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POLICY IDEAS No.12

MALAYSIAN EDUCATION: WHAT DO THE POOR REALLY WANT?

A look at education needs and aspirations of the bottom 40 percent of households in Malaysia.

By Tamanna Patel

Abstract

This paper is an overview of the results of IDEAS' nationwide education survey of households in the bottom 40 percent. The average household income of the respondents was RM 919 per month. With over 1,200 households surveyed in six states across Malaysia, including Sabah and Sarawak, the results provide a glimpse into the barriers faced by low-income parents in Malaysia when they try to provide an education for their children. This paper elaborates on the five main findings which stood out from the data collected:

- 1 Information Gap:** There is an information gap between government education plans and the information received by the poor.
- 2 Accessibility to Education Aid:** Government education aid is not reaching the needy.
- 3 Dropouts:** Lack of interest in school continues to drive students to drop out at an early age.
- 4 Education Expenses:** Education related expenses continue to be a burden for parents from low-income households.
- 5 School Accessibility:** Accessibility to schools continues to limit choice for parents.

Intro

The Education For All initiative under UNESCO published a compilation of statistics in 2013 on the benefits of education, which opened with the following statement:

“Education lights every stage of the journey to a better life, especially for the poor and the most vulnerable. Education’s unique power... can only be fully realised, however, if it is equitable. That means making special efforts to ensure that all children and young people – regardless of their family income, where they live, their gender, their ethnicity, whether they are disabled – can benefit equally from its transformative power. To unlock the wider benefits of education, all children need the chance to complete not only primary school but also lower secondary school. And access to schooling is not enough on its own: education needs to be of good quality so that children actually learn.”¹

This sums up the myriad of education-related statistics that are covered in the pages thereafter, from links between education and decreasing infant mortality rates to education leading to children becoming adults with higher levels of tolerance. The relationships of particular interest for the IDEAS’ Giving Voice to the Poor project are the ones between education

and jobs, wages and social mobility. For example, in rural Indonesia, an additional year of schooling reduces the chances of an individual falling back into poverty by 25 percent.² Whereas in a country like Mexico, with a similar GDP per capita to Malaysia, education decreases the income gap between men and women. A primary education for a woman in Mexico means she will make approximately 68 percent of an average man’s wage, but with a secondary education this proportion increases to 75 percent. This indicates that the higher the level of education, the narrower the wage gap between men and women in developing countries.

Comparisons also show that the higher the percentage of the population with education, the lower the income inequality. Adults in Pakistan and Vietnam spend similar lengths of time in school, with an average of 4.5 years and 4.9 years in school respectively. Yet, the percentage of educated population in Vietnam was 92 percent while in Pakistan it was only 49 percent. Consequently, Pakistan suffers from a higher level of income inequality than Vietnam, with a Gini coefficient of 0.6 compared to Vietnam’s 0.25.³

In a developed country such as the United States, the economic return on education is clear as well. A Bureau of Labor Statistics comparison between educational attainment and median weekly earnings showed that a higher level of education corresponded with a higher median wage (as well as lower unemployment rate). For example, in 2012 if an American had less than a high school diploma their income would be USD 471 per week while a

1 *Education Transforms Lives*, Education For All Global Monitoring Report, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002231/223115E.pdf> (2013)

2 Ibid

3 Ibid

high school diploma would fetch USD 652 per week, or 38 percent more.⁴

The level of educational attainment in a country may have another implication as well. A study done by the World Bank found that “countries with a higher education attainment level are most likely to achieve better education equality than those with lower attainment levels.”⁵ This suggests that the more educated the population, the lower the levels of education inequality within the country. Hence the poorest in the country should be pushed to increase their number of years of schooling or at least mandatory completion of secondary school should be implemented while ensuring accessibility to quality education.

Malaysia is no exception, since quality education can improve the socio-economic status of the population, and more so of those who are poor as it will open up a world of opportunities and employment for them. A joint report by the United Nations Development Programme and Malaysia’s Economic Planning Unit found that “amongst poor households, over two-thirds have either no formal education or only up to primary level.”⁶ Additionally, the report showed that the likelihood of poverty decreased with increased education.

For example, the probability that

a household was poor if headed by an employed 30 year old single Malay living in urban Johor with higher education was 0.07 percent while this probability increases substantially to 1.3 percent for his rural counterpart with only a secondary education.⁷

Through the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025 (MEB), the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) is working towards improving access, unity, equity, quality and efficiency of education for all Malaysians. Their efforts are commendable and many of their ideas are not without merit. For example, distributions from the Poor Students’ Trust Fund are to be made conditional on parental involvement and student attendance.⁸ However, the perennial problem threatens to ensue as we have seen with many policies in the past - implementation, monitoring and evaluation falling short of what is promised.

It is without question that education improves the social mobility of individuals and this is key to breaking out of the cycle of poverty, yet many governments around the world still struggle to provide quality education especially for the poorest of their citizens. With this in mind, IDEAS embarked on an ambitious project, Giving Voice to the Poor to discover what the poorest Malaysians seek for their children’s education.

Methodology

To ensure robustness of the research, both focus group discussions (qualitative research) and a survey (quantitative research) were conducted to collect data from low income parents across Malaysia.

The study was designed in a ‘modular’ form, to allow it to be implemented once sufficient resources were made available for each stage.⁹

Stage 1 – Focus group discussions

Seven focus group discussions (FGD) were held in different states to tease out the appropriate dimensions to be used within a larger scale survey. Three FGDs were held in Klang Valley to capture the views of the urban poor from three different ethnicities. Three more FGDs were held in Kelantan, Perak and Negeri Sembilan to understand the views of the poor from different ethnicities in rural areas. The remaining FGD was held in Sabah to capture the views of the poor in East Malaysia.

The findings were summarised in our Policy Ideas entitled, “Giving Voice to the Poor.”¹⁰ The information collected at this stage was used to craft the quantitative questionnaire for Stage 2.

4 *Earnings and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment*, Bureau of Labor Statistics http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm, (December 19, 2013)

5 Vinod Thomas, Yan Wang, and Xibo Fan, *Measuring Education Inequality: Gini Coefficients of Education*, World Bank, <http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/pdf/10.1596/1813-9450-2525>, (December 15 2000).

6 *Malaysia Measuring and Monitoring Poverty and Inequality*, United Nations Development Programme, http://www.undp.org/my/uploads/Poverty_monograph_2nd_print.pdf, (December 2007).

7 Ibid

8 *Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025*, Ministry of Education Malaysia, Chapter 7 page 24 (September 2013).

9 Giving Voice to the Poor project was funded by ariseAsia, ECM Libra Foundation, Yayasan Sime Darby and Yayasan Tinggi.

10 Wan Saiful Wan Jan, *Giving Voice to the Poor*, IDEAS, <http://ideas.org.my/?p=6509>, (February 2013).

Stage 2 – Quantitative nationwide survey

A sample of 1,207 people were interviewed across Malaysia, to ensure the survey findings were statistically significant.¹¹

Low-income parents from across the four regions in Peninsula Malaysia (North, Central, South, East) and East Malaysia were interviewed. A face-to-face survey methodology was used to ensure completeness, which meant the survey was a comprehensive nationwide undertaking. This is probably the first time ever such an extensive education survey was conducted among the poor in Malaysia. This fieldwork took place from August to September, 2013.

The selection of locations was based on a combination of the incidence of poverty, and ability of the demographic of the state to represent the region.

The eligibility of the respondents was based on household income. The cut-off point for household income was calculated as 40 percent of median state household income level. Median figures were used instead of mean figures as mean can often be skewed due to high income earners.

TABLE 1: MAXIMUM HOUSEHOLD INCOME LEVEL FOR RESPONDENTS

Location	Household income of respondent to not exceed
Kedah	RM 800
Klang Valley ¹²	RM 2,300 (urban) or RM 2,000 (rural)
Terengganu	RM 850
Johor	RM 1,200
Sabah	RM 800
Sarawak	RM 950

Source: e-Kasih database figures and IDEAS calculations

The exact locations and neighbourhoods for sampling within the selected states were identified based on the statistics provided by e-Kasih database¹³. This was applied to all the states, except for Klang Valley where Projek Perumahan Rakyat¹⁴ were the main target areas for fieldwork.

Each respondent was also required to be at least 21 years old, with at least one child under their responsibility who was of school going age (between 7 to 17 years old) and they had to be involved in and/or make decisions with regards to the child's education. If they had more than one child they answered questions with regards to only one child.

12 Klang Valley here refers to Selangor and Kuala Lumpur.

13 E-Kasih the Malaysian National Poverty Data Bank

14 Public housing areas.

Stage 3 – Validation roundtables and final analysis

Following the results of the quantitative survey conducted in Stage 2, two roundtable discussions were held involving education and community development experts, NGOs and other key stakeholders from government to delve deeper into the identified issues and fine-tune our final recommendations.

The roundtables allowed us to speak directly about specific issues with experts, uncovering the emotional aspects and reasons that were not able to be fully explored in a large-scale survey. This helped to validate and strengthen the findings from the previous two stages.

Parents have minimal interaction with their child's schools, teachers, headmasters and Parent Teacher Association (PTA) representatives – most speak to them two times or less in a year.

11 Confidence level at 95% with margin of error +/- 10%

Results & Discussion

Results from our study indicate that, for the bottom 40 percent of Malaysians, there are five key areas related to education that need improvement.

1 There is an information gap between government education initiatives and the information received by the poor

A recent report published by the World Bank on Malaysian education observed that schools rarely benchmark performance against national or regional standards.¹⁵ This means that parents are told how their child is performing relative to students in the same school, but they are unaware of how the child might be performing in a national or regional context. With this limited information, no matter how involved parents are in their child's education, they will be unable to judge how schools truly perform with regards to instructional content, staffing, assessments, or increasing accountability.¹⁶ The same report noted that with the right combination of school-based management and increased parental involvement, or a change in teachers' actions, education outcomes can be improved.¹⁷

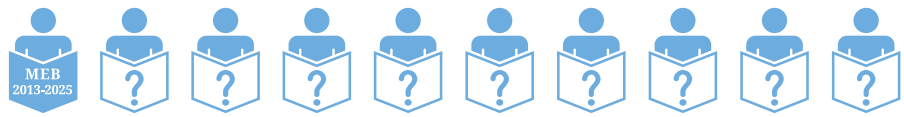
In our survey, an overwhelming 90 percent out of the total 1,207 parents interviewed have never

15 *Malaysia Economic Monitor December 2013, High-Performing Education*, World Bank, http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2013/12/13/000442464_20131213121538/Rendered/PDF/832910WP0P14640Box0382083B00PUBLIC0.pdf, (December 2013).

