EQUITY, ACCESS AND EDUCATIONAL QUALITY IN THREE SOUTH-EAST ASIAN COUNTRIES

The Case of Indonesia, Malaysia and Viet Nam

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Introduction
The United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goal 4 reconsiders education goals as an initiative beyond access, emphasizing more strongly the axioms of equity and of quality. These tenets, although aspirational, can be challenging considering that will affect the other. Expanded access to educational opportunities does not necessarily guarantee a quality education. A quality education, where resources are sometimes privileged for a few, may not be equitable in benefitting marginalized groups. Therefore, what is the sweet spot for balance in this trilateral relationship?
While the global agenda should be rightly followed, how educational equity, access and quality is interpreted by countries has to be viewed through a domestic lens. We need to consider if there has been a privileging of one over the other. And if so, wonder if this is how we envision society to be created.

This paper, therefore, aims to review the most recent literature concerning educational equity, access and quality in three Southeast Asian countries – Indonesia, Malaysia and Viet Nam. It will attempt to draw out pieces of research that demonstrate issues around this paper’s theme and how it complements or contrasts with state discourse and policy action. On a whole, this paper aspires to reveal the contemporary concerns, if any and where possible, of each part of the trinity. For instance, a key guiding research question is that if a country presents data on educational equity, who gets included in the figures and whose stake is compromised along the way?

Indonesia, Malaysia and Viet Nam were chosen for two broad reasons. Firstly, they are of interest to the Foundation because of its current project interests. Secondly, and more importantly, they are middle income countries situated within the Southeast Asian region and are seeking educational reform to escape the middle income trap. The issues then of educational equity, access and quality is a central theme that will pervade these societies. It has been argued that educational quality, and not just access, is the basis on which a causal relationship is established with economic outcomes (Hanushek and Woessmann 2007). However, while economic outcomes are necessarily important, the nuances of who benefits is a crucial consideration. As resources are arguably finite, governments have to balance between who to privilege and who gets excluded. This raises questions as to what is meant as a fair and just society, and what are the rightful schooling and economic outcomes for countries competing in a society of states.

The literature on educational quality, equity and access is vast. As I try to draw out insights from the literature, and broadly synthesizing it in a comparative angle within a single paper, I will attempt to provide macro understandings instead of micro analyses. Further, this paper is limited to research and reports available in English – a significant factor since literature in national languages could have provided other perspectives. This paper does not claim to be a comprehensive overview of educational quality, equity and access. Nonetheless, its significance is in thinking how three Southeast Asian countries have achieved, attempting or are struggling to achieve education equity in quality.
A Global and Theoretical Overview
Today, nations and the global community are aspiring towards a new direction in education goals for the next 15 years. At the recent Incheon Declaration for Education 2030, a call was made for nations to work "Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all" (UNESCO, 2015b). Established as part of the new global agenda in improving the original Jomtien and Dakar Education for All (EFA) initiatives, the tenets for a transformative education agenda is now to holistically tie in access, inclusion, equity and quality into a singular framework. A noble call, and one that is in line with the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 for Quality Education.

Although educational access continues to remains a key challenge for governments to work towards, there is recognition now that access without educational quality is insufficient for sustained and improved livelihoods. Countries have largely achieved goals in enrolment for boys and girls at the primary level, but much more needs done at all levels of education (United Nations, 2016). Ambitiously then, SDG 4 for a quality education set ten targets achievable by 2030 (see figure 1); with educational equity and quality featuring prominently in early childhood, K-12 education, higher education, and future lifelong learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All girls and boys receive free, equitable and quality K-12 education which are relevant and lead to Goal-4 effective learning outcomes.</th>
<th>All girls and boys have access to quality early childhood education, care and development such that they are prepared for grade school.</th>
<th>Equal access for all women and men to affordable TVET.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase the number of youths and adults with relevant skills for employment.</td>
<td>Eliminate gender disparities in education, ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training, including persons vulnerable, with disabilities, and the indigenous.</td>
<td>Ensure that literacy and numeracy is achieved substantially amongst the population.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure that learners achieve knowledge and skills which promote sustainable development and lifestyles.</td>
<td>Build and improve existing educational facilities which are child, disability and gender sensitive. The provision of safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.</td>
<td>By 2020, substantially expand globally scholarships available for developing countries for enrolment in higher education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers.</td>
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Figure 1: SDG for 2030

Demonstratively, the Education 2030 Framework for Action (2015a) articulated a need to focus on educational quality and learning. Point #22 detailed that "Increasing access must be accompanied by measures to improve the quality and relevance of education and learning" (p. 10). Apart from equipping schools with the
necessary resources, safe-facilities, learner-centred pedagogies and non-discriminatory practices, education systems must also have the right teacher policies and regulations in place: those that effectively recruit, empower, train, motivate and deploy strategically teachers across schools.

