work. How they’re trying to make changes (in their own communities). So it really inspired me to do the same things as well...’

For Rahman, it was his ‘MIQ time’ which piqued his interest in helping his Malay community.

“That was the best time that we had. When we had all the discussions. We don’t have it anymore but the team still meets up for e.g. we just met up yesterday...We still keep in touch in our own different ways and we support each other’s programmes. And each of us have developed our own niches for e.g. some are now involved in the madrasahs...or interfaith work.”

For Sabrina, it was also her experiences as an undergraduate in IIU, although she graduated two years before Ida.

“That was the time I was suddenly exposed to people with all kinds of attitude. But what impacted me most was the lecturers that I came into contact with. So when I stepped out I was so inspired. It was almost like a personal ideology in that I wanted to make a change in the young ones. So while I cannot say exactly what or how, I know things changed when I stepped into IIU. Cos back in school before that, I’ve always been the quiet one.”

Ida, who is a close friend of Sabrina quipped, “Ya, that’s what people normally say about Sabrina - the moment she stepped into IIU, she totally changed.”

To this, Sabrina added,

“Ya, you don’t see a problem until you step out of your comfort zone. When I went to IIU, I saw all the challenges the Muslims are facing...What the Malays are facing. So the reflection started then.”

Bibi, a Clubilya respondent, described her ‘transformatory moment’ when attending a school camp in secondary three.

“The bond between us (the Malay students) and the other people was not so close. So Malay and Malay only, Chinese and Chinese only. But during the camp, we were like made to mix with the Chinese. Previously, we thought that these people *macam sombong* (looked arrogant). We didn’t mix with them before cos we were not so open-minded. *Macam nak gian dorang nanti takut dia orang ingat kita ni macam apa* (We thought that if we started to kid around with them, they might think that we were trying to cause trouble). So, like we didn’t bother. But when we got to know them, they were not like what we thought of them. After that day, the bond between us and them got closer.”

Arman’s response related to his experiences when participating in the adventure camps organised by the Adventure Seekers, a polytechnic student activity group in which he was a member of. According to Arman, the group organises adventure-based activities such as mountain climbing, jungle trekking and overnight camps especially in neighbouring countries such as Malaysia. Each activity will usually comprise a mix group of 30 participants from the various ethnic groups.

“We will cook our own food then we will share it by passing it around in mess tins. We’ll have rice, and other stuff...and with one spoon, we’ll pass it around. But the food

is *halal*. Then when we go trekking, we share the same bottles of water. The Councillors – the group leaders - will strictly speak in English to each and every one. The Councillors are the club’s leaders. Once it was *puasa* (fasting) month when we had a training session. During the fasting month, training starts at 5p.m. and ends at 9p.m. But all will get *tekan* (literally ‘pushed’- but in the local context it implies ‘pushed to the limit’) together – cannot drink and all that. But at sunset (which coincides with the break of the fast for the Muslims) all will take a break together. We’ll drink plain water, eat bread and dates. So we learnt about each other’s differences this way. Like the Councillors will say ‘Your Malay friends are fasting. If they can endure it, why can’t you?’ At the time, I was the only Malay in the group but everyone still cooperated.”

### **6.5. Participants’ Feelings of Conscientisation**

Paulo Freire (1970) describes ‘conscientisation’ as a process leading to political engagement and political literacy. More current observers however, see conscientization as acts involving a recursive process of reflection and action targeted at individual and social transformation. According to Seiler and Abraham, such processes

“take shape through encounters in/with diverse and often conflicting discourses....(which serves to) reveal asymmetrical power relations and the ways in which dominant scripts of marginalization are often enacted. Decoding the dominant structures in these discourses is a complex and political act that might offer some possibilities for transformative practice” (Seiler and Abraham, 2009).

This research sees increasing conscientisation as a mark of capacity building for critical thinking. Responses gathered from the sharing sessions will thus play a major role in helping

me interpret the programme participants' experiences in terms of their questions and reactions to challenges in a world which, to them, may be increasingly less 'natural'.

When a group of respondents who have all completed, or about to complete, their pre-university education were asked if the level of education that they've achieved will spur them to "go out and help improve the status of the Malay community", the responses were varied.

Kamisah, who is currently pursuing a polytechnic diploma course in Mass Communications replied,

"Of course you should do something. But what can we do? Change years and years of mentality? Produce people who are like us?..Or give birth... (laughter)."

Hamdan, a polytechnic graduate who is currently a madrasah teacher declared,

"That's what I've been trying to do. Cos many in my family have been 'motivational sparks' in the community, for example, Ahmad Mattar (a retired government Minister). So I get motivated to do something after seeing their achievements." As such, he also wants to be a role model based on this message: "I'm Malay, you're Malay. You can do it too."

Ahmad, who is currently undergoing National Service and will soon begin his university education, reflected that,

"It takes two in order to make a change. The other party must also want to change. He must believe in himself. Also, I must make myself to be the contrast to the stereotype. In order to energise (the other Malays), I must go against the stereotypes. For example, I must not be laid back (in my attitude)."

Namaz, who had just completed his 'A' level examinations and is currently serving his National Service in the Civil Defence admitted that, "I feel that I am different...in one way or another." He revealed that he now aspires to become a teacher so that he will be able to contribute to the community.

Sabrina admitted that she felt conscientised

"...because of my involvement with societies back in IIU. And then coming back here, I came under training with MUIS. I think that was the action bit which made me realise that Islamic knowledge is one of the tools that can get these people out of the 'hole' they're in."

"What drives me now", stressed Ali, a student completing his International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme,

"is the thought of my parents...Like they've been doing so much for me, lah. There's just so much that I want to do for them in return. But at the same time *insya'allah* (god willing) when I'm up there one day and I'm happy with life, I just hope that I can actually reach out...not just reach out for the sake of reaching out but to actually make sure that its effective and like, create an impact...like leave a legacy. But my intention is not just to leave a personal legacy but to get us out of this misery. I don't know but I think it's a misery. And they (the Malays) are not getting themselves out of it."

Mastura, currently a trainee teacher, did however admit that during certain periods,

"I kind of feel detached (from these feelings). So I feel the need for reinforcement and revival. I need to reenergize myself..."

The discussion with the group of three young activists revealed that having already been conscientised, they felt that they can now engage themselves in different areas of society.

Rahman thought that he no longer needed to be involved in tackling

“...issues relating to the status of the Malay community. I appreciate the country and the social community as being uniquely diverse. There are ‘cultural’ things that I need to do but these differences are normal. So I’m now motivated to do interfaith work cos I understand how faith gives us different lenses to see the world.”

Sabrina, on the other hand, still preferred

“...to be an activist to the Malay community and especially to the younger generation...To bring them out of that stigma, especially the religious bit...where everyone perceive Islam as rigid. I want them to move out of that perspective.”

#### **6.6. Participants’ Aspirations for the Malay Community**

This section seeks to examine the nature of the capacity-building process by seeking the respondents’ feedback on issues pertaining to their aspirations for the Malay community. This will be achieved by exploring the viability and feasibility of the ‘visions’ which they have highlighted. It functions to see if participants are able to utilise their critical thinking skills to conceptualise ‘end-products’ which are ‘developed’ and ‘complete’. The more insightful these aspirations are, the greater the level of capacity-building for critical thinking can be deemed to have taken place.

For example, Ima aspired for parents, especially mothers, to play a greater role in the upbringing of their children. However, without elaborating she also said that “...men need to learn to treat women better.”

Imran reinforced this notion when he voiced that

“... parents that should attend more of these kind of courses (he mentions previously of critical thinking programmes similar to TOK) instead of the children themselves...Because sometimes it’s not really their (the children’s) fault. It’s the upbringing...”

Certain aspirations surfaced by the respondents related to the role of religion in the Malay-Muslim community.

Ahmad for instance, aspired for the learning of Islam to be seen as

“...not as boring as they (the Malay youths) think and also to make them realise that through learning about Islam, they can apply it in their daily lives.”

Ima looked at the close association between the Malays and the Islamic faith.

“I think the religion plays a big role in helping...In being able to help...Like it might get complex from here...But I think religion can fix a lot of things if it was used right. And if we have the organisation to do it right...”

In another session, Arman, a participant of the Youth aLIVE programme voiced how he aspired for the religion to play a greater role in the development of the Malay character.

“...to know Islam is to be a good person. For example, a good Muslim is a good neighbour. To me, to be a good Muslim, a model Muslim...is to show the way through knowledge (of the religion).”

A few respondents aspired for a change in the mindsets of the Malay community.

Ima said,

“I think if the mindsets of the Malays are able to change...to think that they have the capacity to do what as they want...that there is so much more to what they can achieve. I think then we can succeed.”

Ali wanted the Malays to have the ‘energy’ to spring back in the face of obstacles or setbacks.

“You have to bounce back that hard. People give you ...you give people back what they give you ...They give it to you in your faces, you give it back in their faces..That is my mindset. That is what drives me...”

Imran is of the impression that the Malays do have the ability to do things well. However, he showed his cynical side when he mentioned that the Malays are currently only capable of accomplishing ‘useless things’ such as *lepak* (implying perfecting the art of displaying a ‘carefree and laid back’ attitude). Oblivious of the fact that such statements themselves are stereotyping members of another community, he sarcastically quipped

“Even the Chinese can’t *lepak* like the Malays! We can do these kinds of useless things so properly, even though it’s useless, at least we know how to do it properly. Cos we go all out for the things we love. If only we channel that interest into something where it’s actually useful...We can actually be the light that leads the future generation to glory.”

Norma aspired for members of the Malay community

“...to want to take a step to prove that we can make it. I don’t think that any organisation can really help the Malays unless they themselves want to be successful...To want to maximise your potential and overcome adversities, whether financial or familial or whatever. You have to want to do it! It’s not just one person or one organisation that

needs to help the Malays. The Malays have to see that education is important and that it is the one thing that will help us. It's the answer and they have to take that step..."

Some respondents stressed the need for the more able members of the community to come forward and assist in the endeavour to uplift the status of the Malays.

Lila associated her aspirations for the Malay community to that of chess pieces.

"It's not so much to do with strategies but their order of rank and order of importance. Like maybe start off with small moves but then start influencing others to become 'knights' and later even 'kings' who are able yet very 'flexible'...such that their faith can make them withstand all the interactions and influences. Cos I also want to remind the Malay-Muslims that we were once 'kings' cos we came up with some maths theories and we can revive that again. Of course, I can start by being the smaller ones first. And pushing myself to be one of the 'kings' one day."

Danial saw futility in social organisations attempting to change the mindsets of the Malays youths. Instead, he aspired for the more 'successful' peers to come forward and help the youths in the community who will need guidance.

"If their friends or their seniors talk to them, then they'll be more inclined to listen. So it needs to come from the inside, not from the organisations but from people...Like you and me... people like us, lah. Basically, cos since we have gone the 'right' way, we know what benefits we can use to try to convert people's mindsets. So that they'll be able to see..."

While Ima did agree that more from the community should come forward to assist the rest, she first wants those who are able to go all out and achieve success for themselves first,

“so as to be in a place where they can offer help. Because if I’m useless, then I can’t help even if I want to. I won’t have the capacity even if I want to. Even so, I think I’ll help in education. Like I’ll probably want to provide money to give to that kind of help.”

Norma saw value in developing a stable and loving home environment.

“I’ll start with my own family first. Start with people you’re close with first...And then try to change others...Cos if you can’t even help yourself, or help your family, then who are you to help other people?”

Associating her aspirations to that of a flower waiting to bloom, Aminah, the participant from the Youth aLIVE group wants to guide young individuals in the community to

“...grow positively. To become a better person...a better young Muslim who won’t be embarrassed of the religion.” In this aspect, she sees herself as wanting to organise fun activities for the youths, “...cos I’m one of them...”

### **6.7. Participants’ Suggestions for Improvements in the Conduct of Outreach Programmes**

This section relates to the participants’ evaluation of the activities which they had participated in. The respondents’ feedback points to processes which may enhance capacity building for critical thinking.

Some respondents from the discussion sessions hinted that they will be reluctant to participate in community outreach programmes if the venue is in a mosque.

Kamisah explained,

“No offence, but this is at the mosque. It’s a personal problem...cos I feel that I’m just a Muslim on paper. So I don’t think I’ll fit in.”

Fatimah added,

“It’s not so much a fear of being judged. It’s more of the perception that you are there to be indoctrinated. I think it makes them hesitant. I think if you want to do like critical thinking stuff you have to get away from religion first because that way you can get more people to come in. Your religion stuff...it can come in later. You can start off with ‘fluff’ first. And when people take interest, you can have whatever other activities. There’s just a stigma attached...you have to admit it...”

According to Salbiah, this was why she thought that the Young Minds Club has been so successful with students like her.

“...they don’t force you to *sembahyang* (pray) and they make it (i.e. enforcement) so subtle.”

Malik, a Youth Development Officer in a mosque interjected,

“...actually that is what we have been trying to do. We’ve been giving only very subtle messages. But because we do it (i.e. the activities) in the mosque, people are apprehensive.”

Ida looked at community outreach programmes for their multicultural value. As such, the idea of an appropriate venue is important because of the

“...need for people (of all cultures and backgrounds) to intermingle so that they can share with each other. If not, the only problem they think in the world are the ones that they are facing...or what their friends are facing...But perceptions change when you

interact with other people who do not share your background. I believe that this is actually lacking in the (current) programmes. It should not just be about discussions or getting yourself more concerned about your own problems.”

The issue of approaches adopted for the transmission of Islamic values were also questioned.

Zainal wondered why the messages of Islam could not be transmitted using ‘current culture’.

Instead we

“...use old ustadz who use sunnahs, hadiths...which youths cannot relate to. During the Friday *khutbah* (sermon), you see youths sleeping, playing with their PSPs (PlayStation Portable games) in the mosques. The Christians use rock songs...but not Muslims... everything *kena* (literally, gets hit with) ban. So Muslim elders can’t relate to youths. Even in a *ceramah* (Islamic forum), the ustadz fails to relate to the current culture of youths.”

Sabrina, who is now the acting head for the aLIVE curriculum in her mosque, suggested that

“Malays need to be engaged and to be hands-on. So small group training sessions will be good. Also, youths prefer to be involved in camps and sporting activities, not some ‘preachy’ event. The aLIVE programmes are good because there are a lot of opportunities for discussions. If teens can remember even one item which was discussed, then (the lesson) is considered a success.”

Ahmad also valued his experiences participating in the aLIVE programme. In fact, he had this suggestion,

“Maybe, on the side of religion, something can be done to pull back the ‘middle class’ - the ones between the elites and the *rabak* (socially dysfunctional) class. Maybe what

needs to be done is to *tangkap* (catch) their interest back to the subject of Islam. So one example is like this Youth aLIVE programme. So far, we had always been forced to go for the ‘normal’ kind of madrasah programme... where it’s purely been about you learning things like Islamic jurisprudence strictly as a subject. And you learn it in Malay which is.... ok, lah...to me...I’m not really eloquent in Malay. So when I came for this programme...at first I was thinking that this is going to be another waste of time, lah, so called. But I was surprised that this is taught in English. To me, that is one step in the correct direction, lah. And then the second point is that the stuff that they taught us. The modules are very different when compared to the traditional madrasah type, lah. Plus, as you know, madrasahs don’t teach stuff like Quranic Sciences or Islamic Architecture. To me, this is very good cos it first sparked the curiosity... the interest back into the subject. So maybe that is what is needed to bring this middle community back. What I also suggest is like...you make activities eg. Malay youths are very strong in sports so maybe we can link that to another – studies, lah. So maybe we can link those two together and at the same time make the subject more interesting. Maybe like more of the approach and the subject to be more in the fun method...Something that they will enjoy so that they will want to learn more. As they learn more, they take home more things to learn...not just play and play...then they learn nothing after that.”

Some respondents proposed the idea of situating community outreach programmes catering to Malay youths in the mainstream schools instead of external venues where they are normally conducted. Nora, who was from the Express stream in her former secondary school, understood that programmes conducted by organisations such as Mendaki cannot be part of the mainstream academic curriculum. However, she provided the opinion that

“...maybe such programmes can start from the school itself. Cos in my experience...I never got to know the NT(Normal Technical) stream people (The academic band for the lowest achievers). NT people don’t mix (with students from the other streams) even when the school organises open tournaments. So maybe organising such programmes in schools will take away the boundaries. So the different groups can create mixed teams together and so get to know more of each other...”

Arman gave his consensus to both Ahmad’s and Nora’s suggestion.

“...during my secondary school years, I was in the Normal (Academic) stream (this is the ‘middle’ stream – between the Express and Normal (Technical) stream). ‘Acad’ students will usually find it easiest to mingle with both sides although it’s more difficult for the other two to mix with each other.” Ahmad then proceeded to describe what he perceives to be a solution to the problem. “Yesterday, when I went to watch a bodybuilding competition, I saw a lot of support and cooperation from participants and spectators regardless of their ethnic group. So like Ahmad said, maybe through sports to create understanding, not just in the classroom where you just end up sleeping.”

He elaborated further,

“The problem with youths today is that they don’t like to just sit down and talk and talk. They like the more adventurous and interactive kind of thing. For e.g., through camps, we can interact with people and get to know them - their backgrounds, culture and beliefs. Through games and interactions, we can learn to appreciate people and their culture. Sports can be a way...as well as outdoor activities. The important thing is to make it interactive.”

Lila agreed “...that we should start from school.” However, she believed that the classroom experience will benefit the Malays more. She shared her experiences during her Malay language lessons in junior college.

“The *cikgu* (teacher) will discuss with the class a current Malay issue whenever one crops up. She will criticise (the community) which makes us Malay students feel guilty...causing us to want to discuss on why it’s happening and then discuss ways to prevent it from happening again. So, I think the way is for it to start with the schools. Also, the school will have ways to contact the kids so will be in a better position to help...”

Based on his experience, Rahman agreed that organising ‘big seminars’ may not be very effective as

“...you get turned off by characters who try to ‘act smart’ by asking stupid questions. I was one of these smart alocs. The more engaging sessions happen in smaller groups where there will be opportunities to start talking and start thinking. It’s especially useful to have a facilitator of sorts who is able to provoke your thoughts, for example, with questions like, ‘How many Malay students are in JC? How many Malay students go to universities?’ So the facilitator initiates the role of ‘envisioning’. Cos these things were not our direct concerns but with these kinds of questioning, it makes you feel that you can make a change...”

The respondents also queried why certain seemingly positive activities were not repeated. Fatimah, a former member of MClub’s the Young Minds Club gave kudos to the organisation for taking up the role of

“...a bridge which connects like-minded people. Some of it (i.e. the activities) was brilliant like the MUN conference...but they don't repeat it. It's like I benefited from it but it's sad that others cannot. So if you have these glimpses of something good, why not repeat it?”

Some respondents also mentioned the need for a consistent follow-up to activities which are aimed at building up the critical thinking capacities of Malay youths.

Rahman declared that

“...there must be that ‘realisation’ first...quickly followed by ‘empowerment’. Cos if you realise and then you're not allowed to do anything, then the conviction will soon fade. But to realise and then be given a chance to make that resolution concrete with something to do either by service learning or what not makes them think...that this is the little I can do for now...but then what else can I do?”

Sabrina added that

“There needs to be constant communication...constant engagement with one activity after another. And there must be opportunities to get them to physically act (on a task or situation). They can't just be talking about them. There must be action and empowerment...(for the exercise of) creativity, sympathy, empathy...For them to see how they can make a difference...If not, (the conscientisation) may deteriorate and they get angry, frustrated even.”

Ida thought that

“there's no immediate strategy. I think it's more of a step-by-step process of going through experiences and the knowledge that we gain...”

## **6.8. Conclusion**

This chapter served to present data which had been collected during the course of this study, focussing on the responses from the sharing sessions. The data has now been collated and categorised under the relevant themes necessary for the conduct of this research. The breakdown of the groups and its specific members has been included in Appendix 2 for ease of reference. In this present form, the data can now be used to justify the evaluation and findings which will now be presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DISCUSSION

#### 7.1. Introduction

This chapter serves to provide a discussion of the findings from this research. The objective is to introduce theoretical foundations which will shape the way in which these findings are understood. The application of analytical frameworks in this discussion will thus ensure clarity and subsequently set the basis for the adjustments, refinements and specifications transforming the basic premises of this research into practical and applicable conclusions.

