

Re-Examining Implementation of Policy on Equity in Education in Malaysia

Abu Bakar Nordin

ABSTRACT: Democratization of education implied that all children of school age should have the right to be in schools and also have the right to be assisted to achieve as much as what their cohorts have achieved or what has been specified by the curriculum. However, owing to variations in factors such as family economic and education backgrounds, ethnicity, school locations, school and teacher distributions, allocation of school funds, diversity in the implementations of specific reforms, the presence of physically and mentally handicapped students and parent-teacher association involvement in school activity; accessibility and achievement fell short of the expectation. In examining the current forms of policy implementation and reforms discrepancies found run not only counter to the sacred doctrine of democratization of education but also work against the sacred goals of providing equal education opportunity for all children. Streaming according to performance, despite having its own advantages, does not help in either accessibility or achievement and thereby antithetical to equity. Therefore, the current practices in the implementation of the policy and reforms should be re-examined within the context of a reliable framework, so that remedial and much more innovative considerations such as purposeful distributions of teachers, making additional fund available for needy schools, streaming according to the needs of children to be able to learn effectively, and dispensing some allocation and organizational skills to educate parents to be actively involved in school activities can purposefully be undertaken.

KEY WORDS: Equity in education, education policy in Malaysia, re-examining policy in education, and education and equity.

Introduction

In 2011, there were approximately 5.37 million children between the age of seven and eighteen enrolled in the government schools in Malaysia. Out of this, 2.22 million children were in secondary schools and the rest were in primary schools. Despite its proud achievements in ensuring that every child enrolling in primary education and even better still came out in 10th and 20th placings in mathematics and science achievements respectively in TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) in 2003 – although the placings in those two subjects plunged down to 20th and 21st placings respectively in TIMSS in 2007 – the success story was not shared by every group in the country. Measured by a number of public

Prof. Dr. Abu Bakar Nordin is an Emeritus Professor at the Faculty of Education UM (University of Malaya), 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. For academic purposes, he can be reached via e-mail address at: a_bakarnordin@um.edu.my and a.bakar43@yahoo.com

examinations conducted by the Ministry of Education, the bulk of Malay pupils in rural areas or in the poor areas of the main cities performed much lower than the Chinese counterparts in all public examinations in almost all of the school subjects.

Inability to master 3Rs (Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle) at grade three among pupils from low income groups was higher than 5 percent which is the national average rate. Dropout percentage out of the primary school population was at 1.9 percent in urban area and 1.2 percent in rural area, while for the lower secondary school level the percentage of dropout was much higher and larger discrepancy seen, that is at 9.3 percent and 16.7 percent respectively for urban and rural areas. The dropout percentage for the aborigine pupils was much higher. The problems of equity in education at both the primary and secondary school levels were still far from being resolved even when these problems gained attention fifty years ago, particularly in its *Second Five-Year Malaysia Plan* in 1963. In the New Economic Policy or DEB (*Dasar Ekonomi Baru*) in 1969, the main policy thrusts were the eradication of poverty, particularly in the rural areas of the country and restructuring of the society so that stratification was not identifiable with ethnic groups and also compounded by locations. In this context, education was viewed as playing an important role in the long run, in achieving those two thrusts. However, to achieve those thrusts education needs to be equitable.

As it is there were a number of discrepancies found in the schooling process. These were discrepancy between accessibility or participation and achievement; discrepancy in infrastructure and basic facilities among regions and areas, particularly between urban and rural areas, Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia; discrepancy between the main stream population and the specific minority groups like the aborigines; discrepancy in terms of group awareness and involvement in education and group ignorance and apathy towards education; and discrepancy in economic terms and certain political decisions which led to the discrepancies in both psychological and educational readiness for success in schooling. Realizing the importance of bridging the gaps if equity were to be realized the Ministry of Education Strategic Blueprint or PPIP (*Pelan Induk Pembangunan Pendidikan*) in 2006-2010 and NKRA (National Key Result Areas or *Bidang Keberhasilan Utama Negara*) were launched and endorsed in much of the planning in RMK-10 (*Rancangan Malaysia ke-10 or Tenth Five-Year Malaysia Plan*) in 2011 which re-emphasized steps of bridging the identified gaps towards equity.

