

# A REVIEW OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME IN EXPEDITING MALAYSIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM REFORMS

Noriadah Abdul Karim,<sup>a</sup> Amirmudin Udin

<sup>a</sup>*Universiti Teknologi Malaysia*

\*Corresponding author: rohinjunior@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the School Improvement Programme and its role in enhancing the delivery of education system in Malaysia. More specifically, the paper evaluated the implementation efforts and the challenges faced regarding the School improvement programmes. Although school improvement efforts have long traditions in Malaysia and over the years many educational reform plans for school development have been designed and implemented. Yet, there are mixed reactions regarding the success of these reforms and school improvement programmes. Previously, many studies have examined the impact of these programmes on schools, student development and academic achievement and so on. However, these studies have provided little information about the efforts and challenges on the implementation of the School Improvement Programmes in Malaysia. Hence, the main aims of this paper were: to investigate into the efforts and challenges and to provide some suggestions as to how these challenges could be overcome. To achieve these objectives, the paper carried out a surgical dissection of the current literature on the school improvement plan, its efforts and the challenges in Malaysia. The critical investigation into the existing literature on different aspects of the School Improvement Programme, implementation efforts and the challenges showed that school improvement plan in Malaysia ..... On the basis of this study, the paper suggests that.....

**Keywords:** School Improvement Program, Malaysian education, system reforms

## **INTRODUCTION**

Education plays an essential role in the preservation, development and continuation of human civilization. It is the foundation of moral regeneration and revival of the people which later can create a dynamic platform to rejuvenate and breathe new life that lays the foundation of a more self-aware and conscientious society (Hallinger, 2003). The economic and social development of the society is possible and sustainable if the education system becomes the major driving force for developmental acceleration. Improving the quality of human development, agents of educational change must be identified and schools are rightly decided upon as hubs where knowledge is disseminated to the masses (Mok, 2006). Consequently, modernization of school system to bring in these positive changes is considered integral to ensure the transition in rural areas happen seamlessly and this has been proven to be the case whenever constructive changes are made, in line with the aspirations of a nation (Ahmad, Manaf, & Marzuki, 1999).

Malaysia made a bold stride forward in education ambitions by putting in place a 12 years programme (year 2012 to 2015), with the launch of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) on 2012. The MEB is designed to place the Malaysian education system on equal footing with the best in the world by 2025. The MEB aspires to address the concerns over the deficiencies in the present education system to prepare the students to compete in the current highly competitive, fast and knowledge based job market. Furthermore, the initiatives of the Education National Key Result Area (NKRA), which is a subset of the MEB, aims to enhance students learning experience and equality by striving towards a comprehensive transformation on the current institution to involve schools, teachers and principals (Bajunid, 2000; Lee, 2000).

The major goals of School Improvement Programme in Malaysia involve the modernization of school systems using a top-down approach, changing the whole schools by garnering active participation of all ages and levels as well as improving instructional processes which encompass a comprehensive array of organized factors such as program, teaching methods, school management, leadership, professional development of teachers, research and findings, parent involvement, monitoring and evaluation (Liew, 2009; Lie, Pang, Mansur & Malaysia, 2009). Education expedites nation building for it is the driving force to revolutionize industries and provide a dynamic platform to rejuvenate and breathe new life into the changes needed to create a more self-aware and conscientious society. Economic & social development of a country is possible and sustainable in the long run if the education system becomes the main driving force for developmental acceleration. For the improvement of the quality of human development, it is necessary that agents of educational change must be identified (Zailani, Wahid, Premkumar & Sathasivam, 2007).

Schools are considered as hubs where knowledge is disseminated to the masses. As such, schools must be held accountable for the different outcomes they churn out on a yearly basis, be it the changes of improving students' achievements or the imminent impact education has on the continual development of society, in line with the aspirations of a nation. The national government of Malaysia realizes that participation in primary and secondary education is vital for economic development. The role of schools

as critical players in ensuring the quality of life needed to realized and recognition of wide variations in the degree of critical cross national issues in Malaysia must be explored and addressed in order to enable the education system to produce the desired human capital to develop the country by the year 2020 (Siddiquee, 2006). School reforms offer schools more effective strategies to ensure success for all students. The education NKRA was established to be a catalyst for the country's future by developing the minds, talents and capabilities of the next generation in a more universal manner. In 2011, Education NKRA has moved ahead in introducing some more initiatives in improving students' outcomes such as continued support in terms of pre-school agencies and operators, Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS), Identifying more High Performance Schools (HPS), Enhancing the all school systems through School Improvement Programme (SIP) and so on (Pong,1996).