The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first discusses the key findings of the research based on the data presented. In line with the theme of the study, it will first attempt to investigate the presence of mental models and how they manifest themselves in the worldview of the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore. This is preceded by an evaluation of activities highlighted by respondents during the discussions as having had the effect of allowing them to be more critically aware of themselves as members of the Malay-Muslim community. This point is reinforced with a discussion of more specific indicators which may reflect that this aspect of capacity building for critical thinking had indeed taken root. The strength and effectiveness of the capacity building process is then scrutinised and linked to specific components of the activities which were mentioned during the sharing sessions. This section of the chapter is then made complete with concluding statements of whether capacity building for critical thinking has been evidenced from the respondents' participation in community outreach programmes.

The second section in this chapter deals with an exploration of specific key themes and their effects on the Malay-Muslim community based on how they were surfaced in the course of this study. Among others, these will include the role of religious education, the question of Malay identity as well as the need to take into stock political considerations when putting into action any plans to formulate programmes based on the findings of the research.

Details from these two sections will then be used to provide the list of recommendations for further action in the next chapter.

## **7.2. Findings**

The findings in this section are extrapolated from responses analysed according to themes laid out in the previous chapter. As mentioned, wherever possible, the arguments presented will be triangulated with data collated from my observation of various community outreach activities, the life history interviews conducted with respondents whose backgrounds differ in terms of age, ethnicity as well as academic and professional achievement, as well as information gathered from email and telephone enquiries. In addition, as a means of comparison, perceptions gathered during a circle conversation session with a group of non-Malay participants will also be highlighted where appropriate. These findings will then be contrasted to the current literature describing the outcomes of similar studies.

### **7.2.1. Evidence of Negative Mental Models**

According to Johnson-Laird (2010), when individuals perceive the world, their vision submits to a mental model of how things are depending on scenarios which they had encountered in their lives. Likewise, when they try to comprehend a given description of the world, they

begin so by mentally constructing a similar, albeit less rich, representation of the world based on meanings accorded by their personal knowledge and experiences.

However, while each of these mental models represents a distinct set of common possibilities, they nevertheless fail to consider the relevance and uniqueness of particular situations or contexts. This is because mental models are said to be iconic in nature implying that the structure of their representations can be generalised and customised to correspond to the structure of what the individual wishes for it to represent. Unfortunately, once it takes shape, mental models become absolute in the sense that each represents only one depiction of what is true at the expense of others which must then be taken as false. In other words, mental models are inflexible as they accept only one version of reality while discounting all other possibilities.

Seen from a sociological perspective, mental models gain currency in the Malay-Muslim worldview by virtue of the fact that they are products of human interaction. This can be explained in relation to the concept of symbolic interactionism. According to Giddens (2001, pg. 17-18), symbolic interactionism “directs our attention to the detail of interpersonal interaction, and how that detail is used to make sense of what others say and do.” Haralambos (2000), in emphasising that meaning and identity arise through verbal and social interactions, argues that individual self-concept develops from interaction processes since it is in large part a reflection of the reactions of others towards the individual. The individual, in turn, reacts by perceiving herself or himself in terms of her or his self-concept. As such, “if they are consistently defined as disreputable or respectable, servile or arrogant, they will tend to see themselves in this light and act accordingly” (ibid, pg. 15-16). Sartore and Cunningham (2007) in their article discussing the under-representation of women in leadership positions of

sports organizations, argue that women should not be blamed for the phenomenon. Instead, they propose that “the responses to the social and cultural forces that function to shape one’s self may result in the unconscious manifestation of self-limiting behaviors. Thus, when applied to sports organizations, it is perhaps these self-limiting behaviors that are partly responsible for the under-representation of women within leadership positions” (pg. 245-246). Similarly, it can be deduced that the processes of symbolic interactionism have resulted in the creation of self-concepts among Malays who begin to see themselves as individuals who are lacking in initiative, academically unmotivated and lazy. Cumulatively, these perceptions lead to the creation of negative mental models which translate to self-defeatist attitudes. Ultimately, these attitudes then transform into the fatalism often depicted by the Oedipus Effect (Popper, 1957), more popularly known as the self-fulfilling prophecy. Michael Biggs (2009) describes the self-fulfilling prophecy as a “causal sequence whereby an actor’s belief motivates behavior that turns it into reality, while at the same time the actor(s) misapprehend the causal sequence as one whereby belief simply reflects reality.” In other words, what these actors have failed to comprehend is the irony that it is their own beliefs which have actually led them into taking actions which shape their reality. Unfortunately, as these beliefs are eventually validated, they end up assuming that it had been true at the outset. Biggs provides the example of a teacher who, from the beginning, believed that a student is mediocre. The teacher would then act and behave very differently and this would cause the student to eventually perform poorly. This phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy based on teacher expectations in the classroom has been specifically labelled as the Pygmalion effect (Woolfolk, 1995).

From the presented data, mental models are seen as existing in the Malay worldview as the respondents’ feedback are predominantly shaped and characterised by over generalisations,

personal bias and popular sentiment. This is seen from the responses provided when the theme of causes of the Malay problem was discussed. For example, Imran's comment on how he can sometimes be lazy "like a typical Malay" tells us of his very unfavourable perception of his own community's lack of drive and motivation. Such a condemning remark on Malay attitude can only be said to have stemmed from his negative mental model of the Malay character as it was undeservedly cynical and made without proof or concrete examples. Neither was there any consideration of extenuating circumstances such as level of socio-economic or familial background.

Similarly, responses such as Fatimah's suggestion that "the Malays have no vision" or Ahmad's accusatory "the Malays...are just *malas* (lazy) to *timba ilmu* (seek and acquire knowledge)..." lacks proper basis and elaboration and can therefore be attributed to their negative mental models of the Malay community. Although the discussion sessions themselves have managed to single out individuals whose personalities run counter to the mental models prescribed to the community, (for example Ali, who refuses to give in to the popular belief that the Malays' inability to progress has been caused by a lack of opportunities) the overall nature of the responses does suggest that negative mental models may have played a part in retarding the progress of the community. The effect of self-fulfilling prophecies come into play when the Malays, believing in the futility of their character as projected by these negative mental models, lose their sense of objectivity and no longer see value in maximizing their efforts to accomplish a task!

Nevertheless, there have been instances where the discussion shows much insight and the responses accompanied by relevant examples, for instance, the sharing of the participants'

understanding of the concepts of *syukur* (thankfulness to God) and the related issues of *takdir* (fate), *pasrah* (leaving it to God's will) and *nasib* (luck).

In contrast, the circle session conducted with a group of 11 seventeen-year-old Chinese students reveal negative mental models of their community which are much less severe compared to those voiced by the Malay participants. For instance, when asked for their feedback on what they think are the problems facing their community, Eric was the only respondent who provided some measure of insight through his answer.

“What makes me sad is that we are so departed from our cultural heritage that we're really screwed up. Though I hate every shit thing about Chinese culture, it's like we have no cultural background, it's quite sad if you think about it.”

On a lesser note, Henry mentions that

“Chinese people get ostracised almost everywhere, except maybe in China. Like in Japan or other Western countries, we get ostracised.”

In fact, rather than the opposite, a few others in the group actually voiced a problem relating more to their positive mental model of themselves as a member of their community. Jenny reflects this when she reveals that

“I hate to have to identify myself as a Singaporean Chinese cos everyone thinks that every time you tell people that you're Chinese, they automatically think that you're from China.”

While the response does imply a negative impression of the Chinese from China, it nevertheless indicates pride in being a member of her Singapore-based ethnic community.

The life history interview conducted with Alice, a 19-year-old female Indonesian-Chinese student can perhaps shed even more light on the impact of mental models on a community's cognitive well-being. Alice, an ASEAN scholarship recipient studying in Singapore, had earlier on in the interview admitted that she does feel her minority group being discriminated against by the mainstream Indonesian society resulting in the community being able to focus only in the economic sector.

“...the fact is that economy is the only field that we can like excel in...We can work at. Because it's impossible for us to go beyond that, even like in academia, politics, law...everything besides economy, we don't have much chance. So I think a lot of Indonesian-Chinese, they just prefer to stick to the business. They excel in it even more because that is the only thing that they can do.”

Nevertheless, Alice continues,

“They just have this notion or generalisation ‘Oh, Chinese will do well in trade and business’. And they're usually richer...but not all Chinese are rich, a lot of Chinese I know are actually quite poor also. Ya, they have small shops.”

This thus alludes to the fact that while the Indonesian-Chinese minority community does face obstacles in their progress, their motivations are framed by a positive mental model of their community which projects its members as possessing an inherent ability to succeed in the sphere of business. Again, based on the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy, this will ensure their continuing success as a community – at least within the domain of enterprise.

This example thus reinforces the argument that, in the case of the Malays in Singapore, negative mental models within the worldview of the ethnic group have acted as a barrier

impeding the progress of the community. There is thus a need to remove these negative models in order to ensure that the community is able to progress as it rightly should.

Conversely, the research can also postulate that a successful alignment of positive mental models within members of the ethnic community can translate to better strategy implementation and in turn, to overall group performance. Gurtner , Tschan, Semmer and Naegle's (2007) research on team processes and performance has established that success in developing shared mental models among members in work groups will result in increased efficiency. Based on empirical support from studies which provided evidence for a positive relationship between shared mental models and group performance, the researchers conducted an observation exercise that centred on a team-based military air-surveillance task. They hypothesised that a positive congruence of shared mental models in teams will in turn relate to better strategy implementation, and subsequently to group performance. This became conclusive when a strategy discussion component was introduced in the work flow creating opportunities for team members to develop a similar understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities, interaction patterns and information flow. Based on the positive results, the researchers proposed a process model which emphasises the component of 'reflexivity intervention' in group work flows as this will have the effect of aligning shared mental models and thus improve team performance.

Applied to the larger context of the Malay-Muslims in Singapore, this 'reflexivity intervention' component could be introduced in community outreach activities where it functions as a means of creating awareness and to subsequently eliminate negative mental models while introducing and aligning positive mental models in the community. This, in turn, may lead to the conscientisation of the Malays indicating the development of capacity

building in the critical thinking abilities of its members. Ultimately, it is hoped that such cognitive processes will eventually act to replace the current vicious cycle prevailing over the lives of Malay-Muslims in the country with that of a virtuous cycle ensuring the steady and continuous progress for the community.

### **7.2.2. Has Capacity Building for Critical Thinking Taken Root?**

This section will answer the question of the extent to which capacity building for critical thinking has been successfully developed in the minds of the participants in this research. In line with the premise that the emancipatory and transformatory approach will achieve this objective via its conscientisation effects, the discussion will now focus on the nature of events or activities which were reported by the respondents as having had an impact on them during the discussion sessions. In first analysing the participants' feedback on positive experiences gained after having involved themselves in community-based programmes, the investigation will further attempt to isolate the means by which these events or activities have managed to create changes in their 'states of mind'. Micheli (2011) describes 'state of mind' as one driven by an inherent 'dispositional ingredient' and is similar to what was written earlier in this thesis regarding Bourdieu's explanation of 'habitus' and how it induces mental states which are beyond the conscious control of the individual.

As this discussion is expected to be speculative in nature, many of the arguments raised will be hinged on the support of existing theoretical literature and empirical case studies. Subsequently, the research will seek to identify the more specific requirements for which future capacity building for critical thinking programmes must first consider before they can be designed and implemented.

### **7.2.2.1. Evaluating the Activities from the Perspective of Emancipatory and Transformatory Education: How capacity building may have been facilitated**

To recapitulate, emancipatory and transformatory education is valued for its ability to stimulate critical thinking by imposing intellectual standards on the individual's thinking processes. The approach motivates individuals to find meaning in their lives by encouraging them to actively engage in enquiry and hence contribute to the creative transformation of the world around them. Through introspection and a continuous reflection of past and current activities, participants of the emancipatory and transformatory education process develop self-reflective knowledge which will consequently enable them to acquire a greater awareness and understanding of human actions. These individuals are then conscientised into questioning and challenging the state of affairs which, to them, are no longer natural and acceptable. According to Pinar (2009), such approaches 'unmask power' that maintain the status quo and inspire individuals into taking action to change unequal situations, such as those arising from power imbalances.

The approach culminates into the empowerment and transformation of the individual by enabling changes to their frame of reference when perceiving the status quo. The success of the emancipatory and transformatory approach is seen when individuals embark on actions such as mobilising resources to improve their lives or ideally in the case of the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore, by creating, educating and growing an advocacy base by way of social movements.

#### **7.2.2.1.1. Conduct of Dialogue**

The previous chapter presented data which centres on activities that bring about consciousness and awareness created through dialogue. To reiterate, dialogue as a

pedagogical concept denotes learning opportunities in which interaction, verbal or otherwise, takes place and ideas are exchanged and understood. Such a notion of dialogue assumes “that the speaker and the spoken-to share ‘the same moral world’; it represents an open-ended, inclusive, and reciprocal relationship that permits pluralism and connection across differences” (Lavery, 2009, pg. 120). Dialogue is used to promote egalitarianism, tolerance and mutual understanding. Participants are invited to share and listen to one another’s ‘stories’, stressing receptivity and the absence of judgment (ibid).

Binding and Tapp (2008) give credit to Gadamer who, in exploring the concept of dialogue, sees conversation as an inherently human mode of understanding. They cite the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher’s assertion that it is through the dialectic of question and answer, the to and fro of dialogue and genuinely open conversation that a topic may come to be more fully understood. Gadamer mooted the idea that conversation holds possibilities to transform productively not only the understanding of the topic, but also the very being of the participants in the dialogue.

In the previous chapter, data provided by the respondents point to dialogic activities such as the conduct of the aLIVE programmes as well as personal encounters such as Rahman’s experiences in his interactions with a person whom he looks up to as his mentor.

Elements of dialogue may be detected in almost all of the activities reported by the respondents as having had a positive impact on them. From informal barbeques to adventure camps to forums and seminars, the inherent presence of dialogue can be inferred by the continuous interaction of these participants with their peers during these occasions.

Nevertheless, as a cornerstone of the emancipatory and transformatory approach, authentic dialogue must be extended to more than just a simple means of conversation. A distinction,

therefore, must be made between ‘conversation’ and ‘dialogue’. As clarified by Alexander (2005), while the end point of conversation may not be clear at the outset, in dialogue, it usually is. Where conversation often consists of a sequence of unchained two-part exchanges as participants talk at or past each other, dialogue explicitly seeks to make attention and engagement mandatory and to chain exchanges into a meaningful sequence. Specifically, it is the act of questioning which differentiates conversation from dialogue. Additionally, a critical issue to be asked is what follows from the answers: ‘If an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself, then it falls out of the dialogue’ (Bakhtin, 1986, pg. 168).

As such, it must now be noted that the methodology of this research, through the conduct of dialogue via the focus group and circle sharing sessions, has in itself acted as an agent of change on its respondents because of its resulting conscientisation effects. Fatimah, one of the respondents indicated as much when she proposed that more of such sharing sessions should take place involving Malay-Muslim youths.

“Ya, ya, we should...Where teenagers can come together and talk about simple stuff but talk a lot you know...And in talking a lot you get enlightened. Yes, you talk a lot...but its good...That’s supposed to be good.”

My observation of an interfaith group meeting can be used to support the value of dialogue. The meeting was part of a series making up a programme called the Developing Conversation Circles and was under the auspices of the Harmony Centre. According to Lai (2010), such informal meetings can be taken to represent the concept of ‘ground-up multiculturalism’ as it detours around what official initiatives have sometimes failed to achieve. Participants of these meetings, comprising followers of all the different faiths in the country, create and exploit

friendships by discussing on themes such as their family and personal histories. In the meeting that I observed, I took note of the friendly banter indicating the presence of trust and camaraderie among members in the circle. The participants, in each being able to have their say when asked to share in the celebration of the group's common values, showed a genuine understanding and appreciation of each other's cultural and religious practices. There was also openness and maturity shown especially during a particular moment when a discussion on the topic of ethnic jokes was introduced.

Nevertheless, dialogue can only be made an effective component of emancipatory and transformatory education if it is planned and introduced purposely together with the necessary 'rules of engagement'. This is to ensure that participants remain involved but are guarded against the attitudes and prejudices which they bring into the discussion from their own cultures. In the case of my observation of the interfaith engagement session, the facilitator was careful to first list out the ground rules before the meeting was allowed to progress. These rules require that participants be 'present' throughout the course of the meeting, to listen to each other, to use the 'I', 'Me' and 'My' language, to surface assumptions and to ensure confidentiality. The participants were further tasked to be good listeners, to continuously embark on a process of reflection and to see each other as equals in the 'circle'.

In contrast, my observation of a group of respondents during a Clubilya activity showed how the use of dialogue may fail to attain its objectives if the ground rules were not properly laid out from the very beginning. The session began on a promising note as the facilitator, a Malay volunteer with no apparent religious agenda, first conducted a self-awareness exercise where he initially produced a mint-condition \$2 note and showed it to the group. After doing so, he proceeded to tear a bit of the note before crushing it into the smallest size possible and then

straightening it back into as much of its previous state as possible. In the follow-up question, he asked the group of at-risk youths whether the torn and wrinkled note still has any monetary value in their eyes. The answer, of course, was a resounding ‘Yes!’ He then associates the note to the ‘colourful’ backgrounds of the participants and tells them that just like the note, each of them still possesses inherent value despite their previous run-ins with the law. However, instead of inviting the participants to share their personal ‘stories’ to reinforce the point, he embarked on a ‘mini lecture’ relating to the values of applying oneself positively which unfortunately towards the end, resulted in a cheeky response of ‘Ya Ustadz!’ from someone at the back of the group. While this was, of course, done in jest, it provides the signal to me that these youths have had enough of one-way communication, even if the message is relevant and positive. The learning point is that for effective dialogue to take place, what is required is a component of what Habermas (1984) has conceptualised as ‘communicative action’. He refers to this as “the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations” (pg. 85). Kim and Kim (2008, pg. 55) elaborates that the concept involves “a non-strategic and non-instrumental action oriented to mutual understanding.” From the perspective of effective dialogue, ‘communicative action’ takes place when participants are allowed to interact intersubjectively and cooperatively with others so as to understand one another.

On another occasion, I arranged to observe the conduct of a 3-day, 2 nights state-sponsored community outreach programme called *Kursus Keluarga Saadah* (Course on Creating a Happy Family) which was organised and sponsored by the Selangor state government of Malaysia, Singapore’s closest neighbouring country. The programme was targeted at Malays who are recipients of the State’s public welfare assistance scheme, with the objective of

transforming the mindsets of these poverty-stricken individuals so that they will be more motivated to better place their energies towards improving their lives and those of their immediate families. The state-funded retreat, inclusive of meals and accommodation, was conducted at a low-cost resort so as to generate interest as well as to alleviate the participants from the distractions of their everyday environment. The programme appropriately included activities centred on themes such as ‘The Ideal Marriage’, ‘Effective Parenting’, ‘Islamic Family Law’ and ‘Managing the Family’. With the participants being Muslims and the nation being a predominantly Islamic country, it was decided by the organisers that the best way to transmit these positive messages was to conduct the learning process under the ambience of the religion so that it will be easily identified and assimilated by the participants. In fact, one of the highlights of the programme took place on the final day when a local Ustadz was called in to deliver a sermon extolling the virtues of working hard to improve on one’s situation in life as reflected in the Qur’an. Displaying great oratorical skills and getting approving nods from his audience, the Ustadz ended his session with a call for questions from the floor. Noting that the audience was emotionally swayed by the rhetoric and not so much by motivations to think more critically of themselves, I was nevertheless expecting the participants to be inspired enough to pose questions such as ‘Should I get another job to earn extra income?’ or ‘Do I take on a job even if it takes me too far away from my family?’ Instead, an unemployed but obviously moved young father eagerly raised his hands and earnestly queried, “Ustadz, can you **JUST** tell me of a do’a (prayer) which I can recite to make me not lazy???” Such an ‘unthinking’ question again points to the fact that dialogue requires an active two-way reflection process for any form of critical thinking to take place.

