The Equal And Equitable Provision Of Primary School Education In Malaysia: Issues And Challenges

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Abstract

Equity in education refers to the facts that personal and social circumstances are not obstacles to achieving educational potential, and all individuals able to reach at least a basic minimum level of skills Equality in education, on the other hand, insinuates the important role in assisting deprived students and schools The main governing policy of education in Malaysia, the 1996's Education Act 550, states that two main goals to be achieved in the nation's educational system are equality and equitable provision. In order to be equal in education, the governance and the educators must provide the children with same educational opportunities regardless of their socio-economic background, genders, races, geographical location, and physical or mental disabilities. On the other hand, equity in education is highlighting that personal and social circumstances are not obstacles to achieving educational potential, and all individuals able to reach at least a basic minimum level of skills. This paper discusses the issues and challenges in providing both equal and equitable access of primary school education in Malaysia.

Keywords: Education, equality, equity, primary school, Malaysia.

Introduction

According to Equality and Human Rights Commission (2016), "Equality is about ensuring that every individual has an equal opportunity to make the most of their lives and talents, and believing that no one should have poorer life chances because of where, what or whom they were born, what they believe, or whether they have a disability." In other words, to be equal in education, the governance and the educators must provide the children with same educational opportunities regardless of their socio-economic background, genders, races, physical or mental disabilities, and geographical location. It was supported by The University of Edinburgh (2016), equality is about not treating anyone differently or less favorably. The children have the same rights to get an equal education with no excuses of holding them back.

On the other hands, equity in education is highlighting that personal and social circumstances are not obstacles to achieving educational potential, and all individuals able to reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (OECD 2012). It is different with equality. It is described using two situations whereby a taller boy standing on a lower box whiles a shorter boy standing on a higher box. The end result of these two boys will be standing at the same height to see the same view together (Blair 2014). This is the whole concept on equity in education. Some children come with less so they need extra attention and help to achieve some results in the learning. They should not be perceived as a burden to their parents, teachers or even society but instead, we have the responsibilities to guide them in their way to success.

Equality and equity in education has important role in assisting deprived students

and schools (OECD 2012). A successful education system must make sure all the students to have the equal access to resources. However, it requires all the related parties to cooperate by giving more guidance and support to the children who are in need when compared to the majority of the children in the community as in a way to bridge the learning achievement gap in Malaysia. As a comparison, equity in education refers to equity in outcomes while equality focuses on the same input given to the children. By applying both at the same time, it is always strongly believed that it can help to create better future for our next generation and it also brings great positive impact to the development of our country as a whole. Due to that, Education for All (EFA) which emphasizes two key ideas, equality and equity, must be kept on mind from time to time and be practiced by feeding the real needs of education in Malaysia.

Discussion

Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 has outlined five outcomes that inspire the Malaysia education system as a whole: access, quality, equity, unity and efficiency. In order to achieve the policy of Education for all, full access of education and reduction in achievement gaps for equity need to be fulfilled. There are some statistics and researches done to compare the enrolment rate and achievement gaps in urban and rural areas specifically in primary schools.

As every child deserves equal access to an education, the Ministry has come to ensure universal access and full enrolment of all children from preschool through upper secondary school level by 2020 (Ministry of Education Malaysia 2013). In 2016, the enrolment rate in primary education increased to 97.2% compared to 94% in 2011 (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2013). The Ministry is committed in ensuring 100% participation in primary education and reducing dropout rates in remote locations.

Furthermore, the Ministry also aims to reduce the achievement gaps in underperforming schools, students with special education needs, urban and rural schools, poor performing states, and socio-economic status. A research was done to check on the school performance showed that the percentage of high performing schools (Band 1 and 2) consistently increased to 39.9% in 2016 compared to 36.8% in 2015 (Ministry of Education Malaysia 2017). For the enrolment rate of Orang Asli primary education also showed a significant increase to 27697 pupils compared to 28567 pupils in 2012. The average attendance rate of Orang Asli pupils' increases tremendously by 76.7% to 86.3% surpassing the target set in 2016 of 82%. Some actions had been taken by the Ministry of Education to ensure equitable support and overall increased in school performance. Education for all is one of the government principles that is envisioned in national education system since 1956 in the Razak Report. There are five system aspirations for the Malaysian education system. Equity and access are two of the five Malaysian education system aspirations.