In order to comprehend the policy implemented by the government, first of all the term equity needs to be clearly understood. Equity, in this context, is interpreted in terms of accessibility and achievement. Accessibility is translated into equal opportunity offered to all children to attend schools which was translated into providing adequate facilities for effective learning to take place. Achievement is translated in terms of performance in the school and public examinations which reflects the mastery of specified knowledge and skills and the imbibement of acceptable values (Hutmacher, Cochrane & Bottani, 2001; and Meuret, 2002). As to enable policy on equity to be successfully implemented, the cause of inequality

must first be understood, then, only adequate measures can be undertaken to bring about equity.

Implementation of Education Policy on Equity

Historically, the focus of the education policy was on building of schools in urban areas where rapid economic development took place. Schools were well equipped and manned in contrast to low priority given to rural areas as seen in terms of slow development taking place in many rural areas. The gaps in the provision of educational facilities and, thus, opportunity were also witnessed between schools of different types. All these led to the differences in the achievement among students. However, in the *Third Five-Year Malaysia Plan*, the discrepancies were the subjects of focus as witnessed the statement of the goal pertaining to education as, “to close the gaps in the educational opportunity between the rich and the poor, among the regions, and among the ethnic groups through fair allocation of national resources and facilities” (*Third Five-Year Malaysia Plan*, 1976:3).

As in 2005, there were 5,077 (66.8%) primary schools and 792 (39.0%) secondary schools in rural areas. Many of these schools did not have proper infrastructure and learning facilities. Around 767 primary schools and 28 secondary schools, for example, did not enjoy 24 hour electricity supply and some did not have regular supply of diesel to run their generators. Some were supplied with low voltage electricity which was able for ICT (Information and Communication Technology) use. Clean water supply was not available in 1,517 primary schools and in 68 secondary schools. Quite a sizeable number of schools in rural areas are unable to access ICT. Teachers are not able to be placed in rural schools, while the schools for *orang asli* (indigenous people) and in remote parts of the country, particularly in Sabah and Sarawak, are normally manned by teachers who are not trained, thus not well versed to manage both the students and learning. Similar problems faced by teachers who were teaching disadvantaged children and other at risk groups of pupils.

Aware of these problems, the Ministry of Education redoubled its efforts to improve the situations. For example, as found in the system there were 15,444 untrained temporary teachers in primary schools and 2,895 in secondary schools. In order to provide teachers in critical subject areas in rural and remote areas, the Ministry of Education launched school based teacher training programme. To reduce the digital gap between rural and urban schools in the *Eighth Five-Year Malaysia Plan* in 2000, the Ministry of Education in put up infrastructure and ICT laboratories provided equipments such as computers in many schools in rural and remote areas of the country.

Registration in the higher secondary schools was 71.7% as compared with 84.4% for lower secondary schools and 96.0% for primary schools. The attrition rate of registration was addressed in many forms of aids and supports for children of *orang asli* (indigenous people) and other minority groups, including those from

poor families to attend and continue schooling until form five. To overcome high rate of failure to master 3Rs (Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle) at the primary school level, the Ministry of Education launched pilot program for problem class at 71 schools in 2004 and later changed to early intervention programme for reading and writing. Teachers who handled these classes were trained in remedial teaching. For the disadvantaged children, the Ministry of Education identified those children categorized as having learning problems such as behavioral problems, autism, down syndrome, attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia from those who are defective in hearing and seeing. Consequential to that, the Ministry of Education until 2005 provided 28 special education at primary schools, 2 each at the secondary level and for vocational stream. At the same time, inclusive education was put in place at 739 schools.