Upon closer analysis, the young father's response can actually be interpreted as symptomatic of a recurrent problem related to dialogic attempts where ground rules, specifically those requiring participants to treat each other as equals during the sharing sessions were not laid out or adhered to. In similar vein to the cynical retort of 'Ya Ustadz!' in the Clubilya example, what one can speculate is that more often than not, the participants were exposed to various forms of one-way, top-down communication oriented towards the propagation of Islamic values and very much focussed on the theme of 'corrective dialogue' (Talissee and Aikin, 2005). With such imbalances in power, there is no room for adjudication, compromise or consensus. Such an attitude towards dialogue therefore not only obstructs the spirit of critical inquiry, it renders inquiry altogether impossible. This leads to the sense of frustration which is then manifested through these cryptic responses!

#### **7.2.2.1.2. Experiential and Reflexive Learning**

Some respondents revealed that they gained personal insights into the lives and worldviews of other individuals because of the opportunity to participate in a process of experiential and reflexive learning. This came about either when they physically interacted with individuals or groups from the other ethnic communities during occasions such as multicultural get-togethers or when they involved themselves in charity projects such as distributing food or essential items to the needy, especially those from their own community. Fowler (2007) describes experiential learning as the non-institutional aspect of learning which offers a more pragmatic approach to education. Smith, Emmett and Woods (2008) consider experiential education to be an authentic learning process as it is 'highly individual, allowing students to be involved in their own learning activities.' Kolb however, declares that experience must be translated into learning by undertaking a series of steps after an initial experience. "There

must be a reflection on the experience followed by an understanding of what the new learning means to the individual and a conceptualisation of how it can be used in the future” (1984 cited in Knutson, 2003, pg. 53). Other thinkers such as Freire, Schon and Jarvis agree that reflection allows for the self-application of thought to experience as a means of gaining knowledge (Dyke, 2009).

This could explain why I was not able to detect any indication of conscientisation as a result of experiential and reflexive learning until it was surfaced during the discussion sessions. For example, Arshad and Azah would not have highlighted their conscientised feelings if not for the fact that I asked for them to share personal experiences based on such activities which made them question the status of the Malay community. As such, following Kolb’s suggestion, there is a need for constant sharing and reflection of personal experiences in order to expose and develop conscientised feelings. According to Knutson (2003), experiential learning challenges all learner domains holistically, rather than fragmenting the learning process into cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skill acquisition. In their study of outcomes-oriented student reflection, Griffin, Lorenz and Mitchell (2010) concluded that their subjects exhibited enhanced competencies as a result of the strategy of integration, coordination and reflection which the authors had proposed. It was mentioned during a circle session that the ‘Probe Night’ conducted by the Ain Society is an event carried out twice every year to serve such a purpose. However, self-reflective exercises such as these must be made an ongoing activity for its effects to be evident (Moss, 2008). As emphasised by Rahman in one of the discussion sessions, because such encounters involving the human touch is important, “...it’s (must) not (be) just listening for one time, but a continual engagement.”

### **7.2.2.1.3. Interculturality and Intersubjectivity**

In the previous chapter, respondents such as Arman and Ahmad had implied that they, as well as their counterparts from the other ethnic groups were able to develop intersubjectivity when they embarked on activities which provided them with opportunities to mix with other individuals of different ethnicities and backgrounds. Arman highlighted his interactions with the other non-Muslim members of his polytechnic's Adventure Seekers Club during the Muslim fasting month while Ahmad mentioned his very 'open' class discussions on controversial inter-ethnic issues as examples of this.

Writers such as Xiaodong Dai (2010, pg. 14) however separates the concept of intersubjectivity with that of interculturality. "While intersubjectivity refers to the interpersonal connection between individuals in the same society, interculturality refers to the complex connection between and among cultures whose members negotiate intercultural agreements and work together to establish reciprocal interactions." He explains that while the two concepts lie in the same continuum, intersubjectivity and interculturality express different levels of human connection. "Intersubjectivity facilitates social communication and paves the way for the development of interculturality. The construction of interculturality in turn broadens people's horizons and enriches intersubjectivity" (ibid, pg. 16). Tochon and Karaman (2009) elaborates that intercultural competence requires emotional sensitivity and needs to be learned in context. In this regard, the research sees intersubjective engagements as providing the contexts where emotional sensitivity can be acquired. Intersubjective engagement can also be seen as allowing for genuine dialogue to take place which in turn opens the channels for intercultural communication. The interplay of these two processes then makes the extension of intersubjectivity and the development of interculturality possible.

In being involved in ethnically non-exclusive activities, participants become more exposed to the diversity of perspectives existing in society and are no longer preoccupied with their own. With the realisation that the world is no longer about judgements but about perspectives, they become more aware of their own cultural 'blind spots'. This is supported by Schweisfurth and Gu's (2009, pg. 472) study on the intercultural experiences of international students studying in UK universities which revealed that "for most international students, a more cosmopolitan identity, along with greater confidence, does emerge over time". This is due to their observations and transformatory experiences in studying in a multicultural student environment. Similarly, an extract from a Muslim participant's reflection piece written at the end of the interfaith engagement series under the Developing Conversation Circles programme is evidence of this:

"..the weeks of sharing and understanding one another, listening and learning from one another's experiences are what I looked forward to every month.....The circle is my first 'real' interaction...with adherents of other religions ... it started formal, but as we went along, and began to know more about one another, the formalities became mutual respect and then trust, and I myself learnt to be more open and willing to share my thoughts and views. It came to the point that it's easy to share and discuss, similar to discussing with friends and colleagues, and I feel, the members of the circle are my friends" (Guat, 2008, pg. 10).

Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that the success of the activities mentioned by the respondents very much depends on the skills of the individuals charged with facilitating the events. Smith, Emmett and Woods (2008) point out for the need to facilitate rather than to direct the discussions. The facilitator must be able to pull ideas together and encourage

maximum participation from the other members. For instance, in the case of Arman's Adventure Seekers Club, the facilitators made it a point to raise awareness of the cultural and religious diversity between the members of the group while at the same time garner understanding and appreciation of such differences. In Ahmad's experience, the same quality was probably shown when the teacher prompted reflective questions, thoughts and actions during his General Paper lessons.

#### **7.2.2.1.4. Scope of Empowerment and Ownership**

In a study based on the theme of empowerment among Latina nurses in Mexico, New York and Indiana, Baker et. al (2007) concluded that there is a potential relationship between empowerment and retention of nurses in the service. However, in this particular context, empowerment has been narrowly defined as "a synergistic reciprocal process based on the leader-follower trust relationship within an organizational context" (Klakovich, 1995 cited in Baker et. al, 2007, pg. 125). It results in the heightening of motivation due to the presence of elements such as access to resources and support and shared decision making resulting in the accomplishment of personal and organisational goals. This also serves to create a sense of ownership and belonging in the worksite (ibid).

When it comes to the larger society, a more expanded definition applies. For instance, Drydyk (2008, pg. 237), describes empowerment as "a combined enhancement of decision-making and influence over strategic life-choices and barriers to agency and well-being freedom". This implies expanding individuals' freedom of choice and action in shaping their own lives. Drury and Reicher (2009 pg. 708) however attach the term more to 'collective' empowerment and define it as "that positive social-psychological transformation, related to a sense of being able to (re)shape the social world, that takes place for members of subordinated groups who

overturn (or at least challenge) existing relations of dominance”. According to Baker et. al. (2007, pg.125), “An outcome of empowerment is seen when people, organizations and communities increase mastery and control over their lives”. This study however sees value in both definitions. While it expects empowerment as first beginning to operate at the personal level, it envisages that once a critical mass is reached, empowerment can collectively be experienced at the communal level.

While this research does not yet perceive the ‘collective’ empowerment based on Drury and Richter’s definition, it can however, affirm that personal empowerment has been brought about as a consequence of the programmes attended by some participants. This is evidenced by the implied sense of personal value and fulfilment when respondents talked about their experiences when given the opportunity to make decisions, shoulder responsibility and the chance to enjoy recognition when the end result was well received. The respondents provided examples such as their direct involvement in the conceptualisation and delivery of projects such as the national level MIQ quiz and the Daniel Pearl public concert.

Based on an email interview, I was also informed of an annual inter-junior college level student conference which was designed, organised and led by students who are members of the Malay Literary, Drama and Debating Society (MLDDS) of a particular JC. According to the respondent, “The conference was conceptualised and positioned for the development of Malay students by providing them with a platform to plan and organise an inter-college event. For it to be a college-level event, it must be conducted in English and though the organisers may be Malay student leaders, the participants need not be. Also, it was positioned for the Malay students to think about and participate in national issues and discourse.” The annual conference was very well-received and many of the Malay student organisers gained such

pride and motivation in its success that it became the driving force for them to excel further in their studies and subsequently, their lives. Unfortunately, there were administrative obstacles a few years into its inception and although the programme is still successfully conducted on an annual basis by the institution, it no longer came under the purview of the JC's MLDDS.

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that any one-off act of empowerment and ownership, while resulting in the individual's heightened self-esteem, will however be insufficient to develop conscientised feelings or the accompanying capacity building for critical thinking. This seems to be the case depicted by the Clubilya respondents as no trace of critical reflection was detected as an end-product of the concert in which they were involved in. To reiterate the sentiments of youth activists Rahman, Sabariah and Ida in the previous chapter, for a conscientised mind to be sufficiently developed, there has to be a constant engagement from one activity to another. Similarly, for the activated feelings to be sustained, the contact must be frequent and pleasant (Merwe and Albertyn, 2009, Lachapelle, 2008). Rahman even emphasised the need for every moment of 'realisation' to be quickly followed by an act of 'empowerment' aligned to goals and approaches that will add to the conscientised feelings. In fact, for the situation to be ideal, it should be worth noting that progression of one activity to the next must not only be made at the lateral level but also at the vertical level signified by accepting the trust of bearing higher responsibilities (see Smith-Ruig, 2008, pg. 27). As exemplified by the MIQ structure, the advancement of previous organising committee members to the role of mentors not only served to enhance the individuals' self-value, it maximises their potential and boosts their motivation to serve the community.

On the other hand, a case study can be presented of how the lack of proper empowerment and ownership may result in creating the wrong kind of 'activists'. One of my life history

interviews was with Azlan, a 25 year-old volunteer with Clubilya. Discovering that he had been giving his time to the organisation since he was 17 years-old, I wanted to gauge how conscientised he had become by enquiring about his motives for volunteering with the NGO. Expecting an answer which reflected an activated mindset, Azlan however provided this simple answer:

“...the only reason for me... is to help him (referring to a particular social worker in the organisation who has become a close personal friend)...He calls me... so I come down...not only me but I think the rest of the guys as well...I think there are about 10 other guys around my age...So he asks me and I come down... So if he isn't there, there wouldn't be any volunteers...”

He clarified that the friendship began when he participated in a community outreach programme supervised by the individual. They have remained friends ever since and in fact, Azlan revealed that the friendship became closer when, as a troubled youth, the staff had provided him with guidance and valuable advice. The individual had made such an impact in the lives of Azlan and his other friends that

“At times, he calls us even though he couldn't be there himself. We'll still come down...but only for his sake.”

The interview thus reveals that despite his many years of voluntary service, Azlan's motivation for performing social work was never attributed to the conscientisation process. If anything, the driving force for his actions has been fuelled by bonds of personal friendship rather than from any critical understanding or inherent motive to do good. Critics may argue that such forms of motivation are better than no form of motivation at all. Nevertheless, this

research points to the fact that a conscientised mind brings with it an inherent strength of commitment to make positive changes to the lives of those it comes into contact with. Albert Bandura's concept of 'collective efficacy' can be applied in this case "where community members consciously take action on behalf of the community or neighbourhood to improve life for the residents when they can see the incentives for doing so" (Gamble and Weil, 2010, pg. 149). These individuals, as such, will be more convincing in playing the part of role models to their charges. What has been missing in Azlan's years of service to the community is undoubtedly a sense of ownership and empowerment to a community effort which could have then led to the conscientisation process taking place making him into a more effective, committed and passionate volunteer helper.

In contrast, a life history interview with one of the founders of AMP gives us an idea of the self-sustaining power of the conscientised mind once individuals have been made to experience a sense of ownership and empowerment when undertaking a community effort. Yang, a professional who is now in his fifties, recalls on how AMP was formed:

"We were a core group which graduated from the University of Singapore at the time. We were then active in the University of Singapore Muslim Society. So we were conscious and very activised. When we graduated, we initially wanted to form some kind of organisation for graduates of the society...If we had formed the alumni then, it would have been the first of its kind - an organisation for Muslim graduates. But by then, we were caught up with our jobs...We were fresh graduates trying to establish our careers. That was in the 1980s...Then there was these series of political controversies that came out. But it took us about four years before we finally took action...The first controversy was in the early 80's and it spread all the way to 1988/9. So we thought we

must do something. We galvanised ourselves and organised the First National Convention of Malay Muslim Professionals which then concluded with the consensus to form AMP by October 1991.”

Today, Yang and his peers are still active in the running of this very successful NGO. Presently, his peers, like him, are slowly handing over the reigns of leadership to the younger generation of office bearers.

#### **7.2.2.1.5. Nature of Leadership Opportunities**

Based on the data mentioned in the previous chapter, the issue of leadership opportunities must also be elaborated and clarified. While the participants provided information on occasions where they gained positive experiences, for example, when taking the helm in organising the nationwide MIQ quiz, the more important consequence is the impact that such opportunities have in creating a conscientised mind. The previous discussion of Azlan’s commitment to voluntary service has made it clear that participation in a community-based activity or attainment of a leadership position will serve no long term benefit to a particular ethnic group if there is no accompanying conviction in ‘collective efficacy’ that drives it. In the list of skills reflected in their article on effective leadership, Riggio and Reichard (2008) highlights three essential traits which, according to this research, can be applied to characterise conscientised leadership. The authors point to

1. ‘Social expressiveness’ which is the ability to communicate verbally and to engage others in social interaction,
2. ‘Social sensitivity’ which comprise not only verbal listening skills, but also a general knowledge of social rules and norms as well as the ability to “read” social situations.

3. 'Social control' which refers to sophisticated social role-playing skills and the use of tact in social situations.

Goleman and Boyatzis (2008) however, insist on a more overarching outlook that sees effective leadership as founded on 'social intelligence' which they define as a set of interpersonal competencies that will inspire others to be effective. They believe that "spending time with a living, breathing model of effective behaviour provides the perfect stimulation for our mirror neurons, which allow us to directly experience, internalize, and ultimately emulate what we observe" (pg. 54).

This correlates with the findings of the research which indicate that an individual's journey towards informed, enlightened and emancipatory leadership was in each case accompanied by the guidance of a mentor. Mentoring is defined as a deliberate pairing of a more skilled or senior person with one who is less skilled or experienced. The more experienced person provides information, advice, leadership, and emotional support guiding the lesser skilled person in growing and developing specific competencies (Roehrig et. al, 2008, Murray, 1991).

John C. Maxwell notes that most leaders became leaders through the influence of another leader (Maxwell, 2007). This is validated by McCloughen, O'Brien and Jackson (2009) whose research on nurse leadership concluded that participants attribute their own experience of being a mentee as contributing to their development as nurse leaders. Their conviction on the effectiveness of this approach has even made them open to using their energies to mentor others for this specific purpose.

Mentoring is thus identified as an important catalyst in the development of future leaders and enhancement of leadership skills (Bozeman and Feeney, 2008, Henry 2010). Other writers

such as Grossman (2007) view mentorship as a critical component for the preparation of leadership roles and leadership succession.

The mentor's task is to act as a role model while at the same time to provide the protégé with honest feedback. In order to guide the protégé to determine the correct course of action, the mentor constantly questions and seeks clarification on the desired objective for every action decided upon by the appointed leader. However, it is crucial that the mentor never make decisions for the protégé (Boldra et. al, 2008). When describing how they became better persons because of the chance to take on a leadership position, Rahman and Ida emphasised not so much on the sense of achievement they felt at the conclusion of their efforts, but on the process of being mentored by their seniors. No doubt the seniors were, in Rahman's words, "very irritating" especially since they were made to defend and justify every one of their decisions because of the latter's constant challenges, the process nevertheless heightened their resolve and conviction of their personal strengths, abilities and responsibilities as a member of their community. Just like the subjects in McCloughen, O'Brien and Jackson's (2009) research, they valued the outcome so much that they now consciously take up the role of being a mentor to their juniors whenever an opportunity arises.

At a much younger age and at a less conscious level, Rashid, the Clubilya respondent had similarly described how he was able to distinguish himself as a leader in a school camp because of the positive support he received from his team's instructor. However, apart from his heightened sense of self-esteem, I was not able to detect conscientisation as there was no evidence of self-awareness relating to limitations that can be linked to his status as a member of the Malay-Muslim community. This is perhaps explained in two ways. 1. The 'mentorship' that he received was spontaneous and not part of any specific guidelines or long term

objectives apart from the personal motivations of the instructor. This is evident by the fact that Rashid was not able to recall specific learning outcomes of the activities or their impact on him other than the memory of his interactions with the instructor. 2. For secular-based mainstream academic institutions in Singapore, the official government policy has always been to negate or 'neutralise' links to ethnicity in any of its activities (Quah, 2000). Therefore, the issue of race or any connections to it will have been intentionally downplayed during these occasions. If the camp had been a Malay-focussed community-based programme, it might be expected that some form of conscientisation may have developed even if the mentoring had been haphazard or unplanned.

### **7.2.3. Conclusion: How successful was the capacity building process?**

While the previous section has provided explanations on how specific components of each activity may have evoked feelings of conscientisation within each of the participants, as a whole however, these community outreach programmes do not seem to have had a sustained effect in building up the youths' capacities for critical thinking. When analysing responses relating to the participants' feelings of conscientisation as well as their future aspirations for the community, one can perceive mainly suggestions or statements of intent rather than purposeful decision making, action taking and self-actualisation driven by personal conviction. For instance, Namaz was unable to say for certain that the activities had made him think more critically about the status of his community although he did admit that he now feels himself to be a 'different' kind of Malay. As if to emphasise this, he states his intention to be an educator in the future so that he can further contribute to the community. Ali, the seventeen-year-old student, confessed that he now feels motivated to do well in all that he does. However, this desire is not driven so much for the sake of improving the status of his Malay community but

more because of his love and appreciation of what his parents have done for him. Others such as Kamisah, even, displayed cynicism and scepticism when asked how she can help the Malay community. "...but what can we do? Change years and years of mentality???"

Though probably aided by their maturity in years, the only set of youths who impressed me as being more conscientised is the group of three 'twenty-somethings' comprising Rahman, Sabariah and Ida. It was because of this initial impression that I decided to further conduct a life history interview with Rahman so as to gain a better insight into his motivations in wanting to engage in community work. The responses from the three individuals show that their personal aspirations for the community have been backed up with actions such as organising and participating in interfaith events, volunteering their services in community projects, and becoming earnest mentors to those who seek their guidance. At this juncture, the research indicates that what differentiates the three individuals from the other respondents is the 'thoroughness' of their experiences.

While all the respondents admitted that they had gone through at least one of the five experiential categories identified as enablers of the conscientization process, none were able to declare that they had experienced all except for the three. The closest is perhaps Mastura, a 23 year-old trainee teacher who had previously participated in dialogues, charity projects and interfaith meetings. However, she admitted that she had not had the benefit of taking up leadership positions or in the ownership and delivery of community-based efforts. As such, while the activities in which she had participated in has conscientised her enough to see the need for improvements to the status of the Malay community, the motivation could not be sustained. This is proven when she admitted that due to the clashes which occur because of her present responsibilities, she now feels "kind of detached" from the issues affecting the

community. Nevertheless, she does see the need and intends to arrest the decline in conscientisation by re-immersing herself in activities which will “reinforce, revive and reenergize” her initial sense of activism.

