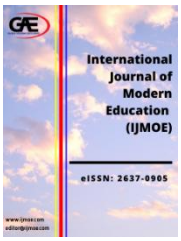
International Journal of Modern Education
EISSN: 2637-0905
Volume: 8 Issue: 30 (June 2026) PP. 105-112



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MODERN EDUCATION (IJMOE)
www.gaexcellence.com/ijmoe

EQUITY IN MALAYSIAN EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS

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Article Info:

Article history:
Received date:28.04.2026
Revised date: 14.05.2026
Accepted date: 31.05.2026
Published date: 09.06.2026

To cite this document:

Radzi, N. A. M, Chulan, M., & Rahman, A. A. (2026). Equity In Malaysian Education: Challenges and Pathways to Progress. *International Journal of Modern Education, 8*(30), 105-112.

Abstract:

Education equity is important for national development in Malysia, yet there are disparities across the socioeconomic strata, geographic locales, and resource availability. By examining this intricate inequity, this paper synthesises the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 and analyses extant policies and interventions which aimed at promoting equity. Meanwhile, the main challenges are to bridge the digital divide, provide resources for rural schools, and ensure quality teaching across all communities. Effective strategies that require holistic measures is needed to integrate technology equitably, foster parental engagement, and promote culturally responsive teaching that values diverse backgrounds (OECD, 2023). Classroom instruction, extracurricular activities, co-curricular activities, and community service should be encouraged to support holistic education aside having regular classroom instruction. According to Kantova (2024), schools should engage parents actively in their children's education process and their involvement is a crucial factor in student success. Additionally, teachers' qualifications are essential for student development. The success of these initiatives can be measured through student surveys, teacher feedback, and assessments of students' non-cognitive skills. This conceptual paper aims to explore the contributing factors to educational inequalities and provides a few recommendations for educators and policymakers, which leading towards a more equitable and developed Malaysia Madani.

International Journal of Modern Education
IJMOE
EISSN: 2637-0905
Volume: 8 Issue: 30 (June 2026) PP. 105-112

DOI: 10.35631/IJMOE.830008 **Keyword:**

Educational Disparities, Equity in Education, Inclusive Education, Malaysia, Malaysia Madani, Social Justice

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Introduction

Education equity is essential for national development, and it is not merely a matter of social justice. Equity in education highlights that social and personal circumstances do not prevent individuals from reaching their full educational potential and everyone may attain at least a minimal level of skills (OECD 2012). Malaysia Madani framework outlines that since Malaysia strives to realise its vision of becoming a developed nation, it is essential to ensure that all citizens have access to quality education for developing a skilled workforce and a cohesive society.

However, despite notable progress in the expansion of access to education, inequalities in educational outcomes continue to exist among Malaysia's different regions, socioeconomic groups, and ethnic communities (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). These disparities have challenged the potential of all individuals and impede the overall progress of the nation. Thus, this paper aims to explore the main factors that contribute to educational disparities and analyse current policies and interventions focussing on these inequalities. Furthermore, it also provides recommendations for academicians and policymakers to create a more equitable and inclusive education system which encourages all students to succeed, regardless of their background or circumstances. These notions will be drawn from relevant literature and best practices. Malaysia can fully utilise the potential of its human capital and create a more equitable and prosperous future for all by addressing the underlying causes of educational inequality.

Factors Contributing to Educational Disparities

Educational inequality in Malaysia derives from a complex interplay of socioeconomic, geographic, and systemic factors (Ismail et al., 2024; Othman et al., 2022). According to Shimi et al (2024), socioeconomic status plays a vital role where students from low-income families often face difficulties to access quality education due to lack of parental support, limited resources, and insufficient nutrition. Meanwhile, those students who were from higher socioeconomic class families can afford educational resources like technology, tutoring services, and textbooks. Furthermore, students whose parents are highly educated often have the knowledge and resources needed to support their children in making informed educational decisions (Choudhary, 2023). Kumar et al (2021) found that the parental involvement is often associated with higher socioeconomic status, which impacts students' academic achievement and overall well-being.