Further, systems of quality learning assessment should be emplaced or improved upon, with learning outcomes defined in both the “cognitive and non-cognitive domains”. Clearly, the call for a quality education is beyond strengthening content development but for an education which imparts the necessary skills, values, attitudes and knowledge.

In strategizing a new way forward, it is important then for stakeholders to unify the trinity tenets of equity, access and quality in meeting Education 2030 goals; and more critically, improve the livelihoods and societies under their charge. Even in cases where Millennium Development Goals (MDG) have been met, it is important to look beyond the figures and realise the effects demonstrated in society.

Lewin’s (2015) argued in his recently published monograph “Educational access, equity, and development: Planning to make rights realities” that as governments laud their achievements in attaining educational access, it is still very much “unfinished business” (p. 21). While enrolment has been of great significance in attaining desired figures, what is just as necessary are continued efforts to ensure that the child stays in school and successfully completes the education cycle. He goes further in providing a plan and discusses key concepts for countries in developing and enhancing their basic education, highlighting the dialectical issues between access and exclusion. He then adopts the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions & Equity’s (CREATE) model (Lewin, 2007) in seeking to illuminate the various zones of exclusion (see Figure 2).

...school quality and school processes are inseparable from educational access and outcomes and an extended vision of universal access to education...

The zonal model is tied to the concept of an expanded vision of access, reminding stakeholders and policymakers that the straightforward action of increasing education enrolment capacity is simplistic and insufficient to a meaningful and equitably distributed education. Where countries claim that “high enrolment rates equate to success in universalizing access” (Lewin, 2015, p. 45), it is in fact a concealment of “low rates of completion and very unsatisfactory levels of achievement”. As such, the zonal model provides an expanded vision in viewing and tying participation to educational quality, relevance and learning outcomes which can contribute to the discussion on greater educational equity.

Going further, Lewin argues that the notions of equity, access and the quality of education are intimately linked as they each reinforce the other. For instance, educational access is meaningless unless it is tied to quality learning outcomes perceived by students and families as instrumental for their future - a point touched upon by Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2011a) in the next section.
The argument for a quality education is, therefore, not new. As part of its Global Monitoring Report (GMR) series for the EFA, UNESCO dedicated its early publications thematically on “Education for All: The Quality Imperative” (2004) to initiate a discussion about educational quality. It noted:

Quality must be seen in light of how societies define the purpose of education. In most, two principal objectives are at stake: the first is to ensure the cognitive development of learners. The second emphasises the role of education nurturing the creative and emotional growth of learners and in helping them to acquire the values and attitudes for responsible citizenship. Finally, quality must pass the test of equity: an education system characterized by discrimination against any particular group is not fulfilling its mission. (UNESCO, 2004)

Yet researchers like Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2011a) critically note that the UNESCO 2004 GMR report’s discussion and subsequent analysis “remained generic and somewhat philosophical as though it remained beyond the limits of concrete action”. While the analysis is useful for academic discourse, it does not clearly provide an operational strategy for education reform to achieve educational quality, access and equity. At best, UNESCO’s emphasizes that educational quality is a subjective understanding, tied towards societal goals. What would have been more useful for discussion is an understanding of how educational quality is fundamentally linked to issues of equity and access; and not viewing each term in its own ambivalent, esoteric concepts. As such, the authors propose that what is needed is further study on the “backward linkage between school quality and
Exclusion from schooling” (p. 2) in critically stringing in the tenets of quality, access and equity into a concrete plan of action.

Earlier research on the quality of education has been viewed within an input-output framework (e.g., Hanushek and Woessmann (2007); Temple (2001); Ramirez, Luo, Schofer and Meyer (2006)), where educational quality is regarded through the lens of economic development. Others articles have also noted the necessity of academic infrastructure and safe environments to enable classroom learning to take place. These necessary, important considerations, however, only provide one part of the bigger picture in understanding how to create educational quality or why educational quality is important. But there is little understanding about how educational quality can also improve educational equity and accessibility outcomes.

Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2011b) therefore argue that the “quality of schools and the processes therein impinge on the levels and nature of participation and completion of basic education by children”. The argument proposed, underscores educational quality as central and the motivator to why children attend school, relegating to the side-lines other explanatory factors such as poverty and social-cultural issues. To sustainably achieve educational access and provide an educational system that is equitable, the key takeaway is to improve the quality of education provided within schools – suggestively a factor largely determined by teachers first, followed by an effective school leadership (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Empirically then, the contemporary measures of a quality education are the measures of cognitive development and a student’s social and emotional development (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012, p. 5) – best exemplified to a degree through national assessments and international benchmarks where possible; but the latter needs to be appropriately used.