16 Ibid

17 Ibid

9/10 of parents surveyed are unaware of the the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025



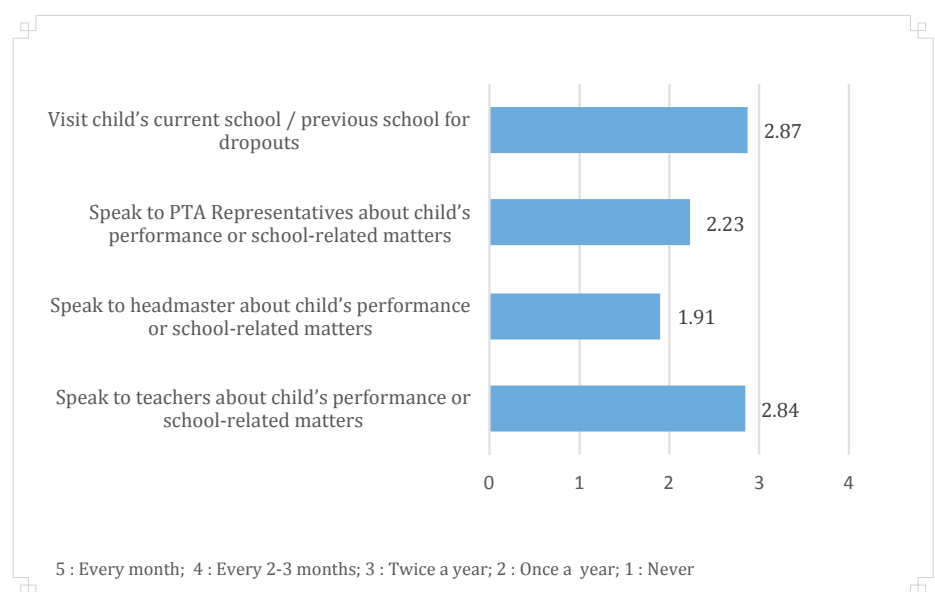
heard about the Malaysian Education Blueprint or MEB. This is indicative of the fact that this segment of the population was not included in the consultations that occurred prior to the final drafting of the Blueprint, and that parents in the bottom 40 percent remain largely uninformed about initiatives that impact their child directly.

The complexity of the information gap emerges when three things are considered: first, the frequency of parents' interactions with teachers and principals at their child's schools, second, their overall satisfaction levels with

school facilities, teachers and management, and curriculum, and third, their preference for their child's current school and private schools.

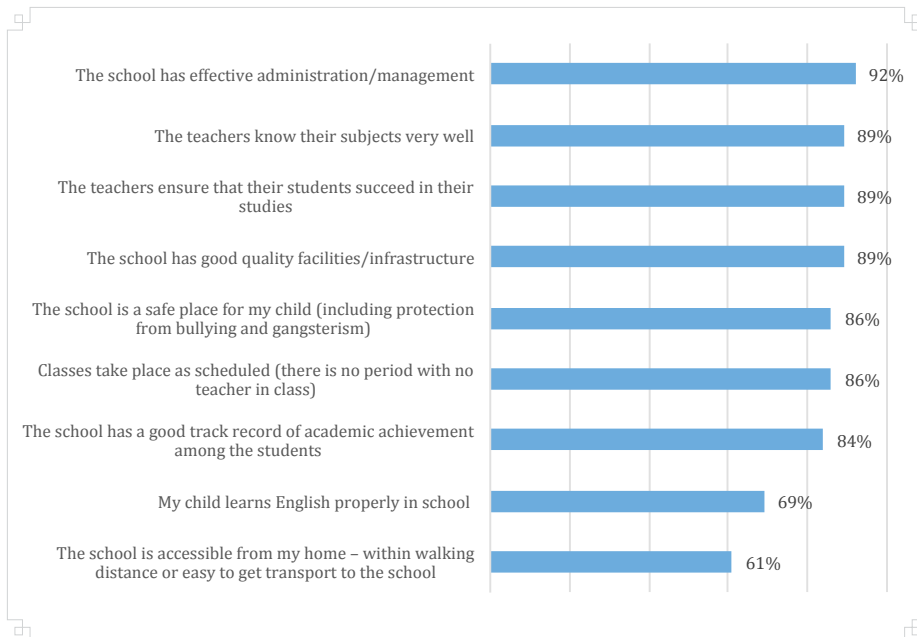
Parents have minimal interaction with their child's schools, teachers, headmasters and Parent Teacher Association (PTA) representatives – most speak to them two times or less in a year. Parents' visits to schools are equally as infrequent, as indicated by Chart 1 below. This greatly reduces their ability to gauge how well their child is being taught and the competence of school staff.

CHART 1: AVERAGE FREQUENCY OF PARENTS' INTERACTION WITH SCHOOL PERSONNEL AND VISITS TO SCHOOL



Source: IDEAS

CHART 2: PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT SCHOOL AND TEACHERS



Source: IDEAS

In fact, a government study conducted on teachers' lesson delivery indicated that 50 percent of lessons delivered were below par.¹⁸ These are issues parents in the bottom 40 percent are unaware of and their minimal interaction with schools leave them with a false sense of satisfaction as indicated by our results, shown in Chart 2 above. We found that 89 percent of parents agreed or strongly agreed that teachers ensured students succeeded in their studies. While a large majority of parents (84 percent) were of the impression that their child's school had a good academic track record. These parents are coming to such conclusions without much information about the school or much interaction with the school.

The information gap is also widened by parents' lack of desire to have more frequent communication with teachers or headmasters, as indicated by Chart 3 and 4 below. A majority of parents (67 percent) do not wish to have more interactions with teachers and headmasters because they trust teachers know better about educating their child (87 percent) and they get enough information about school from their child (43 percent). This means parents are placing unwavering trust in the knowledge and skills of teachers. Another indicator of this is that the majority of parents (69 percent) agree that their child learns English properly at school, an opinion that seems ill-informed given that the MOE admitted two-thirds of their English teachers were not proficient in the language.¹⁹

18 *Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025*, Ministry of Education Malaysia, Chapter 5 page 3 (September 2013).

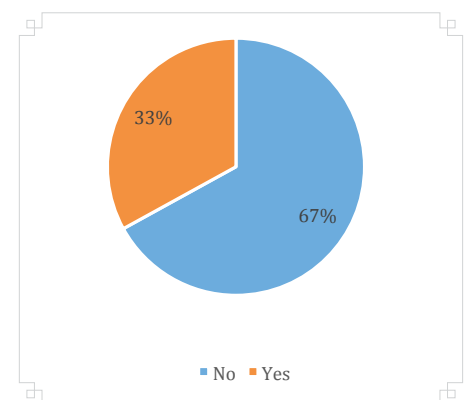
19 "70% of English teachers not fit to teach," The Star, <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2013/09/11/Idris-Many-teachers-not-fit-to-teach-70-of-English-instructors-found-to-be-incapable-says-Education.aspx/> (September

A majority of parents (67 percent) do not wish to have more interactions with teachers and headmasters because they trust teachers know better about educating their child.

In general, the data shows that parents are satisfied with the contents of the current curriculum, difficulty levels and emphasis on science. If parents were better informed of these issues, they may not be as satisfied with the schools

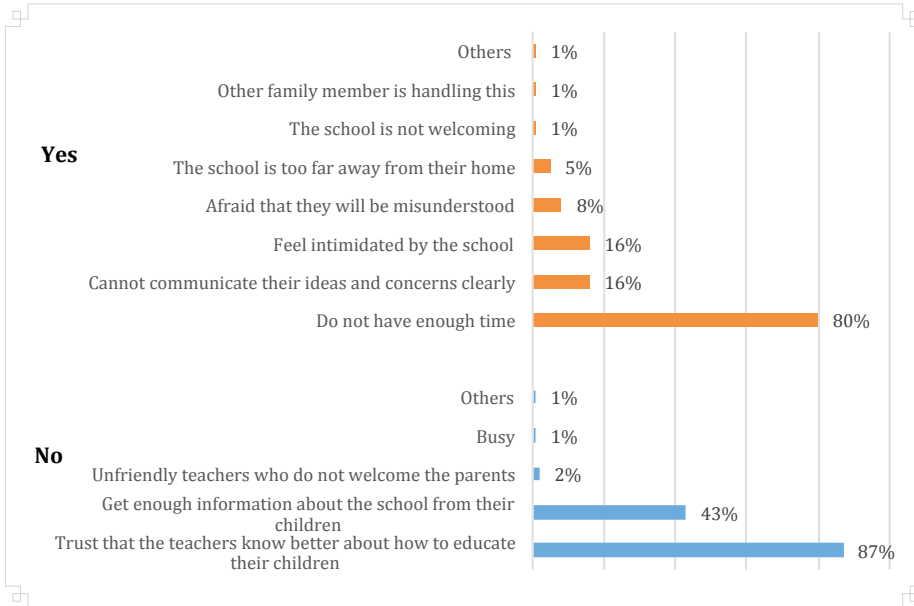
11 2013)

CHART 3: DO PARENTS WISH TO HAVE MORE FREQUENT INTERACTIONS WITH SCHOOL?