International Journal of Modern Education
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EISSN: 2637-0905
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Besides that, in terms of geographic location, disparities were found in rural schools where they often lack the infrastructure, resources, and qualified teachers (Wen, 2023) while in urban areas, schools are provided with extracurricular activities and advanced coursework (Choudhary, 2023). That is, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may find it challenging to join extracurricular activities because of their limited financial resources.

Besides socioeconomic and geographic factors, systemic issues within the education system can also affect disparities. Students from marginalised communities may be disadvantaged by a rigid curriculum that does not cater to their diverse learning styles and needs, where the assessment methods are prior to rote memorisation than critical thinking (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Furthermore, cultural and linguistic barriers can hinder the academic progress of students from ethnic minority groups (Ainscow, 2023, 2024; OECD, 2023).

Current Policies and Interventions

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 outlines several strategies for promoting equity in education, including targeted funding for disadvantaged schools, scholarships for low-income students, and special programs for marginalised communities (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). The Ministry of Education has also implemented initiatives to promote inclusive education, such as the use of ICT in schools to enhance teaching and learning and the provision of support services for students with special needs (Othman et al., 2022).

The existence of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles offers a framework which potentially create more accessible and engaging learning environments for all students (Fazliyah et al., 2020; Idawati et al., 2024). It further stresses the significance of providing many ways of representation, action and expression, and engagement to cater to diverse learning styles and needs. It indicates that the implementation of these UDL principles help educators to create more inclusive classrooms that inspire all students to succeed.

However, though there were efforts, disparities persist. Those students who were from low-income families continue to face difficulties in pursuing their higher education while rural schools are unable to provide quality education since, they often lack the resources and infrastructure needed *(*Wen, 2023). Thus, there is a need to have more targeted and comprehensive interventions to address the main causes of educational inequity and create a level playing field for all students.

Recommendations for a More Equitable Education System

In Malaysia, the policymakers and educators must address existing disparities strategically through targeted interventions across various domains to create a more equitable and inclusive education system. The following recommendations which are supported by the evidence and aligned with Malaysia Madani goals suggest a roadmap for attaining greater equity in educational outcomes:

Increase Targeted Funding for Disadvantaged Schools

It is important to prioritise funding for schools in rural and low-income areas for levelling the playing field (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). This funding should focus on improving the physical infrastructure, providing access to updated learning resources, and enhancing

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IJMOE
EISSN: 2637-0905
Volume: 8 Issue: 30 (June 2026) PP. 105-112

teacher quality through competitive salaries and professional development opportunities (Wen, 2023). Additionally, it enables schools to conduct programs which address the specific needs of their students like after-school tutoring, mentoring, and enrichment activities. Othman et al (2022) believe this strategic investment directly focuses on the inequality which intervene the students' progress in underserved communities. As supported by Sohn et al (2022), improving students' academic performance and providing quality education to disadvantaged and underperforming students are the main reason why school funding policy need to be improved.

Expand Scholarship and Financial Aid Programs

Many students from low-income families in Malaysia have financial constraints and this remain a significant barrier for them to pursue their higher education. Shimi et al., (2024) believe that it is essential to expand scholarship and financial aid programs to ensure these students could pursue their educational aspirations and reach their full potential. There are a lot of financial aids provided by the Malaysian government such as MARA Educational Foundation (Yayasan Pelajaran Mara-YPM), Tunku Abdul Rahman Foundation, Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam (JPA), Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA), and National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) to assist all individuals obtaining equal education opportunities and pursue higher education which led to increasing number of professionals and experts in Malaysia (Haniza, 2021). These financial aids cover tuition fees, living expenses, transportation costs, and other educational-related expenses. Moreover, the application process should be made simpler to increase awareness among the low-income families pertaining to availability of financial aid opportunities. In fact, efforts should be made to enhance intake of quality students by expanding scholarship programs to all students regardless of their race, religion, or background.

Implement Culturally Responsive Teaching

The cultural backgrounds and experiences of all students are recognised by conducting culturally responsive teaching which incorporates them into the curriculum and teaching approach. This approach can enhance student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement, particularly for students from marginalised communities (Ainscow, 2023, 2024; OECD, 2023). Teachers need a continuing professional development which emphasizes on cultural awareness, sensitivity, and pedagogical strategies to implement culturally responsive teaching effectively. This would create inclusive and equitable learning environments. As supported by Fatmawaty et al (2024), this pedagogical approach aims to create more equal and interesting learning opportunities by bridging cultural gaps in the classroom Therefore, this approach is mostly relevant in Malaysian contexts since the classrooms often comprise students of various ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds.