Still, oversimplifying any strategy at its extremes through a singular means of “quality education” for improved access and educational equity, fails to recognize instances of institutional or structural constraints that can prevent access. Educational systems are not removed from the social, and plans for inclusive education are necessary to reach the marginalized and excluded.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has argued, through the concept of pedagogical inclusion, that inclusive education is more than being physically present and it has to go beyond being pedagogically excluded. There needs be an inclusive school system that actively responds to the needs and unique characteristics found
in each learner, especially those at risk of marginalization and underachievement – creating an education system that is adaptable to the individual (Asian Development Bank, 2010).

For the ADB, there are multiple rationales for an inclusive education, with many warranting a strong focus on economic efficiency and development (see figure 3). ADB further argues that by beginning from a rights-based approach, rather than from a philosophy of defect and deficit, 1) equity can be achieved, 2) barriers can be identified and removed, 3) and that diversity and difference can be welcomed. OECD also reinforces the notion that the pursuit of equity and educational quality can produce high performing (and positive economic) outcomes, highlighting that:

- School failure penalises a child for life. The student who leaves school has fewer life prospects – lower initial and lifetime earnings, more difficulties in adapting to a rapidly changing knowledge-based economy, and higher risks of unemployment.
- Poorly educated people limit economies’ capacity to produce, grow and innovate. School failure damages social cohesion and mobility, imposing additional costs on public budgets.
- Equity is possible with quality, and that reducing school failure strengthens individuals’ and societies’ capacities to respond to recession and contribute to economic growth and social wellbeing. (OECD, 2012)

Nonetheless, while the concept for inclusive education is attractive, it has to be understood as a political construct that is multifaceted and oftentimes widely appropriated for various causes, according to stakeholder interest:

The construct inclusive education is simultaneously used to promote globalization; erase cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and indigenous identities in search of a common core within all humans; and to identify and give voice to the experiences and lives of people who live at the margins of social institutions and, in doing so, make visible power laden polycultural discourses that construct differences. (Kozleski, Artiles, & Waitoller, 2011)

Kozleski et al. (2011) note that the literature on inclusive education theory focuses largely on ability differences (i.e students with disabilities and special needs), and instances of professional discourse highlights its 1) justification or its 2) implementation. Indeed, these are important considerations. However, when inclusion is situated within a normative context, it is a recognition of how it is a product of social and historical forces – one that is instituted by norms and/or power. It is crucial, therefore, that stakeholders realise that inclusive education varies across context. For instance, inclusive education as understood across developing and developed countries necessarily differ because of resource availability: “Many developing nations are still struggling to achieve universal school access and completion, whereas developed nations are concerned with equity in participation"
Equity, Access and Educational Quality in Three South-East Asian Countries: The Case of Indonesia, Malaysia and Viet Nam

and outcomes across diverse groups” (p. 5)¹. This prompts a recognition that though the term inclusive education is easily transferred, its perception and aspirations in each instance is founded on very different ideological and operational priorities. Therefore, which groups gets to benefit in the inclusive education process highlights the political contestations reasoned on more than a case of resource supply and demand. It is an exposition of the power differentials present in what is supposedly a homogenous and global concept.

In synthesizing the varying ways of thinking in achieving educational quality, access and equity, there needs to be a better appreciation of perceiving the operational and social realities present in any one system. While there can be a global approach and calls for noteworthy aspirations, the nuances found in the domestic will, and rightly so, differ. Stakeholders must realise that strategies to tie the trinity tenets will require multiple points of entry and that there is no one answer to the challenge.

It is an imperative, however, that the lives of people must improve—a goal that holistically employs educational quality, access and equity in the process. Yet in transposing the global unto the local, more must be done to understand the impact of these aspirations. There must be contextual research conducted in understanding how and why children do not attend or drop out of schools; how educational quality can reduce exclusion; and in line with social and economic aspirations, how the trinity tenets of educational quality, access and equity can envision the establishment of a fair and just future but come into contestation with history, culture and power. These are necessary, and rightfully challenging, thoughts to provoke and are crucial conversations for policy makers and educators to have. Failure to do this can mean that we inadvertently worsen the lives of the very people we sought to improve.

The Case of Three South-East Asian Countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Viet Nam
The quest for an equitable and quality education is a widespread endeavour, constantly engaged by governments in both developing and developed nations. In 2004, then Director of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Arief Sadiman noted that the promotion of a quality and equitable education is common educational policy across Southeast Asia (Sadiman, 2004). Despite differences in geographical, cultural and levels of socio-economic development, the regard for a quality and equitable education has always been viewed as a necessity for a nation. Especially in instances where much of Southeast Asia is made up of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic groups, the national agenda for education is to build social cohesion. On top of which, there was the need for a country to be plugged in to the knowledge-based economy and the global environment, demanding the need for skilled human capital.