Source: IDEAS

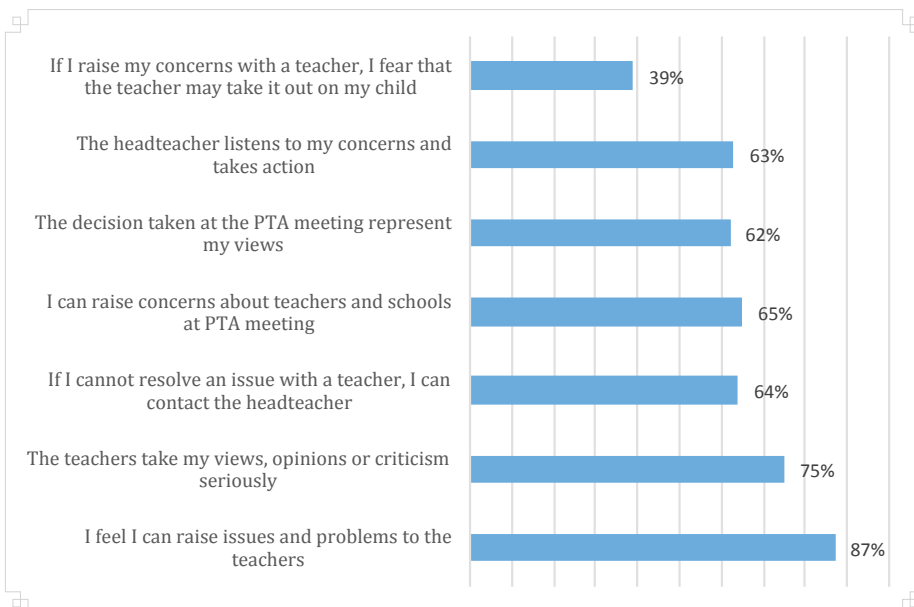
CHART 4: PARENTS' DESIRE TO HAVE MORE INTERACTION WITH SCHOOLS - WHY SOME SAY YES AND MOST SAY NO



Source: IDEAS

and teachers, just like the MOE itself. When it comes to raising issues and problems to teachers, the majority of parents (87 percent) feel they are able to do so, as shown in Chart 5 below. However, when it comes to taking these concerns seriously, and if there is a need to escalate problems up to the headmaster, the parents are somewhat less positive. A lesser number feel that teachers take their criticism and views seriously (75 percent) while even less feel that the headmaster will take their views into consideration and act upon them (63 percent). One of the more troublesome statistics is that there is a worry amongst parents that if they were to voice a problem to a teacher, this may translate to unfair treatment for their child (39 percent).

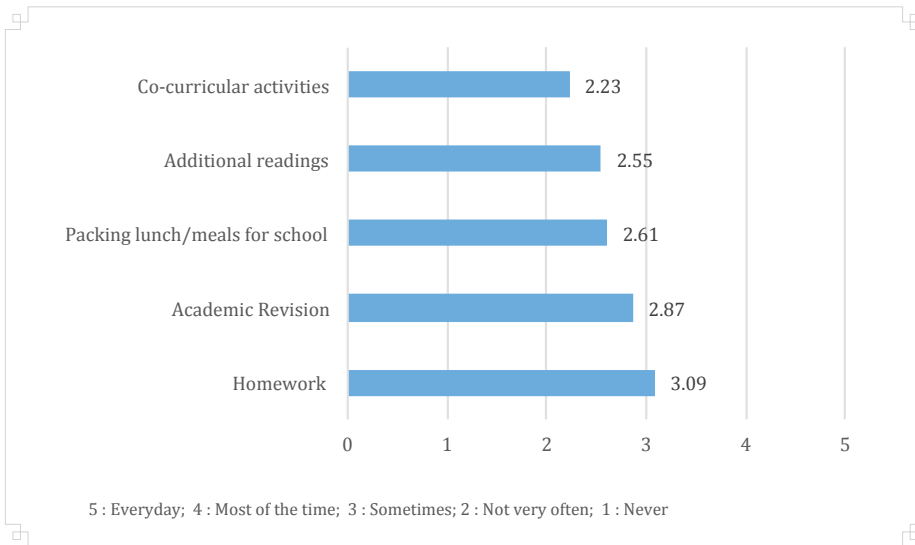
CHART 5: PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE ON ISSUES AND CONCERNS RAISED



Source: IDEAS

Those parents who do wish to interact more with the schools are hindered by multiple reasons (as indicated earlier by Chart 4); one being a lack of time (80 percent), and others being the fear that they cannot communicate their ideas and concerns clearly or are intimidated by the schools (both at 16 percent). In these cases, schools need to do a better job of reaching out to parents, be more approachable, keep them better informed, keep lines of communication open, and work with parents to alleviate their concerns.

CHART 6: AVERAGE FREQUENCY OF INVOLVEMENT IN CHILD'S SCHOOL RELATED ACTIVITIES



Source: IDEAS

Parents are also rarely involved with their child's homework and even less so with academic revision, additional readings, packing meals for schools or any co-curricular activities (Chart 6 above). This is probably due to the fact that they are busy trying to earn a living with 89 percent of them being unskilled blue collar workers, self-employed or agricultural workers. Additionally, 98 percent of parents are not educated beyond secondary level, limiting their ability to help their child in academic related matters.

Despite high levels of satisfaction with teachers, headmasters and facilities, a majority of the respondents were still eager to jump at the hypothetical chance to send their child to a different school. A majority would enrol their child in a private institution if the government were to pay for it (74 percent). Although these parents have little understanding of what is going on in the wider realm of education in Malaysia or even in their child's school community, they have an inclination that their child has

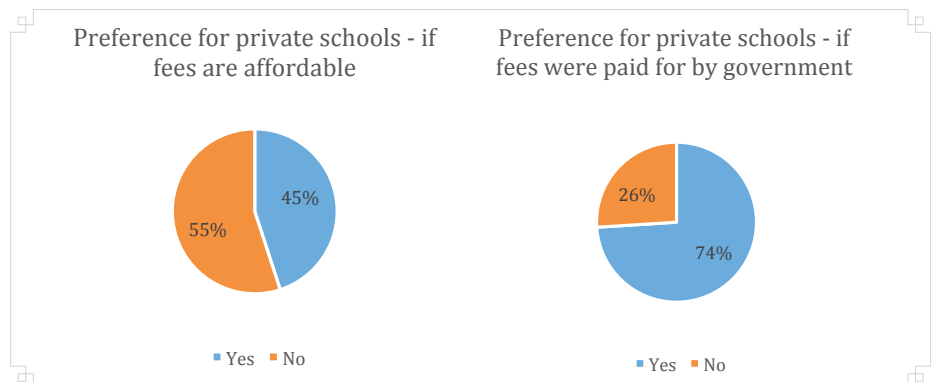
missed an opportunity for a better quality education.

School leaders and teachers, the community, private sector players and the government need to bridge this information gap. Parents need to be more informed about the developments at schools, be more involved in their child's school life, put pressure on the school to improve in areas that they think their child needs more attention in, and to exercise their rights as parents.

Many studies have shown that parental involvement in schools, besides increasing levels of accountability for schools, can also improve student achievement. A particularly interesting study showed that parental effort, defined as parental involvement, not only at home with children on school work, but also parental involvement at school, is associated with higher academic achievement. This impact was found to be significant, and an extra USD 1,000 per student spending would be required by the school to match the magnitude of improvement in achievement.²⁰ The government must factor in this issue when introducing reform initiatives that require parental involvement.

²⁰ Andrew J. Houtenville and Karen Smith Conway. *Parental Effort, School Resources, and Student Achievement*, Journal of Human Resources, XLIII(2): 437-453, (May 2008)

CHART 7: PARENTS' PREFERENCE FOR PRIVATE SCHOOLS



Source: IDEAS

2 Government education aid is not reaching the needy

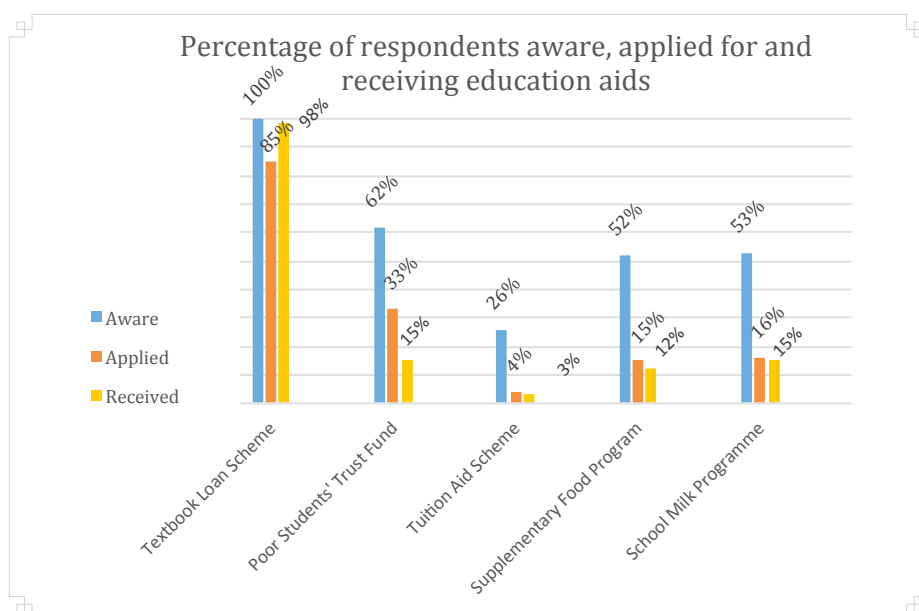
The Malaysian government invests millions in education aids. The Department of Social Welfare offers students from low income families funds for a variety of expenditures including uniforms and bus fares under the Schooling Assistance (Bantuan Sekolah) programme. The MOE also disburses various forms of aid for students. One of the most popular education aids is the Poor Students' Trust Fund (PSTF), which in 2005, benefitted 857,000 with a total disbursement of USD 29.5 million²¹ (approximately RM 96.3 million). A treasury report states that RM 200 million was set aside under the same scheme in 2010²², indicating that the amount of education aid being disbursed is on the rise.

Chart 8 above shows a worrying situation, one of poor awareness of the education aids that are available for this segment of the population. Furthermore, of those who are aware, a very small percentage apply and/or receive the aid. For example, a little less than two-thirds of those surveyed were aware of the PSTF, and only a third of those who knew about it applied for it and even less, 15 percent, received the funds. This indicates potential issues with the disbursement system, as well as with any aid awareness programmes put in place, as the aid is not trickling down to the families who need it.

