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PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICE AND POLICY

Success Increasing Access and Retention in Primary Education in MALAYSIA

By Dr. Lorraine Pe Symaco

Acknowledgements

This case study is one of a series of four. Any product like this is the result of a range of contributions and actions. EAC expresses its gratitude to the Global Learning Group of FHI 360, and Dr. Mark Ginsburg in particular, for leading the process of the completion of these detailed case studies. This included identifying the four authors, developing a consistent approach to the research, coordinating it, and finalizing, with the authors, the case studies. EAC also wants to thank the case study authors (Hana A. El-Ghali, Divonzir Arthur Gusso, Agreement Lathi Jotia, and Lorraine Pe Symaco) for their valuable scholarly work. The detailed case studies are available on the EAC website (www.educateachild.org.qa). Each case study contains a richness of detail, and we are grateful for the careful documentation of this important history of progress towards universal primary education for all. Educate A Child provided the original idea and outline, substantive feedback, funding, design and printing.

Disclaimer

Purpose

The world is approaching the 2015 deadline for achieving universal primary education—a target identified by both UNESCO in the World Declaration for All (2000) and the United Nations in the Millennium Development Goals (2000). Educate a Child commissioned four scholars to look at the successes and challenges faced by their respective countries that are close to achieving the goal—Botswana, Brazil, Lebanon, Malaysia.

About the Author

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List of Abbreviations

DAP	Democratic Action Party
EFA	Education for All
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNI	Gross National Income
GOM	Government of Malaysia
GPS	Gred Purata Sekolah (Grade Point Average)
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
LINUS	Literacy and Numeracy Screening
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MOE	Ministry of Education
MSC	Multimedia Super Corridor
MR	Malaysian Ringgit
NEP	New Economic Policy
NER	Net Enrollment Rates
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NIR	Net Intake Rate
PAS	Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party)
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
PMR	Penilaian Menengah Rendah (Lower Secondary Assessment)
SES	Socioeconomic Status
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysian (Malaysian Certificate of Education)
SUHAKAM	Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia (Human Rights Commission of Malaysia)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPSR	Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (Primary School Evaluation Test)

Executive Summary

A multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society of more than 29 million people, Malaysia is composed of ethnic Malays (66 percent), Chinese (25 percent), Indians (7.5 percent), and other indigenous peoples (1.5 percent). Since gaining independence from Britain in 1957, the government of Malaysia has considered access to and quality of education critical to fostering national unity, bridging economic disparities, and enhancing economic growth. One of the wealthiest countries in Southeast Asia, Malaysia has committed substantial financial resources to education, allocating about 17 percent of total public expenditure annually.

Under the British,[1] there were five types of vernacular primary school—English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil—run by either missionaries or the government, in addition to Islamic schools, or *madrasahs*, where children learned the *Qur'an.* The post-independence government converted the original Malay schools into what were termed "national" schools (in stages between 1957 and 1968) and incorporated most of the previous existing English, Chinese, and Tamil schools into the government education system, though these institutions were labeled as "national-type" schools, due to the language of instruction.[2] The Education Act of 1961 declared primary education to be compulsory and free for all children regardless of their ethnicity and religion.[3] The First Malaysia Plan (1966–1970) and subsequent plans affirmed that, "unless the education system is geared to meet the development needs of the country, there will be a misallocation of an important economic resource, which will slow down the rate of economic and social advance."

In 2005, with 95.9 percent net enrollment rates (NER) for both boys and girls, Malaysia was close to achieving the United Nations' Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education, though the NER has been at or above 95 percent since 1994. Moreover, its survival rate to year 6 in primary school also remained relatively high, averaging 96 percent from 2005 to 2010.

Access to education, however, remains lower for children who are poor, members of certain ethnic groups, live in remote and sparsely populated areas, or have special needs. The NER calculations also exclude undocumented children—those whose parents are migrant workers or refugees, in fact not citizens. The socioeconomic status of families is the strongest predictor for primary school access and retention. In response, the Ministry of Education has been working closely with state and district education offices, international organizations (such as UNICEF and UNHCR), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as Child Aid Borneo, as well as the Human Rights Commission,[4] to expand access to primary schooling to all children.

[1] The British role on the peninsula began in 1786 when the British East India Company, searching for a site for trade and a naval base, obtained the island of Penang from the Sultan of Kedah. Malaysia was a British colony and protectorate in the 18th and 19th centuries. After World War II, a period of Japanese occupation, Britain once again assumed control of Malaysia. The freedom movement led by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) finally resulted in independence in 1957. Available at http://asiasociety.org/countries/country-profiles/malaysia (Retrieved February 26, 2014.)

[2] Some Chinese schools opted to stay independent and continued to follow the curriculum from China without aid from the Malaysian government, and some madrasahs continued to operate. Furthermore, within a few years after independence most of the English-language schools transitioned to use Bahasa Malaysian as their language of instruction, and thus became categorized as national schools.

[3] It is important to note, however, that because of differences in their school systems, stemming from British colonial policies, the Education Act was only extended in 1976 to Sabah and Sarawak, the former being a state that has tended to exhibit lower NERs.

[4] The Human Rights Commission was established by Parliament under the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia Act of 1999.

The student-teacher ratio improved between 1970 and 2010 and exam performance rose from 2000 to 2011. During that period, the government not only incorporated schools that existed prior to independence but also devoted significant resources to building schools and preparing teachers. This has resulted in significant increase in the youth literacy rate from 88 percent in 1980 to near-universal literacy of 99 percent today.

On the national examination (*Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* or UPSR) taken at the end of year 6 of primary school, students in rural areas performed less well than their urban peers; however, the gap narrowed between 2005 and 2011 from more than 7 percent to 3.8 percent. In addition, from 2006 to 2011, girls consistently outperformed boys on UPSR and other learning outcome measures.

In line with the government's support to lift up the sector, an education *transformation* plan was recently proposed to improve access, equity, and quality of education for the children of Malaysia. The transformation plan will take place in 13 years (2013–2025) and has the following initiatives (Government of Malaysia, 2012, p.208):

- Phase 1 (2013–2015) focuses on supporting teachers and core skills. It is envisioned that there will be 98 percent enrollment in primary level and that 25 percent reduction in the urban–rural gap will be achieved.
- Phase 2 (2016–2020) focuses on accelerating system improvement and envisions a 100 percent pre-school to lower secondary enrolment, reduction in the urban-rural gap at 50 percent, and additional 25 percent reduction in the socio-economic and gender gap.
- Phase 3 (2021–2025) focuses on excellence with increased operational flexibility while maintaining and improving the enrollment rates, as well as the urban-gender gap of the prior phases and a 50 percent reduction in the socioeconomic and gender gaps.

Investment in education remains a critical factor in Malaysia's development plans in line with the country's *Vision 2020.* Positive indicators of access and retention coexist with improvements in the quality of education as evidenced in student-teacher ratios and test scores. Despite inadequacies in providing education to some communities, improvements can be attributed to the strong political commitment of the government to focus on—and provide resources for—education, alongside assistance provided by local and international organizations.

Introduction

Malaysia, located in the South-East Asia region, shares its borders with Thailand and Indonesia (see Figure 1). Malaysia comprises 13 states and three federal territories divided into two regions; West Malaysia (also known as Peninsular Malaysia) and East Malaysia (two states—Sabah and Sarawak and one federal territory—Labuan).

Figure 1 Maps of Malaysia

Malaysia in the South-East Asia region Malaysia

As of July 2013, the population of Malaysia was 29.8 million. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country comprising the Malays and other Bumiputera[5] of Sabah and Sarawak (65.9 percent), Chinese (25.3 percent), Indians (7.5 percent) and other races (1.3 percent). In the 19th century under British rule, the Chinese and Indians were brought to Malaysia to work mainly in tin mines and rubber plantations. When the country achieved independence in 1957, they were granted citizenship.

Access and quality of education have been a key agenda of Malaysian government to foster national unity and enhance economic growth. The First Malaysia Plan (1966–1970) and the subsequent plans give much importance to education: "Unless the education system is geared to meet the development needs of the country, there will be a misallocation of an important economic resource, which will slow down the rate of economic and social advance" (Government of Malaysia, 1965 p.163). The government allocates substantial financial resources to education annually, constituting about 17 percent of the total public expenditure.

[5] The term *Bumiputera* is a Malay word commonly used to describe the Malays and indigenous communities in Sabah and Sarawak. "Bumiputera" is a Sanskrit word which means the "son of the soil."