This belief was echoed in the 2013 ASEAN State of Education Report. Priority 2 which noted a need to 1) increase access to quality primary and secondary

¹ Emphasis as per source.
education across the ASEAN region; and 2) that there was also a need for an improved quality of education, which includes higher performance standards, more opportunities for lifelong education, and widespread provision of professional development support (ASEAN, 2014).

Still, what is clear is that despite government accolades, aspirations and attempts to improve equity and access, there is a significant number of children who are not in school. Whatever the reason, the prevalence of Out of School Children (OOSC) reflect the failure of governments, potentially contravening the commitments made to its people in the social contract (see figure 4). Further, apart from OOSC being an educational rights issue, the situation also presents significant economic costs to a country (UNESCO, 2015c). In Viet Nam, it is estimated that the economic cost of OOSC is 0.3% of its GDP, and in Indonesia, that figure is as high as 2.0% of its GDP. UNESCO remarked that while other regions face an issue of educational access, for East Asia and the Pacific (EAP), the greatest concern should be about educational retention - 58% of OOSC are primary school dropouts (ibid, p. 2).

Figure 4: Thousands of Out of School Children (OOSC) in 2012 (UNESCO, 2015c)

Costs
- Financial/Poverty
- Opportunity costs
- No clear schooling benefits

Quality
- Poor teaching quality
- Teacher absenteeism

Geography
- Remote locations
- Urban-rural divide

Infrastructure
- Physically disabled students
- Sanitation
- Safe environment

Social
- Ethno-linguistic minorities

Others
- Natural disasters

Figure 5: Non-exhaustive reasons for OOSC
The figures for OOSC is, as such, just one example amongst many that reflect the reality often obscured by data that exhibit progress and success cases. The reasons for exclusion are many and there are real economic costs to its presence. This exposition, does not however, assert that governments are not finding ways to resolve the challenges. Instead, it establishes much work remains to be done. And that far from the issue of equity, access and quality being one that is country specific, it is a phenomenon that is systemic and experienced by many countries.

Indonesia

At the constitutional level, the Indonesian education system is based on Pancasila – the official foundational philosophy of the Indonesian state. The goals of its national education system are to:

Develop capability, character, and civilization by enhancing its intellectual capacity and developing students’ human values: being faithful and pious to one and only one God; possessing a moral and noble character; being healthy, knowledgeable, competent, creative and independent; and acting as democratic and responsible citizens. (Mullis, I.V.S et al. (2011, p. 396) as cited in (ASEAN, 2014, p. 44))

In this manner, education has a key role in cognitive and moral development, and the establishment of a national identity. While it is an aspiration, the demands this places on the Indonesian state are broad and heavy.

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<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Lower Secondary</td>
<td>Upper Secondary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>Voluntary</td>
<td>Compulsory</td>
<td>Becoming Compulsory</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>Fees (small)</td>
<td>Free</td>
<td>Fees (small)</td>
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Reifying the philosophy, the 1945 Constitution states that every Indonesian citizen has a right to a quality, basic education. In 1985, compulsory primary education was mandated for children aged 7 to 12 years, and by 1994, 13 to 15 years of age. The 2005 education reforms also abolished tuition fees. Most recently, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MOEC) has extended compulsory education to include the upper secondary school years. These efforts are largely in line with the country’s educational goals to 1) improve equity and access, 2) enhance quality and relevance, 3) and strengthening education management and accountability (Firman & Tola, 2008). Work done by Suryadarma, Suryahadi and Sumarto (2006) shed light on some reasons for reform: the case of low secondary school enrolment, for instance, is due to issues like cost, performance in national examinations, religion and opportunities for employment.
As a means to improve educational access across all socio-economic groups in the country, Indonesia embarked on an initiative of Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) – a step taken since 2001 when a directorate under the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture was established. The lack of early childhood education, as established by Alatas et al. (2013), is often caused by rampant poverty, lack of affordable ECED services, missed opportunities and low probabilities of positive parenting. The World Bank and the Indonesian government has sought to counter these challenges by introducing Community-Based ECED services in 50 districts across 21 provinces. While ECED is a generally agreed upon as desirable in the global education agenda, the authors note that there are issues in 1) collaboration, 2) scalability, 3) follow-up, 4) further professional development, 5) quality evaluation and 6) project implementation which make suspect any efforts for effective ECED as evaluation of quality in Indonesia. Yet, while these are necessary operational challenges to resolve, more research is needed to understand the implications of these recommendations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Net Enrolment Rate (%)</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary Education</td>
<td>95.23</td>
<td>95.41</td>
<td>95.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Education – net/lower secondary</td>
<td>74.52</td>
<td>75.64</td>
<td>77.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Education – net/ upper secondary</td>
<td>55.73</td>
<td>56.52</td>
<td>57.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary Education – gross</td>
<td>22.64</td>
<td>26.34</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>Survival Rates (%)</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary Education</td>
<td>94.16</td>
<td>89.36</td>
<td>95.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Secondary</td>
<td>99.26</td>
<td>96.72</td>
<td>97.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Secondary</td>
<td>95.9</td>
<td>96.79</td>
<td>96.58</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Attainment of the Population aged 25 years and older (%)</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>30.58</td>
<td>31.48</td>
<td>30.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Secondary</td>
<td>14.45</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>15.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Secondary</td>
<td>20.34</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>20.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>8.15</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite Indonesian having large successes in achieving gender parity in its education system, with girls doing significantly better in literacy achievements when compared to boys (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012, pp. 11, 24), class inequality amongst the various gender groups are still prevalent. Educational cost appears to be a major consideration as to why students do not attend or drop out of school (UNESCO, 2012, p. 70). Further, girls who were generally successful in PISA were from richer families (ibid, p. 127), and almost 80% of young people from the richest households compared to only 20% from the poorest households, were enrolled in upper secondary schools or institutions of higher education (ibid, p. 183). These results were in spite of efforts by the Indonesian government to enhance equitable access and school performance through local school grants such as the BOS and BOSDA.
Improvement Programme (World Bank, 2012) – suggesting that state money is not always a main lever for change.