Topping all the compensations in order to overcome the problems of discrepancies in the opportunity in education, the Ministry of Education spent RM (Ringgit Malaysia) 1.0 billion every year giving aids and supports to students from the disadvantaged families in the forms of supplementary food (RMT, *Rancangan Makanan Tambahan* or Food Supplementary Program); milk (PSS, *Program Susu Tambahan* or Milk Supplementary Program); hostel food fees; payment of school and examination fees and school uniforms through trust fund for poor students or KWAPM (*Kumpulan Wang Amanah Pelajar Miskin*), and transport cost for going to schools.

Re-Examining the Policy and its Implementation

After fifty years, even with so much inputs being undertaken, the gaps in inputs, in the process, and in attainment between different groups of students and between inputs and attainments are still noticeably significant. Because of these gaps, there is a need to scrutinize and identify the possible weakness in the policy and in its implementation, so that a revised effort could be launched in bringing about equal opportunity in education.

Policy implementation by the Ministry of Education is difficult to interpret due to a number of reasons. *Firstly*, there is confusion in differentiating the identified gaps in education, be they the inputs, the cause, the process, or the results. *Secondly*, the approach to equity seems lacking clear framework, and exclusive in its assumption, causes, and impacts which were not helpful in formulating of policy and forwarding steps for action. *Thirdly*, there were elements in the policy which were antithetical to the attempt of attaining equity.

As to the first question, inequality gaps were almost lumped together and in so doing creates confusion as to the question of causality. This confusion does not help in the diagnosing of the problems of inequality and, hence, formulation of equity policy will not be easy. In examining the policy embarked, it appeared that the cause of inequality in both accessibility and achievement is assumed to stem from ascription factors such as social class, gender, ethnic group, and locality; while

factors were identifiable with natural endowment such as intelligence, aptitudes, and psychological characteristics were regarded to be functionally and, therefore, equal among the various groups of students (Mosteller & Moynihan eds., 1972; and Kozol, 1995).

Unequal outputs are the result of the disadvantageous modalities of primary socialization for those identified groups. Consequently, the focus in bringing about equity is to ensure accessibility was equitable. The allocation of resources was based on compensating for those who are being handicapped by the circumstances such as being poor, being in the rural area, and belonging to at risk groups. This could be seen in terms of giving priority to providing of school facilities and equipments, taking care of student health and welfare, opening of opportunity for boarding school placement, and allocating of other forms of aids to these groups.

This interpretation of deficit theory, unequal accessibility to education due to cultural deprivation, is the main cause of shortfall in the outputs leads to almost simple solution which sometimes fails to connect between cause and effect. Thus, it is viewed that equal treatment in terms the amount of resources allocated would worsen the results. Hence, according to Talcott Parsons, it is strongly felt that the right step to take is to propose policies of increasing equality of opportunity through equity of treatment in the form of compensator policy (cited by Meyhew ed., 1983). This is, in fact, the basis of the policy being pursued in the *Third Five-Year Malaysia Plan* in 1976.

More schools were built in rural areas and facilities in those schools were vastly improved. Qualified teachers were sent to these schools. Science subjects were emphasized and students were streamed into science streams. More boarding schools were built and priority was given to the students from rural background. Scholarships of various kinds were provided at all levels for those who deserved to be helped. As a result in the seventies, large number of students from rural and low income families were able to follow tertiary education. Many successfully came out filling up vacancies as professionals in both public and private sectors. At that time, it appears that policy implementation is on the right path, moving towards equity in educational opportunity.

Continuing into the 1980s to 2000, the Ministry of Education keeps on identifying gaps in achievement and coming out with programmes to improve the shortcomings in the implementation of the compensatory policy. Unfortunately, after about forty years of adopting the deficit model through the implementation of the so-called compensatory policy, inequality in inputs, between inputs and outputs, and among outputs of various groups in the society are still significant. The *Tenth Five-Year Malaysia Plan* in 2011 is a good example to illustrate why inequality of opportunity in education is unattainable.