Therefore it can be concluded that, having involved themselves in various community outreach programmes, the perceptions of the participants in this study tell us that capacity building for critical thinking has only been highly successful for a few. To the majority of the respondents, capacity building had not really taken place or at most, taken place only for the short term.

### **7.3. Key Issues Surfaced in this Research**

This section deals with a discussion of several key issues surfaced during the course of this study and their implications for the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore. These include issues such as the role of religious education as well as how the Malay identity is valued in the current social context.

#### **7.3.1. Differing Views on the Role of Islamic Education**

The data collected based on the participants’ responses with regards to their perception of the problems facing the Malays as well as their aspirations for the community indicates a contradiction in the way they see how Islam makes an impact in the lives of its members.

For instance, some respondents attribute the cause of the Malay problem as being due to what they view as an increasing number of Muslims who no longer conform to the requirements of the religion. They provided a variety of factors explaining the reason of this - ‘excessive’ religious demands, misinterpretations of Islamic messages, corrupting influences of modernity stemming from the West. While some of these reasons are more arguable than

others, nevertheless, they can all be linked to comments made regarding the outdated way in which the doctrines of the religion are being reinforced or transmitted by the clerics. This, in turn, relates to the issue of the pedagogy used in teaching the religion. To rephrase what was reiterated by respondents Zainal and Hamdan, there is a general ‘disconnect’ between the teachings of the religious leaders and the larger Malay-Muslim community.

As is explained by Tan (2011) in her article comparing Islamic schools in Singapore and Britain, one of the challenges facing Islamic education is the pedagogical and mental shift for teachers to move from a more teacher-oriented to a more student-centred teaching style. She explains that the dominant pedagogical mode in many Islamic institutions today is listening, memorisation and regurgitation within a teacher-centred learning environment (see Talbani 1996; Eickelman 1985; Zakaria 2008; Tan and Abbas 2009). It has been observed that an impeccable recitation of the Qur’an is so valued that understanding a text or asking questions is perceived to be unnecessary and even impeding successful memorisation in many non-Arabic speaking countries (Zia 2006). Hewer (2001) asserts that such a transmission approach conflicts with a child-centred approach to education and discourages the exercise of individual freedom to maintain a variant synthesis of personal knowledge.

Similarly implied in their article *Defining Islamic Education: Differentiation and Applications*, Douglass and Shaikh (2004, pg. 9) argues that Muslim educators in the U.S. are in favour of a more student-centred approach because “...in order for the youth to live as Muslims in a free society that places few outward constraints on individual behavior, students must truly understand and internalize Islam's principles, beliefs and practices, and learn how to apply them in contemporary society.”

Halstead (2004), whose article focuses on Islamic education in Britain argues that if Muslim children are made to learn the values on which British citizenship is based on in total isolation from the religious precepts which underpin their membership of the worldwide Islamic community, a dichotomy will occur as it results in a deviation of the fundamental Islamic principle of *tawhid* (unity). “To Muslims, there would be a danger in putting the teaching of citizenship before the teaching of religion. The only approach to social education that would appear to be compatible with Islamic principles is to put the religious values at the heart of the educational process for Muslim children, but then to build into the process whatever else they need in order to learn to live, for example, as full British citizens” (Halstead, 2003 cited in Halstead 2004, pg. 524). Such an approach is therefore seen to be more compatible with the application a student-centred pedagogy. Nevertheless, the challenge remains for all faith-based pedagogy in modern society in balancing the need for critical thinking with the constant demand for unquestionable belief which accompanies many forms of religions.

It was therefore not surprising that a sharing session with a group of youths who are participants of the aLIVE programme revealed that they have so enjoyed and benefited from the updated and improved religious modules that they now believe that instilling greater religious knowledge among Muslims is key to resolving the social problems currently plaguing the Malays. This contradiction can perhaps be reconciled by taking into consideration the more positive experiences felt by these respondents in learning about the religion based on the new approach for the teaching of Islamic education initiated by MUIS. In an email reply to my query, a spokesperson for the statutory board has clarified that the aLIVE curriculum was created, among other reasons, to address the issue of content relevance and disconnect. “While the content (previously) taught was accurate, it was found that not all

of them were presented in age and developmentally appropriate manners. A disconnect was found between the cognitive and moral abilities of the child of a particular age and between what was taught which made the child at times feel overwhelmed.” In addition, it was decided that there should be a change in the medium of instruction. “Traditionally, Islamic educational programmes were conducted in the Malay language. While this was found to be effective, it was also noted that many young people prefer to learn in English, which was not widely available then and thus they would have only limited access to these programmes.”

Following these findings, MUIS decided to revamp its existing curriculum and develop a holistic and comprehensive Islamic values education programme, specifically the aLIVE programme, to cater for young people aged 5 to 24 years old to address the gaps within the current educational framework. Nevertheless, while MUIS institutes the aLIVE curriculum to Islamic educational institutions under its administrative purview, the government statutory agency however, has not made the framework mandatory for the numerous privately-run madrasahs in the country. The rationale is that while MUIS plays a supervisory role over all Islamic educational institutions in the country, to simply throw its weight by embarking on legalistic measures to enforce the new curriculum may be tantamount to ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’ as the risk of these institutions rejecting the ‘whole message’ will become greater. In addition, according to the MUIS respondent, “our policy is that we do not want to have only one form or model of Islamic Education (IE) in Singapore as there may be parents or students who benefit from the different models. What we want to encourage is the spirit of continuous improvements, of good standards in IE. This, we feel we can do indirectly by inspiring the private centres to look at their curriculums critically and improve it where

necessary and by public demand. And if they want to use aLIVE, they can always approach us for it”.

There is thus a need for the statutory board to tread lightly and to hopefully lead by example.

### **7.3.2. Malay Identity in Flux**

The study has also picked up on the issue of Malay identity which has become problematic in the current social context. Traditionally, the shape of Malay ethnic identity straddles between established cultural and religious practices but with little attachment made to biological linkages. This point was introduced earlier in this thesis with reference made to Hall’s (1996) preference for the use of the term ‘identification’, rather than ‘identity’. This can be seen also during the sharing sessions where quite a number of the participants were children of mixed heritage families with either one of the parents being non-Malay or with one or both the parents themselves being products of mixed heritage families. In fact, I mentioned previously that on two particular occasions, I came across members of the discussion group who admitted that they did not even possess a trace of Malay blood. One was a Malabar Indian by descent while the other was a set of twin girls who were children of a Chinese mother and an Indian father. Nevertheless, due to reasons such as self-acceptance and practice of the Malay culture and tradition as in the case of the participant who was of Indian origin and adoption by a Malay family as in the case of the mother of the twin girls, the issue of ethnic identity has not posed much of a problem as these characteristics are understood and accepted by all from the community.

However, since the country’s independence, the government of Singapore has put in place an official policy of racial classification in which the individual’s ethnic label is made to follow

that of his or her father. Institutionalized rigidly through the four CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) social-political identities, such a bureaucratization of 'race' is a legacy of the British colonial period. However, it has been re-engineered to serve the 'hard multiculturalism' model under which Singapore has flourished since its dramatic split with Malaysia in 1965 (Vasu, 2008). For instance, by reflecting the person's 'official' race in his or her identity card, a powerful instrument of social control is created through its function as an ethnic identifier (Chua, 2008). Unfortunately, the legislative practice can be said to have a compounding effect on the Malay problem as it either perpetuates the racial stereotypes due to the actions of the few dysfunctional members identified with the community or it alienates a mixed heritage individual who might otherwise play a positive role as a member of the community.

During the sharing sessions, the former is reflected when Salbiah mentioned that

"the Malays today...they want to 'break the law' but they do not want to be identified as a non-Muslim...They still want to have the label..."

The latter is highlighted by Ima's apology

"..I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm very sorry...It's horrible but its true...But to be completely honest I'm quite happy to be able to say 'Oh, I'm not completely Malay'. So sometimes, I hide away from that fact...But I am and I know that no identification card is going to change that so I don't know...You can't help it."

Social identity theory argues that the desire for positive self-concepts drives individuals to attain membership in groups reflecting high social status. This favourable self-concept is enhanced when, compared to other groups, a positive distinctiveness is created between one's

own group and relevant out-groups (Hornsey, 2008). Ima, whose 'Indian' label in her identity card originates from a great-grandfather on her father's side who was married to a Malay, is thus motivated to align herself with what she perceives to be a higher status group. This is highlighted by Turner (1999) who suggests that members of low status groups may resort to strategies such as physically or psychologically leaving the group in favour of a higher status group. The corollary of such actions is that it leaves the lower status group with even less resource to improve its condition.

Nevertheless, changing social contexts are now leading the Malay community to come to crossroads as to how their ethnic identities should be shaped. This point was alluded to earlier in this thesis when a discussion was made on Bordieu's assertion that life "is itself in flux and undergoing incessant transformations" (Reed-Danahay, 2005, pg. 62). In the case of the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore, this helps to explain why only minute incremental changes can be observed, until, hopefully a convergence of circumstances leads the community to a 'tipping point' where it undergoes the much hoped-for process of transformation.

Giddens' explanation of reflexivity reinforces this notion. He implies that the demands of living in a radically and rapidly changing world results in one's identity to be in a state of flux. As such, it needs constant monitoring and possible revision. Similarly, one's direction in life is likely to be in flux (Giddens, 1991). Richardson et al. (2009, pg. 65) further elaborates on Giddens' perspective

“While people have always constructed their lives in changing worlds, the nature and the pace of change in contemporary times is qualitatively different from previous ages.

For example, the relation between space and time and the nature of communication have been radically altered by the globalizing tendencies of modernity. This kind of change requires a constant self-monitoring and processing of experience that he refers to as a reflexive processing of experience. Giddens is saying that people have to constantly check into, think about, and evaluate their social interactions and experience. In Giddens' work, this reflexivity is essential for the ongoing project of the self."

These concepts thus help to explain why the research has revealed a rise in divergent identities among the Malay-Muslim respondents. Apart from the social distance created by a divisive government policy, the research has also picked up on the consistent 'I/We versus You' sentiments such as Ali's exasperated "That's why I'm disappointed...like there's no reason for them not to do that (i.e. do better for themselves) or Rahman's criticism of "...the absence of seeking excellence in all that they do".

The rise in diverging identities in the Malay community has made more definable the social hierarchy existing within the ethnic group. Unfortunately while hierarchy serves the function of establishing order, facilitating coordination and motivating individuals, it tends to be self-reinforcing and inevitably divisive. However, according to Dovidio, Saguy and Shnabel (2009, pg. 431), studies have shown that "groups whose members have well-defined, accepted, and complementary roles are better able to manage scarce resources (Harris, 2006), more effective in routine activities (Peterson, Mitchell, Thompson, and Burr, 2000), and better able to respond to unexpected situations (Firestone, Lichtman, and Colamosca, 1975). All members potentially benefit from these coordinated efforts. An effective structure that facilitates group performance and success, and brings associated rewards and resources to the group, would seem likely to be quite stable."

The community must therefore agree on a compromise so that an environment can be created where it becomes feasible for the different roles to co-exist. Such a concession should be more acceptable to the community as the reverse can only be the formation of a tense and hostile atmosphere due to the forced sharing of a potentially constrictive identity. The Malay identity, or rather lack of concrete identity, will remain a core issue to be tackled.

### **7.3.3. Negotiating the Political ‘Minefield’**

While the findings of this research may be able to contribute to a better understanding of how programmes can be designed with the specific objective of building up Singapore Malay-Muslim youths’ capacities for critical thinking, there remains an important issue of whether such programmes will be able to navigate around the political minefield that is Singapore. As mentioned in previous chapters, the administrative and legal infrastructure of the country clamps down on activities which are deemed to have a destabilising effect on the nation’s economy especially if it originates from challenges to the country’s political stability and racial harmony (Chew, 2000, pg. 20). As illustrated by the shutdown of Fateha.com and AMP’s previous run-in with the ruling government, the need to carry out emancipatory and transformatory approaches to community education must be accomplished without any perceived threats in the eyes of the authorities in the current climate.

Nevertheless, rather than resorting to threats (in essence, the use of hard law) or financial incentives (bribes) the Singapore government prefers to utilise the use of ‘soft power’ which is the ability of a political entity to obtain what it wants by virtue of being an attractive model (Nye, 2004). In the context of Singapore society, “this means the government can use soft law to attract, socialize, and co-opt the citizenry, especially the minority Malay-Muslim community, on the imperative of ensuring that religion is not abused to sow discord, conflict

and violence. These attributes of soft law may facilitate the socialization, the formation of consensual knowledge, and a shared understanding” (Tan, pg. 356). Therefore, apart from the actions taken against these two organisations, the government has not had any reasons to place a heavy hand on the activities of Malay/Muslim Organisations in Singapore. In fact, it has been very supportive of programmes which is clearly welfare-oriented in their objectives such as the ones managed by Clubilya and the Ain Society.

However, studies reveal that hierarchical relations systematically lead to different preferences and strategies for members of advantaged groups, specifically those who are motivated to maintain the status quo, and for members of disadvantaged groups, who desire to alter the status quo to improve their group’s position. These different motivations create tension which can possibly escalate into conflict. Ironically, the same studies also reveal that such conflicts may result in a benefit for the group or society as a whole. Allowing for the disadvantaged group’s voice to be heard, even at the expense of what seems to be a temporary loss of intergroup cooperation, may, in the long run, create a reservoir of distinct resources and perspectives upon which the society may draw in times of need. (Davidio et al., 2009, pg. 435). The authors further advised that “organizations and individuals should not be afraid of conflict when it arises or of the externalization of the differences in identities. Policies based on the denial of differences (e.g., “color-blind” policies) are often motivated by a desire to avoid conflict (Schofield, 1986). These policies can prevent both sides from expressing their authentic identities, thus reducing the chances for a genuine intergroup dialogue and consequent exchange of ideas. The active denial of these issues may result in an increased anxiety and decreased performance as cognitive resources are exerted and ultimately depleted

in efforts to avoid recognition of group differences (Shelton et al., 2006). “There are greater long-term benefits for managing the conflict than for avoiding it” (ibid, pg. 442-443).

Such visions of an ideal, however, are not shared by the leaders of the country. The concept of ‘good citizenry’ in Singapore is linked to the principal of harmony, characterised by collectivism and a strong interventionist government (Tan, 2008). It is a form of civic republicanism which focuses on passive, responsible, rule-abiding citizenship (Hill and Lian, 1995; Gopinathan and Sharpe 2004) with the government playing an intrusive role in the economy and society (Wee, 2001; Asad, 2006).

Unless there is a shift in the political environment, any programme which is to be formulated based on the findings of this research will need to take into consideration these limitations. This unfortunately forbodes what may be a daunting task as political awareness and social action remains a key component of emancipatory and transformatory education. Nevertheless, it is not an impossibility as responsible and ethical thinking, both components of the critical thinking process, can be equally emphasised.

#### **7.4. Conclusion**

This chapter’s discussion indicate that based on the experiences shared by the respondents, various components of community outreach programmes have been identified as having the ability to build up their participants’ capacities for capacity building via the conscientisation process. However, for the majority, these have had no lasting effects as what they underwent were only piecemeal and one-off experiences of which some were not even in an emancipatory frame. The feedback from the three very experienced youth activists however, tells us that a more sustained and holistic approach is required.

In addition, three themes have been mentioned as issues arising from the evaluation of the data. These must be considered when formulating the recommendations which will be disclosed in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **8.1. Introduction**

This concluding chapter of the thesis begins with a recapitulation of the study's findings via a revisiting of the Research Questions. It then attempts to evaluate the research process by recalling the various opportunistic moments which helped shape the research outcome's successes. This self-analysis then goes a step further by reflecting on the limitations faced in the conduct of the research.

The next segment of the chapter evaluates the various ways in which the findings of this research can be applied towards formulating a plan to build up Singaporean Malay-Muslim youths' capacity for critical thinking before proposing what I see as a viable alternative.

It ends with a discussion of the various areas for improvements (AFIs) in which similar research can be better conducted as well as the other related areas in which this particular research can be extended in the future.

#### **8.2. Revisiting the Research Questions**

The research findings can be summarised by answering the Research Questions stated earlier in this thesis:

##### **8.2.1. General Research Questions**

What are the personal experiences of Malay-Muslim youths participating in community outreach programmes? Do these result in them being conscientised about the status of their

ethnic group? Do such experiences serve to build up their capacity for thinking more critically of themselves and their role in the Malay-Muslim community?

#### **8.2.1.1. Specific Questions**

- i. How do Malay-Muslim youths perceive their community and their places in it?
  - a. To what extent are there feelings of pride, frustration, disappointment or disdain shown by the respondents?

Depending on the topics discussed during the sharing sessions, the respondents expressed a mixture of all four emotions relating to their perception of the Malay-Muslim community. For instance, while there was mention of pride in the way Malays are seen to be a close-knit community, negative emotions such as frustration at the Malays' perceived lack of motivation, disappointment with the community's general underachievement and disdain over what is considered to be the wrong kind of priorities was also reflected. These feelings were especially voiced by members who sense themselves as no longer being 'trapped' by the situations that they are in. In consequence, a flux in the Malay identity can be seen to be arising from this phenomenon. Specifically, it relates to issues of divergent or conflicting identities highlighted by the 'I/We versus You' sentiments in the participants' responses. In the case of mixed heritage individuals however, the preference is to take up the identity of their other ethnic group which is seen to be more successful than the Malays. Either way, this leads to a decreased attachment to the community leaving the lower status group with even lesser resources to improve its situation.

- ii. What changes did the youths see in themselves as a result of their participation in the programmes?

- a. To what extent was there rejection or refusal of prevailing ideas, beliefs and concepts?
- b. To what extent has there been receptivity and accommodation of new ideas, beliefs and concepts?

The findings show that the Malay-Muslim youths who participated in community outreach programmes generally gained positive learning experiences from the activities. These were typically reflected in the form of an increased sense of personal value and fulfilment gained because of the interaction or accomplishments made during these programmes. Apart from two respondents who reported that they did not see or feel any changes in themselves, the majority agreed that because of the experiences that they had undergone, they have become more aware of the need to improve the status of the Malay-Muslim community of which they are part of.

To this extent, the research recognizes prevailing ideas, beliefs and concepts which, when viewed from the perspective of negative mental models, may inhibit the individual's ability to think rationally, objectively and critically. While the study suggests that **positive** mental models may benefit members of an ethnic community because of their inherent motivational value, **negative** mental models however, lead to the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy making it difficult for an ethnic group to progress. The data in this research unfortunately reflects that such negative models are prevalent in the worldview of the Malay-Muslim minority group in the country. If the respondents in the study can be taken to be representative of the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore, the data does indicate that some members of the community are successfully rejecting these negative mental models and are aspiring to improve themselves and their Malay-Muslim community. However, the study nevertheless suggests that predominantly, members of the ethnic group are sustaining many negative ideas, beliefs and concepts and these have

further reduced their motivation to strive and enhance the status of the community in whichever way they can.

Based on the analysis of the data collected, the Malay-Muslim respondents in this study have benefited from their participation in community outreach programmes as they have become receptive to new ideas, beliefs and concepts such as the need to be more accommodating to the views and perspectives of those who are not from their ethnic community or their faith. However, when it comes to ideas, beliefs and concepts which challenge their status quo such as their right for fair treatment, non-discrimination and equal access to resources, many of these Malay-Muslim youths remain unmoved and unconvinced that they have a role to play in the social process.

- iii. How were new ideas, beliefs and concepts presented during these sessions experienced, interpreted and rationalized by these participants?
  - a. What was the environment in which the exchange of ideas took place?
  - b. To what extent was there active communication?
  - c. To what extent did the subsequent decision-making process take place in an open and well-informed manner?

According to the analysis of the data collected, to some extent, effective communication and exchange of ideas occurred during occasions which allowed for the emancipation and empowerment of the participants. These occasions presented themselves in five specific experiential categories:

1. When there were *effective dialogue* and *continuous reflection* taking place.
2. When *reflexive learning* took place as part of the *experiential process*.

