ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS OF EQUITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract

The second target of Sustainable Development Goals exists to ensure that all girls and boys across the globe are ready for primary education as they have access to quality early childhood development, care, and preschool education (UNICEF, 2018). Education can help children who are not capable of attending a good school due to one common barrier: money. On the other hand, some parents cannot send their kids to public schools as the acting law does not accordingly require an Early Childhood Education Program. Worse, a preschool program is pricey and often unaffordable to many low-income communities. This paper searches for issues in the education system of Malaysia in terms of equity in young children education and the essential solution conducted by the Ministry of Education (MOE).

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Equity, Sustainable Development Goals

INTRODUCTION

Referring to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in regard to Article 28, every child has the right to free and compulsory education that the Ministry of Malaysia has accepted in 1997. According to the National Pre-School Curriculum, a TADIKA is an early education center for young children between the age of four and six. Although preschool education is not compulsory, the Malaysia Education Blue Print 2013-2025 reported in its latest update that almost 91% of children between ages four and six registered for preschool, in either private or public schools in 2014 (Malaysia, 2015 cited in Da Wan et al., 2018) which expresses the importance of child development around this time. However, many children are still unable to access the advantages of learning and training in schools. On the other hand, poverty is the first enemy of education on every level. According to Jonah Edelman (co-founder and chief executive officer of Stand for Children), a nonprofit education advocacy organization, the impact of poverty on academic achievement is significant and starts early (Levy & Edelman, 2016). Following this important fact, there are various ways to cope with the impact of poverty on low-income communities, including the influence of schools, teachers, and government on their education, which are as follows:

1. Incentives for qualified teachers to teach in low-income areas;
2. Receiving better resources and funding for disadvantaged schools;
3. Build more schools in rural areas and provide better transportation to schools;

4. Identifying at-risk children as well as providing funds and implementation for children living in poverty.

However, the ability of children to learn include; health, well-being, limited literacy and language development, access to material resources, and level of mobility. Differences in health and life opportunities are still apparent between the poor and rich in a wealthy society (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2006). Therefore, children from low-income families not only receive the worst education even if they fall victim to lifestyle and health issues, which hinder their ability to learn. Even though, for the most part, relative poverty does not severely restrict access to essential resources (water, shelter, food). Children in these groups are also less able to achieve higher performance in education and are more likely to be fired or low-paid in unskilled occupations in adulthood (Roberts, 1997, Hurtb et al., 1999). For instance, the rate of childhood disease can be caused by poor nutrition, inadequate medical care, and substandard housing. In this case, physical and cognitive development can affect premature birth and low birth weights. Therefore, such factors influence the ability of children to benefit from schooling and economic hardship can also adversely affect mental health, self-efficacy, self-image, ability to concentrate, and motivation to do well in school.

Based on the Department of Statistics in Malaysia, Malaysian people are categorized into three different income groups which includes the top 20 percent, the middle 40 percent, and the bottom 40 percent (Malaysia, 2017; Economic Planning Unit, 2018). In Malaysia, three types of public preschools are run by three ministries and private preschools are set up by non-government organizations (Mustafa & Azman, 2013). These preschools are very different in their goals. In other words, to promote equity, since independence in 1957 (The World Bank Malaysia, 2018), the Ministry has invested heavily in encouraging preschool enrolment as part of the Education NKRA (National Key Result Areas) to promote equity (Malaysia, 2013). As for the results, improvement is present in children's outcomes across Malaysia's education system to create a united Malaysian with multi-ethnic races, as the main target is to grant access to all children (Wang, 1999).

The important role of education is in realizing Malaysia's ambition to be a developed country (Mahathir, 2008). According to the Official Website of the Malaysian Prime Minister, Malaysia is a united nation, with a confident Malaysian society imbued with morals and ethical values to live in a democratic, liberal and tolerant, supportive, economically just and equitable, progressive and prosperous, and in full possession of a competitive dynamic, robust and resilient economy as well as finally becoming a full member of the developed world by 2020. Meanwhile, there is an absolute gap in underperforming preschool children with special education needs, vulnerable children, rural and urban poor performing states, and socio-economic level which needs to be reduced by:

- Allocating more funds for schools that include special education students for teachers and infrastructure.
- Allocating more resources and special protection for vulnerable children such as *Orang Asli*, indigenous children, immigrant or refugee children as children without birth certificates cannot attend government schools.
- Providing incentives for teachers and school leaders in rural schools, providing additional funding and support for under-performing states, e.g., deploying more coaches and funds for infrastructure.