To achieve these goals the school improvement plan provides procured and methods. For example, basically the School Improvement Programme (SIP) is a comprehensive effort to transform every school, especially underperforming schools into excellent educational institutions by challenging and lending them support. While the SIP supports all 10, 000 schools in the Malaysian schooling system, this programme focuses on low performing school nationwide, especially in rural areas can be supported financially and academically to produce the desired results. For this purpose, a centralized data collection system and self-help tool called School Improvement Toolkit (SIT) has been launched to boost up the school performance (Lee, 1992; Jahanfar, Lye & Rampal, 2009).

School Improvement Program (SIP) addresses all of the above for it involves the modernization of school systems using a top-down approach, changing whole schools by garnering active participation of all ages and levels as well as improving instructional processes which encompass a comprehensive array of organized factors such as programmes, teaching methods, school management, leadership, professional development of teachers, research and findings, parental involvement, monitoring and evaluation (Sua, 2012). Actually School Improvement Plan is a powerful tool to improve the quality of education and recognized all over the world, particularly in developing countries where rudimentary education systems have yet to evolve (Lee, 1999).

Over the last many decades, Malaysia had seen many changes in her school system. Schools are being more accountable than ever before and many changes taken place in many forms. Stakeholder, administrator, teachers, students and parents have the responsibility to prove that students' learning is taking place effectively (Lee, 2000). Reformation in school system consists of creating greater coherence of instructional guidance policies that will create large number of effective school. As a result, schools are developed to be better places for learning. This relies on changes at both school level and within classrooms, which in turn depends on schools being committed to fulfilling the expectations of children and their parents (Ahmad, Manaf, & Marzuki, 1999; Brown, 2007).

In other words, school improvement refers to a systematic approach that improves the quality of schools. The school improvement program is a plan-initiated education program based on long experiences of supporting basic education in the developing world. Its aims are to ensure support to every aspect of a school essential in creating the best learning environment for children, to promote the active participation of children and communities in school governance, to hold the individual school

management accountable for children's enrolment, attendance, learning and successful completion (Cheng, 2002).

The main idea behind community schools was that the school must hold a central place in the community in order to provide the desired educational service to the community and the education of children needs to be linked to that of the grownups. In this perspective, the content of school programmes should be based on the real needs of the community (Coles, & Southworth, 2004). Besides, School improvement is the continuous process of establishing vision and purpose for each district and subsequently improving areas of need in student achievement. Lee (1992) stated that the systematic school improvement process serves as a means to improve student results. A school with a focused vision shows enthusiasm for the school improvement process. A focused school, through their vision examines research-based factors related to student performance, determined beliefs, develops a shared vision to focus improvement, and determines expectations for student learning. This focused vision is shared commonly with all stakeholders of the school district and state (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001; Lee, 2000).

The infrastructure for the school based reforms consists of the challenging academic contents, standards, student and faculty performance standards, assessment system and a reward and punishment based approaches to control system implementation for achieving the desired results. These processes ranges from the fundamentally grassroots, site-based model of reform to the more closed down low-performing schools for their reopening with new school leaders, teachers, and staff. The main goals of the school improvement are: (a) to improve the students' academic outcomes and (b) to encourage a high-quality, robust, standard-based classroom instruction procedures with the aim to develop the higher-order performance and cognitive skills of the learners (Hallinger, 2005; Cheng, 2003).

In the school improvement programme one of the important elements is principal of a school (Simkins, Sisum, & Memon, 2003). Principals provide an academic leadership and direction to the overall academic activities in school. Leadership is a social process involving complex relationship with multiple and evolving influences to influence followers to move in a desired direction (Hallinger, & Leithwood, 1994). In the school improvement programme, the school principals were recommended to regenerate school systems by resetting directions, redeveloping its people, redesigning their organizations and managing their instructional programmes for organizational transformation. Therefore, as instructional leaders in leading curricular instruction in school and change facilitators, school principals should be idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration (Hallinger, 2003).

One of the essential roles of school principal is providing guidance for bringing about the desired change or transformation in the school (Coles, & Southworth, 2004). The transformational entities should include facilitating instruction, accountability, establishing communication and rapport and managing change (Sharma, 2010). Besides, providing support and working as a coach, principal also works to build the capacities and competencies of teachers and provides them accessibility to teaching and learning content, encouraging innovative and creative environment, selecting active pedagogies and creating communities of learners (Lee, 1992). Although this is a challenging task, however, there are some examples of low performing schools. This happens when the schools have strong leaders, active

participation in the entire school activities such as, parental involvement, teachers' matters, administration, school boards, teacher unions and students' improvement. For this purpose, principal normally need support from all the stakeholders for the school improvement plan (Hallinger, & Leithwood, 1994). Principals are the key players in the school improvement process. They play a wide variety of roles to ensure that the improvement plan and its implementation are successful. One of their most important responsibilities is to ensure that improvement plans reflect the characteristics of their own school and its community (Hallinger, 2010; Cheng, 2003).