A number of reforms were introduced of which some were running counter to the spirit of equity. Introducing of high performance school, selection of students for special schools based on assessment at the end of primary school, pitting schools against each other in terms of performance which inevitable leads to the

focus on examination, and those students identified to be potentially beneficial to schools' ranking apart from continuing the old policy of selecting students for boarding schools based on ability with only token regard of the social background are examples how policy implementation departs from the spirit entrenched in the *Second Five-Year Malaysia Plan* in 1963.

The introduction of smart schools (*sekolah bestari*) with an emphasis of using ICT (*Information and Communication Technology*) in pedagogical approach added to the inequality of the opportunity since many of the schools in rural areas for a number of reasons such as lacking in infrastructure, trained teachers, and computers will not be able to embark on the project at the same time as the smart schools. Although by 2005, about 92,685 schools were able to be connected by broadband through the *SchoolNet Project*, student readiness and facilities in rural areas, both at schools and at home particularly, are far inferior to those able to be enjoyed by those in urban schools. Thus, in the Ministry of Education Development Master Plan or *Pelan Induk Pembangunan Pendidikan* (PIPP), the intention to decrease the gaps with regards to locations, socio-economic standard, and levels of students' ability (and) the aims of the Ministry of Education (MoEM, 2006:32) was to ensure that all schools and the students have the same opportunity and ability for excellence inclusive of national schools and national type schools so that access, equity, and quality could be upgraded will remain as a dream.

In examining a long list of activities and achievements as recorded some did comply with modality of compensation, but many others seem to promote meritocracy, favorable to those groups which had a good headstart. Failing to pursue the deficit theory, as shown in the inconsistency of implementing compensatory model, is caused by the confusion in the adopting of a clear policy frame work which inadvertently leading to the introduction of the elements of meritocracy consistent to the concept of contest mobility. Establishing of high performance school, pitting schools against each other, and selection of students for different streams and for different schools are some of the practices subscribing to the structural-functionalist model of equity in which achievement namely natural endowment characteristics such as aptitude, intelligence, and personality are functional therefore equitable.

Forging forward for equity in education requires consistencies in differentiating symptoms, causes, effects, and process or action to be overcome the symptoms, the causes or the effects. Success in overcoming failure with regards to requires both policy and procedure differentiations. A student could not attend the school regularly because of poor health or unable to follow mathematics lessons because he/she was unable to read and calculate would require different compensatory treatments in the deficit model, from a student who did not attain excellence in examination or dropped out from school. Therefore, policy must identify the symptoms and be based on causes and not effects which could only act as pointers to policy ineffectiveness.

Thus, in formulating a policy and its implementation, the underlying assumption taken needs to be consistent and comprehensive, while at the same time taking into

consideration of the implementation of the policy vis-vis compensatory model, in the past. Merely pursuing the deficit theory, as exemplified in the implementation of compensation alone, is not enough. Inequality opportunity in education policy must be tackled on many fronts, nevertheless they must be consistent. Through pursuing of compensation hopefully inadequacy in the opportunity to access and achieve in education is overcome.

Unfortunately, compensation alone as proven by the past records does not help and is unable to explain persistency in the gaps in opportunity in access and in achievement. Providing amenities, tailored made programs, and others do ensure that every one gets equal opportunity to education and equal opportunity to learn. Compensating of amenities, for example, will not act directly in opening of access to education or in changing of student performance. Policy on compensation will only help if efficiently implemented to change the culture of the actors involved in teaching and learning namely students' attitude and motivation to learn, teachers' ability and disposition to teach, schools' climate and environment conducive for learning, and the supportive neighbourhood.