Equity of access to education

The inequality in the availability of preschool begins a vicious cycle, where low-income children do not have the same educational opportunities early in life as middle or upper-class children have. However, low-income communities should recognize that there are some early childhood

education programs available at an affordable cost for their families. So, with little research, they can find opportunities for their children. A school in such areas has deficiencies in education and creates barriers to learning for preschool children. Most important reason is that these schools are overcrowded and have limited resources (books and computers) and limited infrastructure with unqualified teachers who may burn out from operating under prolonged resource strain.

Giving importance to the Curriculum Development Center from 1972 (Ministry of Education, 1984) in administration of pre-school education indicates the education system in Malaysia for pre-school programs has continued to emphasize accessibility to equity and quality strengthening as well as improving the achievement of rural students to reduce the performance gap between rural and urban areas (Hassan & Rasiah, 2011). The socio-economic urban-rural gaps are expected to narrow, but they will also affect the corresponding achievement gaps between federal states and school types. Achieving this reduction would make Malaysia one of the more equitable systems in the world.

Although the education system envisioned for all Malaysian children with any conditions to be equipped with the tools they need to unlock their future, children, especially in rural areas (Redmond et al., 2017), experienced significantly higher non-income deprivation than children in urban areas. According to the Ministry of Education in 2017, about 90.9% of children were enrolled in pre-school (Ministry of Education, 2019). In that category, most of the children are from low-income communities, and only 60 percent of children have the opportunity to attend preschool. Among those children, often boys from rural low-income areas are not interested in enrolling in primary school after pre-school and are more likely to end up dropping out of school to help their parents (UNICEF, 2019). Therefore, they feel tired at school and cannot focus on their studies. These children have no reason not to come to school because if they do not, they will miss the free food. Hence, the school needs to think of alternatives like distributing food coupons and parents should also play a role in encouraging their children to concentrate on their studies (Faizuddin, 2018). For social justice, accessibility and equity are issues and affect many factors.

Many preschools still differ across states by gender, socio-economic status, and location (Majzub, 2009). The best school systems provide the best possible education for all students, regardless of ethnicity, geographic location, or even socio-economic background. In this case, the education system will actively support social mobility by providing additional assistance to those at a disadvantage, thereby ensuring that a student's socio-economic background will no longer be the biggest driver of whether or not he or she succeeds. However, diverse groups of children with special needs should be accommodated in the preschools; these include Down syndrome, the Mentally Retarded, the Autistic, and the Slow Learners.

The Ministry of Education Malaysia provided programs for children with special needs, vulnerable children and gifted children. Although the education system desires to provide access to alternative educational pathways like vocational education to make adequate opportunities for students with different abilities to develop their talents, this underperformance is related to three demographic and structural challenges (Malaysia, 2013): First, 73 percent of under-enrolled schools are located in remote rural areas. This requires students to travel long distances to attend school and reduces the likelihood of high-performing teachers and principals. Second, these schools lack the advantages associated with scale: co-curriculum offerings, better facilities, and interactions with a more diverse group of peers. Finally, many of these schools are in low-income areas and face difficulties related to lower socioeconomic status. Low-income families face more significant challenges in keeping their children in school, as the costs of school supplies, uniforms, and transportation fees often result in higher student absenteeism. Statistically, 50.1% boys and 99.9% girls attended preschool and 66.4% of them are mismatched by age or over-aged to attend preschool and 7.1% of Malaysian children in all ages drop out from studying (Mortimer et al., 2014). Therefore, students from low-income families are less likely to have attended preschool; they will enter primary school without the preschool benefits enjoyed by their more affluent peers.