In 2005, with 95.9 percent net enrollment rates for both boys and girls, Malaysia was close to achieving the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goal (MDG) in education; it should be noted that the NER has been at or above 95 percent since 1994. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has been working closely with state and district education offices, international organizations (for example, UNICEF and UNHCR), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as Child Aid Borneo, as well as the Human Rights Commission,[6] to expand access to primary schooling to all children. However, access to education is lower for children who are poor, live in remote and sparsely populated areas, and without citizenship documentation. It should be noted that children without citizenship documents are not captured in the calculations of NER, and thus represent an additional population of out-of-school children and youth.

[6] The Human Rights Commission was established by Parliament under the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia Act of 1999.

Country Context

Key Aspects of Political Context

Malaysia has experienced some important political transitions that define present Malaysian society. After gaining its independence from British colonial rule in 1957, a series of decisions were made to draw the territories of what was formerly known as Malaya. In 1963, Malaya (Peninsular Malaysia), Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore came together to form a country known as Malaysia. This interfered with Indonesia's plans to expand its territories, which during the period of President Sukarno unsuccessfully attacked Sabah and Sarawak (from 1963–1966).

In the early 1960s, Lee Kuan Yew (of Singapore) began his campaign on the concept of *Malaysian Malaysia*, opposing Article 153 of the Constitution of Malaysia that outlines the special privileges of the Malays and indigenous peoples in Malaysia. These included quotas in obtaining public services, educational scholarships, and licences in business and trade. In August 1965, Singapore, with its predominantly Chinese ethnic group population (CIA, World Factbook, 2013), seceded from Malaysia to form a separate country.

On May 13, 1969, Malaysia experienced riots between Malays and Chinese. The riots began in Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding areas in Selangor, and then spread to other parts of Peninsular Malaysia (for example, Malacca, Perak, and Penang), which had large ethnic Chinese populations. A state of emergency was declared, Parliament was suspended for 20 months, and the country was ruled by the National Operations Council (Comber, 2009). The country's first prime minister, Abdul Rahman, resigned and was succeeded by Abdul Razak, who served until 1976.

The *Rukunegara*, the country's official ideology, was introduced in 1970, a year after the May 13 riots. The aim of *Rukunegara* is to create a harmonized society with a common ideology (Jeong & Nor Fadzlina, 2012) based on its five principles. In particular, the second principle, "Loyalty to King and Country," discourages any citizen from questioning Malay supremacy in the country. Also, Malay special rights, national language, religion and other sensitive matters were banned from public discussion, even in Parliament, to avoid another May 13.

Mahathir Mohammed was the prime minister of Malaysia for 22 years from 1981–2003. In 1991, the Malaysian government under Mahathir's leadership adopted *Vision 2020*, a 29-year plan for Malaysia to become "a united nation, with a confident Malaysian society, infused by strong moral and ethical values, living in a society that is democratic, liberal and tolerant, caring, economically just and equitable, progressive and prosperous, and in full possession of an economy that is competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient" (Government of Malaysia, 1991, p. 1).

In 1998, Mahathir dismissed his then-deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, after months of economic policy differences. Following Anwar Ibrahim's arrest, numerous rallies were held in different places in the Klang Valley area. The *word reformasi*, or fast reform, gained popularity among Malaysians, especially the young professionals. Many shared Anwar's belief that the country urgently needed political reform.

In 2008, the National Front (*Barisan National*), the ruling political alliance since independence in 1957, faced its biggest and strongest opponents during the 12th general election. As a result, it failed to win a two-thirds majority, which it had held previously and which was required to pass amendments to the Malaysian Constitution. Following this election, the then-prime minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was also the president of the National Front party, resigned and was succeeded by Najib Razak. Under his leadership the government implemented a number of changes in all sectors, including politics and economy, under the label of transformation. However, the National Front did not win back its two-thirds majority in the 13th general election, which was held in May 2013. In fact, the National Front received fewer votes than were received by the opposition, *Pakatan Rakyat*, consisting of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), and *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR).

Key Aspects of Economic Context

The New Economic Policy, launched in 1971 approximately two years after the inter-ethnic group riots, focused primarily on reducing socio-economic disparities between the Malay and Chinese. The strategies to eradicate poverty and restructure the society resulted in a significant improvement in income distribution by 1990. The proportion of households living below the poverty line declined from 49.3 percent in 1970 to 16.5 percent in 1990, and was reduced further to 5.1 percent in 2002 (EPU, 2013). Rural development also took place, significantly reducing poverty in rural areas. It should be noted that the Gross National Income (GNI)[7] per capita of Malaysia has steadily increased from 2,330 in 1980 to 8,660 in 2000 (World Bank, 2013).

When Mahathir became prime minister in 1981, he introduced three key concepts in the country: modernization, Islamization, and industrialization. During Mahathir's leadership, Malaysia became one of the strongest economic powers in the region, transitioning to an industrialized society from one based mainly on agriculture (rubber and palm oil) and tin mining. Mahathir introduced Islamic banking and Islamic insurance among other institutions as part of his concept of Islamization.

In line with *Vision 2020* (Government of Malaysia, 1991), the country began to develop information and communication technology (ICT) in 1991. In 1996 Malaysia launched the Multimedia Super Corridor MSC) to make Malaysia a multimedia hub (Songan, n.d.). As a result, Malaysia has become one of the largest exporters of semiconductor components and ICT products in the region. Also, based on *Vision 2020*, Malaysia established biotechnology as a major area of the economy in 2001.

Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP) grew annually by an average of 5 percent over the period of 1970–2000, and 5.5 percent between 2000 and 2010 (UNDP, 2005; UN, 2011). The most recent, 10th Malaysia Plan (2011–2015) charts the new policy directions and strategies required to achieve the status of a high-income nation, also in line with *Vision 2020*.

[7] GNI per capita is based on purchasing power parity (PPP) converted to international dollars using PPP rates.

Under Najib Razak's leadership (2008–present), the New Economic Model (*Model Ekonomi Baru*) was introduced in 2010. The New Economic Model aims to develop a competitive market and investor-friendly environment, shifting from an ethnic-based to a needs-based economy.[8] It is expected that by 2020, the per capita income of Malaysians will be RM49,500 (US$15,000), twice what it was in 2010 (Prime Minister's Office, 2011). For Malaysia to compete in the global economy, the New Economic Model highlights several key factors such as modernising labor legislation and reforming public sector.[9]

Key Aspects of Education System History

During British colonization there were four types of vernacular primary schools—English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil (the language of most of the Indian immigrants originating from South India). The English schools were run by missionaries and the British government, located in the urban areas and generally had racially mixed student bodies. However, only children of the affluent and educated parents were enrolled in the English vernacular schools. The Malay schools, which were typically found in villages, focused on vocational or life skills such as farming, fishing and handicrafts. The Chinese- and Tamil-medium schools were located mostly in towns and estates, respectively, as the Chinese worked in tin mines and the Tamil-speaking Indians on rubber estates. These schools followed curricula from China and India, respectively, and had teachers from these countries. There were also *madrasah* (Islamic schools), where the children learned the *Qur'an.*

At the secondary level there were mainly English and Chinese independent schools prior to independence, although some Malay secondary schools were set up for the children of elites and the royal family.[10] Tertiary education was very limited, with some students going abroad, mostly to England, to pursue their studies. Some teacher training colleges also operated to prepare teachers for primary schools.

Because the British government practiced the "divide and rule" concept, there was no effort to integrate—let alone unite—the people of different ethnic groups through education (Rudner, 1977). Children completing English-medium schools gained better jobs compared to those who completed the other types of schools. The British government did not give much importance to the development of schools in Sabah and Sarawak. However, Christian missionaries initiated schools in some parts of Sabah and Sarawak, and Muslims established *madrasah* in other parts.

[8] Prior to the New Economic Model, the New Economic Policy (NEP) (Government of Malaysia, 1971) was ethnic-based in that it favored Malays and *Bumiputras* to advance their socio-economic status. A needs-based policy focuses instead on economic requirements and essentials, regardless of ethnicity.

[9] The modernizing labor legislation is designed to match qualification with jobs, retaining highly qualified individuals in the country (to avoid brain drain), and welcoming foreign talent. Reforming the public sector involved creating a leaner and more competitive public sector through recruiting and training workers with better skills.

[10] The first Malay school was established in 1855 in Pahang.

Education during the initial post-independence era (1957–1970) was designed to promote national unity (Rudner, 1977). A common national school for all ethnic groups and religions was established to integrate people in Malaysia. This was outlined in the 1956 Razak Report. In 1957, all existing primary schools were converted to national or national-type schools, while all secondary schools became national schools. At the primary level, the original Malay-medium schools were renamed as national schools, while English-, Chinese-, and Tamil-medium schools became the national-type schools. Malay language was the medium of instruction in the national schools and made as a compulsory subject to be taught in the national-type schools.[11] The English national-type schools were converted into Malay-medium national schools in stages between 1968 and 1982, but the Chinese and Indian national-type schools have continued to operate. Some Chinese schools opted to stay independent and continued to follow the curriculum from China without aid from the Malaysian government.

