

Fulfilling the Aspirations of Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025: Issues and Challenges

Abu Yazid Abu Bakar

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, MALAYSIA.

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Abstract: The education system in Malaysia has undergone continuous development in order to create a top-notch global education system. The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) acts as a strategic plan to meet the future requirements of the education system in Malaysia. This blueprint places significant emphasis on five key areas: assessment, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency. It also centers around five important goals for students, encompassing knowledge acquisition, critical thinking abilities, leadership aptitude, bilingual proficiency, as well as ethics, spirituality, and national identity. In order to realize these objectives, the blueprint presents 11 transformative changes that need to be implemented.

This paper explores the challenges and issues that need to be addressed in order to fulfil the aspirations outlined in the guiding policy. It also proposes strategies to overcome these challenges and ensure the successful implementation of the blueprint's objectives.

Keywords: Aspirations, Educational Blueprint, Issues and Challenges, Malaysia

Introduction

As the education system in Malaysia progresses, it encounters changing challenges in the pursuit of its objectives (Hussein, 2012). Extensive efforts have been made to establish an education system of international standards within the country. Acting as a roadmap for the development of the Malaysian education system, the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 provides comprehensive guidance. The MEB places particular focus on five key aspirations for the system: assessment, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency. Additionally, it emphasizes five aspirations for students, encompassing knowledge, thinking skills, leadership skills, bilingual proficiency, ethics and spirituality, and national identity. To realize these aspirations, the MEB identifies 11 crucial shifts that need to be implemented. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the system and student aspirations outlined in the MEB 2013-2025.

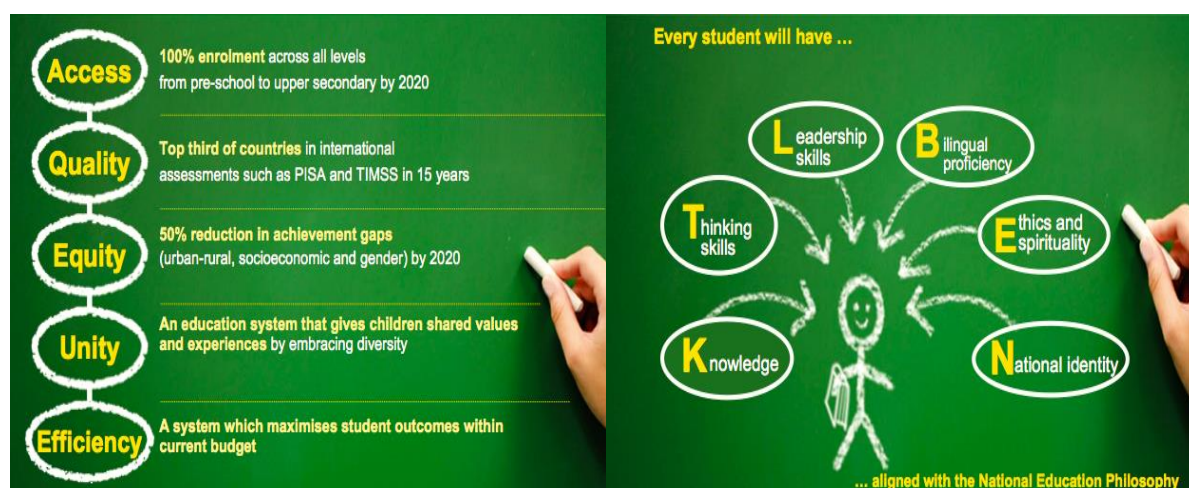


Figure 1: The MEB's 2013-2025 System and Student Aspirations

Despite Malaysia's goal of becoming a global education hub by 2025, there have been persistent challenges in raising the international standard of education. It is evident that the issue is not solely attributed to a lack of budget. In fact, Malaysia allocates a substantial amount of approximately RM55 billion or 3.8% of its GDP to education, which is more than double the average of 1.8% among other ASEAN countries (Roman, 2018). However, despite this significant investment, Malaysia continues to rank in the bottom third of global

rankings, as highlighted by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) for two consecutive years. These statistics demonstrate that quality education cannot be solely achieved through financial investment alone.