R. Bourdieu and P. Passeron (1978) refer the educationally conducive environment for change as cultural capital. In the cultural capital, it is postulated that individuals' total compliance to external forces acting on them without their awareness will not be able to bring about any change. Individuals are instrumental of the culture of the group to which they belong, and of the structure of the culture which is hierarchically based in the form of the dominant and dominated cultures. By virtue of hidden influence, individuals are induced to want what scholastic and occupational status society allows them to attain, as members of particular social classes or sub-classes. This concept of cultural capital has proven to be very useful for understanding the mechanisms for which compensation is transformed and, hence, determined educational groups' inequalities. The very question raised at this juncture how is compensation able to transform the culture of the individuals trapped in the cage of social structure.

Discussion and Recommendations

Going back to the drawing board, there are a number of important concepts need to be constructed so that objective reality is clear and understood for policy implementation to be pursued. First of all, the concept of equal opportunity or equity in education needs to be clear, but current notions of equity are much more complex that even American authors who advocated a closer approach to equality, while calling it a key value on which everyone ought to agree, admit that it is unfortune that general equality or equity is almost impossible to define. Similarly, in commenting on this difficulty, D. Boorstin wrote as follows:

Take our concept of equality, which many have called the central American value. No sooner does one describe a subject like this and try to separate it for study, than one finds it diffusing and evaporating into the general atmosphere. "Equality", what does it mean? In the United

States, it has been taken for a fact and an ideal, a moral imperative and a sociological datum, a legal principle, and a social norm (Boorstin, 1953:176).

Despite the difficulty in defining the precise meaning of the term, equality or equity at least three interpretations could be forwarded. The classic and still widespread concept is based on the principle of equal opportunity for students belonging to different types of social groups (class, stratum, race, gender, community types, etc.); meaning that scholastic outcomes must be independent of ascriptive variables. This, then, falls more clearly within the meritocratic perspective. This concept of liberal equality of opportunity provides distinctions between genetically inherited *versus* socially acquired ability, and between freely chosen effort and effort in resulting from socially determined aspirations. The second way of defining equity is to identify the inequities one hopes to eradicate. Two sources of inequity are evident; those arising from the system's structure and practices, and those arising from the student's ethno-cultural and socio-economic context. The third way of defining equity is to consider the broad sequential elements comprising a common trilogy emerging from resource allocation (supports, finances, and taxes); the process of schooling (the school experience, program, content, and access); and the outcomes (learning achieved and impacts on later life).

The second concept which needs to be clear is related to the clarification of the modality to build the framework for action. For this, one needs to go back and examine a number of proposed sociological theories and approaches which would be able to explain the fundamentals and the mechanism of policy formulation and policy implementation. So far, the deficit theory as proposed by the functionalist originated from the works of Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons seemed to be convincing and managed to gain widespread support (cited by Mestrovic, 1988; and Meyhew ed., 1983).

Educational inequalities, according to this view, stem from ascription factors such as social class or stratum, gender, ethnic group, or nationality which are residual traces of pre-modern society. So, the deficit theory was proposed in which the cultural dynamic of cultural deprivation is considered to be the main cause of unequal outputs in school. In order to grasp the value of the educational output in terms of equity, the nature of the overall socio-economic context which influenced the functioning of all social sub-systems should be taken into consideration. On the process side from this theoretical standpoint, the amount of resources allocated to compensatory education should be the focus of action. In such a perspective, equity of treatment requires some kind of compensator policy rather than simply equality of educational provisions.

Inequality can also be considered from the perspective of social or cultural reproduction theory. Inequalities among groups are produced by social constraints and not by genetic endowments and individual choices (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1978). All inequalities are inextricably interwoven into the global structure of our society. One of the important contributions of this theory is that it believes educational systems also contribute to the reproduction of unjust inequalities

in a subjectivist way. In one of the strains of this theory, there is a belief that cultural factors do not directly affect but mediate structural factors which, in fact, affect individual behavior. The concept of cultural capital, introduced by the cultural reproductionist, opens the room for the formulation of equity policy to consider the process of cultural change resulting from structural change. Variance found in academic success than might help in explaining the process of cultural transformation resulting from structural change. If this is true, then, one has to be cautious and selective in providing compensation in the hope of bringing about educational equity. What needs to be thought through is how to support a rational pedagogy aimed at compensating initial disadvantages of cultural capital.