The Education Act of 1961 was key in establishing a national education system, in which primary schooling was to be free for all children regardless of their ethnicity and religion. The primary focus of this act was to "establish a national system of education...to promote the cultural, economic and political advancement in this country, besides making the Malay language the national language" (Government of Malaysia, 1961). However, due to differences in their school systems, stemming from British colonial policies, the provisions of the Education Act were only extended to Sabah and Sarawak in 1976. In addition, the 1961 Act called for vocational and technical education to be introduced along with academic programs at the secondary level.

The Education Act of 1961 was replaced by the Education Act of 1996 to regulate the expansion of education. A significant aspect of this new act was the introduction of the pre-school education in the country's national education system (MOE, 2001). Automatic promotion was also initiated to address the inefficiencies of students repeating classes.

In addition, the 2002 Amendment to the Education Act of 1996 requires primary education to be compulsory and stipulates that Malaysian parents who fail to send their children to school shall be fined 5,000 Malaysian ringgit (RM) or imprisoned, or both. However, this part of the Act has not been enforced.

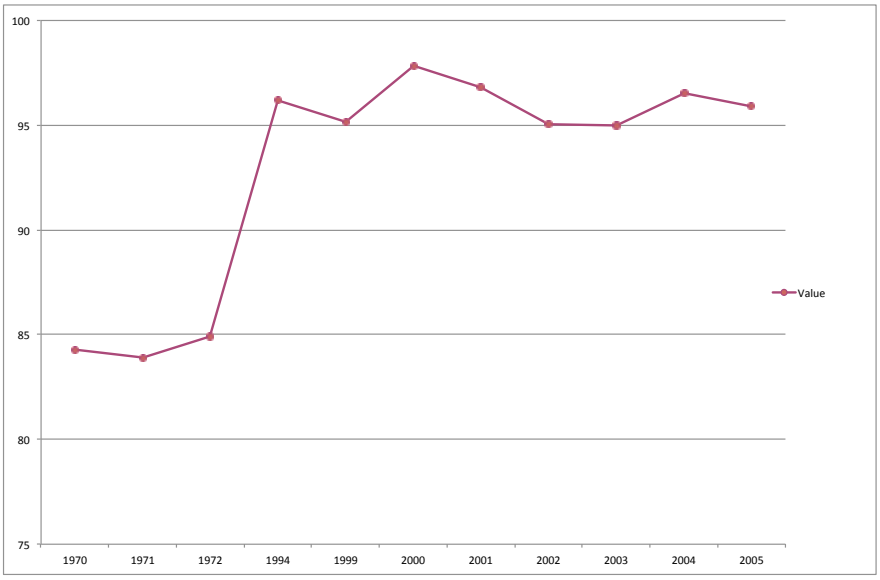
[11] Although national schools use Malay as the medium of instruction, national-type schools use Chinese or Tamil.

What Has Been Achieved?

Patterns of Primary School Access and Retention, 1970–2005

Figure 2 shows the primary school net enrollment rate for selected years (indicated by dots) between 1970 and 1972 as well as between 1994 and 2005. This rate measures the proportion of children ages 7 to 13 who were enrolled in primary school. Note that this rate was already relatively high in 1970 (84.3 percent) and had increased to 96.2 percent in 1994. Between 1999 and 2005, although minor fluctuations occurred, the percentage of primary school-aged children enrolled remained at or above 95 percent but did not reach 100 percent (with the highest net enrollment of 97.8 percent, recorded in 2000). It is important to note that the figures—both the numerators and denominators of these percentages—exclude undocumented children (such as, those whose parents are refugees or migrant workers), who face special challenges in gaining access to public schools.

Figure 2: Primary school net enrollment rate (1970–2005)

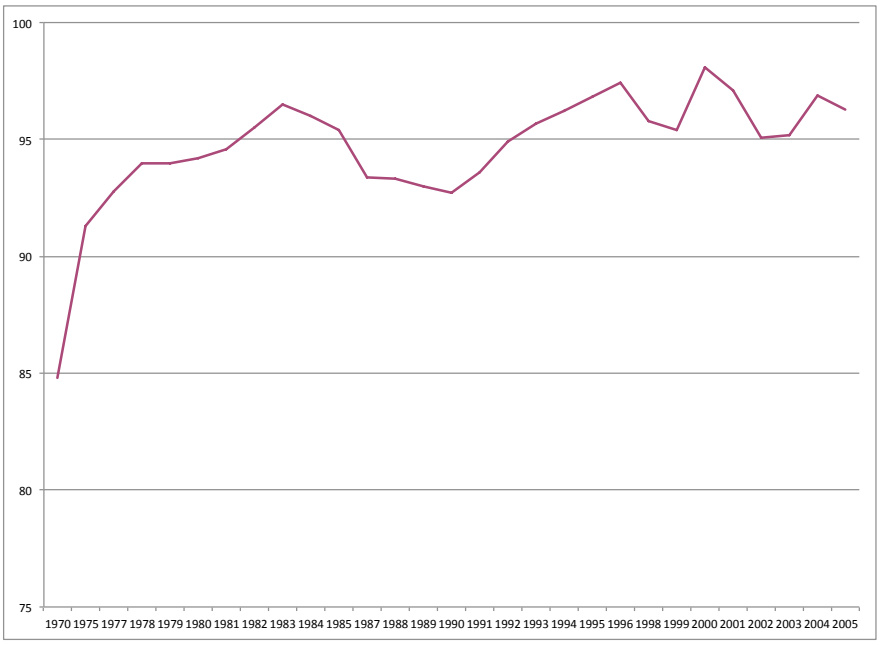


Source: World Bank data

That the NER has remained below 100 percent points to a relatively small, but nonetheless important problem of access and retention. That is, some children do not enter the first grade and some children who enter the first grade drop out before completing six years of primary schooling. Figure 3, which displays the primary school net intake rate (NIR) for the years 1970 to 2005,[12] addresses the question of access. As can be seen, the proportion of 7-year-olds who enter the first grade was already relatively high in 1970 (84.8 percent). However, it took more than a decade (in 1982) to increase by 10 percent and thus more than 95 percent of 7-year-olds were enrolled in primary school. Since 1982 the NIR has ranged from 92.7 percent (in 1990) to 98.1 percent (in 2000), with it being 96.3 percent in 2005, the latest year for which statistics are available. Thus, even ignoring those children without documents (to be discussed below), some 7-year-olds do not enter the first grade.

[12] This rate measures the proportion of children age 7 who were enrolled in grade 1 of primary school.

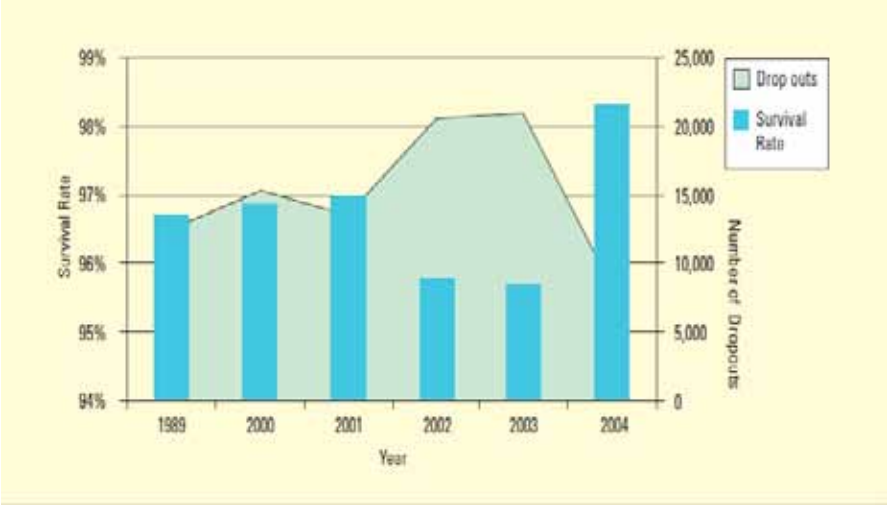
Figure 3: Primary school net intake rates, 1970–2005



Source: UIS (2011)

That dropout also contributes to keeping the NER below 100 percent is evidenced in Figure 4, which presents primary school survival rates and dropout numbers for some of the relevant years, 1989 and 2000–2004. For instance, the primary school survival rate was relatively high in 1989 (96.7 percent), though not equal to 100 percent, which would be the case if there were no dropouts. Moreover, with the exception of the years 2002 and 2003, the survival rate gradually increased between 2000 and 2004, when the figure was 98.3 percent.

