Gaps in Malaysia’s urban and rural schools

Name

Institution

Outline: Gaps in Malaysia’s urban and rural schools

* **Introduction** – background information on the topic to include relevant statistics that put the issue into perspective, showing the disparity between urban and rural schools. Includes the specific figures on schools in urban and rural locations, as well as the illiteracy percentages with respect to age. The figures are intended to show that there is a significant divide between learning outcomes reported for urban and rural schools.
* **Discussion –** 
  + **Understanding Malaysia’s education system** – background on Malaysia’s education format, starting from preschool to higher education. Showing how many years students take at each education level, funding, instruction language, and examination formats.
  + **Education inequality in Malaysian rural and urban schools** – discussing the disparities between rural and urban schools in Malaysia. Indicates disparities in education accessibility, and causes of the disparity between urban and rural schools.
  + **Malaysian education policy gaps** – discussing the stop-gap solutions that the Malaysian government has applied over the years, the basis for these solutions, and their fundamental failures in rectifying the situation. Focus is placed on the compensatory policies and how they have played a role in perpetuating the education disparity.
  + **Addressing education inequality in Malaysia** – discussing the strategies that have been applied to address the inequality and proposing new strategies that would further bridge the gap between urban and rural schools. Particular attention is placed on discussing the merits that an alternative approach would provide to address the social constraints when compared to the compensatory policies. It particularly notes that education equity must begin with cultural equity that addresses the demonstrated bias while acknowledging the conflicting social interests so that there are no ideological effects.
* **Conclusion** – a recap of the main points presented in the paper.
* **References –** alphabetical list of references used in APA format.

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**Introduction**

According to 2017 demographic figures, Malaysia has a population of approximately 31.1 million of which about 9.64 million (31%) are 18 years of age and younger. 7.78 million Malaysians (25%) reside in rural areas. In 2015, Malaysia reported significant school enrolment rates among the population aged 18 years and younger. The net enrolment ratio was 80.75 % for pre-primary education, 99.52% for primary education, and 73.4% for secondary education. The out of school figures for the same year were reported at 14,470 for out of school children, and 201,525 for out of school adolescents. The illiteracy figures were reported at 131,139 for persons between 15 and 24 years of age, and 1,441,790 for persons older than 14 years of age. The literacy rate is reported at 97.61% for persons between 15 and 24 years of age, 93.73% for persons older than 14 years of age, and 63.12% for persons older than 63 years of age (UNESCO, 2019). At a glance, these figures show that Malaysia has made significant education achievements, however, a closer review indicates existing educational disparities and inequalities that disadvantage rural schools when compared to urban schools. The present paper discusses the education inequalities that exist between students in Malaysia’s urban and rural areas, and proposes strategies for addressing these inequalities.

**Discussion**

**Understanding Malaysia’s education system**

Malaysian education system formally begins when children reach 4 years of age. At this time, the government recommends that all children should attend preschool. Primary education formally begins when a child turns 6 years of age, in which case the child is expected to enroll for the school that begins on the first day of January. The government has mandated that primary school attendance is compulsory for all children, with the expectation that they would complete the six years of primary school. Students who have successfully completed the six years of primary education are allowed to proceed to attend five years of secondary education that has similarly been made compulsory by the government. The Malaysian government enables attendance of primary and secondary education in public institutions through a free public education system that sees all students proceed to sit for the public common examination that facilitates their efforts to attend higher education. Malaysia’s education system includes kindergarten and preschool education that targets children between 4 and 6 years of age, primary education for six years that targets children between 6 and 11 years of age, secondary education for five years (three years in lower secondary and two years in upper secondary) that targets adolescents between 12 and 16 years of age, and pre-university (post-secondary education) that could take between one and two years targeting teenagers between 17 and 18 years of age. Upper secondary education offers four learning options that include religious, vocational, technical, and academic education. Post-secondary education offers three learning options that include STAM for one year, matriculation certificate for one year, and STPM (form 6) for one and a half years (Study Malaysia, 2015).

Higher education is offered past secondary education, targeting teenagers who are 17 years of age or older. There are four options for higher education. The first option is diploma and certificate education targeted at persons 17 years of age or older. The second option is teacher education and training institutes that target persons 17 years of age or older. The third option is Bachelor’s degree for three to five years targeting persons 18 years of age or older. The final option is post-graduate education (including Ph.D. and master’s studies) that go on for between one and five years (Study Malaysia, 2015).

The government recognizes that it has a multicultural population and seeks to reflect this in the schools categories that are intended to reflect the identity and needs of different populations. In fact, it has six categories of schools at the pre-tertiary level. The first category of schools are private and government kindergarten schools that follow the national preschool curriculum. The second category is public and government-funded national schools that follow the national curriculum and take the corresponding national examination. The third category is government-aided schools that are similar to the second category of schools except that they are divided into Tamil and Chinese instruction schools. The fourth category is privately funded schools that follow the national curriculum and take the corresponding national examination. The fifth category is independent Chinese schools that apply a unique curriculum running for 6 years that use Chinese as the instruction language. The final category is foreign system schools that apply a foreign curriculum and includes expatriate and international schools that either use English or other instructional languages that are not indigenous to Malaysia (OECD, 2019).