Susanti (2014) argues how the notion of how financial capital\(^2\) and its interplay with social and cultural capital was crucial in overcoming the historical discriminatory policies aimed at marginalizing the Chinese Indonesian’s opportunities for educational access. Despite being a minority ethnic group actively discriminated against through educational policy and politics (Clark, 1965; Dawis, 2008), Chinese Indonesians appear not to suffer in educational attainment. In particular, the minority group’s enrolment at the secondary school level was significantly higher when compared against the national rate (D. Suryadarma, Widyanti, Suryahadi, & Sumarto, 2006). Susanti (2014) argues that in addition to the influence of financial capital, Chinese Indonesian parents who emphasize the importance of education, and the associated cultural expectations of children in the family, contribute to motivations for stronger yet unequal educational access and opportunity for the minority group in Indonesia. Therefore, though there was an active set of discrimination education policies in the colonial, Sukarno and Suharto times, the effective use of capital by affluent members within the Chinese Indonesian community was crucial in overcoming issues of access. The intent of the findings, however, was not to position the Indonesian Chinese as more privileged in comparison with other ethnic groups. Instead, the findings suggest that the improvement of educational equity cannot be limited to an improvement of financial capital alone. Rather, there must be a concerted effort in also improving the marginalized group’s social and cultural capital concurrently in motivating reasons for education participation.

The contemporary research corpus on ethnic minority groups and contemporary education policies for equity and access is, however, limited (Susanti, 2014). One of the few research pieces (Daniel Suryadarma, Suryahadi, Sumarto, & Rogers, 2006) note that today’s Chinese Indonesian are experiencing inequality in access because of the operational issues of school availability and ability to pay, rather than a case of systemic ethnic bias.

\(\textit{\ldots while the abolition of educational fees is a noble one, it is not a neutral endeavour…}\)

Therefore, cost is still oft cited as a major obstacle in improving educational access, and governments have responded by making basic education free. However, as the abolition of education fees leads to exponential school enrolment, educational quality drops. Educational fees then re-emerge because of an inadequacy of funding to continuously improve educational quality, which then leads to high drop-out rates. In seeking a solution to maintain free basic education, authors such as Bentaouet-Kattan and Burnett (2004) propose that replacement funds be provided and sustained in instances where school fees have an impact on educational quality and access.

Although the inadequacy of continued funding may suggest an administrative issue, Rosser and Joshi (2013) disagree, arguing that the issue is also political: “the

\(^2\) Bourdieu’s (1986) notion of capital is used here.
lack of capacity to replace funding . . . is the outcome of contestation between different interest groups reflecting inequalities of power”. They argue that there are stakeholders in the system who benefit from school fees. In the Indonesian case, it was found that politico-bureaucrats with the support of businesses had three main reasons to maintain the status quo (see figure 8).

![Figure 8: Three main reasons to why Indonesian interest groups want to maintain school fees, adapted from Rosser and Joshi (2013)](image)

As such, while the abolishment of educational fees is a noble one, it is not a neutral endeavour. The provision of inclusive education has clearly highlighted certain degrees of politics at play, and that in order to realise Universal Free Basic Education (UFBE), there must be shifts in the political environment. A blanket approach to spending more needs to be challenged with spending better (World Bank, 2013b).

The presence of politics is thus exceptionally evident and overt in the Indonesian education system. In a seminal piece by Chang et. al (2014), the authors argued in their work of “Teacher Reform in Indonesia” that the complex interplay of the political and economic contexts of the Indonesian state affect its policy-making process for comprehensive and effective reform (p. 10). This understanding is especially important as though educational quality, access and equity is generally agreed upon conditions to achieve (Jalal & Hendarman, 2008), what is problematic is not the knowledge that is known for educational change but how to institute targeted solutions within the political economy.

