Study to uncover why Malays are over-represented in Normal (Technical) stream debunks stereotypes about community instead

A study to uncover why Malays are over-represented in the Normal (Technical) stream was unable to throw up any answers, but it was able to debunk commonly held labels such as "laziness", or the misconception that large families lead to poor academic performance.

It also found that regardless of race, the reasons students in general end up in the Normal (Technical) stream in the school system here include having a poor command of English, being late bloomers, or that they are just hands-on learners.

The results of these findings were announced by Associate Professor John Donaldson of the Singapore Management University's School of Social Sciences during a webinar on Wednesday (Sept 1) night.

The four-year-long "process tracing" study — a form of qualitative research that seeks to develop and test theories — was a collaboration with the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (Rima). It involved 105 students aged between 18 and 33 who had completed the Normal (Technical) stream.

Of the 105 people, 53 were Chinese, 47 were Malay and five were Indian.

The study was commissioned by AMP Singapore, formerly known as the Association of Muslim Professionals, a non-profit organisation serving the Muslim community, to better understand why Malays are over-represented in the Normal (Technical) stream.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong during his National Day Rally speech on Sunday had said that the census in 2020 had highlighted some "worrying trends" within the Malay community about education, and that extra attention needs to be paid to students who are falling behind.

The census showed that 19.8 per cent of Malays aged 25 and above had a post-secondary (non-tertiary) education as their highest qualification — a higher proportion than other races polled in the census.

Here are some findings from the latest 206-paged study, titled Dreams Realised, Dreams Deferred: Understanding and Addressing the Racial Gap in Educational Achievement in Singapore.

DEBUNKING STEREOTYPES

Assoc Prof Donaldson, the study's primary researcher, said that the team had focused on two inter-related questions:

- What factors explain the education gap among Singapore's ethnic groups?

- What factors explain why some Normal (Technical) students — including Malays and others — end up with better outcomes than others? Are these "success factors" the same for Malay students as they are for others?

While the researchers were unable to answer the question of why Malays are over-represented in the Normal (Technical) stream, Assoc Prof Donaldson said that the answers disconfirmed some common hypotheses about the community.

In trying to find out why his interviewees went to the Normal (Technical) stream, Assoc Prof Donaldson said that about 70 per cent of his Malay interviewees reported not studying diligently for their Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE).

This is roughly similar to the more than 68 per cent of non-Malays who gave the same answer.

He also found that his Malay interviewees were able to change their mindsets and become more motivated after the PSLE.

For instance, he said that about 51 per cent were "subsequently focused" after the PSLE, higher than the 41 per cent or so of non-Malays who gave the same answer.

In contrast, only about 19 per cent of the Malay interviewees said that they were "consistently not focused" as opposed to about 28 per cent of the non-Malays.

The study also debunked a stereotype that Malays lack aspiration, because it found that more than 70 per cent of the Malay interviewees held a specific, identifiable aspiration or dream, and another 16 per cent held a non-specific or non-material dream such as travelling or spiritual goals.

Other hypotheses that the study debunked included whether students from large families — defined as a household with five or more persons — tended to have worse outcomes.

Research found that while the Malay interviewees generally come from larger families, which in turn had a tendency to lower their per capita income, there was no consistent pattern to show that either of these two factors contributed to a better or worse outcome.

It also found that patterns of family dysfunction occurred in "roughly equal proportions" across the races, and there was "no systematic relationship between family dysfunction and outcomes" because some respondents were able to overcome the negative effects of family dysfunction.

WHY THEY ENTER THE NORMAL (TECHNICAL) STREAM

During his presentation, Assoc Prof Donaldson said that his study was able to identify several reasons why students enter the Normal (Technical) stream, and gave some suggestions for potential intervention.

Hands-on learners

They are generally not academically inclined and struggle while in the Normal (Technical) stream, but become "inspired" when they reach the Institute of Technical Education, Assoc Prof Donaldson said.

A possible solution is to increase the number of vocational subjects to cater for this group and modify teaching styles in academic subjects.

Late bloomers

This group reported being either immature or lacking passion before they entered the Normal (Technical) stream.

As streaming formally begins early – at age 12 – late bloomers are at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts in some other advanced countries, and Assoc Prof Donaldson said that this is unfair because children at this age are generally immature.

To help late bloomers find their focus earlier, they could be given counselling or someone could work with them to find their passion.

Family dysfunction or trauma

These students may have been distracted from their studies because they are "weighed down by life" due to severe family issues or a traumatic experience.

However, with help such as counselling and social work intervention, Assoc Prof Donaldson said that they can often start to "climb the academic ladder".

Undiagnosed or untreated learning disability

Assoc Prof Donaldson made a caveat that this factor was "more of a suspicion than a smoking gun", since they had few interviewees who said that they had been diagnosed with a learning disability.

"But we suspected, based on the interviews, that these people get internalised messages that they're stupid. They may be facing learning disabilities though."

He said that Singapore could consider testing more Normal (Technical) students to see if they might have an undiagnosed learning disability.

Weak in English

Having a poor command of English can be a source of frustration in school for students who might be used to speaking dialects or other languages at home, Assoc Prof Donaldson said.

In that case, extra English classes need to be catered for them as soon as possible.

He also touched on some drivers of success for his interviewees that allowed them to realise their dreams. These included having people who unconditionally believed in them, finding their passion, or even going through a wake-up call such as a setback that forced them to get more serious with their lives.

Assoc Prof Donaldson said that there is a stigma in Singapore against individuals who are not book-smart and this needs to change, because it does not mean that they are not bright people.

Those who are not academically inclined and prefer hands-on work can be smart in ways that others are not, he added.

"I would do badly (in Singapore). I was a late bloomer. A book learner would do well at the A-Levels, but if you changed the tests… to being able to fix a car engine, then the tables would be turned," he said.