## **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS**

Malaysia has made much development in education in the last fifty years (Ahmad, Manaf & Marzuki, 1999). The literacy rate is more than 92 percent. Malaysia is enlisted among those developing countries who have achieved universal primary education and a fastest growth in the secondary school enrollment. Despite of this research shows that the Malaysian students still poorly perform as compared to Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore. The gap is rapidly widening (Mahyuddin, Pihie, Elias & Konting, 2004). The long lasting goals of Malaysian education system are improvement of student outcomes and having access to quality. The main reason behind this goal is to develop a competitive workforce to help Malaysia to get the developed country status 2020. There is a direct relationship between quality of education and quality of life (Ming, Murugaiah, Wah, Azman, Yean, & Sim, 2010).

Quality education is seen as a basis for ensuring the quality of life. Improvement of students' outcome is contingent upon the educational standards. As a part of the efforts of school improvement programme, the following main goals have been focused by the educational managers since the 2020 target was set. To transform the educational system, (Lee, 1999) suggests a broader system of plans and procedures has been formulated to:

- ensure that each child should be able to succeed in life,
- increase 87% of the pre-school enrollment of 4+ and 5+ children,
- ensure that all children have basic literacy and basic numeracy after three years of primary school,
- get school accountable for developing schools
- put in place performance based school systems,
- increase attraction of teaching profession and enhance quality of training and instruction at all levels,
- recruit talented teachers, and
- introduce regular performance management systems and continual professional development.

Writers have advised that to achieve the above set goals, many areas have identified as part of the efforts of school improvement plan and to strengthen the delivery of the high quality education, the following measures have been undertaken. First, a national committee on pre-education has been established to govern the set activities. The main aim of these efforts is to develop pre-school policies.

This includes curriculum, qualifications, requirements, training and evaluation of the teaching and learning process for determining future policy directions. Second, to other one is developing collaborations with the private sector to enhance opportunities and development in the field of education especially at the school level. To achieve this, the concept of holistic education has been identified by incorporating principles for improving the learning outcomes (Siddiquee, 2006; Lee, 1999; Zaaba, Ramadan, Anning, Gunggut, & Umemoto, 2011).

Studies have indicated that for effective teaching and learning there is a need to consider the backgrounds of students in the process of education. For this purpose, as part of the Malaysian school improvement programme, the medium of instruction has been given more thorough attention and the following languages such as Malay, Tamil and Mandarin have been suggested to be given importance as medium of instructions. Furthermore, to create cultural harmony through education, it has been decided that a positive understanding would be promoted among the different clans, ethnicities in Malaysia through education. In a recent development, the Malaysian education ministry has undertaken measures to standardize the school curriculums across disciplines. For this purpose, many initiatives have been undertaken. One such initiative is development of unified curriculum goals to harmonize the links between theory and practice in education (Mok, 2006; Zaaba, Ramadan, Anning, Gunggut, & Umemoto, 2011).

Teacher is an important element in the teaching and learning process. Realizing this, efforts are underway to improve the quality of teachers and teaching assistants at school level. Apart from academic activities, another dimension of the school improvement plan is to create links between public and private sector (Sharma, 2010). In this regard, new incentives have been declared to offer to private school education providers in urban and rural areas. For the implementation of this step, a school information system has been well in place to collate the administrative and academic activities, student and teachers, community and school and ongoing monitoring (Lee, 1992). In another study, Ponk (1996) advised that one of the ambitious targets of Malaysian education system is to raise a developed and quality education by 2020. This is associated with the other key areas such as teaching and learning, research and development, training and evaluation and continuous monitoring (Brown, 2007)

Another important feature of the school improvement programme is developing teaching and learning modules. These are different types of modules focusing literacy skills from 4 to 6 years of students. To implement the step, concept development and critical thinking skills development has been prioritized as essential life skill. The next step is building commitment of stakeholders (Brown, 2007; Bajunid, 2000). For this purpose, different community awareness programmes have been started to educate parents, communities on their roles and responsibilities. To ensure the easy implementation of this process, a robust assessment and monitoring programme have been placed in (Jahanfar, Lye, & Rampal, 2009; Lee, 2000). Schools, school leaders, teachers and other staff have been promised some financial incentives to increase their motivation for work. These incentives consist of 700, 00 per school and 1000 per person. At the same time, allowances for performing students have also been declared. School development is dependent on school leadership (Liew, 2009).