Malaysia, known for its diverse society comprising Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnicities, stands out as a country that showcases unity amidst its cultural and religious diversity. National unity plays a vital role in the nation's progress, and education serves as a crucial tool for fostering integration. It offers individuals the opportunity to enhance their lives, become active contributors to the community, and contribute to the overall development of the country. Education policies in Malaysia need to consider the political and social dynamics of the nation. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has consistently utilized education as a means of promoting unity. The introduction of common-content syllabi and the establishment of Malay as the primary medium of instruction in all schools during the 1970s were viewed as significant steps toward achieving national integration (Jamil, 2010). However, the existence of vernacular schools with their own mother tongue as the instructional language has posed challenges to the implementation of national integration. This issue has been a longstanding concern since Malaysia gained independence.

Issues and Challenges of Fulfilling MEB 2013-2025's Aspirations

While efforts to increase access to education have been made, it is important to recognize that simply expanding educational opportunities does not automatically ensure a high-quality education for all. In some cases, resources may be disproportionately allocated, favoring certain groups and leaving marginalized populations at a disadvantage (Pereira, 2016). Tan (2012) further contends that as the state strives for the democratization of education, numerous challenges have emerged such as:

- a. weak student progression
- b. school dropouts across minority ethnic groups
- c. urban and rural disparity

Weak Student Progression

The current Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) lacks explicit plans that specifically address the needs of underachieving students. The predominant focus of programs within the Malaysian education system is on enhancing the performance of high-achieving students, rather than catering to the requirements of underachievers. For instance, the High Performing Schools (HPS) initiative endeavors to elevate certain schools to meet global standards. Although these schools receive additional attention to maintain the quality of education, there is a dearth of well-developed programs for struggling schools. To tackle this issue, the Ministry of Education introduced the Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS) program as part of the National Key Result Area (NKRA) within the Educational Mandate. While this initiative is praiseworthy, the program is limited in its scope. LINUS is exclusively implemented for students in years 1 to 3, with a special screening for year 4 students classified as non-achievers. Beyond year 4, the government does not have clear interventions planned to address the underachievement issue. In contrast, the Finnish education system prioritizes providing additional time and support to students who require it. The Finnish system recognizes that every student is unique, with potential learning challenges or social issues that may impede their progress. To promote equity within the education system, the Malaysian Education Blueprint should incorporate more comprehensive plans tailored to the needs of underachieving students. This approach would ensure that weaker students progress alongside high achievers, fostering a more equitable educational environment.

School Dropouts across Minority Ethnic Groups

The issue of students struggling with literacy and numeracy has been a longstanding concern in the Malaysian education system, dating back to its early formulation and becoming more critical in the 1960s (Murad Dropout Report, 1972). While there has been a positive decrease in dropout rates, as reported by the Ministry of Education, it is important to recognize that this issue goes beyond mere statistics. Decreasing dropout rates does not necessarily indicate that students are receiving adequate access to formal education. According to the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB), approximately 36 percent of each cohort fails to reach the desired minimum achievement level.

Ensuring equal educational opportunities for all Malaysian children has been a central objective of the education system since independence. However, the migration of the population to urban areas poses a threat to rural schools, as they may face closure due to low enrolment. This situation would leave students in rural areas without access to the education they need, unless alternative solutions are implemented.

Aside from economic disadvantages, dropping out disproportionately affects those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and marginalized groups such as the Orang Asli. The dropout rates among the Orang Asli community remain high, with 25 percent dropping out during the transition from primary to secondary school and a 26 percent dropout rate at the secondary school level, as reported in the MEB annual report of 2014. Addressing this issue is crucial for increasing social mobility and improving the quality of life for this population.

To address the challenge of under-enrolled schools, the Ministry of Education has reintroduced combined classrooms in these schools as a measure to prevent their closure. Combined classrooms involve students of different ages studying together in the same classroom. For example, Year 2 and Year 3 pupils may be taught in the same classroom. Teachers in these combined classrooms are required to prepare lesson plans that cater to the learning needs of both levels of students.

While this approach allows for the continuation of schooling in under-enrolled schools, it presents challenges for teachers. They must manage the diverse needs and abilities of students from different age groups within a limited time frame. This can be demanding, and there is a risk that some students may not receive adequate attention or support as teachers try to juggle multiple responsibilities simultaneously.