There are two categories of schools at the tertiary (higher education) level. The first category includes public colleges, community colleges, polytechnics and public universities that are funded by the government. The second category are tertiary institutions not funded by the government to include foreign university branch campuses, university status institutions, and non-university status institutions (Guan, 2017).

The government funds basic education at both the primary and secondary levels, and has made considerable efforts to fund tertiary education. In fact, students attending public universities are advantaged by government subsidies for their school fees. Students attending private universities do not enjoy similar subsidies, and have to pay the full fees. Other than government subsidies for school fees, students attending higher education have access to other financial aids that include study loans, grants, and scholarships from companies linked to the government, state foundations, public services department, national higher education fund, and ministry of education (de Haan, 2010).

Different instructional mediums are used at different education levels. In public schools at the primary level, the medium of instruction is dependent on the type of schools. National schools instruct students using Bahasa Malaysia (the national language) with English offered as a compulsory second language subject. National-type schools are vernacular schools that conduct student instruction using either Tamil or Chinese with both English and Bahasa Malaysia offered as compulsory language subjects. In public schools at the secondary level, the medium of instruction is Bahasa Malaysia with English taught as a compulsory second language subject. Arabic, Tamil, Chinese, French and other indigenous and foreign languages are offered as additional language subjects. At the tertiary education level, learning instructions are typically offered in Bahasa Malaysia for public institutions, English for private institutions, and English for postgraduate programs (Study Malaysia, 2015).

**Education inequality in Malaysian rural and urban schools**

Despite having made significant efforts to improve the educational levels of Malaysian through free public primary and secondary programs, and subsidized tertiary education, significant inequalities exist between rural and urban schools. In this case, equalities (in the present context) are interpreted as indicators of education achievement and accessibility. Education achievement is the measure of performance in the examination that reflects students’ mastery of specified acceptable values, skills and knowledge. Education accessibility is the equal opportunity that is offered to all children of school-going age to attend school where effective learning takes place with adequate facilities regards of demographic peculiarities and differences (de Haan, 2010).

Measured by the results for public national examinations, students in rural schools performed worse than their counterparts in urban schools. This is an indication that the problems of education inequality are still far from being resolved despite government attention and intervention. In fact, this is not a new problem and was identified in the early 1960s when the government presented a new economic policy that sought to eradicate poverty in rural areas while restructuring institutions and society so that public stratification did not occur at the location or ethnic group levels. In this context, education was identified as an important long-term tool for addressing the inequalities (OECD, 2019).

However, the results have been far from ideal since it is not equitable so that urban and rural schools results greatly differ. As it is, significant differences can be seen. This is especially so for the Malaysian government’s commendable efforts to improve education accessibility (through free and subsidized education programs) but failed to address the achievement and participation concerns, or even the basic facilities and infrastructure discrepancy for the rural versus urban areas. The discrepancy extends to differences between aborigine and mainstream populations, as well as political and economic discrepancies that result in differences in educational and psychological readiness for educational successes (Sundaram & Hui, 2014).

In order to present adequate strategies for addressing the existing education inequalities and discrepancies noted between urban and rural areas, there is a need to first understand the cause of the inequality. Historically, the Malaysian government’s approach to education has been to build education infrastructure and facilities in urban areas to match the rapid economic developments taking place in these areas. The result is that education institutions in urban areas have adequately manned and equipped when compared to schools in rural areas that have been given a lower priority that matches their slow pace of economic development. These gaps in educational facilities have translated into gaps in opportunities, resulting in the achievement differences that are currently being reported for the two areas. The implication is that the government intentionally applies unfair education facilities and resources allocation strategies that advantage students in urban areas while disadvantaging students in rural areas (Arnove & Torres, 2007).

To put the issue into perspective, approximately 39% of secondary schools and 69% of primary schools are in rural areas. However, most of these schools do not have the required learning facilities and infrastructure. Quite a large number of them do not have access to adequate electricity thus limiting their capacity to use information and communication technology (ICT). In addition, schools in rural areas are largely manned by untrained volunteer teachers who are unable to manage learning and student requirements competently. The government has made some effort to address these concerns and improve the situation. Through the ministry of education, the government has offered school-based training programs that improve the competency of untrained teachers. In addition, the government has constructed ICT laboratories with the appropriate infrastructure and equipment thus reducing the digital divide. Besides that, teachers in rural areas are now offered training in remedial teaching to address the higher rates of failure reported among students in rural schools (Guan, 2017).