21 Malaysia Education For all Mid-Decade Assessment Report 2000 – 2007, Ministry of Education Malaysia, http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Malaysia/Malaysia_EFA_MDA.pdf, (2008).

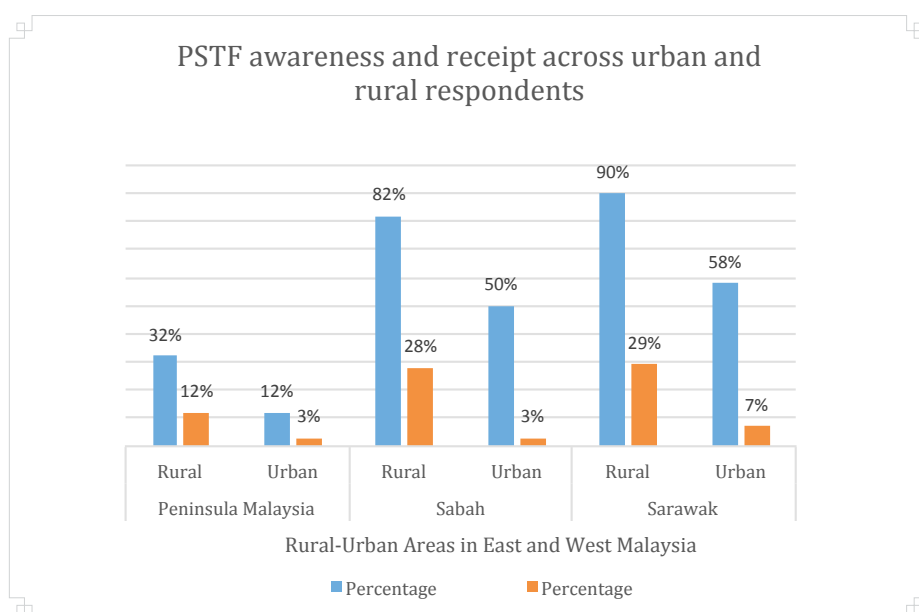
22 *Treasury Economic Report 2012/2013 - Public Sector Finance*, Chapter 4, Ministry of Finance Malaysia <http://www.treasury.gov.my/pdf/ekonomi/le/1213/chap4.pdf>, (2013)

CHART 8: GOVERNMENT EDUCATION AID AWARENESS, APPLICATIONS AND RECIPIENTS



Source: IDEAS

CHART 9: PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS AWARE OF AND BENEFITTING FROM PSTF SPLIT BY RURAL-URBAN AREAS



Source: IDEAS

The discrepancy in the level of awareness and those who actually received the aid may also be due to the income criteria required to be eligible for the aid. In Peninsula Malaysia, the criteria to be classified as a poor household is a maximum household income of RM 720. On average the households surveyed earned RM 919 per month, leaving many outside the boundaries of government aid such as PSTF. However, only 7 percent of those surveyed in Peninsula Malaysia who had an income of RM 720 and below received aid under PSTF. In Sabah and Sarawak the income level to be eligible is below RM 960 and RM 830 respectively, and of those eligible, only 23 percent and 18 percent respectively, received the aid.

A pattern in awareness and recipients emerges when looking at rural and urban households, and holds true for Peninsula Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak – that generally those in rural areas are more aware of PSTF and a higher percentage benefit from the aid. Government education aid efforts of PSTF could mistakenly be seen as focusing only on rural poor, especially in Sabah and Sarawak, if we are to take a look at awareness levels in Chart 9 above. However, in rural areas, those who receive PSTF funds account for at most a third of those who are actually aware of the programme. This statistic is even worse for urban areas, where for example in urban areas in Sarawak, 58 percent of parents are aware of PSTF but only 7 percent seem to be receiving any benefits from the fund.

Despite the government’s attempts to provide additional classes for poor students who are performing poorly academically, many parents still feel that their child is not benefitting from the Tuition Aid Schemes (TAS). In fact, only 15 percent of parents claimed to have a child who benefitted from the scheme. Perhaps, based on their academic performance, most of the children do not qualify for TAS classes. However, 60 percent of parents feel tuition and additional classes would prove advantageous in improving their child’s performance, yet are unable to afford them.

Interestingly, although such a low number benefit from the School Milk Programme and Supplementary Food Programme, on average each household still spends between RM400 to 450 per annum on food and pocket money related expenses. Additionally, none of the respondents reported receiving any education aid from non-governmental organisations.

3 Main reason for dropping out of school is a lack of interest

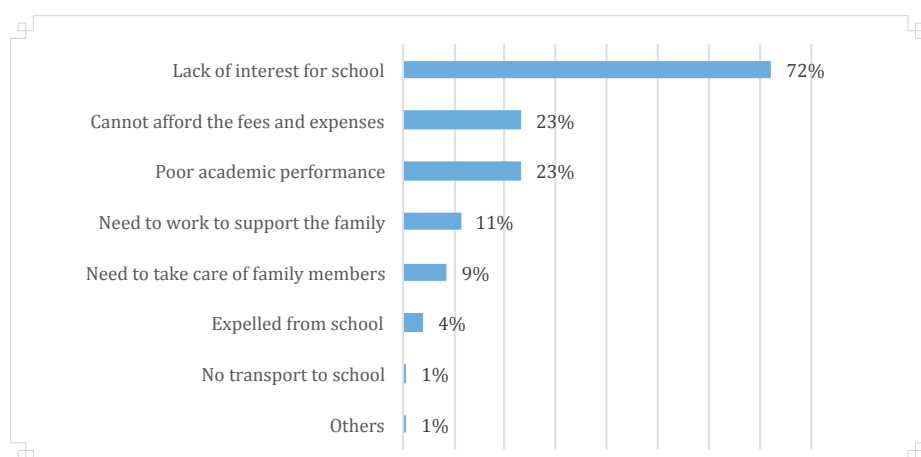
According to a Malaysia Millennium Development Goals 2010 report, over 90 percent of those who are of lower secondary school age and are not in school, three-quarters of those who are of upper secondary school age and are not in school, and two-thirds of those who are of primary school age and are not in school are all from the bottom 40 percent of the income distribution.²³ UNICEF also estimates there to be approximately 17,000 children who drop out annually in Malaysia.²⁴

Many of the education aids on offer have the potential to reduce the level of dropouts, as inability to afford school-related expenses was among the top three reasons parents gave for their child discontinuing school (Chart 10 below).

23 2010 Malaysia Millennium Development Goals Report, United Nations Country Team Malaysia, page 18, <http://www.unicef.org/malaysia/Malaysia-MDGs-Progress-Report-2010.pdf>, (April 2011).

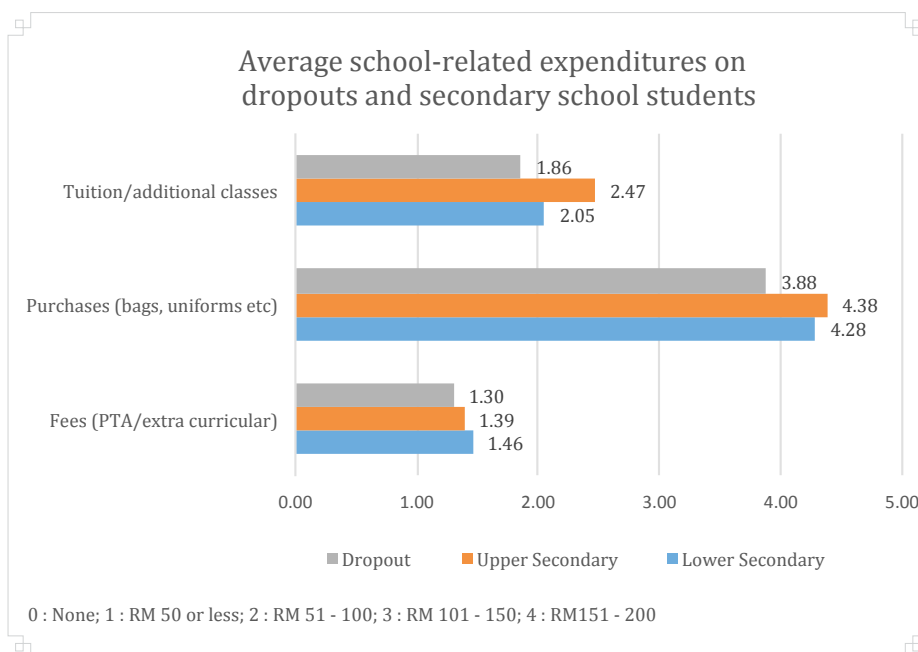
24 Hans Olsen, *Breaking the cycle: Understanding multidimensional child poverty*, UNICEF Website, http://www.unicef.org/malaysia/media_news11-oped-understanding-multidimensional-child-poverty.html, (October 17 2011).

CHART 10: REASONS GIVEN BY PARENTS FOR CHILDREN DROPPING OUT



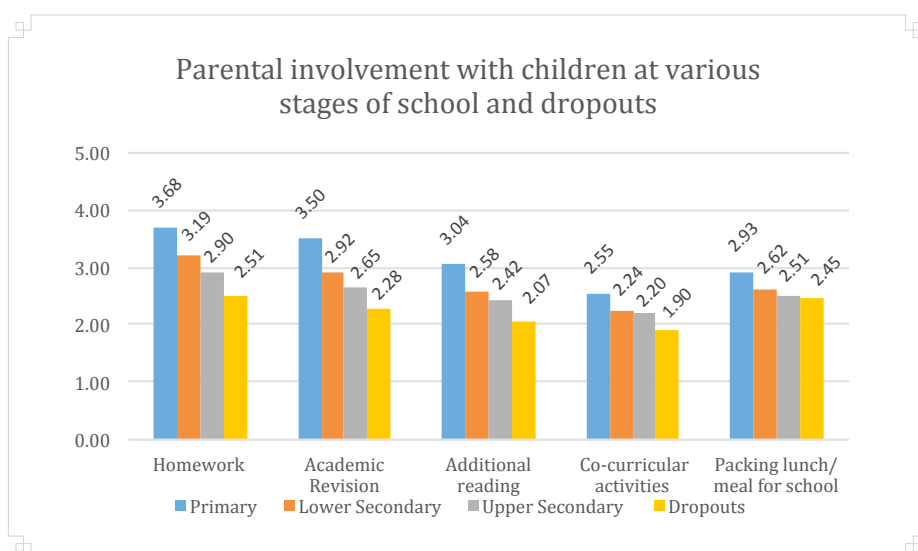
Source: IDEAS

CHART 11: PARENTS' SPENDING BEHAVIOUR FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS AND DROPOUTS



Source: IDEAS

CHART 12: AVERAGE FREQUENCY OF INTERACTION WITH CHILD AT VARIOUS STAGES OF SCHOOL VERSUS THOSE WHO EVENTUALLY DROPPED OUT



Source: IDEAS

In fact, only 63 percent of dropouts' parents were aware of PSTF and only 5 percent benefited from the fund. The breakdown of reasons for dropping out are displayed in chart 10.