Promote Inclusive Education Practices

Inclusive education practices should be promoted to all students, including those with disabilities and special needs, so that they can learn together with their peers in mainstream classrooms (Fazliyah et al., 2020; Idawati et al., 2024). Thus, the resources and support should be provided to schools to create accessible and accommodating learning environments, such as assistive technologies, specialised training for teachers, and individualised education plans (IEPs) that cater to each student unique needs. In addition, it is also crucial to create a supportive and inclusive school culture that values diversity and promotes acceptance.

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EISSN: 2637-0905
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Meanwhile, Supermaniam and Hamdan (2026) found there is an urgent need to conduct comprehensive training that covers classroom implementation, individualised instruction, emotional resilience, and the development of physical and psychological support systems for pre-service and in-service teachers.

Strengthen Parental and Community Engagement

The involvement of parents and community is a significant factor in ensuring student success (Epstein, 2011; Kantova, 2024; Shimi et al., 2024). Schools should create a welcoming and inclusive environment that values contributions of parents and community members to seek their active engagement in the education process. For instance, this can be achieved by implementing various initiatives, like parent-teacher associations, workshops, family literacy programs, and community-based mentoring programs. Moreover, schools should communicate effectively with parents by providing them with regular updates on their children's progress and opportunities to participate in school events and decision-making processes. As supported by Saikia and Ravi (2025), there are various ways parents and community members can contribute to create supportive, equitable, and inclusive learning environments for their children. They further emphasised the importance of having collaborative partnerships between schools, families, and local communities to promote understanding, respect, and culture of acceptance.

Reform Assessment Methods

Traditional assessment methods that mainly rely on rote memorisation often fail to measure students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity skills accurately. According to Shah et al (2020), the assessment methods should be restructured and changed to integrate more authentic and performance-based tasks where students are required to apply their knowledge and skills in real-world contexts for the 21st century demands. For example, the use of project-based assessments, portfolios, presentations, and other alternative assessment methods could provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their learning in a meaningful and engaging way. The results can be measured by using the student survey, teacher feedback, and non-cognitive skills assessment of student.

In summary, the strategical implementation of these evidence-based recommendations could assist policymakers and educators to create a more equitable and inclusive education system that encourages all Malaysian students to reach their full potential and contribute to the nation's progress toward becoming a developed Madani society. Hence, the continuity of observation, evaluation, and adaptation of these strategies are indeed necessary to ensure their effectiveness and relevance in achieving the changing demands of education context in Malaysia.

Conclusion

Education equity is significantly required to build a prosperous and ethical society in Malaysia, and it is not merely a desirable goal. Shah et al (2020) believe that policymakers and educators are able to create a more equitable and inclusive education system that encourages all students to fully use their potential by addressing the root causes of educational disparities and carrying out targeted interventions such as providing scholarships for disadvantage students, improving infrastructure in rural schools, and offering additional support for students from low-income families (Othman et al, 2022). Additionally, educators and policymakers must also be together

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with individuals as well as communities to address educational inequalities, which are particularly influenced by socioeconomic factors (Singh & Narayanan, 2022). The transformative power of such a system will benefit individual students and contribute to the nation's well-being and its overall development. This indicates that Malaysia is one step closer to achieve its goal as a developed Madani society. Further research is required to evaluate the effectiveness of various intervention strategies as well as to explore the long-term impact of this issue.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Perlis Branch, Malaysia for providing the necessary resources and support throughout the course of this research. Special appreciation is extended to colleagues and peers who contributed valuable insights and constructive feedback, which greatly enhanced the quality of this paper.

Funding Statement: No Funding

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Modern Education (IJMOE).

Ethics Statement: This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or sensitive data requiring ethical approval. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Nor Azira Mohd Radzi was responsible for the conceptualization, and overall supervision of the study. Majdah Chulan and Azhar Abdul Rahman contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

International Journal of Modern Education
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