According to the Blueprint (2013-2015), 'access' refers to success in education. In primary school context, the commitment includes ensuring full enrolment of all the children of primary school level and ensuring all of them to complete the primary schooling. As for 'equity', it refers to equity for all students. The commitment includes giving the best education for every student by halving the socio-economic, urban-rural and gender achievement gaps among the student by 2020. Over the years, in order to achieve these two education aspirations, the government has provided additional support and programs, ranging from financial support program, program for Special Education Needs and special program for the Orang Asli communities. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has also implemented the use of ICT in the school to enhance teaching and learning. Despite government accolades, aspirations and attempts to improve equity and access in

education, there are a number of challenges that might impinge the success of Malaysian education system

Issues and Challenges

Improve the Establishment of Per Capita Grant (PCG)

As above mentioned, government has given a number of financial supports in order to achieve the 5 aspiration system of Malaysian education. One of the major funding is Per Capita Grant (PCG) which is channeled to schools every year to support teaching and learning as well as out-of-classroom activities. This fund has caused an issue whereby the amount of fund given to each school depends on the number of students' enrolment in the current year, not on the school needs and the socioeconomic of pupils (Bahagian Kewangan Pendidikan Malaysia 2012). Thus, the schools which consist of less students such as rural schools or schools which located at outskirt of town receive fewer amounts compared to schools in town.

A few past studies show that the financial management in education is related to the successful of a program in a school. However, schools with fewer students face with problems in the amount of allocation received because the allocation of PCG is based on the number of pupils (Husaina, Ranjeetham & Muhammad Faizal 2015). As a result, the headmasters facing challenges in fund managing. One of the challenges is the allocation of fund for each subject. The major subjects such as Malay Language, English, Mandarin, Mathematics and Science will receive more allocation compared to the minor subjects. Due to the PCG, allocation for school facilities such as school resource center, guidance and counselling, various physical facilities and utilities are very limited. Compared to the students in urban areas, in rural areas, most parents have lower income. They are unable to provide the facilities and resources needed by their children in academic achievements.

Hence, the pupils rely entirely on the facilities at school. However, with insufficient provisions in managing school facilities, there is no doubt that student achievement in the urban school is better compared to students in rural schools because students in the urban are easy to access better facilities and learning resources. This problem forms a gap in achieving equity in education between urban and rural schools.

In order to eradicating the gap of student achievement between the town school and the rural schools, PCG should be revised or reviewed after fourteen years of establishment. Adequate allocation should be given based on the school needs, not the number of students in the school. This is also supported by Muhammad Ali Hassan (2014) who states that the economic gap in Malaysia should be balanced if the government is really aimed at reducing the gap of academic achievement in rural schools.

Review and Revise Financial Assistance to Students

The Ministry has committed itself to eradicating inequity in education through the provision of financial assistance to disadvantaged students. Kumpulan Wang Amanah Pelajar Miskin (KWAPM) Under Section 10 of The Financial Procedure Act 1957, is another trust fund which aims to assist and encourage the low socioeconomic households to send their children to attend school and thus, the gap in education between the urban and rural can be reduced. This fund is also meant to eliminate school drop-out cases resulting from poverty and provide equal opportunity and accessibility in education (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia).

Based on the official webpage of Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, the KWAPM FUND was established by MOE since 2003. Up until today, it has been through the history of 14 years. For students in west Malaysia, only households under RM 930 were eligible to apply KWAPM. In Sabah and Labuan,

households under RM1170 are eligible to apply whereas household in Sarawak under RM990 are eligible to apply. During these 14 years of establishment, the application requirements of KWAPM remain unchanged. The Economic Planning Unit (EPU) should increase the household's assumptions to RM 1000 or higher in order to be equivalent to the minimum monthly wages of workers today and in line with the socio-economic development of the country. This will increase the ability of parents to support their children's learning and improve the quality of their education.