Opposing to the Weberian matrix of determinism, the cultural relativist and pluralist on the contrary believes that schools do not simply ratify externally generated inequalities, but they also actively produce inequalities. Thus, the source of school inequity is shifted from the characteristics of the failing children, their families, and their cultures towards more general societal processes, including schooling through their social actors in school (teachers and students), making resistance or change possible (Mehan, 1992). Inequalities among groups are due to the characteristics of agency and culture, rather than structure of the society.

A different perspective, however, was taken up by the new directionalists who look into curriculum as the source of inequality. School curriculum sometimes demonstrates bias and through conflicting social interests produces ideological effects. In this case, curriculum operates as discriminatory institutions and being exploited by culturally dominant groups, so as to reproduce their dominance over the dominated groups (Foster, Gomm & Hammersley, 1996). As a result, the new directionalists propose that fairness in education essentially means differentiated and appropriate curricula for all social groups; that is, equal rights to reproduce their specific cultures and languages through schooling without any dominance or interference on the part of any other group.

Almost similar to this stance is the American interpretive sociology which believes that inequalities in achievement at school are due to the mismatch between linguistic patterns and socialization practices in the home and the classroom (Mehan, 1992). In contrast to the deficit theory in which language use and socialization practices of certain social groups are deficient thus needs to overcome through compensatory education. The interpretive sociologists hold that all kinds of patterns and practices in which both teachers and students modify their behavior in the direction of a common goal are worth considering (Foster, 1971).

J. Coleman (1986) representing the methodological individualism approach put the individuals, as an intentional and rational actor whose choices, are influenced by social constraints but not completely determined by them. He conceptualizes students' school careers in terms of a sequence of decision-making processes in which they compare benefits, costs, and risks connected to each possible choice: to stay in *school* or to drop out, to enroll in one scholastic channel or track rather than in another, to be more intensely engaged in studying or less so, etc. The

choice requires, on the one hand, taking into account objective and subjective resources and, on the other, the goals to be pursued. The amount of available resources, more than the character which the culture inculcated through primary socialization, is considered crucial to explaining individual choices.

J. Coleman (1988), in his concept of social capital in which his stand on individualism entrenched, forwarded also a broader and more culturally inspired way of insofar as it includes not only interpersonal ties and information but also other dimensions such as values, norms, and trust which embrace components of student social background not addressed by cultural-capital theory. If we look at educational inequalities as part of a process determined by an individual's decisions, and subject to influence by external and internal factors, then we have to analytically consider the different decision-relevant variables acting on such a process. Nonetheless, J. Coleman (1988) believes that complete equality of educational opportunity is impossible to reach because it would require a dramatic change in public policy which inevitably too expensive to be accepted by any society. A certain reduction of existing inequalities is possible which, then, presupposes a more active role for schools.

In reflecting upon the definition and the theories upon which a frame work of equity is to be formulated, it is fair to assume that equity refers to equality in the outcomes of schooling and, as for the framework to mount the policy, one cannot rely on any specific theory or approach (Schoeck, 1958; and Kristol, 1972). If sequential elements comprising a common trilogy of input, process, and outcomes were of any guide then, at all these levels steps need to be taken to identify the problems and to propose for the solutions. In the process of identifying the problems and proposing the solutions, perhaps the deficit theory seems logical and convincing in explaining and in suggesting the solutions.