3. When *ethnically non-exclusive* programmes were carried out to create opportunities for the development of *intersubjectivity and interculturality*.
  4. When *empowerment and ownership* of a community project was endowed, recognized and opportunities for *progression* catered for.
  5. During opportunities where *leadership* was practised and accompanied by *mentors* who also act as role models.
- iv. How were the programmes enacted?
- a. Was the approach taken perceived by the participants as appropriate for building capacities for critical thinking?
  - b. What can participants suggest as improvements to these programmes?

The data collected reflects that most community outreach programmes studied had the potential for building capacities for critical thinking via the conscientisation process. However, as piecemeal efforts, they did not generally have lasting effects in sustaining or enhancing the critical thinking capacity of Malay-Muslim youths. The experiences of three youth activists, however, suggests that what will be helpful is for Malay-Muslim youths to undergo a series of emancipatory and transformatory encounters involving five identified experiential categories which, holistically, may lead to a process of conscientisation. In these three youths, such experiences increased their capacity to think more critically about the status of their community. Subsequently, they were activated into wanting to achieve progress for the community - both by improving themselves as individuals as well as by being part of a collective effort to raise the profile of the ethnic group.

The participants suggested that the venues where such programmes are to be conducted be properly evaluated so as to maximise youth participation. A few, in fact, questioned the value of organising such activities in Islamic affiliated institutions because of the stigma attached to such venues by those who are less religiously inclined. A further suggestion was made that such programmes be conducted in mainstream schools so as to easily capture the available pool of targeted participants, specifically the Malay-Muslim students of the schools themselves. The respondents also agreed that such programmes should be made interactive so as to sustain the attention and interest of youths. However, they differed in their suggestions on the approach to take for the conduct of these activities, with some preferring a physical outdoor setting while others opting for serious and open classroom-based discussions.

There was also mention of the need for pedagogy relating to religious instruction to be made more current so as to capture the youths' focus and understanding of Islamic doctrine in the current social context.

The respondents also asked for smaller group learning sessions to be organised as compared to large scale activities such as public seminars and open forums. This is because they felt that such events sets for a more personal approach and therefore will be effective in engaging its participants as compared to the current trends.

Lastly, there was a request that activities which had clearly shown benefit to the participants be retained and repeated for the subsequent cohort instead of discarded after only a one-time undertaking.

### **8.3. Possible limitations of the research**

This section attempts to examine and acknowledge challenges to the validity of the findings by highlighting areas which may be perceived as weaknesses in the research process. It then either attempts to provide rationales for accepting these limits or to explain the strategies implemented to overcome them.

#### **8.3.1. Sampling and Representativeness of the Data**

As already mentioned earlier in this thesis, this research is seen as a timely and opportunistic affair as it came about during a period seen by Malay community leaders as an ethnic group 'crisis'. However, while access to information was forthcoming, a persistent challenge faced in this research has been coordinating group sharing sessions due to the individual schedules of each of the respondents. This has resulted in countless situations where meetings had to be rescheduled, venues changed and the actual group size becoming smaller due to last minute withdrawals. It is however, fortunate that the diversity of the respondents in terms of their age, gender, education and socio-economic backgrounds was retained.

Robson (2007, pg. 266) mentions that "the exigencies of carrying out real world studies can mean that the requirements for representative sampling are very difficult, if not impossible, to fulfil". He highlights this as an ever-present weakness in research work but points out however that "the larger the sample, the lower the likely error in generalizing" (ibid, pg. 261). This comment refers to the phenomenon of 'sampling error', a term describing "the difference between a sample and the population from which it is selected" (Bryman, 2008, pg. 87). Robson explains that "this slippage between what you have and what you want causes problems with representativeness" (ibid, pg. 266). In the case of the research, this may posit grave concerns as participants had voluntarily offered their time to be involved in this study.

It connotes that the sample was self-selecting meaning that these individuals may be particularly interested in such issues and therefore have not been typical in their responses.

This study, however, tries to pre-empt such obstacles by following Cohen, Manion and Morrison's advice that every element of the research "not be arbitrary but planned and deliberate, and that...the criterion of planning must be fitness for purpose" (2007, pg. 117). Therefore, not only has the sampling been purposely selected from the pool of volunteers to ensure a high degree of representativeness within the Malay community, there were also attempts to gather contrasting data from respondents who are non-Malays as a means of comparison. For example, a circle sharing session conducted with a group of Chinese students as well as the life-history interview with an Indonesian-Chinese student who is herself a member of a minority ethnic group in her own country serves to validate the argument that mental models play a significant part in the 'cognitive health' of an ethnic community. In addition, through the use of triangulation, the data collated has been rigorously compared, supported and verified. According to Denzin (1978), triangulation will result in either of three outcomes: convergence, inconsistency, and contradiction. Regardless of the outcome that finally prevails, the researcher will then be in a position to construct superior explanations of the observed social phenomena. "The bias inherent in any particular data source, investigations, and methods will be cancelled out when used in conjunction with other data sources, investigations and methods" (ibid, pg. 14). These safeguards will therefore ensure that there is the convergence of truth in the phenomena identified in the research.

### **8.3.2. Lost-in-Translation Issues**

An issue relating to culture-language relationships and the search for equivalency of meaning in translated words (Jagosh, 2009) emerged during the process of transcribing the data

collected for this research. The research attempts to overcome such problems by utilising the standard technique of back-translation in which the data is first recorded in the source language, translated into the target language, and then retranslated into the source language to ensure accuracy (Brislin et al., 1976; Werner and Campbell, 1970). Nevertheless, it is still felt that the concern over linguistic discrepancies has never been fully resolved. These lingering doubts can perhaps be better understood by elaborating on Mullen's (1995) emphasis that equal importance be placed on both translation and calibration in the conduct of cross-cultural research. Mullen explains that while translation involves finding equivalency between source and target languages, calibration explores whether a word has the same placement or weight in the linguistic field of the target language as the source language.

For instance, in this research, the Malay jargon '*lepak*' was often mentioned in the responses provided by the Malay youths. Directly translated, the term can be taken to mean 'to be laid back', 'to loiter', 'to hang out' or 'to loaf around'. However, in the context of Singapore Malay community, the word emphasises much more than just its literal meaning. It signifies the existence of a subculture where its younger, less achieving members display non-conformist attitudes as a mark of identity. Naturally, to the rest of the Malays in the community, the term carries with it much embarrassment and disgrace. To the less sympathetic non-Malays however, it becomes a trait stereotyped with the ethnic group and made subject to scorn and ridicule. Thus, the tone of derision and disappointment in the responses can be better empathised by the reader if it can be ensured that the full meanings of such words are not 'lost in translation'.

### **8.3.3. Overcoming the ‘Halo’ Effect**

While the diversity in the backgrounds of the respondents may enhance the representativeness of the research outcome, the authenticity of the data however may come into question as a consequence of the ‘Halo’ effect. The popular understanding of the Halo effect is that of the human tendency to positively correlate good attributes along one dimension with good ones along another. For instance, if we judge someone as relatively friendly, we also tend to see this same person as being relatively competent (Rosenberg et.al, 1968 cited in Yzerbyt et. al, 2008, pg. 1111). Unfortunately, the argument also applies to the reverse with some stereotyped groups in danger of being prejudged negatively on their attributes. In this study, the focus group discussions, circle sharing sessions and observations of activities were conducted across a wide spectrum of youths – from groups of individuals labelled as ‘high-risk’ to their more successful peers seen to be at the pinnacle of youth achievement. In such contexts, doubts on the validity of the data collected may be raised as there may be suspicion of the ‘Halo’ effect having had an impact on the researcher especially during the data collection exercises involving groups considered to be part of the lesser achieving members of mainstream Malay society. Nonetheless, it must always be noted that I am aware and mindful of the phenomenon and had constantly sought feedback from my peers and supervising academics. In addition, there has been constant ‘reflection-in-action’ (Schon, 1983, pg. 128) during the conduct of data collection. According to Yanow and Tsoukas (2009, pg. 1340), “Such reflection takes place ‘in the moment’, in a way that decreases its chronological–physical separation from action...such that reflection can usefully be said to take place in the midst of action”. This reflexive practice allows for me to spontaneously adjust my responses in pursuit of a more collaborative exchange thus ensuring that I engage in constant, responsive and honest interaction.

#### **8.3.4. Subjectivity and the Research Design**

While it has been stated that this research falls under the interpretive paradigm, it can also be declared, upon closer analysis, to be constructivist in nature due to the fact that there could have been as many ‘realities’ as there were participants, including those of the researcher. This viewpoint arises as it can be pointed out that meanings are often jointly constructed by all who are involved in the social transactions taking place within the sphere of the research leading to a subjectivist epistemology (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). In such a paradigm, the researcher’s values are assumed to exist, and even embraced in some cases, making subjectivity an integral part of the research.

This interpretivist-constructivist approach has led to the flexible design strategy being adopted for this research project. Robson (2007, pg. 87) mentions that “a good design framework must have high compatibility with the purposes, theory, research questions, methods and sampling strategy” of a research endeavour. Therefore, in this project, the flexible design is deemed to be more appropriate compared to the fixed design because of its ability to “evolve during data collection” (ibid).

For example, this particular research began with the use of focus group discussions as a means of data collection. However, after several beginning sessions, it was decided that the use of ‘circle sharing’ was preferred in order to ensure equity in responses. This strategy was then successfully carried out in the sessions involving subsequent groups. Nevertheless, it was again realised that the method loses its effectiveness during occasions when very small ‘in-groups’ were involved as the rigidity of the queries and the very short intervals in between the turn-taking hindered the participants from issuing well-thought of responses. In the case of this research, the occasion arose with the group comprising the three youth activists. After an

initial round of questioning with these young adults and realising that they are obviously already very comfortable with each other, it was decided then to revert to the strategy of focus group discussion which then more conducive produced the necessary data.

The use of the thematic content analysis, as mentioned in the methodology chapter, may also cause some uneasiness among critics due to the fact that the researcher interprets data according to his or her subjective perspective. This becomes questionable as it can be asserted that other researchers may just as easily come up with their own alternative interpretations using the same set of data (Sandelowski, 1995). This perceived weakness is compounded by the fact that many interesting points not related to the topic under study often comes up when analysing the data gathered using this approach. At its best, content validation for this method of data analysis will require the use of “a panel of experts to support concept production or coding issues” (Elo and Kyngas, 2007, pg. 111). Unfortunately, this doctoral researcher did not have the luxury of recruiting such a specialised panel. Nonetheless, a measure of success was achieved in initiating dialogue with my supervisor and peers with regards to analysing the data before a decision was made as to the way in which the data are to be labelled. Also, “participant validation involves returning to respondents and asking to carefully read through their interview transcripts and/or data analysis for them to validate, or refute, the researcher’s interpretation of the data” (Burnard et al., 2008, pg. 431). This was initiated on three occasions with a respondent from a group where each method of data collection was conducted. In any case, the protocol of content analysis requires that I constantly keep the research question in mind in the course of my work. In addition, I made sure that I consistently revisit the research tasks and only looked for units of analysis that have relevance to them.

Nevertheless, due to the presence of elements of subjectivity involved in interpreting the data and the perceived inconsistencies in the research design, critics may forward the argument that the researcher's 'lens' has inevitably 'coloured' the findings of this study.

This, however, cannot be seen to be a limitation of this research. The component of subjectivity is deemed to be a necessity as the data collected were typically in the form of words requiring that the research be qualitative rather than quantitative in nature. In essence, while interview transcripts, field notes and observations provide a descriptive account of the study, they do not provide explanations. It is the researcher who has to make sense of the data that have been collected by exploring and interpreting them. Therefore, in order to fully understand the phenomena being studied, the researcher must utilise a range of cognitive tools at his disposal including the use of his own perspectives and judgement to focus on issues such as what knowledge requires our attention, how knowledge is learned, the nature of perceived reality, what values are being transmitted, as well as the historical and socio-political perspectives that individuals bring in to the research. In their discussion of the use of mixed methods research, Creswell and Tashakkori (2007, pg. 305) even cite Greene and Caracelli (1997) who emphasised that researchers have a responsibility to honour real world situations by reflecting the differing worldviews and contradictions, tensions, and oppositions.

It has also been reiterated several times in this thesis that every effort has been made to present a balanced approach to the paradigms and methods in the conduct of this qualitative research. For instance, in the section on 'Personal Context' in Chapter One, I followed Morrow's (2005) advice that qualitative researchers make explicit their worldviews, assumptions, and biases so as to assist the reader in understanding the researcher's stance vis-à-vis the research.

#### **8.4. Creating a Community-Wide Capacity Building Programme**

The findings of this study conclude that in order to effect conscientisation and subsequently ensure that capacity building for critical thinking take place, experiencing the five specific domains will be helpful in impacting the nation's Malay-Muslim youths. Although these findings lie within the same strand as the conclusions reached by notable thinkers such as Freire (1970) and Habermas (1996), it nevertheless supports the literature that the application of these theoretical frameworks vary according to culture, political climate and social circumstances (see Hampton, 2010; De Lissovoy, 2010; Jacobson, 2007). Hence, a natural follow-up from this research will be an exercise to formulate and subsequently introduce a community outreach programme incorporating these five dimensions so as to test their importance and draw on the potential illustrated in the research.

However, during the course of the focus group discussions and circle sharing sessions, the same concerns regarding the duplication of programmes and certainty over the resulting wastage of manpower and resources were surfaced by different groups of respondents. In fact, some participants loyal to a particular organisation even voiced what they perceived to be a sense of distrust and rivalry existing in the other organisations implying the possibility of these other institutions 'sabotaging' or even 'hijacking' their niche programmes. As a consequence, even though the research has been able to isolate and identify elements which may serve the purpose of conscientising and enhancing Singaporean Malay youths' capacity for thinking critically about their role in their ethnic community, seeking these organisations' cooperation and uniting their efforts towards developing and implementing a standardised community-wide training programme may be a very daunting task.

Furthermore, many of these organisations have grown to a stage where they are able to uniquely specialise so as to cater to a specific youth cohort such as those from disadvantageous or dysfunctional families (Ain Society), Youths-on-the-brink-of-success (Clubilya) and youths showing academic potential (Mendaki and AMP). As such, making these organisations commit towards formulating and implementing a standardised programme will fail to do justice to the specific needs of these targeted groups.

This thesis therefore looks for an alternative to such approaches by proposing a less specific but more overarching strategy linked to an inventory of experiences which seek emancipatory and transformatory outcomes. These experiences will hopefully lead to a process of conscientisation thereby ensuring that capacity building for critical thinking takes place. The approach requires that activities which bring about these experiences be first identified and grouped according to the strength of an experiential category which it can be linked to. For example, activities which can be associated with the category of experiential and reflexive learning can include volunteering time in an orphanage or a nursing home while activities linked to the experiential category of intersubjectivity and interculturality can include participating in environmental protection and conservation projects or even intercultural homestay experiences. However, it should be expected that these experiential categories will overlap in a sense that their presence may be inherent in the same activity. For instance, inter-faith meetings or get-togethers can be listed under activities where the encounters relating to dialogue and reflection apply. At the same time, experiences which incorporate elements of intersubjectivity and interculturality can also be said to have been embraced during these same events. In another example, the experiential domains of reflexive and experiential learning, empowerment and ownership, and mentored leadership can apply in activities such

as organising donation drives for charity. Where and to what extent these elements can be experienced however depends on the participant's level of involvement and participation.

In line with the strategy, I propose, therefore, a scheme which employs materials that includes a list which reflects a series of activities attached to an identified experiential category but will differ by not naming specific training programmes managed or conducted by any organisation (Appendices 4 and 5). Modelled after a current nationwide initiative called the National Youth Achievement Award<sup>27</sup>, participants issued with the materials will be presented with incentives to voluntarily undergo and experience community outreach activities which will each have the inherent element/s to fulfil the stated criteria. Completion of the programme is indicated when participants have successfully undergone a series of activities which together covers all the five required experiential categories over a specific period of time such as during the period of their study in junior college or polytechnic. In addition, participants are also required to journal their experiences following the completion of each activity based on a guided framework of probing questions. Apart from proof of their emancipatory and transformatory 'journey', the exercise will simultaneously function as an avenue for self-reflection. Submission of the recorded materials will then entitle them to

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<sup>27</sup> Formed in 1992, the National Youth Achievement Award is administered by the NYAA Council of Singapore. The aim of the Programme is to encourage and motivate young people between the ages of 14 and 25 to develop personal qualities of self-reliance, perseverance and a sense of responsibility to oneself, society and nation. They are expected to undergo selfless community service, challenges of adventure, skills development and physical recreation so that they can develop into exceptional individuals who can contribute effectively to society and nation. Today, the programme has been embraced by schools, Institutes of Higher Learning as well as youth and community-based organizations.

To attain an award, participants are judged on personal achievements measured against original circumstances and potential capabilities. This allows for the less able and disadvantaged to participate on an equal opportunity basis. Upon completion of their individual NYAA programme, participants aspiring for the Bronze, Silver or Gold Awards are required to submit their Award Record Book upon endorsement by the relevant assessors or instructors. In addition, they are also required to submit the NYAA Award Diary where they describe their experiences in undergoing each section of the Award Programme (NYAA, 2011).

rewards such as scholarships, study grants or bursaries for further studies or skills development.

Such an initiative however, will require the setting up of an infrastructure comprising an inter-agency entity serving the administrative and supervisory needs of the scheme. Other forms of logistics will include the creation of serialised personal record books to track the experiences of its participants. More importantly, there will be the need to source for scholarships, grants and bursaries to be awarded to successful participants. I believe that this is definitely a possibility as I was informed by Mendaki and AMP on separate occasions during this research endeavour that they are looking for opportunities to further disburse funds to deserving members of the community. In addition, I previously mentioned that an already established inter-MMO/VWO entity, the Community Leaders Forum (CLF), was created in 2003 to coordinate activities to assist the Malay-Muslim community in its progress. Although consensus will need to be sought from the relevant member bodies, it does seem very possible for the proposed scheme to ride on this organisation and its infrastructure.

## **8.5. Conclusion**

In seeking assistance during the data collection stage of this research, I made presentations on this study's objectives to community leaders and academics who were from both Malay and non-Malay backgrounds. On all these occasions, I received encouragement and support with many citing the significance and importance of the research as it addresses current concerns confronting the Malay community in Singapore. It is thus my greatest hope that the results presented by this study will go a long way towards conceptualising a cognitive framework which will collectively mitigate the negative mental models which have been plaguing the worldview of the Malay community in the nation.

### **8.5.1. Preliminary Efforts and Outcomes**

Late last year, a senior teacher from a prestigious all girls secondary school approached me upon hearing of my research. Being a Malay, she had been assigned by the principal to organise a special motivational programme catered for the Malay students of the school. The general perception among staff in the school was that these very few Malay students, while having initially achieved the required grades to gain entry into the premier institution, have somehow not been living up to their fullest potential. The objective of the programme to be formulated was then to motivate these students so as to level up to the expectations required of them. Although more information was required, I hypothesised that these students may have fallen into the trap of mediocrity due to their prevailing negative mental models of themselves as members of their community. Unfortunately, this occurred just as I was scheduled to leave for my final year of full-time study in this university and thus would be away from Singapore. The best I could help was to draft a proposed list of activities which was in line with the preliminary findings of my research. Sad to say, almost a year has passed but my queries to the school on the progress of the programme have not been answered. I am however, determined to see such a programme taking off and so I will make a personal visit to the school upon my return to my homeland.

In my own personal capacity, I am also currently volunteering my expertise and sharing my research experiences by becoming a member of AMP's Education Advisory Panel. The Panel discusses and provides input in the area of education as the organisation prepares proposals which will be presented during its upcoming convention in mid-2012. I am thus hoping to apply some of my findings into these long term recommendations.

News of this research project has also led to an invitation to share my thoughts on a newly launched strategic collaborative initiative jointly managed by Mendaki and AMP. Known as Praxis, the objective of the programme is “to instil (in youths) greater consciousness, as well as cultivate critical and creative thinking on core issues of the day” (Ali, 2011, pg.1). Based on a preliminary meeting which I had with the organising committee, I believe my participation in this initiative will allow me the means to put my findings into practice. For instance, after giving a presentation of my research, the committee has in principle agreed to formulate a programme which will employ the five required experiential categories that will lead to capacity building for critical thinking. So far, this represents the best opportunity in which a pilot programme can be initiated based on my research.