This brings to mind Govinda and Bandyopadhyay’s (2011b) earlier assertion that educational quality is linked with reasons for exclusion. Considering the Indonesian socio-political environment, external factors such as the distribution of costs and the presence of power players can be an impediment to the quality strategy. Yet, educational quality when defined beyond the traditional notions of academic success, is still a strong reason as to why students attend school. Stern and Smith (2016) argue that despite public schools demonstrating stronger PISA performances (i.e stronger educational quality), 40% of families still opted to send their children to (government-dependent) private schools. While reasons of ease of access is obvious in some cases, the authors found that the most commonly cited reason is the demand for religious training and education on top of the national curricula – another form of educational quality.
Malaysia
The philosophy of education in Malaysia, as expressed through the Education Act of 1996 is that “Education in Malaysia is an ongoing effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God” (Loke, S.H. and Hoon, C.L. (2011) as cited in ASEAN (2014)).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Primary</td>
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<td>Upper Secondary</td>
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Figure 9: Overview of the Malaysian public school system (ASEAN, 2014)

While its core philosophy is an ambitious aspiration in creating the well-rounded knowledgeable, moral and spiritual being, the Malaysian government recognizes that in today’s context, its own absolute improvement in cognitive education performance is insufficient and at risk (Ministry of Education, 2012). Despite the progress it has made in educational access, the government acknowledges that challenges still remain in achieving equitable student outcomes. Overall learning outcomes in states with more rural schools are poorer than those without, and the gender gap (that widened from 2007-2012) is both increasing and of concern (ibid, p. E-7). Attention is needed to ensure a cohort of “lost boys” who drop out of school or leave school with low education achievement do not take shape.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>2009</th>
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<tr>
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<td>96.19</td>
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<td>90.01</td>
<td>89.61</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary Education – net/lower secondary</td>
<td>86.51</td>
<td>86.76</td>
<td>86.07</td>
<td>86.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Education – net/upper secondary</td>
<td>77.25</td>
<td>77.19</td>
<td>77.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tertiary Education – gross</td>
<td>40.24</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>40.87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Survival Rates (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary Education</td>
<td>98.8</td>
<td>97.17</td>
<td>98.7</td>
<td>99.06</td>
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<tr>
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<td>96.2</td>
<td>96.27</td>
<td>96.28</td>
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<td>Upper Secondary</td>
<td>96.32</td>
<td>96.7</td>
<td>96.58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education Attainment of the Population aged 25 years and older (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>22.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lower Secondary</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>17.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Upper Secondary</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>31.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>19.9</td>
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Figure 10: Malaysia’s Enrolment, Survival Rates and Education Attainment, adapted from ASEAN’s (2014) ASCC Scorecard for Education
For its strategic plan of 12 years over 2013 – 2025, the recently established Education Blueprint (Ministry of Education, 2012) has envisioned five system aspirations. Three of which are related to this paper’s interest of equity, access and educational quality (see figure 11).

The Education Ministry, therefore, aspires to achieve universal access to education and full enrolment from preschool to upper secondary school by 2020. The quality of education received will be uniquely Malaysian, and comparable to international best practices and systems. The country aspires to be in the “top third of countries” for international benchmarks such as TIMSS and PISA, within 15 years. The ministry also noted that other dimensions of quality that are relevant for Malaysia may be included as they are developed and accepted by international standards. To achieve equity goals, the ministry aspires to halve current urban-rural, socioeconomic, and gender achievement gaps by 2020. For its five system aspirations, eleven shifts were proposed to transform Malaysia’s education system (see Figure 12).
The ASEAN State of Education Report 2013 notes that Malaysia’s main challenge in education is the disparity between high and low socioeconomic status households and their subsequent academic achievement (ASEAN, 2014, p. 65). Inequalities in educational attainment based on home-types, gender or ethnicity have been dwarfed by socio-economic disparities (World Bank, 2013a, p. 60). On the basis of this date, Joseph (2014) asserts that educational solutions moving forward should not be on the basis of Malay Muslim privilege, but instead focused on socio-economic disadvantage. It is a timely call, recognizing that class issues are present, technically, in all racial groups.