However, providing of compensation alone without looking into how transformation for equitability takes place will not be helpful for policy formulation. At this juncture, the concept of social capital and cultural capital which mediate structural change and social change needs to be considered in the policy formulation. In the social and cultural capital, student is seen as an intentional and rational actor whose choices are influenced by social constraints but not completely determined by them and he/she will normally go through a sequence of decision-making processes in which he/she will compare benefits, costs, and risks involved in his/her schooling (Silberman, 1967; and Rothbard, 1970).

In trying to find the equity solution, there should also be a balance between the deterministic and the phenomenological views of active roles of social actors about social change. The idea that the source of inequality is the societal processes, including schooling and not the the characteristics of the failing children, their families, and their cultures must be taken into consideration by re-evaluating the roles played by the school actors namely the students, the teachers, and many others. In relation to that, the school curriculum also should be scrutinized as it normally works in favour of specific social interests which in turn can lead school to be a discriminatory institution.

Following the above argument, it seems that equality of education opportunity in the absence of the principle of fairness will allow only for the rise to meritocracy and contest mobility in education and the world of works. Therefore, to enable the principle of justice to prevail the option taken should introduce policy and programme intervention in the forms of reversed discrimination and sponsored mobility, as to ensure that every individual and every group of individuals be provided with the conditions in which they can succeed (Dyer, 1972; and Lipset, 1972). This is what equity means.

In the United States of America, for example, SES was found to be the most important factor in academic success (Coleman *et al.*, 1966; and Silberman, 1967). While in OECD countries, parental qualifications correlated highly with earning of degrees. Other factors such as gender, location, and being minorities are no less important directly or indirectly in contributing towards inequality. These are the factors needed to be scrutinized and intervened. But as mentioned, the mechanism of how the compensators work need to be understood. Providing of compensation without ensuring that they are able to generate social and cultural capital will not bring about positive change (Martin, 1926; and Ardrey, 1970).

Employing the deficit theory and using of social and cultural capital to undermine and eradicate the force of inequality will not be adequate. The present curriculum and the surrounding political climate of the classroom (among other things) which perpetuate inequality have to be examined and overhauled. Politics plays a major role in the atmosphere of the classroom and the schools, and the level of equity or otherwise dispensed by social actors *vis-à-vis* teachers, schools and education managers policy, and students is far reaching.

Within the classroom, everyone including the student has certain responsibilities for creating an atmosphere of equity. He/she must put forth the effort to understand both the material and the context in which the material is learned. However, it cannot be expected that student will understand the impact of learning the material discussed, presented, and/or discovered. It is the teacher who is responsible to provide the impetus (through activity or through explanation) for learning materials where application is not immediately evident.

However, the teacher is limited in what he/she can do with the kind of students in his/her classroom, with the curriculum and the surrounding political climate imposed on him/her. One needs only to look at the current political antagonism and indecision towards using of English in teaching of science and mathematics in recent years to see how politics can influence curricula and pedagogy (for good or for ill). And not to mention is the policy and the practice of streaming of students into special schools and boarding schools which determine the classroom and school atmosphere detrimental to equity. It is through political means that curricula are developed, standards are set, and teachers are promoted, hired, or fired. These political pressures can serve to promote or (more often than not) hinder equity in schools and outside of the schools.

As mentioned earlier, curriculum also plays a major role in the level of equity found in schools. It serves as a guide for teachers as well serving as a measuring

tool against which teachers and schools are evaluated. By manipulating the curriculum, political powers are able to manipulate the classroom, but, due to the necessary input of teachers in the development of curricula, the classroom does not become a purely political arena. In many ways, the curriculum serves as a mediator between the wants and needs of the power structure and the wants and needs of the teachers and students (Resch, 1998; and Rothbard, 1999). In its role as mediator, the curriculum goes a long way toward setting the tone for educational equity, but, ultimately, the teacher is the one who deals with the students directly and mediates the subject and the students. The teachers as the leading actors hold the key to equity depending on the ways curriculum, facilities, political pressure, policy, and even compensators are manipulated in the interest of the students to bring about equity.