For the development of schools, the role of head teachers and principals has been declared to be highly important. They have been called as change agents. Principals play an active role in developing schools. They are involved in the process of planning, coordinating and evaluating the teaching and learning process in schools. They also ensure a supportive school environment for the overall development of the schools. The new performance approach for head teachers and principals has the following main key characteristics such as applicability, performance measurement and transparency in school performance and so on. These have been recognized as the foundational ideas to evaluate schools as functioning bodies (Lee, 1992; Brown, 2007).

### **CHALLENGES TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMMES**

Education is the main basis for developing quality human capital for achieving the nation's goals. For producing excellent human resources, a practical and active school system is sine qua non (Coles & Southworth, 2004). The role of the education system is to prepare active and competent professional teachers (The education system in Malaysia faces many challenges. One of such issues is that Malaysia is having deficiency in the area of skilled human resource. The main cause for this deficiency is lack of practical educational practices at the school level. As already stated that the Malaysian comparatively poor in the region than Singapore or South Korea. The schools have the role to improve the skills of the graduates. But studies have depicted a bleak picture of the country in the region as compared of its competitors (Lee, 1999). Another biggest challenge is students' declining performance. In this regard, research has held poor teaching quality as the responsible factor for poor student provenance. Writers have indicated that students' performance could be improved by enhancing teacher effectiveness and introducing quality training programmes. Teachers must know different pedagogical approaches to ensure quality teaching and learning (Lie, Pang, Mansur & Malaysia, 2009).

A report by international labour organization declared Malaysian educational efforts to be unrealistic to produce highly skilled talent base. The studies have suggested for a dire need to develop strategies to refine Malaysian skills in workforce (Liew, 2009). In this regard, the roles of schools have been termed crucial and fundamental. Aside for providing the best learning environment, it has been recommended that Malaysia must focus strengthen the education and training systems, infrastructure and quality of teachers and educators (Ahmad, Manaf, & Marzuki, 1999).

### **MEASURES FOR IMPROVEMENT**

For the purpose of school improvement different measures have been adopted by the government. For the purpose of school improvement many measures have been undertaken such as strong school leaders, active involvement of the community and parents, teacher quality and administrative support. Some studies have suggested that for school development it is essential to develop close links with parents, communities, school boards, teacher unions and student organizations (Lee, 1999; Hallinger, 2009). School improvement is a continued process. Research has suggested that for school improvement it is necessary to set high expectations for students, holding school accountable for the performances of students and teachers, provide a safe and conducive teaching and learning

environment, create leaders, recruit and retain quality school staff, training of teachers, improved instructional system and curriculum, supporting students with extra help and time as well as involving the communities are some of the important measures (Cheng, 2000).

The most important elements in the school improvement process is school leadership. An active school leader may work actively through sharing knowledge and experiences, involving the entire school community in the development of learners. School environment has deeper effect on the development of students. There is a need to develop and create a safe, motivating and supportive teaching and learning environment at schools as well as maintaining high quality learning atmosphere (Coles & Southworth, 2004; Lee, 2000). Success in any aspect of the school improvement reforms needs standards, quality teaching and learning materials, competent teachers, robust and quality curriculum and assessment procedures, implementation and a progressive leader. Administrators can manage change more effectively. For this purpose, there is a need to develop links between teachers, community, heads, students and the world of work. This association will lay the foundation of effective school improvement (Bajunid, 2000; Hallinger, 2003).

## **CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

On the basis of the extensive review, this paper concludes that school improvement should be considered a continual process. It is not a onetime activity. However, the major goals of the school improvement it necessary that there is close cooperation between school and parents, school and communities, faculty and parents, effective and active school principal, quality teachers, effective evaluation and monitoring tools. More specifically, for school improvement programme in Malaysia, this paper presents the following suggestions:

- Develop the belief that school improvement plan is a process of creating and developing the actual plan for developing schools. This will help in understanding the fact that improvement is rooted in learning.
- Up-to-date evaluating and assessment system. This will in knowing the effectiveness of the teaching and learning processes and brining improvement in practices.
- Data based decision-making. This will help in taking an informed decision-making on school academic and non-academic matters.
- Building meaningful partnership with the stakeholders. This will help in sharing responsibilities and developing a sense of ownership of the system of education.
- Prioritizing goals. This will help in clearly focusing the direction and implementation of change.
- Selecting the best practices. This will help in knowing and practicing the resources effectively to achieve the set goals.
- Implementation and evaluation of the plan. This helps in reflecting on the effectiveness of the plan and its various processes.
- Focusing student achievement. It must be kept in mind that the school improvement plan helps in determining the best ways and means to enhance students' development goals.



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