Lack of interest for school seems to be the biggest contributor to dropping out. This is compounded by other factors not being in favour of dropouts such as lower levels of parental involvement with the child's homework and extra reading, lower levels of parental engagement with schools and teachers, as well as on average lower levels of expenditure on the child's education in comparison to their secondary peers, as Chart 11 indicates.

Another telling indicator is the level of parental involvement in educational aspects of a child's life. Chart 12 shows that education-related interaction falls as children get older but those who eventually drop out almost always receive the least attention.

A recent study on truancy, while not directly related to dropouts could provide some insight into why there is a significant level of lack of interest. The study revealed that the main reasons students played truant were they did not like teachers or found the way subjects were taught to be unengaging.²⁵ This indicates that teachers can improve efforts to make classes more engaging in order to overcome the level of interest in school.

Additionally, our study revealed that most students (89 percent) dropped out when in secondary school. This is supported by the fact that 94 percent of dropouts

25 "Teachers blamed for truancy," The Sun Daily, <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/834853>, (19 September 2013).

actually completed primary school before leaving school. Clearly, in Malaysia, students from lower-income backgrounds are more susceptible to dropping out during two periods: the transition from primary to secondary school, or during their early secondary school career. In fact, the 2010 Malaysia Millennium Development Goals Report referenced earlier points out that between 2005 to 2009, around 44,000 - 55,000 students dropped out from the mainstream public school system in the transition from primary to secondary school.²⁶

Bridging the information gap as mentioned earlier may also help address some of the issues faced by dropouts. For example, if a child dropped out of school due to a lack of interest, our survey showed that there is a higher chance that his or her parents received only a primary education or no formal education at all compared to those who did not drop out. Parents need to understand the importance of their child completing secondary school and the income-generating options that will open up for their child after having done so. A majority of parents agree that education is important (98 percent) in securing good jobs or futures for their children but many need to make more of an effort to prevent their child from dropping out. This could entail increasing involvement in school related matters and partnering with teachers to achieve this aim. Teachers also need to improve efforts to engage parents and understand challenges they face in keeping their children from dropping out.

26 2010 Malaysia Millennium Development Goals Report, United Nations Country Team Malaysia, page 18, <http://www.unicef.org/malaysia/Malaysia-MDGs-Progress-Report-2010.pdf>, (April 2011).

4 Education-related expenses continue to be a burden for parents from low-income households

A study titled "Poverty and Student Performance in Malaysia" found that school-going children who benefit from higher educational expenditure are more likely to achieve higher examination results, holding other factors that impact student achievement constant.²⁷

Since 2012, school fees have been abolished²⁸, in a move by the government to remove barriers to attending school. This move is not unusual, and has been a global trend of late, but it is almost a moot point if schools do not provide good quality education. For example, a study done in Delhi showed that students who were in government

schools had to spend more on private tuition fees compared to students in private schools.²⁹ This is true in many cases, where the percentage of household expenditure on education in countries where education is supposedly free is still quite substantial. For example, in the Philippines this figure is 33 percent and for Indonesia it is 24 percent.³⁰

For parents, especially those in the bottom 40 percent, other education-related expenditure such as school uniforms and PTA fees, shoes, exercise books, and tuition or additional classes can still prove to be a burden. The majority of parents (88 percent) spend below RM 150 and below monthly on their child's education which is about 16 percent of their monthly household income of RM 919. When asked how much they could afford annually per child, they indicate that they are already spending more than what they can afford as shown in Chart 13 below.

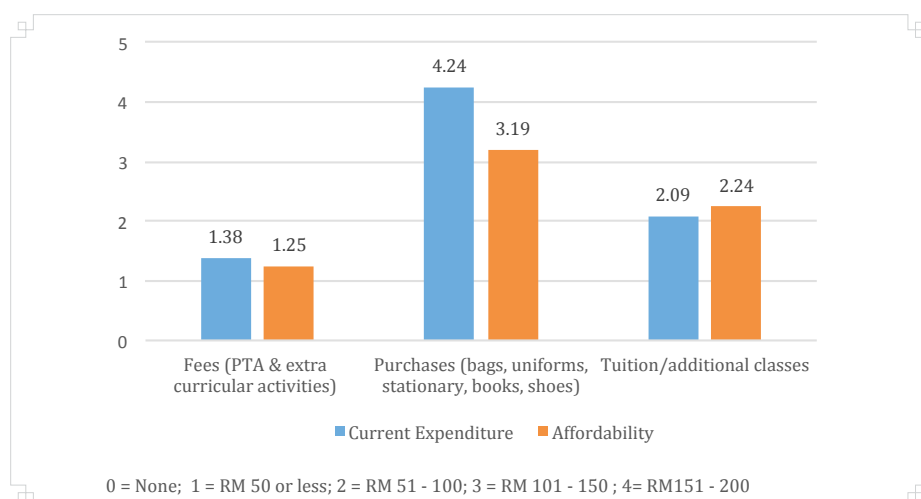
27 Osman Rani Hassan, Rajah Rasiah, *Poverty and Student Performance in Malaysia*, International Journal of Institutions and Economics, <http://ijie.um.edu.my/filebank/articles/3059/Fulltext3.pdf>, (April 2011).

28 "Budget 2012: Free Primary, Secondary Education In Government Schools From 2012," http://www.1malaysia.com.my/news_archive/budget-2012-free-primary-secondary-education-in-government-schools-from-2012/, Bernama (October 7 2011).

29 Parth J Shah Vipin P Veetil, *Entrepreneurial Approaches to Education for the Poor*, Centre for Civil Society, (2006).

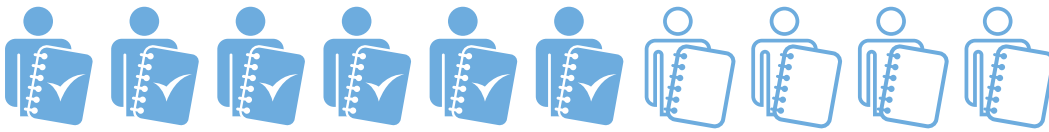
30 *Education for All The Quality Imperative*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001373/137333e.pdf>, (2005).

CHART 13: COMPARISON OF PARENTS' CURRENT ANNUAL EXPENDITURE AND WHAT PARENTS BELIEVE THEY CAN AFFORD

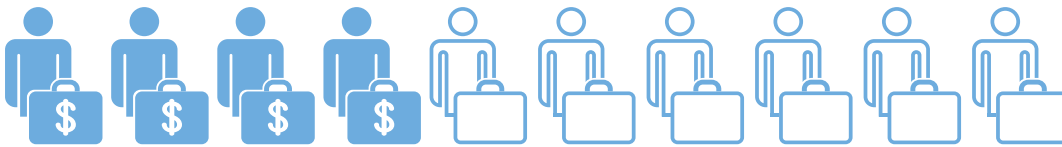


Source: IDEAS

6/10 of parents surveyed believe their child needs tuition or additional classes



4/10 of parents surveyed cannot afford to spend on this additional academic support



Many parents cite issues of affordability – or the lack thereof – as the reason for their children dropping out but for those whose child is still in school, many are also unable to provide the additional educational support they desire. For instance, 60 percent of the total population surveyed believe that their child’s performance could improve and that they require tuition or additional classes but 44 percent said that they could not afford to spend on additional classes, while 19 percent said they could spend only RM 50 or less per child per year. This and the above chart demonstrate the willingness to spend, but the inability to spend on anything but bare essentials for their child’s education.

For those who do spend on additional classes, the average spent ranges from around RM 51 to 100 per annum per child. The amount spent is very minimal and is most probably spent on in-school revision classes prior to exams. However, a larger sum, on average between RM 151 to RM 200, is being spent per annum per child on other school-related purchases such as uniforms, shoes, bags and stationary. If a family had a monthly household income of RM 919, three children, and spent RM 200 on school-related purchases on each child, this would constitute approximately 5 percent of their income, not taking into account fees, transport and, food and pocket money expenditures.

The aspiration of all these parents is to provide for the future of their children through a good education, but affordability is proving to be an obstacle to this dream. This is clearly demonstrated in their eagerness to choose a private school as an alternative to their child’s current school, in the hope that the private school will provide a better education, as noted in the earlier section on the information gap³¹. Existing achievement gaps due to socioeconomic status are seemingly being entrenched not because parents are unaware of their child’s needs but simply because they cannot afford to meet these needs.

³¹ In fact, our study shows that 75 percent of parents believe private school would have better teachers.

The aspiration of all these parents is to provide for the future of their children through a good education, but affordability is proving to be an obstacle to this dream.