Figure 4: Survival rates to year 6 and primary school dropouts, 1989–2004



Source: MOE (2008)

Equity of Access and Retention

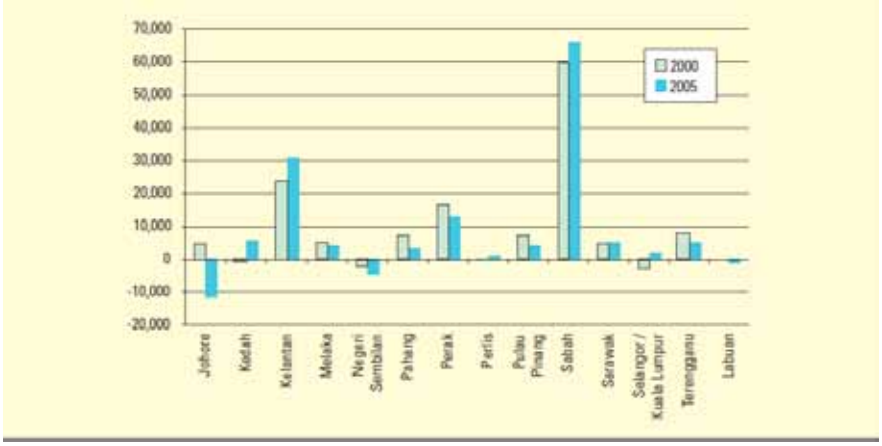
Malaysia has been on the track to providing equitable learning opportunities to all Malaysian children since its independence. The country has a vested interest in bridging the gap in access to education of the various subgroups, given that those without the competencies to participate fully in the society can bring a bigger cost to the country and affect achieving its economic goals. The following sections will examine issues of access and retention for socioeconomic groups, urban/rural residents, genders, indigenous and other minority groups, and special needs populations.

Family Socioeconomic Status Differences

The socioeconomic condition of families is still the strongest predictor for primary school access and retention in Malaysia. Poverty remains a factor limiting access and retention in primary schooling. To illustrate, although 5 percent of primary school-aged children of "poor" families were out of school in 2007, the corresponding figure for "non-poor" was at most 1 percent (United Nations, 2011). For instance, in Gua Musang some families cannot afford to pay the transportation cost as low as 50 cents (Malaysian Ringgit) for their children who have to travel by train for two hours to reach their schools in Dabong and Kuala Krai. The Penan community in Sarawak, a tribe still living a nomadic life, is also greatly affected by poverty. The cost of books, uniforms, and transportation demotivates the Penan families from sending their children to school. It is interesting to note that the same pattern is recorded in the Drop Out Study of 1973 (KPM, 1973) which indicated that, at the primary level, 99 percent of children from high SES families were enrolled in schools as opposed to only 71 percent from lower socioeconomic status (SES) families.

As noted previously, Malaysia has been largely successful at tackling poverty, with the poverty rate declining from 49.3 percent in 1970 to 5.5 percent in 2000 and 4.2 percent in 2010 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011).[13] However, economic development in all states has not been equal, and Kedah, Kelantan, and Perlis remain relatively poorer compared to other states in West Malaysia. For example, as can be seen in Figure 5, Sabah, followed by Kelantan and Perak (located in Peninsular Malaysia), were the states with the highest number of children not in schools in 2000 and 2005. The higher number of out-of-school children in these states is primarily a function of family poverty levels, with Kelantan and Sabah, having two to three times the rates of poverty as other states (UNESCO, 2005).[14]

Figure 5: Number of children not in primary schools, by state, 2000 and 2005



Source: MoE (2008)

Rural/Urban Residence Differences

Malaysia has faced greater challenges in increasing primary school access and retention in the more remote, rural areas of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak. Approximately 58.2 percent of Malaysia's territory is covered by forest. In the Peninsular region, numerous mountains run parallel from north to south, with the main mountain range, Titiwangsa Mountains, dividing the region between the east and west coasts. Not only are the children who live closer to the mountains likely to be from poor rural families, but they also have to travel longer distances to get to school. As a result, many tend to fall behind in their academic performance, which leads them to drop out (Government of Malaysia, 2012; interviews). A similar scenario is also faced by students in Sabah and Sarawak, where remote areas also still lack clean water and electricity. The schools depend on generators and children bathe in the river every day. There are no connecting roads to these places and the only mode of transportation is boat or ferry. The schools in these remote areas also lack infrastructure and amenities (Government of Malaysia, 2012; interviews). As noted by an interviewee from the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia:

[13] In 2010, the poverty rate in Peninsular Malaysia was 4.1 percent, in Sabah 4.9 percent, and in Sarawak 4.5 percent. Nationally, hard core poverty or extreme poverty—those whose household income is below half the poverty line—was at 0.7 percent in 2009.

[14] As will be discussed below, Sabah also has a sizeable population of immigrants and undocumented children, who are not allowed to enroll in public schools. In 2012, the hard core poverty rate was recorded at 1.6 percent in Sabah, the highest in the country, followed by Perlis (0.5 percent), Kelantan, and Sarawak (0.3 percent) (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2011).

Again the access is not there, because the…school and the settlement are far away and the children travel in very dangerous conditions to reach the schools. So other social problems come out. Although the schools are there, I don't think they actually meet the needs of the children. Yes, there they are set up, they run, but then the extended care and concern for all children is not there.

However, challenging circumstances in rural areas seem to affect access rather than retention. This point can be seen in Table 2, which presents dropout rates for schools located in rural and urban areas during the 1998–2004 period. Although there is some variation across years and for different grade (or year) levels, the overall picture shows that dropout is a bigger problem in urban areas than rural areas. That is, for the smaller percentage of rural children who make it into primary school there is a somewhat lower percentage that drop out before completing the six years.

Table 2: Dropout rates in rural and urban government schools, 1998–2004 (%)

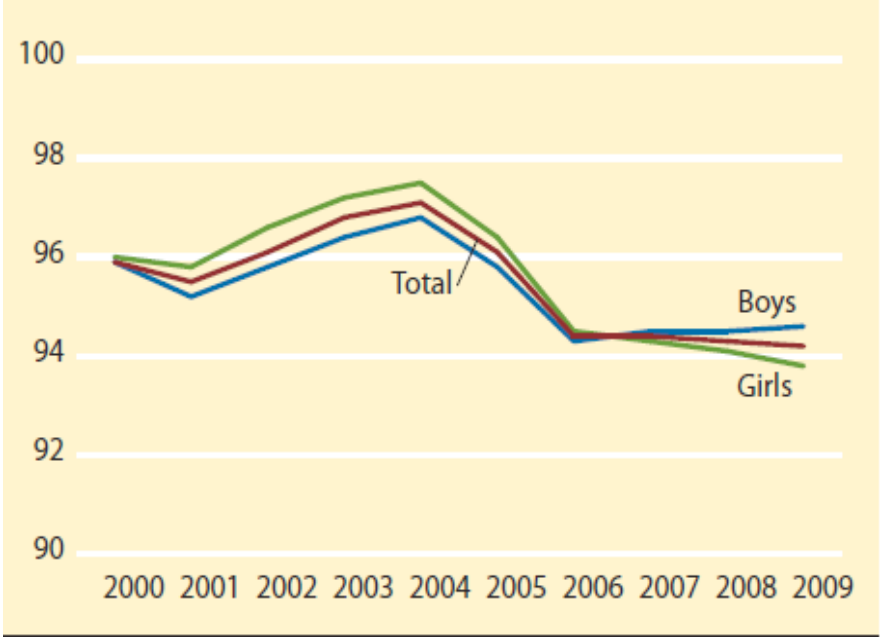
Rural	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Years 1–2	–0.7	–1.1	0.4	–0.7	–0.6	–0.1	0.6
Years 2–3	0.3	–0.2	0.7	–0.3	–0.2	0.6	0.3
Years 3–4	–0.6	–1.5	–0.1	–1.2	–0.5	–0.2	–0.1
Years 4–5	0.4	0.0	–0.2	–0.8	–0.8	–0.1	–0.2
Years 5–6	–2.2	–1.7	–1.5	–2.1	–2.2	–1.4	–0.8
% of total loss at primary level (rural)					**–3.9**	**–3.7**	**–1.2**
Urban	**1998**	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**
Years 1–2	–1.2	–1.6	–0.1	–0.5	–1.3	–2.5	–0.5
Years 2–3	–0.5	–0.9	–0.4	–0.4	–1.2	0.3	–0.3
Years 3–4	–1.2	–3.5	–0.8	–1.6	–0.9	0.1	–0.2
Years 4–5	0.7	0.2	1.6	–0.5	–1.3	–0.1	–0.5
Years 5–6	–1.2	–2.0	–0.8	–1.2	–1.3	0.0	–0.4
% of total loss at primary level (urban)					**–4.7**	**–4.8**	**–1.9**

Source: United Nations, Malaysia, 2011

Gender Differences

Gender does not seem to be a major factor influencing access and retention. Looking at Figure 6, which presents the primary school participation rates for girls, boys, and both genders combined for the years 2000 to 2009, we see very little gender differences. The widest difference is approximately 1 percent, with girls being slightly higher in 2004 and boys being slightly higher in 2009.