Parental issues

Parents have to provide facilities to educate their children. Parental involvement is regarded as a vital term of a child's education mainstream (Hamidun et al., 2019; Saeki et al., 2018 as cited in Lin Abdullah Kamal et al., 2022) and attitude towards education impacts the school performance and perceptions of their children (Mortimer et al., 2014). Therefore, the Ministry of Education (2012) has developed a *Saran Ibu Bapa* or Parent Toolkit as a guide to increase parental involvement in children learning both in and out of school. Education expenses are either directly through personal expenditure to support day-to-day schooling activities or indirectly through taxes, which include school fees, school uniforms, books and equipment, pocket money for meals, school trips, and other charges. These standards are determined by the schools and usually with the support of Parent-Teacher Associations or even the government.

Poverty affects outcomes for people (Smith et al., 1997), and some of these factors include; children's cognitive and literary skills, health and well-being; language development; access to physical and material resources; and mobility level (Parrett & Budge, 2020). Many parents may have to bear the total cost of schooling; some parents may have gotten financial assistance through educational support programs such as subsidies, scholarships, textbooks-on-loan, and hostel facilities (Jamaludin & Mohamad, 2018). In this case, children above the poverty line who enrolled for pre-school surpass those below them.

Under the Child Care Act 611, the Department of Social Welfare conducts intervention programs for young children. This service provides educational assistance to children from low income families to better prepare their children with skills they need to improve educational attainment and to promote quality life (Md-Yunus, 2013). In addition to having their parents protect children from poverty, abuses, neglects, and exploitations, as well as being given the rights to communicate (Yunus, 2019). With this explanation, education is the key to decreasing poverty whilst the best quality education is tailored to meet the unique needs of vulnerable children groups that will affect and eliminate the gap between poverty and education.

The latter was inevitable because they argued that increasing the fees were not feasible as most of the children's parents were of low social-economic status (Aziz et al., 2021). To promote greater equity and help parents, the Ministry of Education is already investing heavily in encouraging pre-school enrolment as part of the Education NKRA (Malaysia, 2013). The government also provides free school uniforms, school textbooks, and some financial assistance especially those with many children. On the other hand, low-income families have no formal education with less time due to holding more than one job (Hanafi & Taslikhan, 2016) to read to their children, no funds for preschool and less stable home environments. Hence, improving the literacy rate among parents with no formal education can boost awareness on the importance of education and its potential in increasing their economic status (Mortimer et al., 2014).

Language and Literacy Development

Early literacy skills refer to the understanding of basic concepts about printed materials, letters and alphabets, letter sounds, letter-sound relationships, and basic vocabulary. Preschool teachers have a significant role in children's literacy development and power to influence early literacy skill development which can potentially impact children's later success in school (Dennis & Horn, 2011 as cited in Hendi & Asmawi, 2018). Experts such as Regalado et al., 2001; Parette et al., 2009; Piasta, 2014; and Rohde, 2015 believe that alphabet knowledge, oral language skills, phonological awareness, and print awareness respectively are four elements of literacy and are more important to be implemented in preschool curriculum. However, most Malaysian preschool curriculum were not interested in conducting professional language teacher before 2010.

In 2010, the Ministry of Education of Malaysia decided that the use of English as an instructional language, together with the Malay language and other mother tongue, should begin in the preschool level to better prepare young children before they attend primary school (Ministry of Education, 2010). However, there are barriers to the use of English language as it relates to both the teacher and the learning environment which are as follows (Goh et al., 2020):

- Lack of confidence and fear of using the language by the teacher
- Lack of the teacher's proficiency in English
- Insufficient time
- Insufficient parental involvement

To come up with this issue, preschool teachers can obtain the knowledge and the required skills in early English literacy instruction by receiving suitable instructional training and consequently be able to promote early literacy skills and motivation of young children (Hendi & Asmawi, 2018).

Young children growing up in poverty face challenges with cognitive and literary ability (Taylor, 2017). In line with this, poverty is also another obstacle in language and literacy development that makes the word gap statistically significant; low-income children will hear 30 million fewer words at age five. These children have trouble reading altogether or are less likely to read. Children from low-income communities come to school behind their more affluent peers; in terms of literacy and language development and differences in access to reading materials (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2008).

In addition, the biggest obstacle to developing literacy for children with special needs is the lack of early literacy experiences. The place where children can be seen and communicate at an early age is the preschool. Thus, preschool access and participation for children with physical and learning disabilities can be delayed by numerous factors, including the lack of preschool in their areas of living or insufficient facilities used in their activities and above all, the lack of proficiency of teachers in applying appropriate curricula for the gifted children. In line with this, parents also believe that it is not necessary or beyond the capability of their gifted children (Mortimer et al., 2014). Moreover nowadays with the growth of knowledge among parents due to training programs that pre-schools provide for them to know more about their children's needs and Alternative Learning Centers (ALCs), which were offered by NGOs to access the special school easier than before to give opportunity for young learner with disabilities.