5 The poor want school choice but accessibility is limited

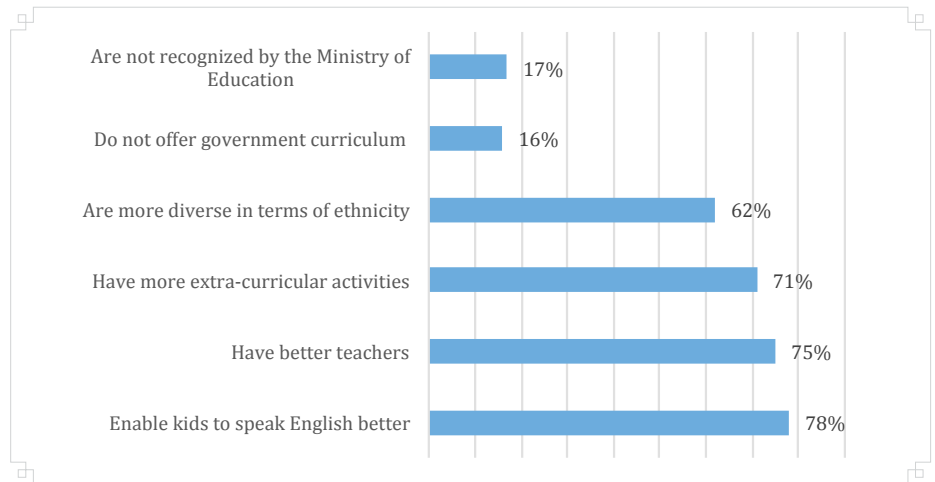
The MEB lists five systemic changes that it strives to achieve, and one of them is access. In the Blueprint, it is seen as an enrolment game. Having said that, 97 percent enrolment for primary level is a great achievement. However, those in the bottom 40 percent continue to struggle with physical accessibility.

In section one, under information gap, it was noted that a majority of parents, (74 percent) would want their child to attend private school if given the option and costs were covered by government. In fact as Chart 14 demonstrates, the opinions of parents with regards to private schools is quite positive. However, if public schools prove difficult to access for a surprising number of parents, private schools then become an even bigger accessibility challenge.

When asked if the school was easily accessible from their home, 19 percent of rural parents and 17 percent of urban parents disagreed. In Kedah 32 percent of parents did not think the school was easily accessible, while this was 23 percent of Klang Valley and 24 percent for Sabah.

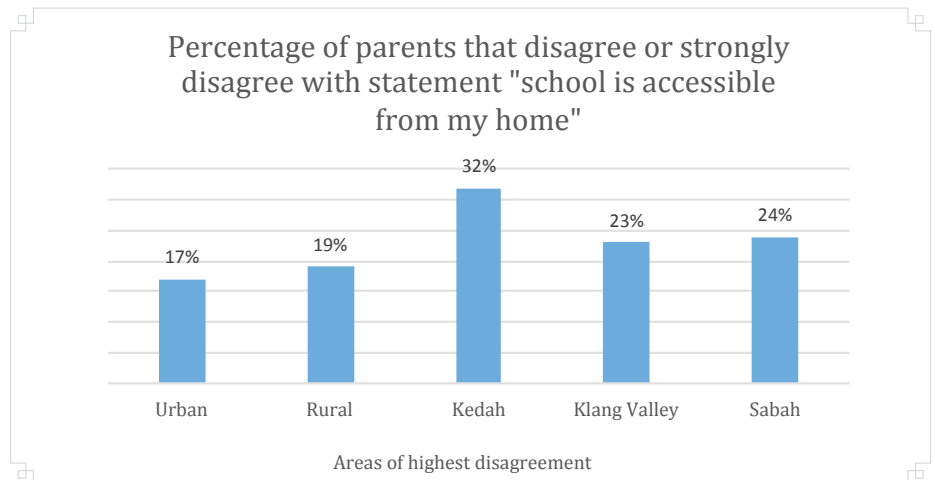
This was surprising, and a closer look at expenditure revealed that though not many of the parents were affected financially because schools were not easily accessible from their homes, parents in Sabah were negatively and disproportionately impacted. For example, 32 percent of the parents surveyed in Sabah were spending extra on transportation to send their kids to school. On average they spend between RM 301 to 350 annually per child.

CHART 14: PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE WITH LISTED STATEMENTS ABOUT PRIVATE SCHOOLS



Source: IDEAS

CHART 15: PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO DO NOT BELIEVE THAT CHILD IS ATTENDING A SCHOOL THAT IS EASILY ACCESSIBLE FROM THEIR HOME



Source: IDEAS

Parents in our survey use various modes of transportation, ranging from bus, to car rentals to ferries to get their child to school. Again, this is a significant amount when the average monthly household income of those surveyed in the state was RM 593, and if we are to assume each family has at least two to three children.

For these and other parents who face accessibility issues, the recent debate on increasing school bus fares³² may soon add to the burden of sending their children to school.

³² "SPAD: No to school bus fare increase for now," The Star Online, <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2014/01/01/SPAD-No-to-school-bus-fare-increase-for-now/> (January 1 2014).

Schools are assigned to students by the MOE, and parents are unable to weigh in on the decision of where to send their child to. While for many parents this is frustrating and some try to circumvent regulations, for parents in the bottom 40 percent, choice is secondary as physical proximity trumps all.

Although an overwhelming majority, 97 percent, said that the current school their child is attending (or was attending as would be the case for dropouts) was their preferred choice, the top two reasons cited for this being their school of preference was that it was easily accessible (64 percent) and that this was the school allocated to their child (44 percent). The first fact indicates that accessibility is still a great determinant of choice of school. The second underlines that school choice is non-existent for the poor.

Besides the fact that the school these parents sent their children to was allocated to them, the main reason cited as preferring the current school (or previous school in the case of dropouts) was that it was the *only* school with easy access. For the 3 percent who said the current school was not the preferred choice, the main reasons for not sending their child to other schools were: child wanted to stay at current school, or no preferred school within easy access from home. Regardless of the fact that they may have been interested in sending their child to a better school, they are unable to do so.

Moving Forward

The above are the five main problem areas that IDEAS has identified from our national survey of the bottom 40 percent. The information collected also points to areas where public delivery of services can be improved upon and made more efficient, to reach those who require the assistance. This information provides a basis for a further in-depth research and analysis into the data collected, and an opportunity for all non-state players, from corporations to small community businesses to NGOs to make strategic and effective investments to minimise barriers to obtaining a quality education for the poorest Malaysians.

The data also emphasises the need for parents to be more actively involved in their children's education while it sees the need for schools to be more open with information provided to parents and to improve engagement with parents. On a policy level, the data supports the need for more school choice for parents. The mechanics for the provision of this choice, whether it is through a voucher system, subsidised or low-cost private schools or more vocational and technical options, is another area that needs to be explored further.

We invite all parties interested in the data that we have gathered to contact us as we would be most happy to share our findings and raw data for others to analyse further.

About the author

Tamanna Patel is a Senior Researcher with IDEAS' Education Unit.

APPENDIX

A. The following are charts representing demographics of respondents from the Giving Voice to the Poor survey (Source: IDEAS)

These charts provide a background of the respondents and their general household situation.

CHART A.1: GENDER SPLIT OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

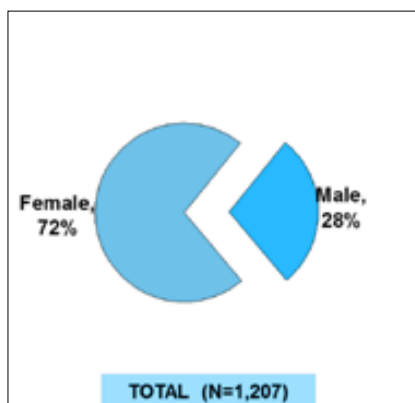


CHART A.2: AVERAGE NUMBER OF CHILDREN PER HOUSEHOLD FOR SURVEY RESPONDENTS

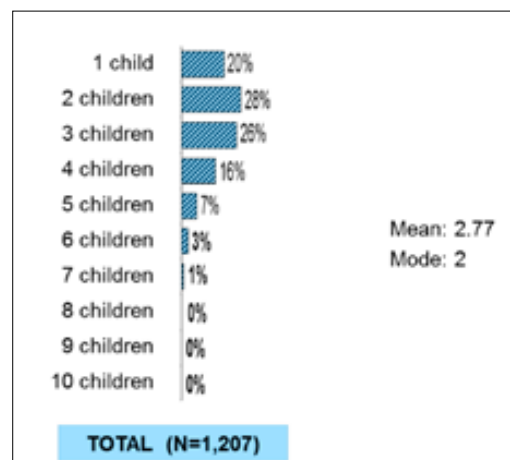


CHART A.3: HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION ATTAINED BY SURVEY RESPONDENTS

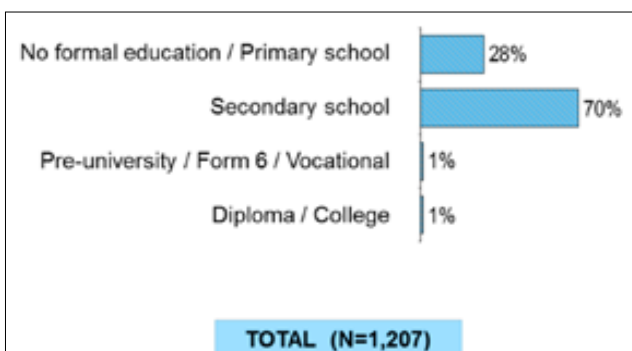


CHART A.4: OCCUPATION OF THE HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD (this is not necessarily the occupation of the respondent of survey)