Figure 6: Participation rates at primary level, 2000–2009 (%)



Source: United Nations, Malaysia, 2011

Ethnic Group Differences

Ethnic group membership is a factor affecting access and retention. Chinese followed by Indians continue to have higher educational attainment and SES than Malays (Brown, 2011; Khalid, 2011). However, the historical differences in primary school access and retention among these groups no longer exist, though some other groups have lower enrollment rates.

Indigenous groups account for 4 percent of the entire primary and secondary school students in Malaysia, of which 68 percent live in rural areas and 80 percent live in the states of Sarawak and Sabah (Government of Malaysia, 2012). Educational access and achievements statistics for these groups are scant, except for some data on primary schools with a predominantly Orang Asli population. Generally, dropout rates are higher for Orang Asli children. For example, Nicholas (2006) compiled statistics concerning dropout rates for Orang Asli children in Malaysia. Although the dropout rate declined between the 1980–1985 and the 1995–2000 periods from 71.6 percent to 42.9 percent, the latter rate is still quite high.

Poverty is a critical factor for Orang Asli children's school attendance (Nicholas, 2006). The poverty rate among Orang Asli in 1999, for example, was 50.9 percent compared to the country's rate at 7.5 percent (Government of Malaysia, 2001). Although school fees were abolished in 1962 and scholarships, school uniforms, school bags, and stationery are provided by the government, other fees are assessed in school (for example, for PTA, sports). Often Orang Asli parents cannot afford to pay these fees, especially when they have several school-going children. Free transportation is also provided for them, since most Orang Asli live in rural areas close to the forest. However, such transportation is not reliable and the distances they need to travel are generally great.

In addition, cultural differences play a role in determining why these children often do not go or stay on in school. Orang Asli's traditional way of learning is through arts, crafts, songs, and folklore, where they are taught by the family to be polite, considerate, creative, and proud of their identity (Nicholas, 2006). Orang Asli children who enter school at the age of 7 also often find it difficult to adapt to the structured system, where the teacher is the primary person delivering the content, and to the new environment with people from different cultures. Language also poses a problem as not many Orang Asli children speak the Malay language when they enter primary school. Thus, many choose to withdraw because they are unable to cope with teaching and learning in the Malay language (Nicholas, 2006).

Another minority group worth mentioning are the Bajau Laut (or sea gypsies) who mainly are residents of Sabah. They have a semi-nomadic life living on boats on the sea, which disrupts schooling for the children. The Bajau Laut are also known to "hunt" (Abrahamsson, 2011) for their livelihoods, diving into the deep seas for fish and often moving from one location to another. Also, culturally they are very different from the other ethnic communities in Sabah and from the culture on which schooling is based.

The Penan tribe in Sarawak was historically mainly nomadic, though the proportion of their population who are still nomads has significantly declined. Nevertheless, there are still some 200 Penan who move through the forests in small groups in the northeastern part of the state. The children of these Penan nomadic groups tend not to attend school.

Different groups of children will have different sets of barriers that would hinder their participation rate in school. The refugee children have been living invisibly in Malaysia for some years, in particular the Rohingya refugees who have been in Malaysia for almost three decades. These children are not given access to free public schooling and have to study in learning centres run by UNHCR, NGOs, and the communities themselves. There is no recognized certification for learning in such centers and the quality of education often is compromised due to lack of educational resources, trained teachers, and crowded classrooms (CRICE, 2013).

Children living in plantations in both Peninsular (smaller in number yet problems persists) and Sabah face similar issues of not being able to join the mainstream schooling. These children, many of whom have parents who are migrant workers from Indonesia, are without proper citizenship documents and at risk of being "stateless." To access government schools, proper citizenship documents are required. This leads to the exclusion of children of refugees and migrant workers as well as undocumented children in the calculations of the NER. Also, for them primary education does not promise a bright future since there are few post-primary educational opportunities for them.

We have huge number of [undocumented] refugee children [in] Sabah. I have given up, and nothing has been done. So these children are going to become adults (...) [b]ut the refugee children are not going to go anywhere. (Interviewee, *Human Rights Commission of Malaysia*)

Other groups with similar fate, being undocumented, are street children and children in detention centers and prisons. It is reported that in Chow Kit, Kuala Lumpur alone there are more than 500 street children whose parents are sex workers or drug abusers (Fazli et al., 2012).

Special Needs Students

Part of the population of out-of-school children is those with physical disabilities (such as, limitations in hearing, sight, or mobility). The government estimates that about 1 percent of the population has special needs, though this is an underestimate since families rarely register their children as having special needs (GOM, 2012). The number of out-of-school children with physical disabilities likely declined when the government equipped some schools with special facilities (GOM, 2012). However, such schools with special facilities tend to be located in cities and towns, and thus rural children with physical disabilities are less likely to attend school. There is also a shortage of qualified professionals (such as occupational therapists). In addition, although tailored curricula for certain groups have been developed (for example, the *Bahasa Isyarat Komunikasi* for deaf students), this has yet to be achieved for children with other disabilities such as autism.

Pattern of Quality of Education, 1970–2011

Access and retention cannot be separated from the quality of primary schooling in Malaysia. One indicator of education quality—an input—is the student-teacher ratio. As shown in Figure 7, this indicator improved between 1970 and 2010; that is, it decreased from approximately 30 to less than 14 during this period.

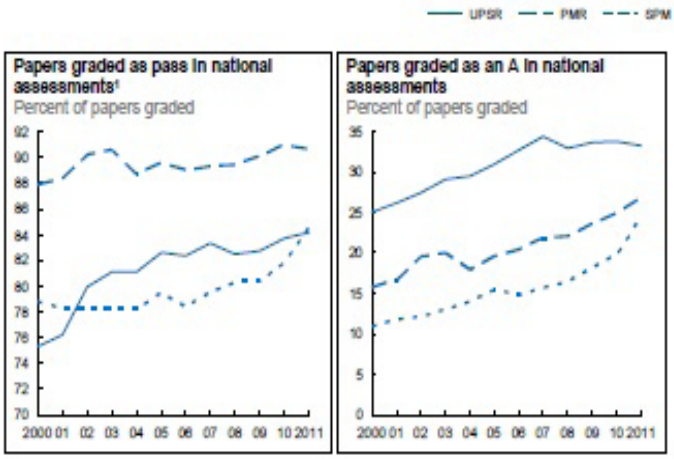
Figure 7: Primary school student-teacher ratio (1970–2010)

Source: UNESCO, Institute for Statistics.

Another indicator of education quality is students' performance on the national examination (*Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* or UPSR) taken at the end of year 6 of primary school. Students in national schools are tested in four subjects: Malay (comprehension and writing), English, mathematics, and science. Students in national-type schools are also examined in Chinese (Comprehension and Writing) or Tamil (Comprehension and Writing). Other exams are administered to secondary students: 1) the PMR (*Penilaian Menengah Rendah* or Lower Secondary Assessment) and 2) the SPM (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia or* Malaysian Certificate of Education, taken by fifth-year secondary students).

Figure 8 presents the percentages of exams scored as passing (that is, a grade of A, B, or C) and exams graded "A" on the UPSR, PMR, and SPM for the period 2000–2011. During this period there is a trend of increasing percentages for both statistics for the UPSR as well as the other two exams. For example, the percentage passing the UPSR rose from just below 76 percent in 2000 to over 84 percent in 2011 (Government of Malaysia, 2012). With respect to the percentage of students being graded "A" on the UPSR, that figure increased from about 25 percent in 2000 to over 30 percent in 2011.