However, as with other pluralistic nations, the intersectionalities of class, ethnicity and identity are strongly interwoven together. In the case of Malaysia, an understanding of its educational equity issues must be seen through a paradigm of the country’s ethnic composition – a feature clearly expressed through its language in education policy (Brown, 2007; Foo & Richards, 2004; Heng & Tan, 2006; Santhiram & Tan, 2002). The composition of the majority Malays and minority Chinese and Indians as the dominant ethnic groups in the country has complicated attempts by the Malaysian state in pushing its equity and educational quality agenda:

While the Malays continue to fight to hold on to their position as the ‘sons of the soil’, and believe that their culture and language should be the core of national identity, the Chinese and Indian struggle for equality, justice and their rights towards culture and identity. Hence, the non-Malay promotes different discourses for enhancing equity in education, focused around the notions of equality and non-discrimination.(Jamil, 2010, p. 66)

This varying perceptions of equity in education is demonstrated by the state’s attempt to democratize education. Scholars (M. N. N. Lee, 2002) have argued that to achieve equitable learning outcomes within Malaysia, there must be a strong “democratization of education” (Eide, 1982) that goes beyond massification and access. Apart from increasing the horizontal expansion of education through the building of more schools, there must also be a vertical expansion that is strongly supported by “the restructuring of educational institutions to meet the diverse needs of students” (Lee (2002) as cited in Tan (2012, p. 54)). Yet, Tan (2012) argues that because of the state’s push towards democratization of education, a plethora of
challenges have emerged such as 1) weak student progression, 2) school dropouts across minority ethnic groups and 3) urban and rural disparity.

Most importantly, as such efforts have seen affirmative action policies in favour of the ethnic-majority but socio-economically disadvantaged Malays, the policy of education democratization has not been well received by the non-Malays. This sentiment problematizes the Malaysian government efforts in their ideals of an inclusive education by bringing forth the contestation felt by all stakeholders who, in their own aspirational desires, perceive educational equity in their own terms.

While it is simplistic to divide the contesting ideologies of educational equity across ethnic lines, Malaysia’s educational history has been about the need to accommodate ethnic aspirations (eg. vernacular schools) and the creation of a national identity vis a vis the effects of post-colonialism and now, globalization. Disagreements therefore abound over the medium of instruction and elements of the country’s colonial past has seen Malaysia’s language policy oscillate between Bahasa Malaysia and English – with some scholars asserting that such indecisiveness has affected the quality of overall learning and educational outcomes (Noori, Shamary, & Yuen, 2015; Yamat, Fisher, & Rich, 2014). For instance, one contributory explanation for the decline in Malaysia’s TIMSS performance was the 2003 change in language of instruction from Bahasa Malaysia to English for Science and Mathematics (World Bank, 2013a, p. 80).

Viet Nam

Viet Nam’s Education Law of 2005 provides for every citizen, regardless of ethnic origin, religion, beliefs, gender, family background, social status or economic conditions, and an equal right of access to learning opportunities (ASEAN, 2014; The National Assembly, 2005). The law also caters for education as a right to all, where the poor should be assisted and for the gifted to train their talents (Sadiman, 2004).

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<td>Level</td>
<td>Pre-Primary</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Upper Secondary</td>
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Figure 13: Overview of the Vietnamese public school system (ASEAN, 2014)

Holsinger (2005, 2007) argues that in Viet Nam, the overall distribution of education is very much egalitarian despite its recent rapid expansion. During the period 1994-2000, there was a 200% increase in upper secondary enrolment, but this expansion was not limited to well to do provinces.
While the Viet Namese state focused its resources on providing free basic education up to lower secondary levels, enrolment expansion at the upper secondary levels was largely provided by the “private or household financing of government schools” (Holsinger, 2005, p. 305). The rapid expansion of educational provision was achieved without the sacrifice of the equal distribution of educational attainment – which Holsinger believes is because of the country’s socialist origins and social progressive policies with regard to the disadvantaged and minorities.

Despite impressions of an overall egalitarian distribution of educational attainment, Rew’s (2008) notes from his review of the Vietnamese educational literature that educational inequality does exists and is increasing within the country. He argues that the “exclusive reliance on national or aggregate indices” conceals the disparities, and it would be much more useful to look at the provincial, ethnic and gender educational data – all which exhibit existing states of educational inequality in the system. While educational inequality may be a systemic derivative, it is also, as proposed by Rew, a cultural contribution through risk-aversion (Behrman & Knowles, 1999; Scott, 1975). Risk-aversion is prevalent among the poor Vietnamese ethnic minorities, who make their livelihood as subsistence farmers. As such, where schooling does not offer real, short-term benefits, agricultural labour is much more preferred. This suggests then that to achieve educational equity and access amongst the minority groups, educational quality must be perceived as real and appreciable.

The government has, therefore, been actively trying to improve enrolment rates among ethnic minority groups by providing more scholarships, encouraging the learning of Viet Namese, providing tuition fee exemptions and constructing boarding schools to allow ease of access and reducing the perceived costs. A national survey conducted in 2006 found that the school attendance rate for girls amongst ethnic minority groups was 61.6%, compared with 82.6% for all other students. Gender equity in education, on the other hand, is at a good overall ratio of 0.9 for primary school, and 0.95 for secondary school (VinaCapital Foundation, 2014).