While the points highlighted in this section do not yet reveal tangible outcomes, it can nevertheless be argued that the findings of this study will potentially reap benefits for the local Malay-Muslim community. Given the opportunity and access to resources, I believe that valuable outcomes can be generated based on the results of this research, especially so given the considerable evidence of interest shown from within the community.

#### **8.5.2. Opportunities For Future Research**

While this research looks at current issues faced by the Malay-Muslim community, the focus has been specifically on the youths within the community. Given enough opportunity and resources, this research should be extended to focus more into the area of family development and parenting skills. In such a research, a different approach and methodology may perhaps be required to achieve the desired outcomes. For example, Casper et al. (2007) points to several approaches in their review of work-family research such as the application of longitudinal and experimental studies. Nevertheless, what is obvious is that for any remedial

action on the community to be effective, it must involve the full spectrum of family life and include all members within the family unit.

An even further extension should look into the taxonomy of skills and experiences required to empower and conscientise, and therefore develop the critical thinking capacity of the Malay-Muslims. This particular study for example, has given indications that the domains of empowerment and ownership, and mentored leadership, while important, appear to be two of the more difficult experiential categories to be encountered by Malay-Muslim youths. By properly identifying the components, sequences and impacts of experiences, priority and resources can then be allocated to these activities. Schemes, such as the one proposed by this research, will thus be made more efficient and productive.

### **8.5.3. My Continuous Academic Development: A Journey in Understanding**

According to Phillips and Pugh (2006, pg. 22), “a holder of a PhD is someone who is recognized as an authority by the appropriate faculty and by fellow academics”. He or she must have “a command of what is happening in (his/her) subject so that (he/she) can evaluate the worth of what others are doing”. Based on such demanding criteria, I see my ‘journey’ as merely beginning even with the completion of this thesis. Nevertheless, clichéd as my sentiments are, the ‘road’ has been tough having embarked in this endeavour after already establishing a stable teaching career with a wife and daughter to be responsible for.

Indeed, my status as a PhD candidate was almost not meant to be when I initially rejected the offer by the university as it was for full-time studies and thus beyond my financial means. Nevertheless, I later made a request to be reconsidered as a candidate for the University’s Split-Site Postgraduate Research Programme. Such ‘sandwich’ programmes, as they are

popularly known, allowed me to remain in my home country while still pursuing my education under the purview of the institution. The one main condition imposed is that I have to spend a specific accumulated period of time onsite in the campus. I argued that this is achievable if I were to take leave from work during my students' holiday periods so as to travel and reside in Birmingham. With the help of my now Supervisor, the University's Admission's Office was persuaded to grant their approval and very soon, the offer letter arrived. The rest, as they say, is history.

Having overcome these initial hurdles, other challenges later cropped up. I began to experience what writers such as Hockey (1994, cited in Park, 2005, pg. 199) pointed out as personal challenges such as intellectual solitariness, professional and social isolation, new work organisation requirements as well as anxieties concerning time and productivity, intellectual life, and supervision.

However, I am thankful that this journey has been made easier with the help of an understanding family, a supportive mentor and supervisor, loyal friends as well as the patience and understanding shown whenever assistance is asked for and rendered by the university's support staff. Furthermore, the learning has been further reinforced by my interactions with such diverse groups that form the rich cultural landscape of Birmingham student life where this doctoral programme is based. The research has made me a much better person as there is now a personal conviction of the need for tolerance and understanding among people of different backgrounds, cultures and origins.

In conclusion, I have to acknowledge that this research has been instrumental in shaping my own transformation into a 'New Malay' – something that I hope members of my own

community will aspire to be. As I stated in a recent publication about my experiences, “I now walk the talk and in doing so, I hope others will too” (Juhari, 2011, pg. 62).

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## Appendix 1

### Bloom's Taxonomy: The Five Levels in the Affective Domain

Category	Example and Key Words (verbs)
<p><b>Receiving Phenomena:</b> Awareness, willingness to hear, selected attention.</p>	<p><b>Examples:</b> Listen to others with respect. Listen for and remember the name of newly introduced people.</p> <p><b>Key Words:</b> asks, chooses, describes, follows, gives, holds, identifies, locates, names, points to, selects, sits, erects, replies, uses.</p>
<p><b>Responding to Phenomena:</b> Active participation on the part of the learners. Attends and reacts to a particular phenomenon. Learning outcomes may emphasize compliance in responding, willingness to respond, or satisfaction in responding (motivation).</p>	<p><b>Examples:</b> Participates in class discussions. Gives a presentation. Questions new ideals, concepts, models, etc. in order to fully understand them. Know the safety rules and practices them.</p> <p><b>Key Words:</b> answers, assists, aids, complies, conforms, discusses, greets, helps, labels, performs, practices, presents, reads, recites, reports, selects, tells, writes.</p>
<p><b>Valuing:</b> The worth or value a</p>	<p><b>Examples:</b> Demonstrates belief in the</p>

<p>person attaches to a particular object, phenomenon, or behavior. This ranges from simple acceptance to the more complex state of commitment. Valuing is based on the internalization of a set of specified values, while clues to these values are expressed in the learner's overt behavior and are often identifiable.</p>	<p>democratic process. Is sensitive towards individual and cultural differences (value diversity). Shows the ability to solve problems. Proposes a plan to social improvement and follows through with commitment. Informs management on matters that one feels strongly about.</p> <p><b>Key Words:</b> completes, demonstrates, differentiates, explains, follows, forms, initiates, invites, joins, justifies, proposes, reads, reports, selects, shares, studies, works.</p>
<p><b>Organization:</b> Organizes values into priorities by contrasting different values, resolving conflicts between them, and creating an unique value system. The emphasis is on comparing, relating, and synthesizing values.</p>	<p><b>Examples:</b> Recognizes the need for balance between freedom and responsible behavior. Accepts responsibility for one's behavior. Explains the role of systematic planning in solving problems. Accepts professional ethical standards. Creates a life plan in harmony with abilities, interests, and beliefs. Prioritizes time effectively to meet the needs of the organization, family,</p>

	<p>and self.</p> <p><b>Key Words:</b> adheres, alters, arranges, combines, compares, completes, defends, explains, formulates, generalizes, identifies, integrates, modifies, orders, organizes, prepares, relates, synthesizes.</p>
<p><b>Internalizing values</b> (characterization): Has a value system that controls their behavior. The behavior is pervasive, consistent, predictable, and most importantly, characteristic of the learner. Instructional objectives are concerned with the student's general patterns of adjustment (personal, social, emotional).</p>	<p><b>Examples:</b> Shows self-reliance when working independently. Cooperates in group activities (displays teamwork). Uses an objective approach in problem solving. Displays a professional commitment to ethical practice on a daily basis. Revises judgments and changes behavior in light of new evidence. Values people for what they are, not how they look.</p> <p><b>Key Words:</b> acts, discriminates, displays, influences, listens, modifies, performs, practices, proposes, qualifies, questions, revises, serves, solves, verifies.</p>

## Appendix 2

### Details of participants involved in the sharing sessions

S/no.	Group S/no.	Pseudonym	Age	Education Level
<b>Organisation: Clubilya</b>				
1.	1.	Azlan	25	GCE 'O' Levels (Volunteer Facilitator)
2.	2.	Maria	16	Currently in ITE
3.	3.	Sasha	17	Currently in ITE
4.	4.	Murni	17	Currently in ITE
5.	5.	Bibi	21	Currently in ITE
6.	6.	Indra	16	Currently in ITE
7.	7.	Salleh	16	Currently in 'N' levels
8.	8.	Hamid	16	Currently in ITE
9.	9.	Shafee	14	Currently in Sec. 3
10.	10.	Rashid	16	Currently 'N' levels
11.	11.	Zain	15	Not schooling
12.	12.	Khalid	16	Currently in yr 2 ITE
13.	13.	Izzat	17	Currently in yr 2 ITE
14.	14.	Arif	15	Currently in 'N' levels
15.	15.	Mahmood	17	Currently in 'N' levels
16.	16.	Aqil	17	Currently in ITE
17.	17.	Salim	16	Currently in ITE
18.	18.	Zaki	15	Currently in yr 1 in ITE
19.	19.	Ramli	16	Currently in ITE
<b>Organisation: Ain Society</b>				
20.	1.	Azah	20	GCE 'O'
21.	2.	Ali	18	GCE 'O'
22.	3.	Zubaidah	18	Undergrad
23.	4.	Arshad	21	Primary
<b>Organisation: MUIS (Youth aLIVE participants)</b>				
24.	1.	Aminah	18	GCE 'A'
25.	2.	Lila	17	Poly Dip.
26.	3.	Nora	17	GCE 'A'
27.	4.	Ahmad	21	GCE 'A'
28.	5.	Arman	20	Poly Dip.
29.	6.	Dollah	19	ITE
30.	7.	Ella	18	GCE 'A'
<b>Organisation: ACS(Independent) – 2009 cohort</b>				
31.	1.	Izah	17	IB Yr 1
32.	2.	Ani	17	IB Yr 1
33.	3.	Haron	17	IB Yr 1
34.	4.	Heri	17	IB Yr 1
35.	5.	Zaini	17	IB Yr 1
36.	6.	Mimi	17	IB Yr 1
<b>Organisation: ACS(Independent) - 2010 cohort</b>				

37.	1.	Danial	17	IB Yr 1
38.	2.	Ali	17	IB Yr 1
39.	3.	Imran	17	IB Yr 1
40.	4.	Ima	17	IB Yr 1
41.	5.	Norma	17	IB Yr 1
<b>Mosque Youth Group and Group of 4 Girlfriends</b>				
42.	1.	Kamisah	18	IBDP
43.	2.	Salbiah	18	GCE 'A'
44.	3.	Nadiah	18	IBDP
45.	4.	Fatimah	18	IBDP
46.	5.	Malik	29	Madrasah
47.	6.	Zain	17	Madrasah
48.	7.	Hamdan	25	Poly Dip.
49.	8.	Mastura	18	GCE 'A'
50.	9.	Mashita	18	GCE 'A'
<b>Mixed-Youth Group</b>				
51.	1.	Mastura	23	Graduate Trainee Teacher
52.	2.	Zaiton	17	GCE 'A'
53.	3.	Minah	17	Undergraduate
54.	4.	Ahmadi	20	GCE 'A'
55.	5.	Namaz	20	GCE 'A'
56.	6.	Zainal	20	GCE 'A'
<b>Youth Activists</b>				
57.	1.	Sabrina	26	Graduate
58.	2.	Ida	24	Graduate
59.	3.	Rahman	25	GCE 'A'
<b>ACS(Independent) – Non-Malay/Muslim Group – 2010 cohort</b>				
60.	1.	Christina	17	IB Yr 1
61.	2.	Helen	17	IB Yr 1
62.	3.	Jenny	17	IB Yr 1
63.	4.	Anna	17	IB Yr 1
64.	5.	Lim	17	IB Yr 1
65.	6.	Henry	17	IB Yr 1
66.	7.	Jason	17	IB Yr 1
67.	8.	David	17	IB Yr 1
68.	9.	Min-Min	17	IB Yr 1
69.	10.	Lee	17	IB Yr 1
70.	11.	Eric	17	IB Yr 1
<b>Life History Interview (Senior Activist)</b>				
71.	1.	Yang (Real name)	54	M.A.
<b>Life History Interview (Youth Volunteer)</b>				
72.	1.	Azlan	25	GCE 'O'
<b>Life History Interview (Youth Activist )</b>				
73.	1.	Rahman	25	GCE 'A'
<b>Life History Interview (Indonesian-Chinese Student)</b>				
74.	1.	Ery	18	IB Yr 1

## **Appendix 3**

### **Sample Interview Transcript**

Wednesday, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2010

Circle Session with a group of 5 Yr 1 IBDP students, aged 17 year-olds.

(Conducted in my house during the Muslim Eid celebrations)

#### **Researcher:**

Tell us your name, current class and your previous school. Then, what makes you a typical Malay and what makes you a unique or special Malay?

#### **Danial:**

I'm Danial. I'm from 5.11. I've been pretty much in ACS my whole life – primary, independent (sec), and independent (IB) again...A true blue ACSian. What makes me a typical Malay? I don't think I'm much of a typical Malay though. Even if I am...I guess to a very little extent, lah. I guess Malays like to enjoy life a lot and I guess it's something we have in common. But I see myself more other than biologically, I see myself more as an untypical Malay so to speak because I have a very different mindset from the typical Malay and I value different things in life. And with all due respect to them most of them do not value education and a lot of things which I personally hold in quite high regards. So ya, I'm quite fundamentally different from them in terms of thinking and perspectives of life.

#### **Researcher:**

...but you're answering both though...cos you're saying that you're not a typical Malay...

#### **Danial:**

Ya I'm not a typical Malay...

**Ali:**

I'm Ali from 5.11, ya. I wasn't from ACS in primary school but I came to ACS in sec 1.. umm.. ok a typical Malay..aaahh.. Ok, I think from the vibes that I get from my friends...the definition for Malay it is like lifestyle..umm..housing, family...like number of members..like...like...size..education..umm most would say big..and education level...perception of a Malay..ya.. So to me...that's how people perceive what a Malay is... For me a typical Malay would be like what he said...like how we value life. I think it really depends on the individual like...umm also very much depends on the mindset. It brings in the question of nature versus nature. Like ummm so what if you are born a Malay. Its how your parents have trained you to think..that's one phase in your life. When you enter another phase in your life, its how you choose to think like..umm there' a point of time where you think about who you want to be and how you want to live your life. I think most Malay children... they like to follow their friends and that's how they view their identity it so much that everyone is the same that's how I see it. Then what makes me unique...umm I think it how my parents brought me up...to question about things around me. Its like...umm they hate it when I become ignorant...not for petty stuff like why the cushion's on the floor and I just walked over it. But stuff like.. how to say it..they make me question, lah. One of the things is like why .. I don't know how to say... like is it being a Malay that stops someone from being successful? That's one of the things. So umm like I think for me is ..kind of nurture...not nature. And umm other things to question are ...that I question myself in fact is religion. Umm...probably ya Theory of knowledge helped, lah..in a sense. The difference is my mindset...I think ya that's what makes me unique.

**Imran:**

I'm Imran, I'm from 5.12. I was in Keming Primary School. Now I'm ACS and now I'm in 5.12. Err...I think a typical Malay is...

**Researcher:**

Its not what you think...its why you think you're a typical Malay...

**Imran:**

I think I'm a typical Malay because I get easily distracted like most Malays...like I'm not a very bad case, lah...Like you know all those 'Reps' out there...the torn sleeves, the floating caps and the skateboards. I think I got very distracted by life and the purpose of life. I think what makes me a typical Malay is that I get very distracted easily and .. I know what my goal is. Its just that I choose not to make it sometimes like out of my own free will. Not because of something stopping me but because I just don't feel like it...like I don't know, just a bit lazy,lah...like a typical Malay. Ahh... what makes me unique is... I'm Dutch...(laughter...) ok, kidding, lah (oh my god...laughter). What makes me unique is ahh is.. I think a typical Malay is like needs so called friends, like you know those types of 'Mats' like need a group of people then they like act damn big gangster. But...I'm not like that I feel like I don't need that many people to back me up. I just need a few good core friends instead of having a lot of friends who run away when the police come, just like a typical Malay. So like I feel like I'm not a typical Malay because in the sense that I choose my friends wisely. And don't follow influences easily, lah. Like I'm not the type who conform to the crowd and stuff because like you can see all the Malays somehow they all dress the same like I don't bother...like I am who I am. I don't care what you think of me and that's how I live life. So ya...

**Ima:**

Hi. I'm Ima Norhimli. I'm in 5.12. I was from Haig girls School (Primary), SCGS Secondary and then I'm in IB now. So what I think makes me a typical Malay is probably be my childhood. Cos err I grew up with my err cos you know how Malays are always very close to their extended family so I grew up in that kind of environment. In a HDB block neighbourhood so I was surrounded very much by family. And my grandmother who brought me up...and she spoke to me in Malay so like back then my Malay

was actually quite good. Then after that I stopped living with her and it became bad...ya so I think also not only my childhood but ermm...the things that... the practices that we do is what makes me Malay... it would be also religion largely cos like you know Hari Raya.. I don't know but I think that's the most Malay thing about me. The fact that I celebrate and I can make 'ketupat' and I make 'kuih raya' so ermm and then also like ermm the cultural things that we do...ahh I think that's what makes me like a typical Malay. Ya, I think what makes me a unique Malay would be the environment that my parents err...bring me up in like ermm you know how...Ok, I don't mean to like make hasty generalisations but what I always see from Malay parents...like for the kids like they tell their kids like oh..don't do that 'nanti jatuh', you know like as in they expect the worse to happen so they tell you to be careful, you know what I mean, like they say...like my grandma especially, she'll go like oh ermm... 'nanti jatuh, ya...' like to all my baby cousins so like as in why would they expect that to happen? My parents don't do that for me. Like they tell me umm just don't think about the negative. If you want something, just do it you know? As in don't even think about falling...cos I don't know...As in why prepare yourself to fall, you know? As in yah...And like, for example that time I was at Pasir Ris. Then we were on the swing so like these little Malay girls came so we had two swings so I gave it up to one of them...then her dad was standing there and her dad was like discouraging her...As in she wanted to do it but then her father was like 'are you sure?'... trying to make her doubt it...like... 'are you sure you can do it?'. So as in I think what makes me a unique Malay would be that my parents and the environment that they bring me up in is that they make me believe that I can do things rather than that I can't. Ya...

**Norma:**

I'm Norma I was from SCGS and now I'm in IB. Ermm I'm not a typical Malay. I'm very detached. Ok..what makes me a typical Malay...I love the Malay culture. I love it when our families gather together. I love it that our family sizes are so large and that the family spirit is there and that's what

makes me happy to be a Malay because of the family that I have and ya...But I'm actually very detached from the Malay culture. I've always been detached like since primary school and like the Malay people and even my family members who are really Malay. Even they know that I'm very detached and that I'm not a typical Malay and its always been like that...And I guess its that way because of the way my parents brought me up...because they didn't want me to be a typical Malay because they were typical Malays and ermm .. umm ...(...laughs and breaks down..) ..sorry..ya..I never addressed this issue before ..(pauses to control herself..) I guess it was difficult for them... ermm...education-wise..both of them didn't even take 'o' levels and I guess they were just scared that ermm whatever constraints that they had on themselves...I will have it also (pause...crying)...I'm sorry..so I guess that they made sure that whatever that was preventing a typical Malay... cos like my mum..she has a big family so she looked at her nieces and nephews and they had financial problems... they had typical family problems like a typical Malay family would have like how their parents would not exactly emphasise on education...She just made sure that it wasn't that way for me and because like everyone else in my family is like a typical Malay and...

**Researcher:**

Are you an only child?

**Norma:**

No, I have a sister. Ya...and so their upbringing was what made me detached and the fact that I went to Singapore Chinese Girls School...ok, like I came from a primary school and they had typical Malays and that was when I realised how different I am and it...but even though we are different, I think there's one thing that holds us together and that is religion like no matter how different I am 'bulan puasa' I am one of them. Ya, so I think that's what makes me...

**Researcher:**

What makes you a SAD Melayu and what makes you a GLAD Melayu?

**Danial:**

Ok ,mine is regarded to be lopsided towards the sad part, lah. But I do have glad parts the thing I like about the Malay community ...

**Researcher:**

But what's the sad part first?