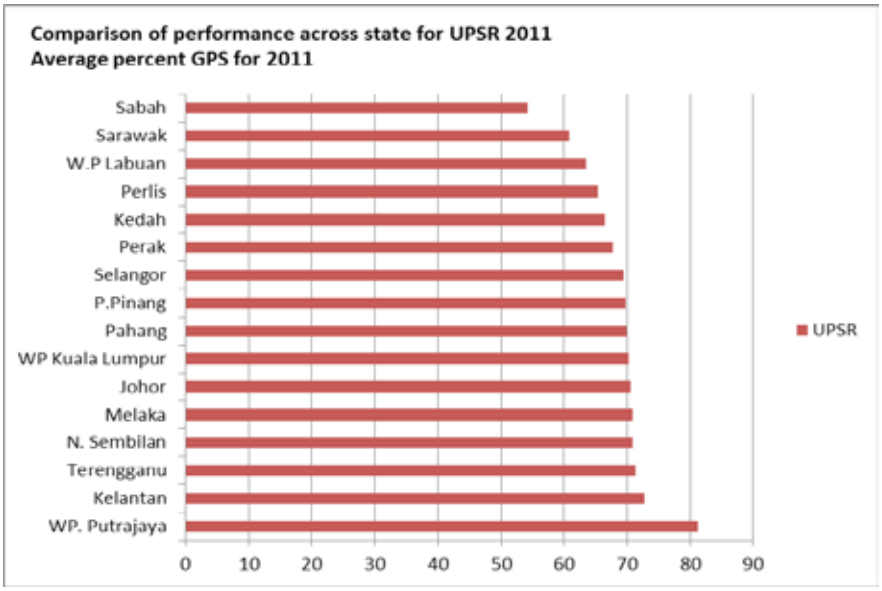
Figure 8: Malaysia national examination (UPSR, PMR, and SPM) results, 2000–2011



1In the UPSR, failing grades are D and E.
Source: Government of Malaysia (2012)

A comparison across states of the GPS (*Gred Purata Sekolah* or Grade Point Average) for the UPSR in 2011 shows that the two worst-performing states are Sabah followed by Sarawak (see Figure 9). These states' GPSs across subjects are 54.3 percent and 60.8 percent, respectively. We also note that W.P. Putrajaya is by far the best-performing state, with a GPS across subjects of over 80 percent. As discussed above, there are a number of factors that may contribute to the lower performance in Sabah and Sarawak, including historical residue from less provision of schooling during the colonial period, high poverty rates, and the rural nature of the population in these states. In contrast, the population in W.P. Putrajaya is highly urbanized and has a greater proportion of middle- to upper-income families (Government of Malaysia, 2012).

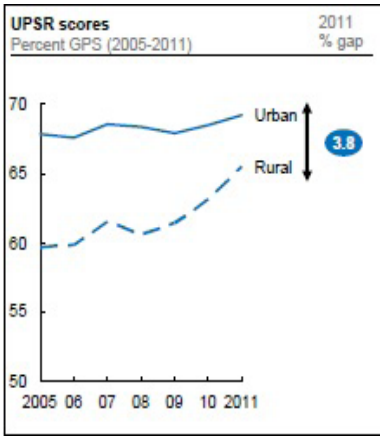
Figure 9: Comparison of performance across states for UPSR in 2011



Source: Government of Malaysia (2012)

That students in rural areas perform less well than their urban peers is evidenced in Figure 10. Note, however, that while the rural-urban gap in exam performance remained visible, it narrowed between 2005 and 2011 from more than 7.0 percent to 3.8 percent. States with more rural schools, like Sabah and Sarawak, usually underperform states with fewer rural schools (Government of Malaysia, 2012).

Figure 10: Comparison of UPSR scores for rural and urban schools 2005–2011)



Source: Government of Malaysia (2012)

Studies reveal that from 2006 to 2011 girls consistently outperformed boys on UPSR and other learning outcome measures, though the details have not been provided (Government of Malaysia, 2012).

Finally, education outcomes are poorer for the Orang Asli group as compared to the national average. For instance, in 2011, though 61 percent of students in Orang Asli schools passed the core subjects in the UPSR, the national average was 87 percent. In addition, 35 percent of the schools primarily attended by Orang Asli are identified as being in the "poor performance" band, although this is the case for only 1 percent of public schools generally (Government of Malaysia, 2012).

Drivers and Impediments of Change

Policies Affecting Access and Retention

The dramatic rise in the NER between 1972 and 1994 can be attributed to the policies set by the government that placed priority on education development. It is common to argue that government officials' political will is a key factor shaping progress in achieving universal primary education (for example, see Kozack, 2009). Evidence of Malaysian government officials' political will can be seen in the First Malaysia Plan (1955–1960), which gave priority to access in education. It was during this period that the government implemented double shifting so that more students could use the existing school buildings (UNDP, 2005). In addition, the New Economic Policy, adopted in 1971 in the wake of the May 1969 inter-ethnic group riots, was aimed at reducing inequalities between Malay and Chinese ethnic groups; education was one of the vehicles used by the government for this purpose.

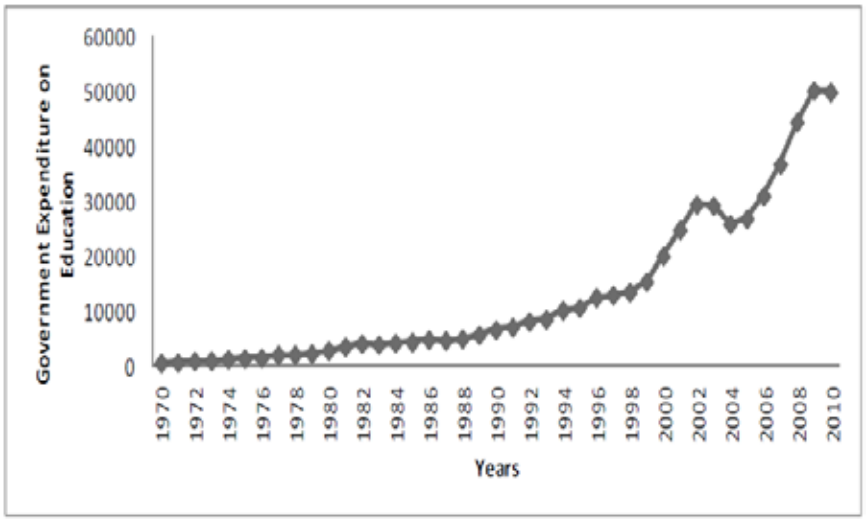
Another indicator of political will is the level of financial resources devoted to building schools and employing teachers,[15] among others. Of course, Malaysia was in a position to increase educational expenditure because of the strength of its economy. As mentioned above, Malaysia's GDP grew annually by an average of 5 percent from 1970 to 2000, and 5.5 percent from 2000–2010 (UNDP, 2005; UN, 2011).

In particular after the riots of May 13, 1969, the government's nationwide effort to foster unity and bridge the economic gap resulted in many schools being built in rural areas and villages and existing schools being equipped with better facilities and resources to equally enhance the quality of education provided. Moreover, during the 1980s additional efforts were undertaken to expand and improve educational infrastructure, especially in rural areas. And under the 9th and 10th Malaysia Plans (2006–2010 and 2011–2015) building and upgrading infrastructure continued, especially in schools in Sabah and Sarawak.

[15] To insure that all teachers in primary schools are qualified (that is, possess a bachelor's degree), the Teacher Education Division of the Ministry of Education has offered scholarships to in-service teachers to pursue a diploma or degree in education through distance learning.

As shown in Figure 11, government expenditure on education increased fairly steadily between 1970 and 2010, with the slope of increase somewhat steeper between 1988 and 1998 and, even more so between 1998 and 2010. Furthermore, public expenditures as a percentage of GDP rose from 4.3 percent in 1971 to 6.9 percent in 1982. From then until 2010 this figure fluctuated, with a low of 4.3 percent in 1982 and a high of 7.7 percent in 2002, but remained relatively high compared to other countries (UIS, 2011). For instance, in 2008 Malaysia ranked 17th (out of 102 countries) in terms of education expenditure for all levels (as a percent of total government expenditure), only second to Thailand in the region (Government of Malaysia, 2012).

Figure 11: Government expenditure on education



Source: Mohd Yahya et al. (2012)

Another financial indicator of political will is that the Malaysian government has invested heavily in pre-schools since the 1990s. Pre-schools have been established in all national and national-type primary schools, with teachers specially trained in pre-primary education. Children who attend pre-schools are less likely to drop out of primary schools (MOE, 2008). Children whose first language is not the language of instruction especially benefit from attending this pre-school for one to two years (MOE, 2008).

The political will of government authorities was also evidenced by implementing the policy of no school fees (specified in the Education Act of 1961). This policy undoubtedly was crucial for promoting access to and retention in primary school among children who live in poverty.