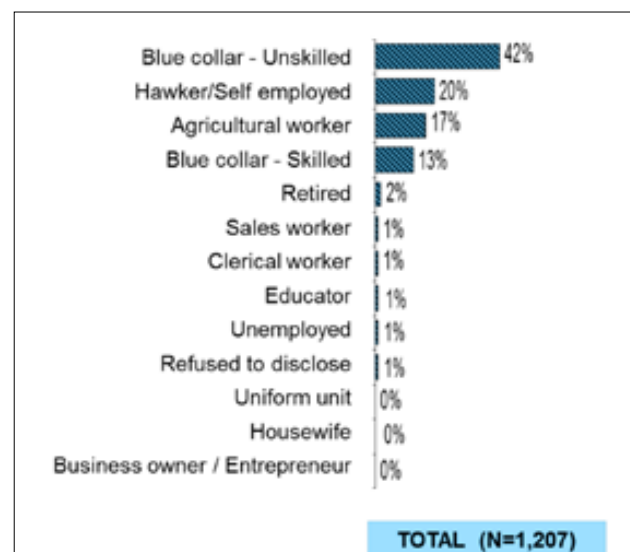


CHART A.5: URBAN-RURAL BREAKDOWN OF THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY STATES

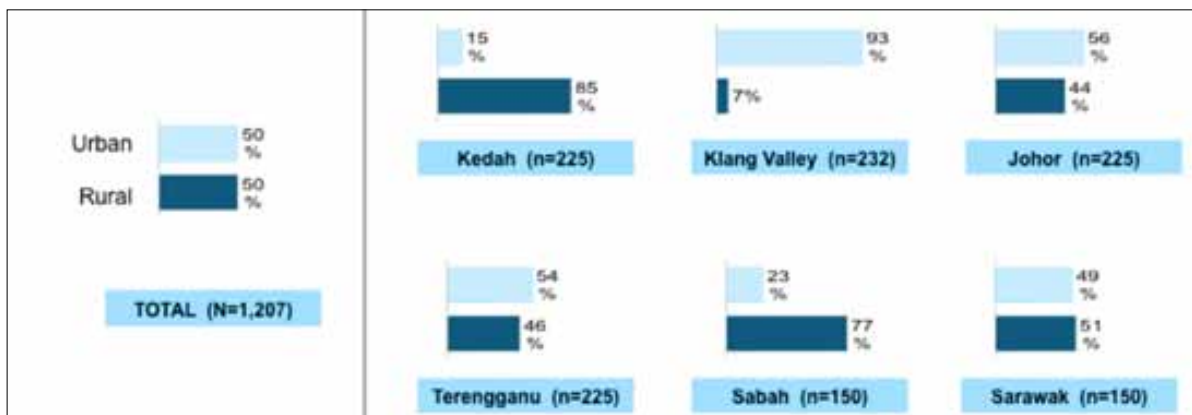
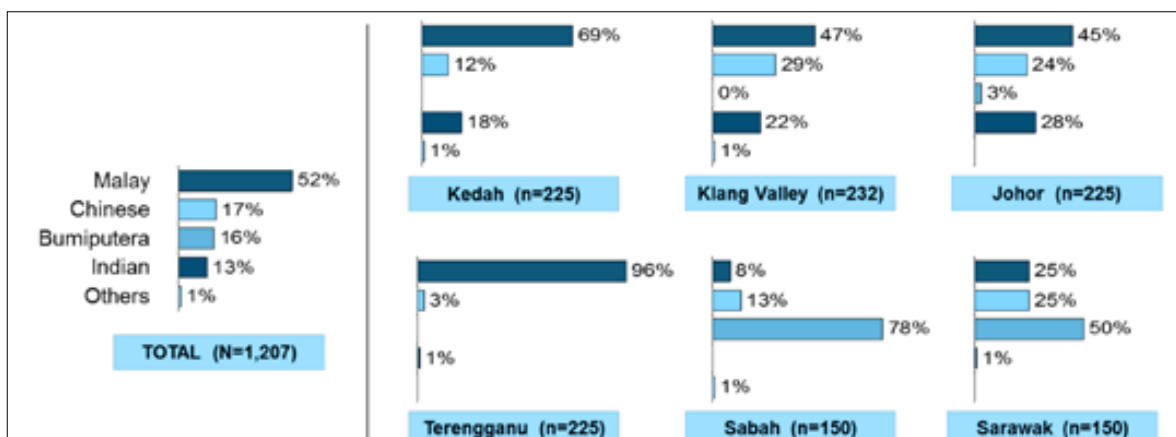


CHART A.6: ETHNIC BREAKDOWN OF THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY STATES



B. The following are charts representing findings from the Giving Voice to the Poor survey (Source: IDEAS)

CHART B.1: CURRENT SCHOOL OF RESPONDENT'S CHILD IF IN PRIMARY SCHOOL



CHART B.2: CURRENT SCHOOL OF RESPONDENT'S CHILD IF IN LOWER SECONDARY OR UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL

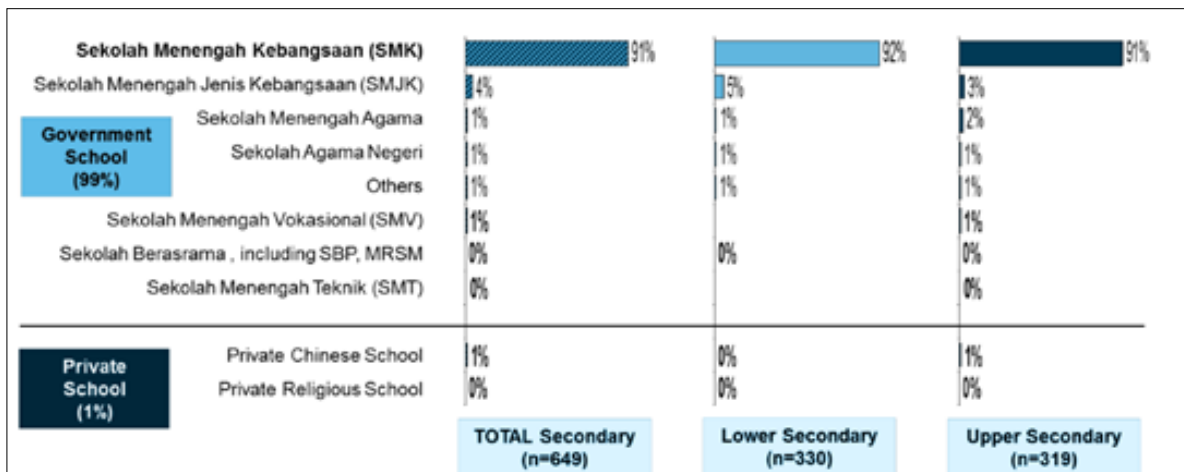


CHART B.3: PREVIOUS SCHOOL OF RESPONDENT'S CHILD IF HE/SHE DROPPED OUT

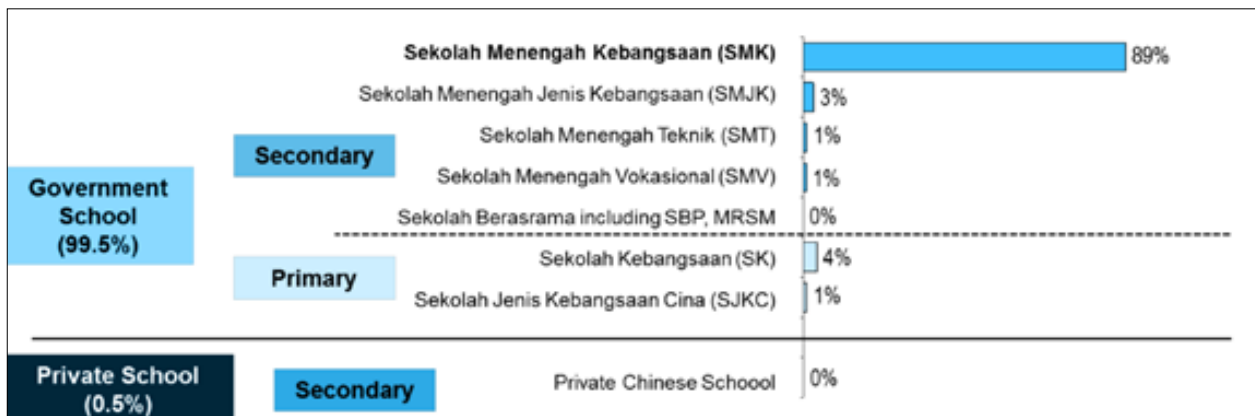


CHART B.4: RESPONDENTS' OPINION ON SKILLS THEIR CHILD SHOULD GAIN FROM THEIR SCHOOLING CAREER IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE



CHART B.5: BREAKDOWN OF THE MODES OF TRANSPORT USED BY SURVEY RESPONDENTS TO SEND THEIR CHILD TO SCHOOL

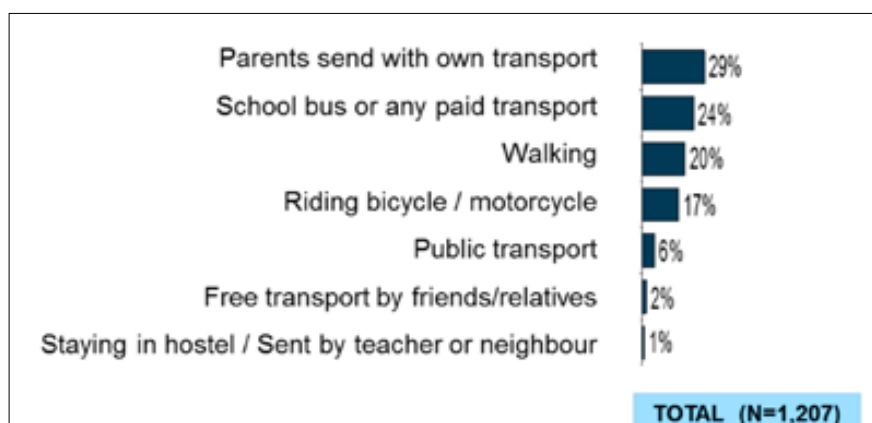
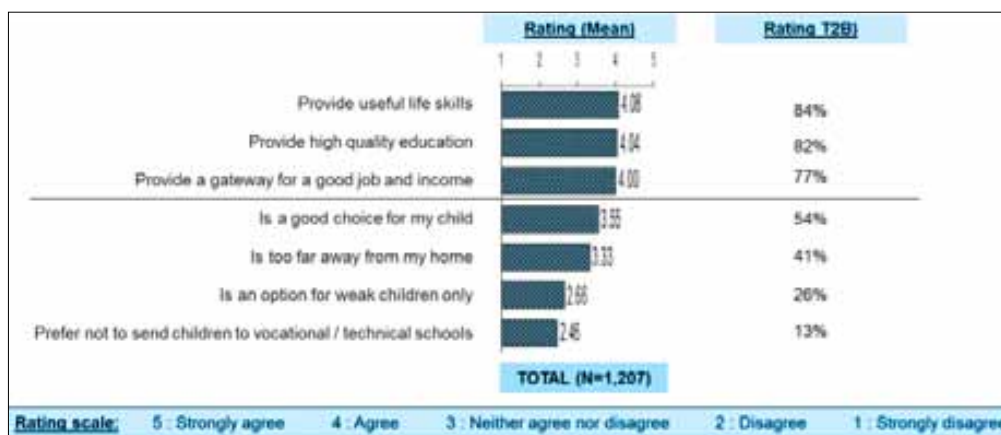