**Malaysian education policy gaps**

After years of applying stop-gap solutions to address the education disparities between rural and urban areas in Malaysia, the differences between education inputs and attainments between the two areas are still prominently significant. These gaps highlight the need to scrutinize the education policy weaknesses so that a revised effort can be launched to ensure that there is equal education opportunity for students in rural and urban areas. It is important to note that whatever policies have been applied to address the gaps, they have largely focused on locality (urban versus rural areas) as an ascription factor while ignoring natural endowment factors, which include psychological characteristics, aptitudes and intelligence that could be regarded as functional and therefore occurring equally among the urban and rural areas (UNDP, 2013). In addition, unequal school results noted for the two localities (urban and rural areas) were considered to be resultant of the disadvantageous primary socialization modalities. Consequently, addressing the existing gaps was translated to imply bringing about education equity in terms of ensuring equitable accessibility. This entailed ensuring that allocation of education resources is based on compensating students in rural areas for being handicapped by their environmental circumstances. This included giving priority to school equipment and facilities allocation, taking care of the students’ welfare and health, opening up opportunities for placement in boarding schools, and allocating other forms of school aid that would facilitate their transition through school. This approach to intervention is based on the assumption that rural and urban areas present cultural deprivation that result in unequal accessibility to education (OECD, 2018).

These policies are based on the awareness that there is unequal education resource allocation with urban areas getting the bulk of the resources. Addressing the existing gaps through equal treatment in terms of education resource allocation would only worsen the situation since rural areas are already disadvantaged. As such, the government identified the best strategy for addressing the existing gaps and increasing opportunities for education equality as applying a compensatory policy that improved equity of treatment through ensuring that students in rural areas have access to more resources than their counterparts in urban areas. The specific approaches entailed building more schools in rural areas, improving school facilities, increasing the allocation of qualified teachers, availing boarding facilities, ensuring that students are ICT ready, and providing targeted scholarships. The compensatory policy has however been criticized for failing to identify the symptoms, being based effects rather than causes, and only acting as pointers to the ineffectiveness of the existing policies. A more appropriate intervention policy would entail being consistent in differentiating symptoms, causes, effects, and interventions. Simply pursuing a compensatory policy that is based on the deficit theory is not enough (UNDP, 2013).

**Addressing education inequality in Malaysia**

As indicated, simply applying a compensatory policy is not enough to address the education gaps noted for rural and urban areas. Offering compensatory education amenities does not ensure that rural and urban students get equal education and learning opportunities. Rather than applying the compensatory policy in isolation, it should be applied in collaboration with a structural change that targets teachers and students with the intention of changing their attitudes so that the students are motivated to learn, and a school environment and climate that is conducive to learning is offered, as well as supportive neighborhoods. By virtue of hidden cultural influences, populations in rural areas are induced to want educational attainments that reflect their rural backgrounds, typically lower than those of their counterparts in urban areas. It is important to note that the described educational culture is one that acknowledges the existence of social constraints (and not individual choices or genetic endowments) as part of the world’s global structure (OECD, 2018).

Even before looking at education, inequalities already exist and are inextricably interwoven into the societal structure, giving birth to the educational inequalities that pit students from rural areas against those from urban areas. It is equally important to note that the cultural factors do not have a direct effect on educational inequalities. Rather, they have a mediating effect on structural factors that affect the behavior of individual teachers, students and other stakeholders in education. Applying this awareness to the present situation indicates that structural change allows for cultural transformation. Put into perspective, the initial disadvantages of cultural capital should be compensated so that the Malaysian government does generate and ratify inequalities, but makes a concerted effort to address them. This would also involve shifting their understanding of the source of the inequality from the unique cultures and characteristics of students in rural areas (OECD, 2012). This would include presenting a new school curriculum that does not demonstrate bias and acknowledges the conflicting social interests so that there are no ideological effects. The current curriculum is being exploited by culturally dominant and is operated in a discriminatory manner that reproduces the dominance of urban areas over rural areas. This implies that the intervention that allows for equality in urban and rural schools should include an appropriate and differentiated curriculum for rural and urban schools as different social groups. This would offer the students equal opportunities to reproduce their specific languages and cultures through education (schooling) without interference or dominance from other cultures. For intents and purposes, the school education should serve as a mediator between the needs and wants of the stakeholders (such as students and teachers) and the existing power structure. In its mediation role, school education goes a long way in setting the tone for cultural equity depending on how compensators, policies, political pressure, facilities, and curriculum are manipulated (OECD, 2018).

**Conclusion**

One must accept that education inequality between Malaysian urban and rural schools is a reality. In addition, one must acknowledge that the government’s efforts to address the inequality through compensatory efforts have realized less than the desired outcomes. In fact, the compulsory education approach that has been applied to ensure that every Malaysian has basic education denies students in rural schools any real opportunities. A more effective approach should complement the compensatory approach with a structural change that changes the attitudes of stakeholders, motivating students to learn, creating a school environment and climate that is conducive to learning is offered, and presenting supportive neighborhoods. Besides that, the Malaysian government, through the ministry of education, should present a new school curriculum that does not demonstrate bias and acknowledges the conflicting social interests so that there are no ideological effects that disadvantage students in rural areas.

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