Material Resources

Despite the extensive financial support by the government for schooling activities, such activities are not free. The urban areas in Malaysia remained far surpassing the rural area with good school services, healthcare, and other infrastructure support facilities. Poverty often places on the family's ability to provide material resources for their children. For instance, they may have limited access to physical space to create private or quiet environments conducive for studying at home or even have limited access to high-quality daycare. To solve this issue, they can provide computer labs and the placement of more trained teachers in rural schools. Therefore, upgrading teaching and learning facilities can decrease the performance gap between rural and urban schools. The schooling expenditure is divided as follows (Hassan & Rasiah, 2011):

School fees include fees for co-curriculum activities, exercise textbooks and stationery as required by schools, school uniforms (including uniforms for co-curriculum such as scouts, police cadets, and sports), transport from home to school and back (such as fares for school bus and boats, and cost of petrol for personal vehicles), pocket money for school meals, tuition (extra tuition fees outside school hours for school subjects including reading and writing books, but

excluding other learning activities such as music and religious classes not related to formal school examinations), and others (mainly hostel fees, educational insurance, and school trips).

Social Mobility

Low-income communities often face further constraints, which is the ability to provide stable housing. Essentially, children have to move from one location to another because of their parents' work or other issues that require them to move. Therefore, frequent moving up usually has a negative academic and social impact on children and it can affect children focus, initiative, and engagement in the classroom. For instance, children in Sabah have diverse ethnic composition with geographical variety which may affect their education. In regard to this issue, the Alternative Learning Centers provided remote schools for children to make free of charge from any incidental costs or school fees and promoted teacher training to address the needs of the community by expanding the comprehensive special model school (K9) and centralized school frameworks to remote area (UNICEF, 2019).

Children deprived from the advantages of school are likely to feel more anxious and confident about school. Out-of-school activities can help build self-confidence by improving learning relationships, so children from advantaged backgrounds greatly benefit from access to more structured and supervised activities beyond school. Social background also influences children's feelings about school from an early age. Children living in poverty are victims of a system lacking their autonomy or ability to make choices that affect their lives. These children do worse not because their parents read to them less but because of their life experiences. If governments are serious about improving their educational capabilities, measures should be taken to improve their life chances, not curriculum (Chandran & Geetha, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Coming up with these factors provides invaluable knowledge to educators in their efforts to support and teach students who live in poverty. On the contrary, it leads to empathy and understanding of the differentiation, scaffolding, and support children may need to meet high expectations. When children know that their teachers are trying their best and even care about them and relate to the realities of their lives, they become far more inclined to trust and actively engage in learning.

As a result, the government in Malaysia needs to think of other ways to help students from low-income communities to strive in schools. Lowering poverty should be on the main agenda for sustainable development. As students from low-income communities are less likely to attend preschool, they will enter primary school without the advantages of the preschool education that their more affluent peers enjoyed.

Datuk Seri Michael Manyin indicates that Malaysia should consider practicing "positive discrimination" in education to help improve the performance of rural schools and children (Ling, 2018). For instance, about 70 percent of all schools were physically dilapidated, and 37 percent had no electricity supply. Some countries practice equalization of education, which means every school is the same and no school is better than another. However, there are schools which are far surpassing others. Therefore, although we cannot practice equalization of education, we can practice positive discrimination, in which additional allocations and the best teachers can be given to rural schools. Identifying the poor urban areas, survey, review the effectiveness of programs, and designing the best policies to tackle urban poverty are some important ways to deal with this issue.

Potential problems can arise when the private sector is driven by the profit motive. There is a tendency in for-profit organizations that sometimes tend to sacrifice quality to maximize profit. For example, unlike the public sector, for-profit organizations may discontinue their services when faced with financial problems. They are also not over-concerned with issues such as equal access. Instead, they tend to avoid services for those with limited ability to pay. Moreover, there can be conflicts between the for-profit principle and the value of education.

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