Although the 1961 Education Act stipulated that primary education would be free, this legislative provision only applies to children with proper registration documents. The policy requiring such documents to be able to enroll in government schools hinders access and retention for refugee and other undocumented children. These undocumented children include: a) children who are born in Malaysia to Indonesian migrants (for example, those working on plantations) and b) children of Malaysian parents who, due to lack of knowledge, failed to register them (at birth) with the National Registration Department. There are also street children, orphans and children born to prostitutes who are undocumented. Because of their families' socioeconomic status, these children do not have the means to attend private schools, although there are some attend learning centers run by communities and nongovernmental organizations (see discussion below).

It is important to stress that children without documents, if they were included in the calculations of the net enrollment ratio (NER), would likely reduce this statistic below what is reported officially. That is, although approximately 96 percent of registered Malaysian children attend primary school, the percentage of all primary school-age children (registered and not registered) living in Malaysia who attend school would be less than 96 percent.

In addition, policies affecting access and retention such as the Razah Report of 1956 resulted in the incorporation into the government education system most of the previously created schools. The Razak Report is a compromise between the Barnes Report, which was favored by the Malays, and the Fenn-Wu Report, favoured by the Chinese and Indians. The Razak Report was incorporated in the Education Ordinance of 1957 and serves as a basis for the present education framework in Malaysia. Based on this report, the large majority of previously existing schools became part of the education system, with Malay-medium schools being labelled as national schools and Chinese-, English-, and Tamil-medium schools being labelled as national-type schools.

Programs Affecting Access and Retention

If we just talk about primary education, in terms of access, I think the MOE can provide primary schools no matter where you are in this country, meaning that the access in terms of distance shouldn't be a problem, except in some very, very rural places. Access to primary education has improved in terms of finance. The government supports the poor by giving free food, transportation, uniform, tuition and scholarships. (*Interviewee, UNICEF Malaysia*)

To achieve universal primary education, the Malaysian government has embarked on numerous interventions to increase the access and survival rates in primary school in the country.[16] For example, since 1976 the government has given supplementary food to students from low income families who come to school without breakfast and are malnourished. In addition, since 1975 there has been a government program of loaning textbooks to students from low-income families. More than 75 percent of children enrolled in primary school benefit from this textbook-on-loan scheme.[17]

Also contributing to increasing access and retention among students from poorer families is the Supplementary Food Program. Administered by the Ministry of Education since 1980, this program seeks to improve the nutrition level of primary students from poor households to advance retention in schools. For example, the program supplied breakfast to nearly 707,000 primary school students in 2006. This program has led to improved attendance rates for children from poor households (MOE, 2008; UN, 2011; UNDP, 2005).

More recently, the Government of Malaysia initiated the Poor Students Trust Fund 2003, which gives funds directly to lower socioeconomic status families and has reduced the number of their children dropping out of school (UN, 2011). Then, in 2004 the government launched a Tuition Aid Scheme that provides extra lessons during the weekends or after school for government school students with low achievement and who belong to households that fall below the poverty line. In 2006, about half a million primary school children received aid under this scheme amounting to about US$52 million (MOE, 2008). Furthermore, the School Milk Program benefited more than

[16] Such efforts have been renewed in recent years. For instance, the 10th Malaysia Plan (2011–2015) emphasized providing special assistance to children in families in the bottom 40 percent of households in terms of income. The assistance includes placement in boarding schools and scholarships.

[17] In 2008, the Ministry of Education made a provision to give free textbooks for children regardless of SES.

half a million primary students in 2006, with the ministry allotting some 20 million Malaysian ringgit annually to that program. These programs have likely reduced the financial pressures that may cause children and youth to drop out (UN, 2011), thus enabling Malaysia to maintain its relatively high primary school net enrollment rate remains high (96 percent in 2005) and its relatively high rate of survival to year 6 (96 percent from 2005 to 2010).

With regard to promoting access and retention of children with special needs, the Ministry of Education developed the Integrated Special Education Programs in 1981 to cater to this population. Children with special needs have three options for schooling: (a) *special education schools* primarily catering to children with special needs, such as visual and auditory impairment or physical/mobility handicap; (b) *mainstream integrated schools* with specific classes dedicated to children with special needs, and (c) *inclusive education programs*, or mainstream schools that integrate one to five children with special needs into mainstream classes. Overall, the government estimates that of children identified as having disabilities, about 6 percent of children are enrolled in inclusive education programs, about 5 percent attend special education schools, and most (89 percent) are enrolled in mainstream integrated schools (Government of Malaysia, 2012). Further, retention is pursued through the introduction of the Early Intervention Reading and Writing Class, implemented in all government primary schools beginning in 2006, which aims to identify children with difficulties in reading and writing (as evidenced in the first year of primary school). Intensive tutoring is provided through this program to ensure retention.

As previously mentioned, Sabah has the lowest NER compared to other states in the country. Sabah is also one of the poorest states in Malaysia. In addition to other previously initiated programs, the Sabah State Education Department began an initiative in 2008 to develop more practical class lessons. The Department organizes activities (such as literacy classes and vocational courses) in collaboration with higher learning institutions for children who are out of school. For example, there are classes to teach children from the Bajau Laut, known also as the "sea gypsy" people, how to create crafts from materials they can gather from the sea. As a result of increasing students' interest in learning the practical class lessons have likely increased school attendance.

More recently, the State Education Department began in 2012 organizing weekly meetings, known as "*Hari Bertemu Pelanggan*" (Client Interface Day), to help people from poor households. This program has attracted many parents to bring their children who have not attended school to the department office. The children are enrolled in normal classes according to their age groups (regardless of how many years of school they have attended). These students are then given remedial classes to help them follow through the lessons taught in school.

Furthermore, the Malaysian government recently reached an agreement with the Indonesian government for the latter to send 109 Indonesian teachers to work on plantations to teach children in the learning centers operated by HUMANA/Borneo Child Aid. There is also potential collaboration with the Government of Thailand to enhance education for children across the region (HUMANA interview).

As for the Orang Asli community,[18] the Malaysian government initiated in 2007 a Special Comprehensive Model School, which incorporates residential education (from Year 1 to Form 3) to reduce dropout. It was reported that attendance rates have been improving from 85.7 percent in 2007 to 97.6 percent in 2010 (Government of Malaysia, 2012). Furthermore, the government is supporting primary school access and retention among the Orang Asli through providing school uniforms, food allowances, and scholarships, at a cost of more than US$3 million 2005 (MOE, 2008).

In addition, as noted by an interviewee from UNICEF Malaysia: "To say that they [the Orang Asli] have no access [to education] would be wrong because they do have support from the community, churches, mosques and temples, also private individuals who provide some basic education." For instance, in 2000, the Rotary Club of Kota Kinabalu, in collaboration with the Roman Catholic Church, built a hostel for students from interior Keningau who would otherwise have to walk for miles to reach schools in and around Keningau town (FSIC, 2013).

Other NGOs assist children to achieve access to primary education by providing various supports. One such NGO is Borneo Child Aid Society, also known as HUMANA, which was established in 1991 and registered as an NGO in 1996. It provides pre-primary and primary education to children living in plantations in Sabah, of which 90 percent to 100 percent of school-age children attend the learning centers in a given plantation. To date, HUMANA has 130 projects that cater to 12,500 children in Sabah. Of these, 10,000 are plantation children, another 1,500 are migrant children who live in the town areas, and the remaining are the Bajau Laut children. Of the plantation children, 90 percent are born in Sabah to Indonesian parents who are plantation workers in this state. The remaining 10 percent are Filipino migrants. However, although these initiatives clearly benefit the children involved, their impact on enrollment is not captured in officially calculated NERs, because the students involved do not have documents and are thus not counted in the official statistics.

HUMANA runs learning centers in these plantations in collaboration with the plantation companies and other organizations. The Malaysian Ministry of Education has approved HUMANA to provide free education to these children toward achieving the EFA and MDG goals. HUMANA organizes education for pre-schoolers for two years and primary school children until grade 6. It employs teachers, mostly Sabahans who have a minimum of SPM (equivalent to O-level) qualification. These teachers receive basic preparation in pedagogical methods in teacher training institutes in Sabah for three months. Currently, there are 300 Malaysian teachers and 109 Indonesian teachers, with the Indonesian teachers sponsored by the Government of Indonesia. In the learning centers the children are taught the Malaysian curriculum and some knowledge of Indonesia and Bahasa Indonesia. They are enrolled and promoted based on ability, not age.