Bantuan Awal Persekolahan (BAP), another trust fund which is given at the beginning of school year should also be increased from RM 100 to RM 300 per year for primary schools. It is hoped there will be no cases of children dropping out to school arises because there is financial support for them to start school sessions (GPS Bestari, 2018). Pupils could use the money given to pay the fees or expenses needed at the beginning of the school sessions. This allows students to stay in the rural areas to gain a better educational opportunity to access and improve literacy rates. Therefore, the government should work with the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) to ensure that the financial assistance provided to students who are from the poor family is sufficient and able to bear the costs of education. Additionally, all teachers should always give their parents information on financial assistance provided by the government so they will not miss any assistance given by the government. Hence, all parties must work together to create education that meets the 5 aspirations of PPPM education which emphasizes 50% reduction in urban-rural gap and 25% reduction in the socioeconomic achievement gap (Blueprint, 2013-2025) . With these implementation and improvisation, it is believed that access and equity in education will be achieved.

Enhances the Infrastructure and Internet Connectivity to Support E-Learning

Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 introduced by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), has set the goal of leveraging ICT in teaching and learning. Every student should have access to quality education and the integration of today's technology world (KPM 2012). In order to realize the initiative, KPM has partnered with the YTL Communications and introduced 1BestariNet project. Under the project, a total of 10 000 primary and secondary schools have been equipped with high speed Internet access without 4G wire that enables teaching, learning, collaboration, and administration to be implemented through Frog Virtual Learning Environment (Chonghui 2018).

A key criterion of using ICT in teaching and learning is the schools must have adequate connectivity, content (such as Virtual Learning Environment) and enough devices to access the content, such as computer lab facilities. Challenges from aspects of inadequate connectivity and devices constraints have seen as major challenges in implementing teaching and learning through Frog VLE. Teaching and learning through Frog VLE requires complete equipment and hardware such as adequate computer by the number of students per class and access to high-speed internet (Hasliza, Siti Munira & Zarina 2017). Problems exist when the infrastructure which is not enough to cause many students who are unable to participate as well as in the teaching and learning process via Frog VLE. Sometimes existing damaged infrastructure cannot be replaced because lack of fund allocation.

Our vast nation has different school environment with different logistic and socio-economic environment that are very different from one another. As evidenced by the findings of the Audit Department (2017), the schools that are most leveraging in this 1BestariNet technology are urban schools with adequate infrastructure, such as a fully equipped computer lab and projectors which are often needed maintenance. Furthermore, urban students can enjoy Internet access not only in their school but also at home, as they get good

support from their parents. Unfortunately, such circumstances cannot be replicated at all the 10,000 schools, expecting all the students and teachers to have the same access to e-learning. The harsh reality of the matter is that rural areas in Malaysia will need more time to make e-learning a reality. (Mei Lick et al. 2017). Hence, 1BestariNet will only widen the achievement gap between the urban and rural schools.

Another factor that impedes the application of virtual learning environment is the dissatisfactory of broadband internet speed. According to 1BestariNet Contract, the contractor should provide bandwidth base of 4Mbps and burstable up to 20Mbps for 9,191 schools. However, studies have found that the bandwidth service (speed access performance) in 41 of 46 schools were between 0.2Mbps to 3.62Mbps, which is low to afford 30 to 40 VLE users at a time. This results a great disparity among the schools in accessing the equal education and achieving the same learning outcomes as the schools with higher internet speed and connectivity. According to the research done by Nor Zaira et al. (2016), majority of teachers say that slow Internet access discourages the interest of teachers and students to use VLE Frog in the classroom. Some teachers prefer to use conventional teaching method which is easier and more effective (Hasliza, Siti Munira & Zarina 2016). Hence, Malaysian education system fails to achieve the goal of this project to connect schools across Malaysia to provide a platform for the education of the Frog VLE.