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### Table 1: Viet Nam’s Enrolment, Survival Rates and Education Attainment, adapted from ASEAN’s (2014) ASCC Scorecard for Education

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<tr>
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<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Net Enrolment Rate (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Education</td>
<td>98.5</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>84.96</td>
<td>85.09</td>
<td>87.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary Education – gross</td>
<td>51.73</td>
<td>52.59</td>
<td>54.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Survival Rates (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Education</td>
<td>91.32</td>
<td>92.16</td>
<td>92.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Secondary</td>
<td>77.99</td>
<td>79.12</td>
<td>81.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Secondary</td>
<td>76.23</td>
<td>79.82</td>
<td>82.47</td>
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A significant and pervading issue is, still, the differences in enrolment rates between rural and urban areas. In the urban centres, 75% of children attended a preschool, compared to 51% in the rural zones (UNICEF, 2010). There is also a higher chance of a shortage of qualified teachers in the rural areas (ASEAN, 2014, p. 100). Further, out of 25 million youths in Viet Nam aged 16 to 30 years, only 4.3% has a university degree, while a staggering amount of 10.7% has yet to complete primary school (Tuoi Tre News, 2016).

A report produced by VinaCapital (2014) asserts that 1) the low participation in early childhood education is an emerging challenge for the country. There is a lack of kindergartens and public preschools due to a lack of infrastructural and an insufficient supply of early childhood teachers (Hong (2014) as cited in VinaCapital (2014)). Further, private preschools come at a cost which is a barrier for low-income families. 2) Educational quality and costs also needs to be addressed. Instructional time for each primary school class stands at 700 hours a year, and the presence of “informal fees” (i.e school safety and maintenance fees, uniform and stationery costs) adds on to the burden of the poor.

Viet Nam’s surprising results in OECD’s 2015 PISA rankings (No. 12 amongst all participating countries) suggests that educational quality, or at least a part thereof, is excellent within the country. Malaysia by comparison was at No. 52. Schleicher (2015) attributes Viet Nam’s success to a committed and balanced leadership between the centre and decentralised schools, a focused curriculum, and the state’s investment in teachers.
Yet, what potentially skews the conclusion is the prevalent presence of private tuition. In 2013, 85% of urban students and 59% of rural students were taking extra classes outside school (Young Lives, 2014). Private tuition is also much more prevalent amongst the rich, at 86% of students, compared to 38% of students from the poorest families (see Figure 16).

Reiterating the impact family income has towards educational equity (Nguyen & Griffin, 2010), it was also found that a family’s socioeconomic levels also had an impact on the amount of education undertaken. Attendance at pre-schools was twice as likely for children from high-income families (a figure at 80%) compared to those from low-income families (a figure at 36%) (UNICEF, 2010, p. 176). In similar trends, the rate of secondary school attendance was 92% amongst the high-income, and 60% from the low-income. As such, the Viet Namese student achievement cannot be immediately attributed to the system’s quality of education. The World Bank concurs that although the country has succeeded in promoting educational access, significant challenges of primary educational quality remain (World Bank, 2015, p. 3).
Concluding Remarks

Indeed, the need for educational equity, access and quality in the midst of inequality and exclusion is a very real endeavour. As exhibited through the countries of Indonesia, Malaysia and Viet Nam, each has their own share of priority issues which contribute to the existing educational state – a result of history, culture, identity, class and power. What is clear, however, is that despite apparent commonalities across countries, each system must adopt its own set of solutions that are specifically targeted for context.

In Indonesia, the literature suggests that before solutions can be embraced, issues around power, capital and religion as part of educational quality must be acknowledged. On the other hand, Malaysia’s issues in education equity is strongly tied to its history and the contestations between the majority Malays and minority ethnic groups. Similarly, Viet Nam also has experienced challenges with educational equity and attainment in its minority ethnic groups. However, this issue is further nuanced with the argument that cultural agency is what prevents effective policy implementation. Malaysia, is committed to inclusive education, though what that actually means to stakeholders are variable. The presence of agency within the literature is, as such, a poignant reminder that policy appreciation is a relational concept. Insofar that it is frequently perceived as a solution to shift the data, policy has very real implications that will invite reactions and effect consequences amongst people. Yet, because policy is relational, it pays to discard assumptions and empirically understand the communities that it means to impact. There is a need, therefore, to interweave the historical, social, political, psychological and economic into the solutions undertaken.

The SDG 4 and Education 2030 goals are aspirational and a necessity from a rights-based and economic-centric point of view. But, when such aspirations are transferred to the domestic, any set of ideals are problematized within the local. What then is needed, is perhaps, a balance amongst the axioms of educational equity, access and quality in tandem with societal aspirations. A philosophical thought that might provoke the type of futures we wish to create.
Note
The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of The HEAD Foundation.

References