These initiatives highlight the efforts made by the Ministry of Education to address the needs of underachieving students and schools facing enrollment challenges. However, it is crucial to ensure that the implementation of combined classrooms is effective in meeting the educational needs of all students and that adequate support is provided to teachers to manage the unique demands of such classrooms.

Urban and Rural Disparity

Research in the context of Malaysian primary education highlights four key factors that contribute to improving quality: educational resources, school climate, leadership, and parental involvement. Statistical evidence suggests that Malaysian parents generally encourage their children to attend school, with enrolment rates in primary education consistently high between 1996 and 2008.

Parental involvement, specifically in terms of monitoring homework and participating in school activities through school-home partnerships, has been shown to positively influence student development (OECD, 2005; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997). In Sabah, research findings indicate a reduction in educational inequalities between urban and rural areas over the past five years, reflecting the effectiveness of government policies and efforts (Sui Chin et al., 2016). However, it was observed that rural teachers perceived lower levels of school climate compared to urban teachers (Mariam & Daniel, 2012), contradicting previous studies that found differences in educational quality.

In summary, this research suggests that the gap between urban and rural schools is not significant in terms of educational resources, school leadership, and parental involvement. This finding is supported by a UNESCO study that indicates a relatively equal distribution of resources in both urban and rural areas in Malaysia (UNESCO, 2008). Malaysia is also reported to have a high number of recorded school resources compared to other upper middle-income countries, demonstrating the effectiveness of measures implemented in the Malaysian education blueprint (UNESCO, 2008).

Strategy to Overcome Issues and Challenges of Fulfilling MEB 2013-2025's Aspirations

To enhance Malaysia's education system, the government has implemented changes in the curriculum, policies, and even the medium of instruction. Each political figure strives to leave a legacy, leading to competition in producing a better education system. However, these frequent changes have had an impact on the results of international assessments like PISA and TIMSS. Unfortunately, excessive changes can also make our education system vulnerable and unstable.

Teachers and students in Malaysia bear the brunt of continuous changes in curriculum, teaching and learning methodologies, and technology. They become the subjects of experimentation as they are expected to apply and implement these policies. For instance, some students were taught Science and Mathematics in English, but after a few years, the policy was reversed, and they had to learn these subjects in Bahasa Melayu again. Consequently, these rapid changes resulted in Malaysia obtaining lower grades in TIMSS and PISA in 2011 compared to 2009. According to the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013), Malaysia's ranking in science dropped from 27th in 2009 to 32nd in 2011. The decline in results can also be attributed to the incomplete coverage of topics in TIMSS by our national curriculum. This indicates a lack of thorough research or needs analysis before implementing curriculum changes to ensure alignment with student needs.

Therefore, it is crucial for the government to conduct a comprehensive needs analysis when considering changes to the national curriculum. As mentioned on the British Council website, a thorough understanding of learner needs contributes to successful course planning. Needs analysis helps policymakers identify the specific needs

and challenges faced by schools to effectively implement the new curriculum. Additionally, regardless of changes in government, policymakers should prioritize the interests of students and avoid mixing politics with education. Constant competition among policymakers to introduce the best policies can be detrimental to education. A well-thought-out timeline should be established to evaluate the success of new curriculum changes, rather than rushing into further modifications without proper assessment.

Conclusion

In summary, a key approach to enhancing our education system is to draw inspiration from other countries and use them as reference points when designing our curriculum. Countries such as Finland, Japan, and Singapore should be given high priority when creating curriculum and syllabi. Finland, in particular, has been recognized as having one of the best education systems globally. Therefore, it would be beneficial for our Ministry of Education to study Finland's education system and tailor it to suit the Malaysian context. For instance, Finland places a strong emphasis on the quality and qualifications of its teachers. They have implemented stringent selection criteria for teacher recruitment, requiring all teachers to hold a master's degree. In Finland, teachers must also meet minimum qualification standards through the Finish matriculation examination or by completing three years of vocational education programs. Furthermore, Finnish teachers undergo training to adapt their teaching methods to accommodate diverse learning needs and styles among students. The Malaysian Ministry of Education can adopt similar measures, focusing on electing skilled and qualified teachers for all types of schools. It is essential for our teachers to receive training that equips them with the ability to adapt their teaching approaches to meet the varying learning needs and styles of our students, thereby providing effective instruction.

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