Above all the problems which have been discussed, education policies need to be sensitive to the possible creation of a digital divide between rural and urban children, due to a less comprehensive ICT infrastructure in rural areas. The education stakeholders must take immediate action to address the problem of slow internet service in rural schools. As such, the National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP) should assist by monitoring the speed of internet access at school and discuss with the Ministry and YTL Communications to speed up broadband speeds up to 4G. If internet access

speed in remote schools can be improved, all students in the rural areas of Malaysia would have the opportunity to enjoy e-learning to bridge the achievement gap (equity) in education.

School dropouts among indigenous groups and Orang Asli

Malaysia education system also aims to enhance programs for groups with specific needs such as indigenous and other minority groups under Malaysia Blueprint of Education (2013 – 2025) in order to achieve the aspiration of 'access' in education. One of the initiatives taken in Wave 1 (2013 – 2015) is to expand the Special Model Schools (K9) to tackle the high drop-out rates among both the indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak and Orang Asli in the peninsular. The Ministry also rolls out the KEDAP (Kelas Dewasa Orang Asli dan Pribumi) for Orang Asli adults in order to provide the adults with sufficient literacy and numeracy to support their children's learning. Besides that, the Ministry has developed a conceptualized curriculum (Kurikulum Asli dan Penan, KAP) to touch the cultural background of indigenous and minority groups and at the same time in line with the KSSR syllabus. Also, the Ministry also improves in terms of teacher recruitment, support and training. Of all the initiatives which have been done, the school dropout rate among the indigenous groups and Orang Asli children is still a major concern.

According to Zehadul Karim (2014), indigenous groups as well as Orang Asli is a community that holds to their cultural and customs. However, the existing KKSR education system seems fail to recognize their background, culture, and native language. The content is not relevant to the Orang Asli's children (Chong 2017). Moreover, the government failed to focus on content designed, pedagogy, curriculum and teaching and learning process which ensure equity among Orang Asli. This unconsciously caused

disinterest among the children in attending school.

In order to improve the attendance among the children, cultural, language, and knowledge that can be recognized and accepted as a formal education system for the Orang Asli's children must be taken into the considerations. The Ministry should also encourage the participation of indigenous groups and Orang Asli in the making of Indigenous education policies. This is further elaborated by Roslan (2016) that collaboration should be present between the Orang Asli and education institutions to make the education system more accessible by the Indigenous groups and Orang Asli community and encourage them to continue schooling.

At the same time, the Ministry must also recognize that the importance of rights, culture, way of life of Orang Asli, indigenous knowledge and their language. Norwaliza and Ramlee (2015) claimed that some teachers found it hard to explain some terms to Orang Asli students to make them comprehend. The researchers also further pointed out that communication problems that are due to the different languages will make the students feel isolated, unhappy unsuccessful in education. It will be ideal if the government can recruit and allocate teachers or teacher assistants who come from the indigenous background to teach in the children in the remote school so that they can communicate with the parents' and the students' and widen mind about the importance of education in upgrading their life. Proper teachers' allocation can also ensure the equity in the education system as the educators need to know how to design a curriculum or lesson that can arouse students' interests in learning. As revealed in a study conducted in a remote primary school in a mountainous environment at Bakalalan, Sarawak, 'the need to relate' the curriculum to their local environment was found to create enthusiasm amongst rural students to stay engaged in school (Selvadurai 2014).

Conclusion

All in all, there are six major issues which have been discussed in this essay, ranging from government policy related education, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), geographical factors, adult literacy and inclusive education. It is deemed that there is still a long way to achieve equity and access of Malaysian education. The policy makers play a significant role. They should regularly monitor access and review the educational programmes and policies that they have established and take immediate and appropriate actions to rectify the weaknesses identified. Howsoever, the success of 'education for all' requires the involvement of other parties such as the school communities. School heads and teachers should work hand-in-hand to address the problems they faced to the stakeholders or policy makers through Parents Teacher Association or National Union of the Teaching Profession Malaysia (NUTP). Furthermore, parents should also take initiative to involve in educational programme carried out by the schools. They are also advised to support, motivate and be concerned about their children's learning in order to lower the tendency of students dropping out from the school.

Acknowledgement

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