

Early gaps among students too significant for comfort, must be closed: Tharman

Groups like Yayasan Mendaki can help address gaps between Malay/Muslims and their peers

Ng Wei Kai

More work must be done to close the gap between students with different academic starting points, as well as the gap between Malay/Muslims and their peers, said Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam yesterday.

The Government is working to address these gaps to even the playing field, but community groups like Yayasan Mendaki are also crucial in this effort, he told an audience of more than 200 at the sixth Mendaki Symposium.

Some of these gaps are too significant for comfort, he said, and there is one between Malay/Muslim students and their peers even after ac-

counting for socio-economic status, said Mr Tharman, who is Coordinating Minister for Social Policies.

He said: "We have to work a lot harder to even up the playing field in the youngest years... The gaps faced by the Malay community are not just because Malays are over-represented in the lower socio-economic groups.

"Even within the lower socio-economic groups, there is a greater proportion of Malays who start off weak in school, and remain weak."

Mr Tharman added: "Every society has this problem, where perfor-

mance in school is not just a function of individual talents and attributes, but also a function of complex, multifaceted and interlinked social problems. And we have to work harder to address these problems in Singapore. Work harder to make sure that the early disadvantages in life do not replicate themselves and become stubborn disadvantages throughout life."

Apart from closing early gaps, Mr Tharman, who was education minister from 2003 to 2008, also touched on the need to broaden Singapore's meritocracy by blur-

ring the hierarchy of skills, and to strengthen a sense of togetherness by increasing social mixing.

There is too sharp a hierarchy between academic skills and non-academic skills, and between some academic skills and other academic skills, he said.

"We have to blur that hierarchy of skills, develop respect for different skills as we grow up, and indeed give everyone a chance to pick up different skills. That, too, has to start young and continue into the working years, so that we have a workforce and society where every skill is valued, and every job well done is respected."

Singapore must also strengthen its sense of togetherness across different socio-economic and ethnic groups. The country has avoided big problems that many other societies have faced, but has to do even better in the future, he added.

"It means avoiding social distances that develop when children are young and stay through life. And importantly, to develop that sense of familiarity, friendship and solidarity that we must have with each other as Singaporeans."

Mr Tharman said one way to do this is through shared experiences

like co-curricular activities, and that much is already being done on a structural level to ensure social mixing through schemes like full subject-based banding in schools.

Such a banding, where students take subjects at a higher or lower level based on their strengths, will be in place in secondary schools by 2024. There will be no more separate Express, Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) courses, with students in mixed form classes.

Mendaki also disclosed selected findings from a three-year study with the Singapore University of Social Sciences seeking to identify the determinants of academic performance among Mendaki Tuition Scheme (MTS) students. The study, covering about 12,000 students in the MTS scheme from 2018 to 2019, found that academic performance was strongly correlated with socio-economic status.

Other major factors were students' intrinsic motivation, performance in mathematics and participation in co-curricular activities. It also found that a strong academic foundation is important in supporting lifelong learning.

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Grades and family finances

A pilot study by Mendaki and the Singapore University of Social Sciences looking at students in the Mendaki Tuition Scheme found a strong association between their academic performance in PSLE and their socio-economic background.

	Higher proportion of high performers' families	Higher proportion of low performers' families
Main applicant (usually a parent)	Married	Unmarried
Household sizes	Smaller	Larger
Children in the Mendaki Tuition Scheme within the household	Fewer	More
Income distribution and mean	Higher	Lower
Housing	Non-rental	Rental
Size of housing	Larger	Smaller

STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

PSLE scores linked to socio-economic status: Study

Researchers at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) have found a strong link between pupils' socio-economic status and their academic performance.

In 2019, they analysed data from 875 Primary 6 pupils enrolled in Malay/Muslim self-help group Yayasan Mendaki's tuition scheme and used cluster analysis to group the pupils into two blocs.

Cluster analysis is a process which groups subjects with similar traits and characteristics together to form "clusters".

The researchers found that the pupils fell into two clusters, with pupils in the first having better PSLE scores, and pupils in the second doing worse.

Pupils in the first group also tended to be of a relatively higher

socio-economic status, while those with indicators related to having a lower socio-economic platform tended to perform worse.

Some of the indicators of socio-economic status that the researchers used were the type of residence, whether or not the pupil lived in a rental block, and the household's per person income.

An extension of this pilot study was conducted three years later, also by SUSS, looking at 2,541 primary-level pupils.

The pupils fell into three clusters, whose characteristics followed those identified in the first study.

Pupils in the first cluster had a higher household per capita income, a lower rate of living in rental housing and a smaller house-

hold size. They also did better in literacy and numeracy.

Pupils in the second cluster were in the middle in terms of socio-economic status and were also in the middle in terms of academic performance, while those in the third cluster skewed towards a lower socio-economic status and had the worst grades.

Researchers said this study provides increasing evidence of the link between lower socio-economic status and lower academic achievement.

The paper said: "The findings of this study indicate clearly that the issue of the Malay community's underperformance goes beyond school support, with social and income inequalities affecting academic outcomes."

Associate Professor Sylvia Chong, who was the principal investigator in both studies, said they provide a baseline for future research.

She said: "A longitudinal study - which looks at the same variables over a longer period of time - would be very useful for Mendaki, moving forward."

Senior Minister of State for Manpower and Defence Zaqy Mohamad, who is deputy chairman of Mendaki, said the findings would help Mendaki make data-driven and informed decisions.

He said: "We have better capabilities now to use data to run our programmes, launch new programmes, and fill up the gaps of how we can help the community."

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