**Danial:**

But I want to do the glad part first...the glad part is as been said before the Malay community is very tight. One time I sat down in a hawker centre and a Malay family sat down beside me and I started talking to him. I don't even know him but I just talked to him...At another time, I broke fast and some random Malay father and son...And I just saw them and said 'hello'. We don't even know each other so that's the good thing and the Malay community is very tight knit although...it might be a bad thing...Though like the families are very close, I have the privilege of being half-Chinese and half-Malay so I know how it feels to be like either...I think my Chinese family is not very tight. Like every Chinese New Year I go to meet them but I don't even know their names. I go like hello...'snigger'... and then they would say hello Danial and I would say 'Hello, Uncle how are you?'...whatever...Basically, I don't know what's happening during the rest of their lives but ok. And they Malay family...I see them like at least once a month. Now my parents don't live with me so I'm even closer to my cousins and my grandmother and grandfather. So the closeness of the Malay family is one good thing that I feel that other races do not have. The sad part ... its quite a long list... Firstly, yah...like I come from a well-off background so I can contrast my situation with that of my cousin and ya...recently there have been a few mishaps in my family. The first one was a long time

ago when my cousin who was one year older than me ended up in court because he stole a motorcycle, got caught for it and he crashed the motorcycle. To make things worse he ended up in hospital so they arrested him in bed. And the irony about that is I feel that the Malays...is that they grow up like that because of nurture. But his mum is herself a university graduate but the son turns out like that which was quite disappointing...and like someone who spoke before me...that I don't really fit in into the Malay family...like compared to my Malay cousins, I am more well-spoken and less 'cool' lah, so to speak. But it doesn't bother me. I am happy with life. Another sad part is the Malay community...there is an disproportionately high crime rate compared to the population rate so that's not too good. It's like they're very productive when doing crime and its like ahh like my cousin... there's another even worse case. It came out in the newspaper recently...my cousin accidentally killed his brother...and ya..it's really unfortunate. But that might not be a typical case but I think that Malays have got a high number of drug related or crime related cases and I think that it can be prevented by...it had not been prevented mainly because of the people they hang out with. Like its obvious when you're young that the people who influence you the most are your parents and your friends. But most of the Malay parents, I'm sorry but they are not very strong and disciplined and so they let their kids run loose. And their Malay friends well, you can call them friends....most of them have like 3 things in their minds – money, cigarettes and later on sex. And therefore they also have high birth rates of which they later cannot support leading to even higher crime rates cos they can't support their own family. Another case was when my another cousin... She was quite like on her way to success, lah...She was like in JC and ya, and one of the forerunners of my family but then she ended up getting pregnant and her life really got affected and she had to drop her studies. I feel sad for the Malay community cos we have potential but we're not using it because we've been brought up...not brought up badly but they weren't properly guided and they prioritise badly.

**Hafidzul:**

Ok umm...I'm sad about the Malay community err...I think ok like apart from all the problems like the high crime rates is... I don't know like for me its why...why malays like why classify them as Malay. Yes they are Malay but that's not why they did that is...is I don't know but its like ...ok a typical Malay right...they.... I think the mindset is very ...you say 'relaxed'... 'lepak'...you know, very ala kadar..I got what I want my kids are ok ok umm I got my ass, my kids are going to school, my wife's at home, I'm earning just enough to feed them. I'm enjoying life. Like...there's no sense of urgency! There's no source of motivation that would bring them to actually like open up like ok what I want to tell them is get real. Its like err the fact that we got no umm sense of urgency ya like 'ala kadar'...its not wrong. Its ok if the condition stays but if everything maintains... like you don't go up and you don't go down...But the reality is that everything's...like the condition is 'merosot' but they don't seem to be doing anything about it. I feel like ...that's why I'm disappointed...like there's no reason for them not to do that. Everyone in Singapore is given the same opportunity like they want to say like whatever it is you can't go for this because you're Malay ...So what? Why let that affect you? There's still other ways for you to actually help your society. I'm just disappointed that they are not doing anything. I don't put it in the sense that I need to help my community? What drives me is the thought that my parents...like they've been doing so much for me, lah. There's just so much that I need to do for them but at the same time 'insyaallah' when I'm up there one day I'm happy with life...and then I just hope that I can actually reach out and not just reach out for the sake of reaching out but to actually make sure that its effective and like create an impact. Like leave a legacy. But my intention is not just to leave a legacy but is to get us out of this misery. I don't know but I think it's a misery and they are not getting themselves out of it. Probably there are organisations here and there that try to reach out. Probably I'm ignorant of what they have been doing but I don't see that it's very effective. Probably

the question lies on how effective it is actually and another thing is how the people who are in need of help are not reaching for help. Like they are just taking things for granted.

**Imran:**

What I'm sad about the Malay community is that people generalise like 'kita sampah masyarakat'. Like, I mean you can't blame them, lah. You go Esplanade like every Saturday evening...The whole stretch is filled with 'Mat Rep' and YPs. People like...I don't know...I mean why must we be the bane of society? Ok I cannot be saying about myself right...but Malays are 15% of the population but 50% of the problems. I mean we can't run away from the fact we are the one causing havoc like...ya lah, I mean like you know recently a Malay guy gangster who got killed in orchard road because he was --- (???) the Japanese team...I mean...like so sad it has to be a Malay. Everytime some stupid thing happen that guy has to be Malay. Oh shit...its not helping...Like why must we continually keep on screwing ourselves over just because we're Malay. And then, the other sad thing is that Malays like the so-called don't see their priorities. Like I've got a bunch of sec 4 friends...I asked them to study for 'o' levels but they said later lah, later...I mean they have no sense of urgency. Like if they know what their priorities are in life they just want to enjoy first and then, I don't know...suffer later. I'm sad lah cos like...ya lah, we're just 'sampah masyarakat'. I'm sad, can't say anymore. But what I'm happy about is 'kita tahu batas'. Even though how screwed up we might be 'kita masih kenal batas'. Like, ok lah, I'll give you a personal experience lah...like with my ex-girlfriend...sometimes she don't like want to hold my hand then I asked her why then she said like dosa. Ok lah ...don't make her feel like a slut but I'm happy lah...cos she knows where to draw the line. In that sense she knows there are some things that you just don't do in public. Like 'tahu batas'...even those people who don't 'puasa' during Ramadan right? At least they're eating 'halal' food lah...although they don't 'puasa'. I mean, we have to be happy about that fact. They know where to draw the line. At least they're not eating pork, like some bastards...they know where to draw the line. Even though their religious

background might not be that strong right, they still know where to not cross the line. I mean even those 'Mat Rep' are like not 'Mat Rep' lah...they're just my friends...like they insist on fasting and stuff and praying and reading the Quran although on the outside they're all screwed up. At least, they know they're screwing up their lives but they're somehow doing something so there's still hope, lah. Even though how screwed up you might be, right?...You can tell there's still hope cos people are not that screwed up yet. I think the religious indoctrination we had since young is still working lah... in a sense. Another thing that I like about the Malay culture is that Hari Raya I go out with my family and just pass the random Malay and just say 'Selamat Hari Raya'. I mean it's so harmonic we're so close knit, like it doesn't matter who the hell you are. Even when I saw this bunch of Malays at peninsula smoking and acting damn big then this bunch of Malay officers came they got damn scared. Then after a while the officers were like telling them 'don't do it again'. I mean...just letting them off just because their Malays. I mean it's bad lah its corruption in a sense but at least they're letting them off like giving them a second chance on the spot instead of getting them to jail. So I think like what I feel is that there is still hope, lah. It's not totally screwed up in a sense. Ok....

**Ima:**

Ok..so what I find sad to be a Malay is that ok, socio-economic and education wise we are the ones at the bottom...like for example the proportion of Malays in the university is not the same as the proportion of Malays in society. Its like...1 or 2%? Or has it increased to 4-5%? But it's not proportionate to the 15% in society. I think this saddens me because education is the way out for many of us. Umm...and then you know in the papers... all the Malay papers...like everyday like... I don't read it every day but I know that there's always some 'remaja' case. Its they always tell us, you know,... ermm show all the bad stuff you know. So its very prevalent in society that umm that the problems that we face is just horrible for me to read it because I'm... even though my IC doesn't say it but I'm Malay, you know. And to be honest I'm quite glad that my identity card doesn't say Malay

because, I don't know..I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm very sorry...Its horrible but its true...But to be completely honest I'm quite happy to be able to say 'Oh, I'm not completely Malay'. So sometimes, I hide away from that fact...But I am and I know that no identification card is going to change that so I don't know...You can't help it. And what also saddens me is that there is this divide in the Malay society...Like there are those that can make it you know...So there are those that has the power... that can... you know... they have the assets to do stuff... but they don't because they are happy, they are satisfied with what they have. And they think like... ok so I can buy a big house now...so ok all you other Malays, you are in the fringes of society... and they don't see a need to help them somehow like...they could, you know. They are ashamed. They acknowledge the fact but they just...I don't know...what I find is that they brush it off. Ya, and I think that this divide is very bad because my mum told me that 'kita berdosa' and I was like what... and she said because we have the duty to help but we are not helping and you know... its an obligation on the part of the educator. And the part of society that can help to actually reach out to the other parts of society that need help. And so I don't think... like what they said, I don't think it's entirely their fault for not reaching out for the help. It's because that they don't realise it and then we are not helping. So I don't know...as in like they wanted to change and also try to help but I have a feeling that they're helping for different reasons. Like its not to genuinely help, you know. It's like...ok I have a society right? So I'm going to tell them this is how I'm going to do so I write in official documents this is how my society needs help but it's just for documentation. I don't know if it's true that is...but I don't think its genuine. And I think they are doing that for name only. Maybe there are people that are genuine in helping but its not translating in the organisation of the help. And they are not reaching out to the parts of society that really need it. And it's not effective. I don't know..maybe it's a Malay thing..nothing can be organised effectively. But I don't know maybe something needs to change and that's the sad thing that we cannot help ourselves. Even those that have the capacity to help...they can't even help themselves.

But why I'm glad to be a Malay is because I always have my family support. And I cannot say that for my Chinese friends...That I cannot say that they have their family support. Because family was never one of their main values in their life. You know their main value is probably just to succeed. You know and that's it. Unlike for us, I feel is different...I feel like...you know, when we went on WoW to Taiwan, and my whole family came...Like my aunt came...I had the biggest, you know, 'clan'. They call it the clan there. Ya, so to some it may be embarrassing but it doesn't affect me as in I'm glad that they're there for me cos I know that they'll be there for me when..when..I don't know lah as in you know, normally even when I stay in Singapore in that one week that I'll be in Taiwan, I'll probably not see them but because I was flying off, they probably felt the need to come and see me so it's an irony...But...I don't know...but I'm glad that they were there for me. And I know that they will be there for me. Whether...like to be proud of me or not...or if I need help they will be there for me. So that is something that I'm glad I have that as a Malay because other races don't have that. That's all.

**Norma:**

What is sad about being a Malay is that the perception that one person already has about a Malay is imposed on us even if it does not necessarily relate to us. Like how people think that if you are a Malay that you must not be smart. You must not be rich. Your son will get a girl pregnant or something...And people will have that perception of me just because I'm Malay. Like I had this neighbour who just moved in. They came back from Australia...and then when she found out that I was 15 years old her, first question to me was 'Are you in Normal Acad or Normal Tech?' Like why do you assume that my calibre is of that standard just because I'm Malay. Just because I'm Malay, I must be in Normal (Tech) or Normal (Acad). That I must go to ITE. Why must you assume that just because ..That's not true right? Even if that is for the majority, there are some people who are capable...That your race doesn't determine the calibre or the skills or the outcome of your life. So I think that's sad because you're just imposed with that perception. That there are restraints on us, lah.

But the good thing about being Malay is that because we are the minority and that ultimately they group us all together...Just like in school...Just because we're Malay...If I were a Chinese, I'm sure that we wouldn't be friends right now. In a way, it draws us together because we know that we are still ultimately one unit...Even if Danial is like not really Malay he's Chinese we still could bring him to Hari Raya (laughter from all...). We told Danial to come cos we're going to his house. Even though he's like saying no he's not Malay whatever...So it still draws us together (laughter). Another thing is that we have religion...Like no matter how screwed up a family is, I'm sure the mother would have taught her children like some do'a. Definitely she would have taught her children like AlFateha, even no matter how screwed up she is. There is still the element of religion. That every family still holds on to. So I think that's why I'm happy because it keeps us grounded.

**Free conversation:**

**Researcher:**

Some teachers' feedback is that the Malay students in school do not seem to want to be identified as Malays.

**Ali:**

Not true. But as discussed, we are imposed with the perception.

When I was in sec 1, I was in training...There was this friend of mine...He just said, 'Hafidzul, just give up, lah. You're slack, you're Malay'. So at sec 1, I had a culture shock. ...so you act dumb...

**Norma:**

But it can work the other way...like I say that I can't play soccer...and they'll say 'But you're Malay??'

**Danial:**

The most interesting thing is that I'm not even Malay and they discriminate me instantly already. Like they see my skin colour. Like one guy who knows me for 4 years already then he suddenly found out – "you're Malay??"

**Norma:**

Discrimination in AC – in SC, it was never like this..sounds like they're kidding, like they're not serious...but I've never faced that in SC..but the fact that they can think of saying that already shows...even in jokes...but you can actually feel it. Some of them actually believe it. And they're trying to see how you take it...So that's why we seem not to bother... but so successfully that people say that we don't want to be seen as Malays.

**Danial:**

Someone once tried to engage me in a war of words – 'You're a Malay, you're stupid, you're not successful, you're dumb'...The biggest irony about that was my family is more successful than his. I beat him recently in grades also...so..but they generally believe that Malays...that cos you're a Malay...yeah...you're no-hopers.

**Ali:**

Is that when we engage in insults...we engage him for everything and when he loses, he ends up with...but you're a Malay..So my reply...so you're Chinese, you're big lah...but I intended it as a joke..

**Researcher:**

Based on what you see all around you, including what's on the table...what items do you think you can pick to associate it as being a source of the problem?

**Ima:**

I think the pillow cos it symbolises comfort. So as Malays, we like the comfortable 'melepak' life. So I guess that our desire for this is more than wanting to do anything else for ourselves. So we desire for the material but we don't really seek anything more relevant. I mean, I like to say not me but in general.

**Norma:**

I pick this glass because like when you look at it does...it like reminds you of the Western culture cos it looks like a champagne glass...And so it's like the Chinese looking at us...The kueh raya...so I mean they just see the juxtaposition...And so how like this one looks so high class like this champagne glass but they don't see that...it doesn't determine the calibre or anything. Its just the exterior...Just the skin just...Because I'm Malay, it doesn't mean ... its an exterior...that's the main cause of the problem...

**Ali:**

Ok...ahh this thing...this cushion.. why? Cos its comfortable. Its like all things pressurise on it but it still sticks together. We still get comfort. Underneath is not very hard also. We get pressurised, up, left, centre, right everything. All over the place but we stick together and we feel comfortable. I think that may be the reason why we are too comfortable, why we are so ignorant. Why we are so 'ala kadar' in that sense...Because probably I don't know how it started off...It is because of this that the discrimination takes place or is it because the discrimination takes place, that is why this mindset becomes stronger. Like there's no hope anymore. Everyone hates us...Like the discrimination is so excessive...Even my kind of people are like causing more problems. So what can I do? I got my cushion. I got my things that I like. So what can I do? I'm only one...So I should just be happy with what I have. So, ya...Its like I don't know which one started first, lah. But that's the problem, we need to address. Ya, we have to get to the root of it and see why it's actually is like that...

**Danial:**

I pick the cigarette because it symbolizes many things. Although it's not in your house, I can visualise 3 or 4 things like..Firstly like...when you first smoke a cigarette, you don't do it by yourself. You smoke in a group that's tight-knit...But the best thing about a cigarette is that its associated with slacking...And Malays like to slack a lot...And some more, it's a costly habit...And ya, the cigarette also symbolizes short term pleasure but long term damage...Like sure you gain like your 5 minutes of highness but after that, not only you lose 1-2 dollars worth for the cigarettes which is a stupid thing to do but you damage your health...And fundamentally, the problem is they don't plan long term, they plan short term...Like my Malay cousins told me that they get \$500 a month as their pay so they get paid on the 29<sup>th</sup> . On the 30<sup>th</sup>, they go spend it all on clothes, on cigarettes...On things that you could use for like 5 minutes...And then on the 1<sup>st</sup> , they run out of money...And then they go and steal some more. No, they either steal or they borrow. And that contributes to the crime rate so no. 1, they are illegally smoking already...And no. 2, their smoking habits leads to them doing other stupid things so that they can supplement the habit of smoking.

**Imran:**

I think the problem is the lights. See, its off. I think that's the main problem. Because we have potential like the light...but we just choose not to use it. It's not switched on. We just happily say...eh, but I got potential, what? So why bother? 'Macam...mak aku ada duit apa? Apasal aku kisah?'...That kind of thing. So I think the root of the problem is mainly...like our mindset. Like the light. Like...its switched off. We don't use it, we don't even use it to emit like rays to enlighten the massive potential that we have...Cos Malays were the top notch sailors in the 15 hundreds. Thats why we have potential...we can succeed in the world. I mean if there are Malay communities all over...in south Africa...because of their descendants who were working for the dutch...I mean...even the dutch wanted to employ us as navigators because we don't even use the stars, I think. We use some

current thing...I mean, who the hell can think of it. That's the Orang Lauts. That's why I think it's just the potential...that we can use...Its just switched off at the moment. So ya lah, I think the root of the problem is we're just not using our brains. We're just using it for the wrong stuff, lah.

**Researcher:**

By association: Identify a cause by association. Look for something and tell us why to you, it symbolises a solution.

**Ali:**

I pick a spring. Cos like this cushion, initially it is a problem. Everything is compressed. Everything pressurises it...But it just takes comfort in sticking together. Nothing happens to a spring. You pressurise it. You 'lantak gasak, belasad'...But there has to be a point where you have to have the energy to spring back. You have to bounce back that hard. People give you ...you give people what they give you ..They give you in your faces, you give back in their faces..That is my mindset. That is what drives me...

**Norma:**

Look at the floor. Take one tile at a time. Everybody has to want to take a step to prove that we can make it...Like it's not...I don't think that any organisation can really help the Malays unless somebody has to want to be successful...To want to maximise your potential and overcome the adversities that...whether financial or families or whatever...You have to want to do it. It's not just one person or one organisation to help the Malays. The Malays have to see that education is important and that it is the one that will help us. It's the answer and they have to take a step...

**Ima:**

I take your wife. Cos of the association between Malays and religion. So I think the religion plays a big role in helping...In being able to help...Like it might get complex from here...But I think religion can fix

a lot of things if it was used right. And if we have the organisation to do it right...And also your wife is a mother...So I think mothers play a very important role in the upbringing...ya,...of the children...And also, I think...like men need to learn to treat women better...So, like I don't know, you know...

**Imran:**

My solution is just the light switch, lah! We need to unleash this potential. Cos its already in us...I mean, we can be so successful in useless stuff like 'lepak-ing', right? I don't see why not we can be so successful in like...useful stuff. Cos like even though it might seem to be a bit insulting, right?...Even the Chinese can't 'lepak' properly. Pathetic. If we can do these kinds of useless things so properly...Even though it's useless, at least we know how to do it properly...Cos we go all out for the things we love. If only we channel that interest into somewhere...Where it's actually useful. We can actually be the light that leads the future generation to glory...

**Danial:**

I think my example would be fruits. Instead of cigarettes in your mouth, imagine a strawberry there. There would be so much benefit for you. But the thing is for them...in their pocket...they don't have strawberries. They only have cigarettes. So they need someone to give them the strawberries. At least they need the more educated Malays to give it to them. The problem is...no one is there to give the strawberries out. And like...they see their friends only using the cigarettes. So they just take the cigarettes. If there are people who, like, guide their way and like give them advice, then I think they will like change...And the thing is I don't think they will come from the governmental organisations or any official place cos well...they think authorities are like lame...So they will rebel against them. And secondly, it's like...if some random adults come down to them....and tell you 'You shouldn't smoke', you will like...'Ok, bye!' However if their friends or their senior tells them, then they'll be more inclined to listen. So it needs to come from the inside, not from the organisations but from like

people...Like you (me)...people like them...people like us, lah...Basically cos since you have done the right way, we know what benefits we can use to try to convert people's mindsets...So that they'll see...So not education, but success as one of the important things in life instead of going down the void deck....