CHART B.6: SURVEY RESPONDENTS' OPINIONS OF VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL SCHOOLS



N.B.: T2B stands for top 2 boxes i.e. number 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree) on the rating scale

CHART B.7: PERCENTAGE OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS IN EACH INCOME BAND AND AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD INCOME OF THE ALL SURVEY RESPONDENTS (RM 919)

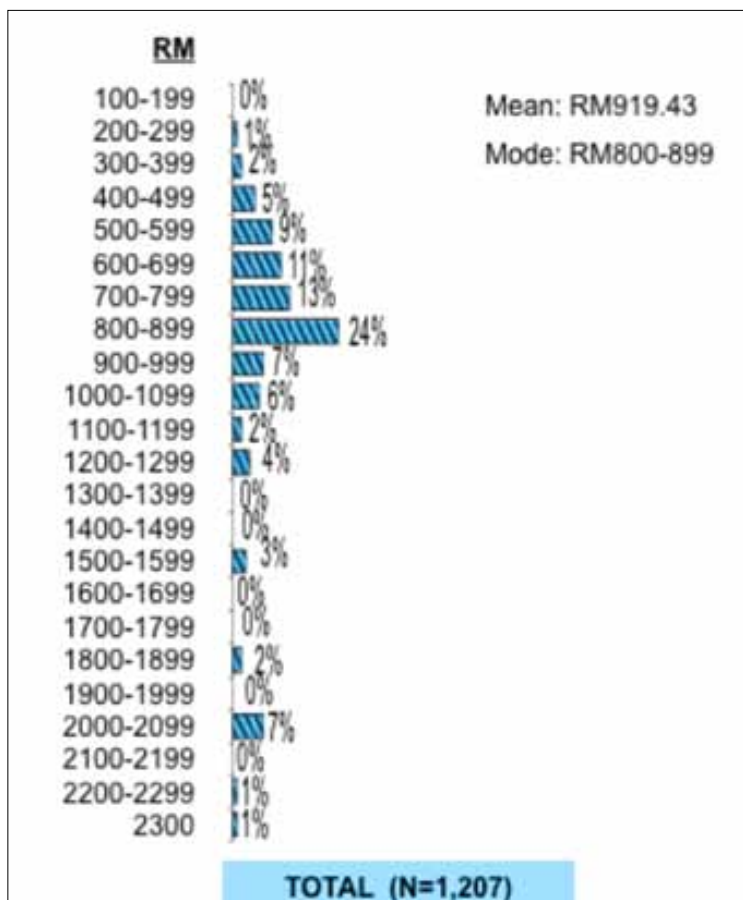
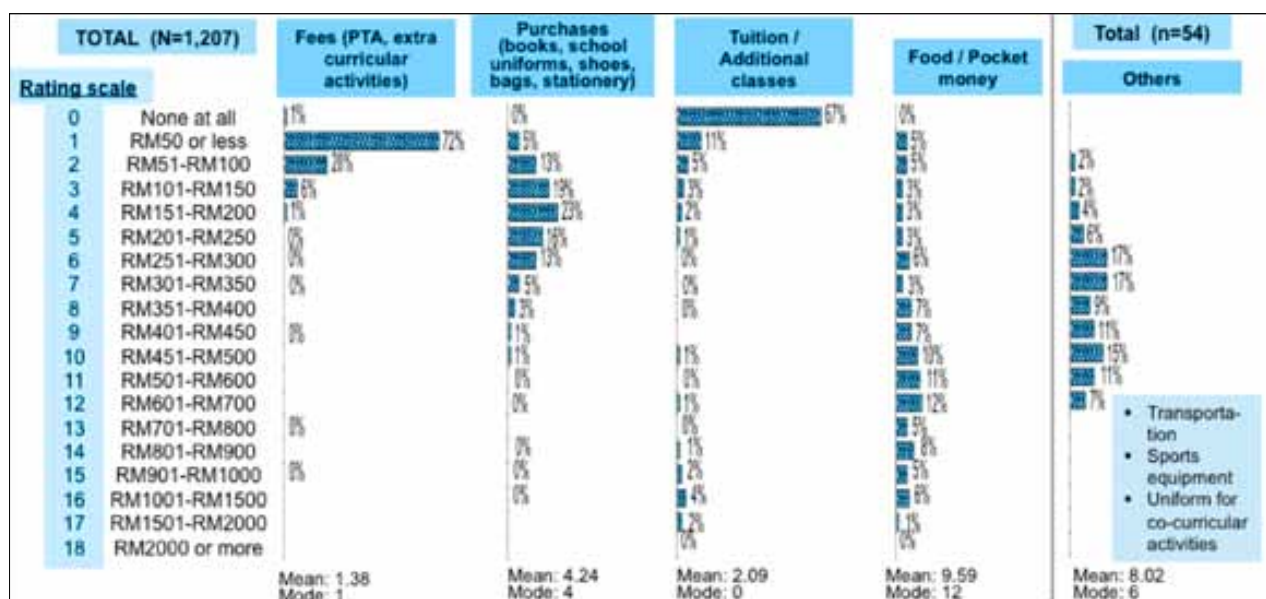


CHART B.8: AMOUNT SPENT ON EACH AREA OF SCHOOL-RELATED EXPENSES PER YEAR BY SURVEY RESPONDENTS



N.B.: Only 54 respondents say that they spend on "other" school related expenses and this covered transportation, sports equipment and uniform for extra-curricular activities.

CHART B.9: AMOUNT THAT SURVEY RESPONDENTS CAN AFFORD TO SPEND ON EACH AREA OF SCHOOL-RELATED EXPENSES PER YEAR

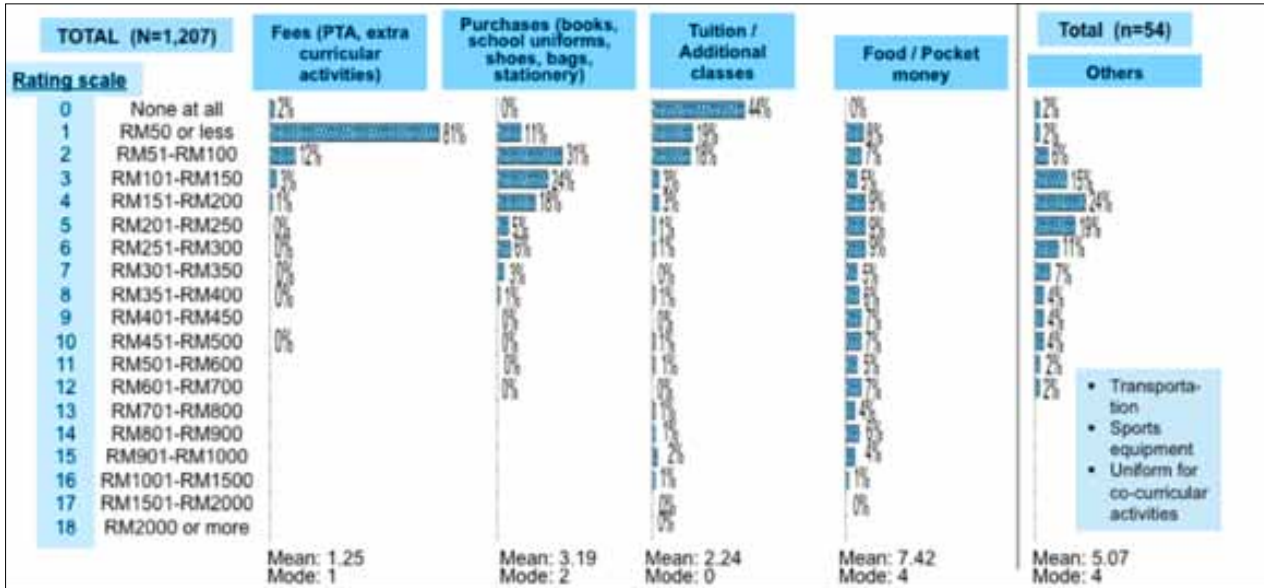


CHART B.10: SURVEY RESPONDENTS' AVERAGE MONTHLY SPENDING ON CHILD'S EDUCATION RELATED EXPENDITURE

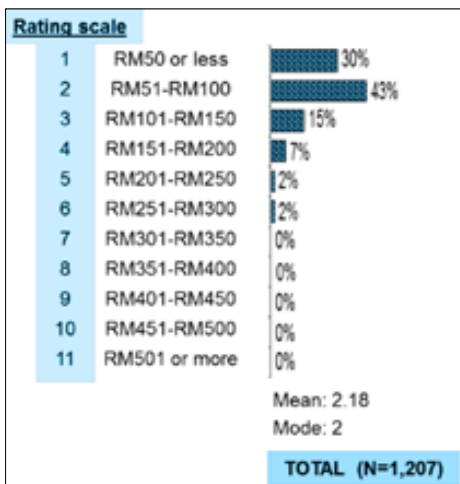
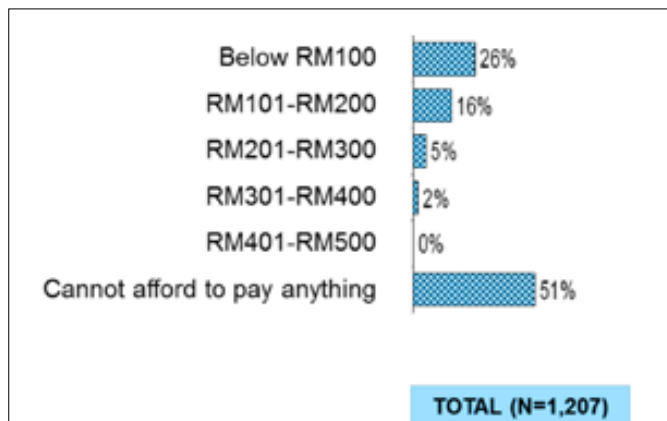


CHART B.11: AMOUNT THAT SURVEY RESPONDENTS ARE ABLE TO AFFORD PER MONTH IF THEY WERE TO PAY FOR THEIR CHILD'S EDUCATION IN A PRIVATE SCHOOL



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