In the light of the interpretations of equity and the frameworks derived from theories on equity, it is safe to say that equity policy and its implementation in the education system in Malaysia needs to be revamped. It is inadequate to rely only on the deficit theory. An adequate framework should encompass how all sectors in the education environment: the society, the various social and political institutions including the schools, the curriculum, and the social actors within the schools like the teachers and the students are to be brought together in formulating social capital, thus, set the stage for the enhancement of learning. At the same time, any form of discriminatory measures promoting meritocracy should be approached with caution (Bell, 1972).

Conclusion

Since each child brings a repository of cultural knowledge, and with all-pervasive variations especially in aptitudes, abilities, and characters, it can be concluded that equality in its fullest sense and true to the tradition of the non-functionalists is only an ideal and unrealizable goal unless drastic changes to society and affirmative action is seriously undertaken in education. Because of that, many sociologists of education believed that by trying to make them equal *vis-à-vis* each individual is unique than one unintentionally destroyed most of what is human in him/her. To be fair to the idea about equity, there is no intention to create equality in man/woman. What equity purports to do is to ensure that every one gets his/her fair share of what is due to him/her. In education, the principle of justice works to ensure that all students are able to learn as much as others in his/her cohort.

The challenges to equity are still dominant with at least in three areas. The first one is even by subjecting all children to the same curriculum; however, we would still be unable to achieve the desired equality. The inborn differences among individuals are too fundamental as a part of their natures to be obliterated even by any form of scholastic engineering. Compulsory schooling not only fails to achieve its egalitarian goal, but by subjecting all to the same studies in lockstep fashion, we effectively deny them any real opportunity at all.

The second one is the existence of a potent force in the society which will always try to maintain its dominance. One way to ensure this dominance is by sending children to selected schools. In Malaysia, there are a number of schools categorized as premier schools, boarding schools, and excellence schools of which both students and teachers are specially selected, while the schools also are given special treatments in terms of allocations of funds and facilities.

As observed in the United States of America by J. Kozol (1992), a policy known as the magnet system was highly attractive to the more sophisticated parents who with their ingenuity and having political connections manage to uphold an ideal of white race dominance by sending their children to magnet schools where teachers are hand-picked and the schools operate much like private institutions. The third one is the confusion in the planning and implementation of the equity policy, and at time compounded with the advocacy of meritocracy which always gains the upper hand in the policy formulation and implementation, especially in the face of the need to meet the global challenges.

With those challenges at hand, there was an urgent need for the authority in Malaysia, or for any country having similar problems, to review the policy both at its planning and implementation levels. Deficit theory alone does not explain students' failure and likewise compensation will not help in bringing about success in learning. Students' failure and steps to help them will only be effective when the cultural context of learning or education is taken into account. This implies that at the macro level, one has to be aware of and work on cultural and social capital theories in converting students to be skilful, knowledgeable, and motivated learners. In this context, the facilities provided and the curriculum implemented need to be genuinely consistent with equity policy. At the micro level, teachers in classrooms have to play the roles of active actors of change, so that students apart from acquiring knowledge and skill they also feel needed and valued by the society.

In spite of the policy drawn and implemented and various inputs provided, it is believed that at the micro level that change can be effectively brought about. Teachers hold the key to some forms of equity. In daily dealing with the students, teachers are able to understand the students' needs, their cultures, and their ideas. This means that teachers are in the positions to provide an atmosphere within which students can explore their own cultural understanding of the subjects learned and get a glimpse of other perspectives on the same subjects. In studies cited by R. Gutierrez (2003), despite such negative curricular tools as streaming and lacks of facilities and instructional materials, students can essentially achieve equally given that the teacher resources are equally distributed.

Today, teachers act as parents, disciplinarians, psychologists, politicians, and above all of equity dispensers. Once teaching can be scaled down from merely the dissemination of information, the more can teachers' skills and attitude be focus towards dispensing equity in other areas of their profession apart from teaching the school subjects.

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