**Researcher:**

What activities which you have gone through which clicks in your mind about something which you think will help the community...Or something which has helped you in changing your mindsets about yourself as a member of your community?...created a 'flash of insight'...something which 'clicked' in your mind...

**Danial:**

Firstly, there are two things...my mum...everyday always scold me. But it's really the parents who are the most important thing in your life..like the first few years..the other one like, basically creates the mindset. If they everyday drill you that studying is good sooner or later your subconscious will believe it's good...And then you will not dare not study. And then...a course I went to...It's called the 'Mindchamps' course. It's not race specific or anything like that...But it empowers you...Like they tell you that first you must believe in yourself...That you can do it...Cos if you like, don't believe in yourself, then you're just going to...Like, if you feel that you are not going to do it...what's the trouble...Like, why try if I'm not going to make it. And that's half the thing about the Malays...Is that half the reason is that they cannot get off their bums...The other half is that they feel that even if they do get up, its so much hassle that I'm probably not going to succeed. The course changed me...Like that time was quite a low point in my life as in I was in sec 2...life wasn't going too good for me grades-wise, cca-wise everything... So it really helps you...Like first it gets you thinking...The other

is it really gave me the confidence to do things I thought I couldn't do. Things which I will never have attempted if I had not gone for the course.

**Imran:**

I think TOK will be a good idea. Cos honestly, TOK is a damn good course. Cos it makes you think out of the box. Like it doesn't go the conventional way. I mean, ok lah...You're a Malay boy. Your father wants you to be a doctor, engineer or lawyer. So typical! So what is the child suppose to be if he doesn't want to be a doctor, engineer or lawyer? So he'll be hopeless right? So he'll just fail and end up a 'Mat Rep'...I mean, that's the crudest way I can put it, lah. So, I think it's not the child that is the problem, its more of the parents. Parents should take TOK...Not TOK, lah...Something related so they can think out of the box...Like why should your child be a doctor, engineer or lawyer? He can be other things that he's interested in. Because, I remember the TOK analogy of the duck and the weasel or something..or squirrel. Like the duck can swim properly but the squirrel can't swim properly. So the animal master forced the duck to climb the tree...But then, after the duck climbed the tree, then he ruined his legs so he can't swim properly after that. So I think it's the parents that should work for the child's protection instead of causing him to do something he doesn't like .. Like based on what they want him to be...I mean, as parents, you should be supportive of what your child is, lah. Like my friends from outside our school says...'Like I can't be a doctor or something'...They feel so hopeless, lah. So why bother, right? After a while...cos in the first place, its not even their interest. Secondly, they can't even achieve it. They don't see the point in doing it. And they just go down the road to doing bad stuff, lah. So ya, I think its more of the parents that should attend more of these kind of courses instead of the children themselves. Because sometimes it's not really their fault. Its the upbringing...

**Norma:**

I think...like...TOK is like a blessing. All these courses that we went for are all opportunities that are given to us because of the schools that we are in. So, like we had these opportunities to experience all these courses. That's what makes us different from the other Malays...Because as much as even if the other Malays want to be better...they want to have that education...They should want to have a better future...some of them are not given an opportunity. So, I think that these activities should reach out to them as well ... not just TOK...but it's a course which symbolises the opportunity that some people are not given as much as they want to take that step...but it's not given to them. I think that's why the problem still persists...

**Ima:**

I watched the movie, 'The Secret', which kind of changed my mindset quite a lot. It's basically about the law of attraction. So it's about mindset...So if you visualise it, it will come...So it's about positive thinking. And I don't know...but it changed the way I think quite a lot cos I used to be quite cynical. And very...too realistic for my own good. So...but then, I realise that...You know, if you don't dare to dream, then you don't go anywhere. So I think crazily sometimes...but it gets me somewhere. And I think if the mindsets of the Malays are able to change to think that they have the capacity to do what as they want, there is so much more to what they can achieve. I think then we can succeed.

**Ali:**

I think...ok...Of all the things that I attended, there is no particular one that clicks. Like he said it just opens up...Like gives you perspective...Like it makes you think...It's just the supplement...But it's up to you to take it... Like for me, I don't know...Like I read the English SL book 'Siddharta'...That's like...he went through the realm of the mind where ... his aim is to gain enlightenment. So he was a Brahmin's son. So everything was going for him...And then he was a good child, a godly child...in that

sense. Then he went to meditate. He broke away from home. Then he went to meditate with his friend...And then, he realised that he still couldn't gain enlightenment...Then, he was a Hindu so he then went to see Siddharta Gautama...Then his friend found enlightenment after listening to Gautama...But he still couldn't find it so he broke away from the realm of the mind I.e. the realm of the learning...Then he went to involve himself in the realm of the body. He just opened up himself to temptation. He became rich and then he had sex all over him but he still wasn't satisfied totally...Then he broke away from the realm of the body and he went to a river...And there was a ferryman who taught him to speak to the river...And the river taught him to detach from the world but not too close to the spirit...It's like, you get to get the best of both worlds. So for me these things are just supplements. It puts thoughts in your head. It spreads the seeds...But it's up to you to water it. And grow it to a tree and bear fruits. So for me, nothing really clicked...But it's just...I felt that I needed to feel the responsibility...of becoming more pious...So that kind of drive...But like he said, one of these things will be good...to change one's mindset...The desire to succeed...

**Researcher:**

To sum up..just one or two sentences from each one of you on how you think you will or how you think you will want to help the community...maybe 5 to 10 years down the road. So imagine yourself 5 to 10 years down the road, just give a couple of sentences...

**Ima:**

First I need to succeed first...and be in a place where I can offer help. Because if I'm useless, then I can't help even if I want to...Cos I won't have the capacity even if I want to. So I think I'll help in education...Like I'll probably want to I'll provide money to give to that kind of help. I hope I am able to do that.

**Imran:**

I'll be successful first...then I'll tell people. I won't tell people off but I'll start encouraging them...

**Norma:**

I'll start with my own family first. Start with people you're close with first...And then try to change others...Cos if you can't even help yourself, or help your family, then who are you to help other people?

**Danial:**

I feel that you don't have to wait 5 to 10 years. The people like you know now...like the juniors...like that kind of people...I know of some juniors who are going the wayward track. Sometimes I do try to talk to them ...I try to be the mentor basically. And I feel that its not by scolding them. You can't get them by scolding. Instead, you should like...mentor them. What I feel is that the govt or the NGOs can make the organisation where they have all these more successful Malays...then they pair them up or maybe like one to two ...they pair them up with like young Malay kids 12-16. You mentor them and give them advice...Offer them...not spiritual help but offer them help...someone they can turn to for advice. So if they do that, they should be quite ok.

**Ali:**

10-15 years...it's too late. People who are already successful are trying to reach out but I don't see it happening. So if I'm there and I'm in the position...It's just a vicious cycle...I feel like...he said the time frame. Of course you can't be too ambitious and try to get the whole of society...It has to take time. I think it will take a few generations for the whole society to actually succeed. I will travel as a pack of wolves...like everyone come out together...Cos if I were to be up there and telling people...Although my approach can be very friendly...it can be effective only to a certain sense...But its different when a friend talks to you...compared to how I didn't quite accept how when the older generation talks to

you about religion...like shoving it down your throat. So it's more of the approach lah...I have to be one of them to talk to them.

**Researcher:**

Thank you, All!

## Appendix 4

Sample page of the proposed **Basic Award Record Book**

Pg. 1

### **SECTION: OWNERSHIP and EMPOWERMENT**

AIM: To experience Responsibility, Accountability and Pride

- To make Muslims youths aware of the needs of others and the place of voluntary service in our community.
- To empower Muslim youths to initiate a useful service to our community.
- To allow Muslim youths to take ownership of a useful service to our community.
- To provide Muslim youths with opportunities to take responsibility, accountability and pride in the success of a community endeavour.

### **CONDITIONS**

BASIC: At least **15 hours** spread over a period of **3 months**.

### **TYPES OF ACTIVITY**

Please choose **ONE** for this section

#### **Examples**

Organising a public concert

Coordinating a multicultural celebration

Conceptualising a 'space' for youths

Formulating a skill development programme for youths

Initiating a new project pertaining to environmental protection and conservation

Creating a new design to help the disabled

\*The above list is not exhaustive. Participants can consider other activities not listed.

S/no.	DATE	DETAILS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE	HOURS COMPLETED
01	1/4/2011	<p>Eg.</p> <p><i>I organised a small lunchtime concert in a corner of the Gleneagles hospital cafeteria. I was part of a group which came up with the proposal. We then contacted several friends who agreed to volunteer and put up acts as part of the concert. Once we had enough appropriate acts for a 1-hour concert, I approached the hospital management for approval to get the activity going. Once received, we organised the rehearsals, garnered sponsors for the logistics and successfully conducted the event. The event was a great success and the audience which included patients, hospital staff and members of the public really enjoyed themselves.</i></p>	<p>Preparation and Rehearsals: 10 hrs</p> <p>Performance: 1 hr</p>

## Appendix 5

Sample page of the proposed **Basic Award Journal**

Pg. 1

### **BASIC AWARD**

SECTION: OWNERSHIP and EMPOWERMENT

ACTIVITY: Lunchtime Concert at Gleneagles Hospital

Start date of project: \_\_\_\_\_

Actual date of event: \_\_\_\_\_

Assessor's report (please provide details of frequency of meetings, preparations, rehearsals, general performance, commitment and improvements made)

*Hassan has put much effort in conceptualising and organising this event. He is meticulous in his planning and execution of the concert and takes pride in its successful outcome. I believe that it was no easy task putting together this 1-hour concert but I can see that Hassan has really dedicated himself towards making this concert a success.*

It is certified that this participant has displayed the qualities of empowerment and ownership and has shown skills in organising, communicating, facilitating and adhering to required protocols.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Designation \_\_\_\_\_

Organisation \_\_\_\_\_

**PROGRESS TO DATE**

This participant has completed the following sections of the Basic Level of the Award Programme. (Fill in the date of the completion).

<b>Section</b>	<b>Date of Completion</b>
Dialogue and Reflection	
Experiential and Purposeful Learning	
Intersubjectivity and Interculturality	
Empowerment and Ownership	
Mentored Leadership	

This page is to be completed and certified by the Award Operating Authority.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Designation \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Organisation Stamp:

## Appendix 6

### Sample of email communications

Gmail - Your input - shamsurij@gmail.com - Windows Internet Explorer provided by The University of Birmingham

https://mail.google.com/mail/?ui=2&ik=291bf266c5&view=cv&fs=1&tf=1&ver=A4v2IRXREaM.en.&am=!JiWoNdWKH58QRn36BUw0Q1GewmR9QwYH9

Sham Juhari to [redacted] [show details](#) Jun 8 [Reply](#)

[redacted]

As promised, I'm letting you have a look at the section of the thesis where your inputs are placed. I hope you're ok with it.

Rgds  
Sham

**1.1.1.1.1. Scope of Empowerment & Ownership**

In a study based on the theme of empowerment among Latina nurses in Mexico, New York and Indiana, Baker et. al (2007) concluded that there is a potential relationship between empowerment and retention of nurses in the service. However, in this particular context, empowerment has been narrowly defined as "a synergistic reciprocal process based on the leader-follower trust relationship within an organizational context" (Klakovich, 1995 cited in Baker et. al, 2007). It results in the heightening of motivation due to the presence of elements such as access to resources and support and shared decision making resulting in the accomplishment of personal and organisational goals. This also serves to create a sense of ownership and belonging in the worksite (ibid).

Nevertheless, when it comes to the larger society, a more expanded definition applies. For instance, Drydyk (2008, pg. 237), describes empowerment as "a combined enhancement of decision-making and influence over strategic life-choices and barriers to agency and well-being freedom". This implies expanding individuals' freedom of choice and action in shaping their own lives. Drury and Reicher (2009 pg. 708) however attaches the term more to 'collective' empowerment and defines it as "that positive social-psychological transformation, related to a sense of being able to (re)shape the social world, that takes place for members of subordinated groups who overturn (or at least challenge) existing relations of dominance". According to Baker et. al. (2007, pg.125), "An outcome of empowerment is seen when people, organizations and communities increase mastery and control over their lives".

This is evidenced by the implied sense of personal value and fulfilment when respondents talked about their experiences when given the opportunity to make decisions, shoulder responsibility and the chance to enjoy recognition when the end result was well received. The respondents provided examples such as their direct involvement in the conceptualisation and delivery of projects such as the national level MIQ quiz and the Daniel Pearl public concert.

Based on an email interview, I was also informed of an annual inter-junior college level student conference which was designed, organised and led by students who are members of the Malay Literary, Drama & Debating Society (MLDDS) of a particular JC. According to the respondent, "The conference was conceptualised and positioned for the development of Malay students by providing them with a platform to plan and organise an inter-college event. For it to be a college-level event, it must be conducted in English and though the organisers may be Malay student leaders, the participants need not be. Also, it was positioned for the Malay students to think about and participate in national issues and discourse." The annual

Done

participants need not be. Also, it was positioned for the Malay students to think about and participate in national issues and discourse." The annual conference was very well-received and many of the Malay student organisers gained such pride and motivation in its success that it became the driving force for them to excel further in their studies and subsequently, their lives. Unfortunately, there were administrative obstacles a few years into its inception and although the programme is still successfully conducted on an annual basis by the institution, it no longer came under the purview of the JC's MLDDS.

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that any one-off act of empowerment and ownership, while resulting in the individual's heightened self-esteem, will however be insufficient to develop conscientised feelings or its accompanying capacity building for critical thinking. This seems to be the case depicted by the Clubilya respondents as no trace of critical reflection was detected as an end-product of the concert in which they were involved in. As emphasised by youth activists Rahman, Sabariah and Ida, for a conscientised mind to be sufficiently developed, there has to be a constant engagement from one activity to another. Similarly, for the activated feelings to be sustained, the contact must be frequent and pleasant (Merwe and Albertyn, 2009, Lachapelle, 2008). To rephrase what was previously said by Rahman, every moment of 'realisation' must quickly be followed by an act of 'empowerment' aligned to goals and approaches that adds to the conscientised feelings. In fact, for the situation to be ideal, it should be worth noting that progression of one activity to the next must not only be made at the lateral level but also at the vertical level signified by accepting the trust of bearing higher responsibilities (see Smith-Ruig, 2008, pg. 27). As exemplified by the MIQ structure, the advancement of previous organising committee members to the role of mentors not only served to enhance the individuals' self-value, it maximises their potential and boosts their motivation to serve the community.

On the other hand, a case study can be presented of how the lack of proper empowerment and ownership may result in creating the wrong kind of 'activists'. One of my life history interviews had been with Azlan, a 24 year-old volunteer with Clubilya. Realising that he had been giving his time to the organisation since he was 17-years old, I wanted to gauge on how conscientised he had become by enquiring on his motives for volunteering with the NGO. Expecting an answer which reflects an activated mindset, Azlan however provides this simple answer:

"...the only reason for me... is to help him (referring to a particular social worker in the organisation who has become a close personal friend)...He calls me... so I come down...not only me but I think the rest of the guys as well...I think there are about 10 other guys around my age...So he asks me and I come down... So if he isn't there, there wouldn't be any volunteers..."

He clarifies that the friendship began when he participated in a community outreach programme conducted by the individual. They have remained friends ever since and in fact, Azlan revealed that the friendship became closer when, as a troubled youth, the staff had provided him with guidance and valuable advice. The individual had made such an impact in the lives of Azlan and his other friends that

"At times, he calls us even though he couldn't be there himself. We'll still come down...but only for his sake."

The interview thus reveals that despite his many years of voluntary service, Azlan's motivation for performing social work was never attributed to the conscientisation process. If anything, the driving force for his actions has been fuelled by bonds of personal friendship rather than from any critical understanding or inherent motive to do good. Critics may argue that such forms of motivation is better than no form of motivation at all. Nevertheless, this research points to the fact that a conscientised mind brings with it an inherent strength of commitment to make positive changes to the lives of those it comes into contact with. Albert Bandura's concept of 'collective efficacy' can be applied in this case "where community members consciously take action on behalf of the community or neighbourhood to improve life for the residents when they can see the incentives for doing so" (Castelloe, 1999 cited in Gamble & Weil, 2010). These individuals, as such, will be more convincing in playing the part of role models to their charges. What has been missing in Azlan's years of service to the community is undoubtedly a sense of ownership and empowerment to a community effort which could have then led to the conscientisation process taking place making him into a more effective, committed and passionate volunteer helper.

In contrast, an interview with one of the founders of AMP gives us an idea of the self-sustaining power of the conscientised mind once individuals have been made to experience a sense of ownership and empowerment when undertaking a community effort. Yang, a professional who is now in his fifties, recalls on how AMP was formed:

"We were a core group which graduated from the University of Singapore at the time. We were then active in the University of Singapore Muslim Society. So we were conscious and very activated. When we graduated, we initially wanted to form some kind of organisation for graduates of the society...If we had formed the alumni then, it would have been the first of its kind - an organisation for Muslim graduates. But by then, we were caught up with our jobs...We were fresh graduates trying to establish our careers. That was in the 1980s...Then there was these series of political controversies that came out. But it took us about four years before we finally took action...The first controversy was in the early 80's and it spread all the way to 1988/9. So we thought we must do something. We galvanised ourselves and organised the First National Convention of Malay Muslim Professionals which then concluded with the consensus to form AMP by October 1991."

Today, Yang and his peers are still active in the running of this very successful NGO. Presently, his peers, like him, are slowly handing over the reigns of leadership to the younger generation of office bearers.

☆ [redacted] to me

[show details](#) Jun 6 [Reply](#)

Hi Sham,

Thanks for sharing. It makes a good read :)

The following line: may i suggest a slight rephrasing, if you agree that is.

"Unfortunately, there were administrative obstacles a few years into its inception and although the programme is still successfully conducted on an annual basis by the institution, it no longer came under the purview of the JC's MLDDS."

To...

"Given administrative obstacles a few years into its inception and although the programme is still successfully conducted on an annual basis by the institution, it no longer came under the purview of the Malay students."

What were the suggested rephrasing? 2 je.

'Unfortunately' and 'MLDDS' to take the attention away from the club that is run by [redacted] Would like to protect her integrity as a senior teacher. Have already had my run-ins with her then coz needed to stand up for the kids. But now that it is under the bridge, need to protect her integrity as a teacher. Will it change the overall drift of your point? Do let me know if it does.

Best,

[redacted]

Sent from my iPhone

- Show quoted text -

[Reply](#) [Forward](#) [Invite Nur Sabariah to chat](#)

Hi [REDACTED]  
It'll be a bit difficult cos the intention is to present the idea that with them given the opportunity to exclusively organise the event, the Malay students were able to develop self-confidence, positive motivation and higher aspirations. "Unfortunately" then provides a sense of dismay that the situation isn't the same anymore. But it doesn't point fingers or give blame to any specific party.

I can try to amend the phrasing to

"Unfortunately, administrative constraints cropped up a few years into the programme's inception. While the institution is still able to successfully conduct the yearly event, it was no longer sufficient for the organisation of the conference to come under the exclusive purview of the Malay students."

Inserting the word "exclusive" gives the idea that there may still be Malays among the student organisers (there probably is...) Without it, the line will appear sinister - as if higher authorities are preventing Malay students from organising the event.

But if you look at it again, the downside is that the line gives the impression that the Malay students do not have sufficient ability to organise the event, which is definitely not the case. And not the message that the thesis intends to put across.

The only way out is to use the word 'MLDDS' instead of 'Malay students'.

Is it ok?

Rgds  
Sham  
- Show quoted text -

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☆ [REDACTED] to me [show details](#) Jun 7 [Reply](#)

Hi Sham,

I do apologise. For academic integrity, I should not have tried to meddle. I am sorry.

I'll go with whatever you think is best. Even if that is the original version that you emailed me. I am sorry for making you rethink that bit.

I blame it on the pregnancy hormones - can't always think straight. Hehe...Paiseh.

All the best Sham for your thesis.

I pun macam nak start PhD. Gonna go for NIE PhD briefing next Saturday - to see how feasible it is, in terms of time and finances. Actually, it is not PhD but EdD.

Best,  
[REDACTED]