[18] The Ministry of Education has also commenced a five-year transformation plan (2013–2018) to address access, retention and learning outcomes of the Orang Asli. Using tailored interventions and introducing ICT education programs that will promote culturally relevant content, the Ministry envisions that the academic performance of the Orang Asli students will improve.

However, HUMANA's director, Torbin Venning, admits that it is difficult to monitor the rate of students in these learning centers who complete grade 6, because many plantation workers move to different plantations or simply return to Indonesia in the middle of their children's schooling. However, absenteeism and dropout in the learning centers are not major issues. Less than 5 percent of children in the plantations served by HUMANA do not attend these learning centers, mainly because they work (Interview). The main challenge HUMANA faces is the lack of educational facilities (such as, classrooms) in the majority of the plantations, which makes it virtually impossible to organize lessons for the children. Apart from that, transportation is also a problem for children who live in rural areas who are required to commute daily to the learning center. Regrettably, HUMANA is unable to open new learning centers because of limited financial resources. The organization also has to constantly monitor and ensure that plantation companies pay for the cost to provide the teachers a reasonable salary. HUMANA, however, receives financial support from the Malaysian Ministry of Education and the Sabah State Education Department to ease the process of opening up more learning centers.

Supplementing efforts undertaken in the past, UNICEF began in 2010 to assist the Ministry of Education in 2010 in developing and implementing Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for children with special needs. It is estimated that more than 23,000 primary and secondary students benefit from this. Tailoring curriculum and assessment for children and improving special education service facilities in schools are promoted by the government. These initiatives are endorsed to ensure better access for students with special needs (Government of Malaysia, 2012).

Conclusion

Malaysia's primary school net enrollment rate has remained high (95.8 percent in 2005) since achieving this rate in the mid-1990s. Moreover, its survival rate to year 6 in primary school also remained relatively high, averaging 96 percent from 2005–2010. Moreover, there is no significant gender disparity between enrollment in and completion of primary schooling. This has resulted in significant increase in youth literacy rate from 88 percent in 1980 to near-universal literacy of 99 percent today and a significant increase in NER between 1970 and 1994. It is also important to note that these positive indicators of access and equity coexist with improvements in the quality of education, as evidenced in student-teacher ratios and test scores. This improvement can be attributed to the strong political commitment of the government to focus on—and provide resources for—education, alongside the assistance provided by various organizations.

However, despite the progress shown by the country having come near achieving the EFA and MDG education goals—ensuring all children have access to primary schooling by 2015—a number of issues persist that need to be addressed. In addressing these it may be possible for Malaysia to incorporate the remaining 4 percent who do not currently obtain a full six years of primary education. The 4 percent are composed disproportionately of children of poorer families, rural residents, and minority groups. Ideally, future efforts can reach all primary school-aged children, while continuing to the quality of education, as measured by student-teacher ratios or test scores (Government of Malaysia, 2012).

There are signs that the government will continue to pursue the goals of access, retention, and quality. For instance, the 10th Malaysia Plan (for 2011–2015) focuses heavily on rural areas to reduce, if not eliminate, the remaining gap between rural and urban in access, retention and quality of education. The plan also focuses on bridging the gap between children in Peninsular Malaysia and those on the islands of Sabah and Sarawak.

The School Improvement Program launched in 2010 also aims to support all public schools to improve student outcomes. Under this scheme, basic infrastructure and amenities (e.g., electricity, water) are prioritized by the government for all public schools, especially in rural areas schools located in Sabah and Sarawak (EPU, 2010). The government aims to ensure that schools meet 100 percent basic infrastructure requirements by 2015 (Government of Malaysia, 2012).

As part of its initiative to improve retention, the government in 2010 began implementing the Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS),[19] which is an early intervention initiative (that is, first three years of primary school) that focused on developing literacy and numeracy among all students. Interventions include improved remedial student-teacher ratio, and training support for teachers to improve pedagogical skills. A total of 400 million Malaysian ringgit was allocated to promote this for the period 2010–2012.

[19] LINUS incorporates both literacy and numeracy programs while previous programs focused on literacy (2006) and numeracy (2008) separately.

Also in 2010, the ministry launched the trust schools. These are public schools that are managed jointly by private organizations/civil society school leaders under the authority of the Ministry of Education with the objective of increasing access and quality in schools. By 2025, this program is to expand to 500 schools, targeting public schools in rural areas and those with enrollments of minority (that is, indigenous group) students as well as students with special needs (EPU, 2010; Government of Malaysia, 2012).

Private and international organizations will also continue to play a significant role in improving access to education in the country. A key organization involved is UNICEF, which launched in 2010 a Supplementary Reading Program to ensure that children in vulnerable communities have access to learning resources. Children living in these communities in Sabah and Sarawak (such as, migrants, plantation workers, refugees, and the poor) are provided with books of different levels and genre to cater to the different reading abilities and interest. Approximately 13,000 students from 90 schools are involved in this program, which also provides remedial activities, story-telling competitions, and reading camps.

UNICEF also collaborates with the Sabah Special Task Force to provide education for out-of-school children in this state. The Sabah Special Task Force manages 33 gazetted centers for refugees and illegal immigrants (UNICEF, 2012b). Education is not provided in most of these centers, and the few that do tend to have overcrowded classrooms with poor facilities and a lack of clean water and sanitation. However, the education center in Kampung Numbak in Sabah was established in 2011 to cater to refugee and undocumented children. To date, the center has over 300 children who otherwise would not receive any sort of formal or nonformal education.

In line with the government's support to elevate the education sector of the country, an education transformation plan has been recently proposed that will improve access, equity, and quality of education for the children of Malaysia. The transformation plan will take place over 13 years (2013–2025) and has the following initiatives (Government of Malaysia, 2012):

a. Phase 1 (2013–2015) focuses on supporting teachers and core skills. It is envisioned that there will be 98 percent enrollment in primary level and that 25 percent reduction in the urban–rural gap will be achieved.
b. Phase 2 (2016–2020) accelerates system improvement and envisions a 100 percent pre-school to lower secondary enrollment and expects a reduction in the urban–rural gap at 50 percent and an additional 25 percent reduction in the socio-economic and gender gap.
c. Phase 3 (2021–2025) focuses on excellence with increased operational flexibility while maintaining and improving the enrollment rates, urban-gender gap of the prior phases, and a 50 percent reduction in the socio-economic and gender gaps.

Investment in education remains a critical factor in Malaysia's development plans in line with the country's *Vision 2020.* Despite the inadequacies in providing education to some communities, it is evident that the education sector will remain one of the country's top priorities. Perhaps what we can learn from this case study, given that the primary school participation and survival rates in Malaysia are indeed admirable, children unable to access mainstream education still exist. Poverty, as in other contexts, continues to be a main detriment to school access and undocumented children (such as, refugees and illegal migrants) are not captured in education system statistics. This poses a set of challenges and demands for Malaysia. The children who are not in school have to be located and their barriers to schooling identified.

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Appendix: Method

Primary and secondary research was conducted for this report. Documentary search was conducted to gather data on enrollment and participation in primary school. The officer from the Ministry of Education also provided assistance in obtaining some of the data on enrollment and participation in primary school.

Interviews were conducted with the following key personnel from government and nongovernmental organizations as well as international organizations:

- UNICEF Malaysia
- SUHAKAM (Commission on Human Rights, Malaysia)
- Borneo Child Aid Society (HUMANA)
- Sabah State Education Department

The following questions were used as a guide in conducting the interviews:

1. What is your/ your organization's role in increasing the access and retention rate in primary schooling?
2. How did you/your organization become involved in ensuring the access and retention in primary schooling?
3. What are the major contributors that hinder/reduce the access and retention in primary schooling?
4. Which categories (above) do you think are at risk/ face more problems than the others? Why?
5. What policy reforms and strategic practices should be implemented to increase the access and retention in primary schooling?
6. Does the National Education Blueprint 2013-2025 address the issues of access and retention in primary schooling?
7. How has Malaysia progressed in terms of students enrolling and completing primary school?
8. Does your organization organize educational/vocational activities for children who are not in school?
9. Any measures taken by your organization to integrate children who are out -of-school back into schools?
10. Does your organization conduct any research/gather data to monitor and evaluate the access and retention in primary schooling? If yes, how were these data used to inform decision making or implement strategies to increase the rate of access and retention?

Limitations: Not all data are publicly available, especially data dating back to 1970s and 1980s. Data were not found for every year but rather selective years. There are also no data on the characteristics of out-of-school children. It was also not possible to conduct interview with Sarawak State Education Department due to the poor cooperation and lengthy bureaucratic process from the central office. Hence, we cannot report on the perspectives of Sarawak officials regarding the situation of children in and out of school in that state.