

Malay Singaporeans poised for next level

Solid middle class has formed which will push kids to do even better, says minister

Rachel Chang

Amid worry that social mobility is slowing for Malay Singaporeans, Law and Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam said yesterday that the community is actually poised to “lift off to the next level”.

While he acknowledged achievement gaps between Malays and Chi-

nese, Mr Shanmugam said he could see that a significant Malay middle class has formed.

Speaking at the Association of Muslim Professionals’ (AMP) annual “Community in Review” seminar, he pointed to how two-thirds of Malay households now live in four-room flats or larger.

Meanwhile, a third now hold jobs in the professionals, managers, executives and technicians category, up from just 7 per cent in 1980.

A solid middle class “poised to understand the importance of education” will push their children to the next level, he said.

Mr Shanmugam, who held a

three-hour closed-door dialogue with participants, also revealed that while Malay children may lag behind other racial groups in educational achievement here, they are still among the top in the world.

In the 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (Timss) survey, Singapore’s Malay students at Secondary 2 level ranked in the top 10 among 42 education systems worldwide for both maths and science.

Overall, Singapore students were second in maths and first in science.

“It’s not that all the work has been done. More work needs to be

done, but there should be significant optimism,” he said.

The remaining gaps were one of the recurring themes for speakers at yesterday’s seminar, whose topic was revisiting policy approaches to social mobility.

National University of Singapore researchers Vincent Chua and Irene Ng presented a study that showed that Malays had less social capital – like contacts who are university graduates – than other races.

Yet former Nominated MP Zulkipli Baharudin, another speaker, said that he hoped Malays “find their own trajectory” rather than worry about closing the achievement gap.

Pointing to how Nantah univer-

sity graduates turned to entrepreneurship when they could not secure civil service jobs with degrees from a Chinese-language school, he urged Malays to “decide on our own path and still be successful and rich”.

Yesterday, Mr Shanmugam also reiterated the message that the Government sees Malay community problems as “national ones”, rather than community ones that are solely the purview of ethnic groups like AMP or Mendaki.

“First, the person needs to want to help himself. Then, the Government has the primary role of making sure the systems and structures are in place so they don’t fall through the cracks. Then, the ethnic groups can come in and help motivate the individual, and partner the Government to achieve much more.”

Chairman of AMP’s research arm Nizam Ismail welcomed the reassurance, and said that he hoped to see measures such as a national-level inter-agency task force set up to tackle the problems of the Malay community.

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Malays have less social capital: Study

Malay Singaporeans have less social capital than their Chinese counterparts, a new National University of Singapore study of nearly 1,000 people has found.

This is worrying because social capital – the value found in personal networks – is a significant factor in someone’s ability to move from one class of society to another, said the researchers behind the study, assistant professor of sociology Vincent Chua and assistant professor of social work Irene Ng, yesterday.

They had analysed a 2005 survey of Singaporean residents for racial differences in social capital, and presented the findings at the Association of Muslim Professionals’ annual seminar.

They found that Malays were six times less likely than Chinese to have university graduate contacts, and four times less likely to have someone in their network living in private property.

The data showed a link too between how much someone earns and the number of graduates they know, with each extra graduate seemingly worth \$180 more a month in salary.

Having an educated parent boosts educational attainment more for Chinese than Malays. Parental resources seem to “trickle down less” for Malays, they said.

The study also showed what sort of effect someone’s network can have on job prospects. Some 56 per cent of job-seekers from a minority race managed to get a job in the professional, manager and executives (PME) category if they were referred by a Chinese person. If the referral came from a non-Chinese, that number drops to 26 per cent.

“Minority members clearly benefit when they rely on job contacts from the dominant group,” said Dr Chua. The problem is that such inter-ethnic job help is rare, he said. Of 330 instances, only 18 were inter-ethnic. “More must be done to increase inter-ethnic integration so that resources can be shared between different groups,” he added.

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