

Educating Orang Asli Students: The Challenges Towards Achieving the Malaysian Sustainable Education Agenda

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ABSTRACT

Low participation of the Orang Asli students can be seen in the local education system and has persisted even after decades of study and enforcement of several government policies. This paper reviews prior research on Indigenous education, to determine how the Orang Asli students are impacted by the mainstream educational curriculum. In attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) vision of “Education for All” and ensuring that indigenous students succeed in school, this paper is of the view that a culturally compatible curriculum must be implemented in schools. Besides, teachers may need to tailor their teaching style to the Orang Asli students’ needs to allow a more enhanced learning outcome while retaining their cultural competence.

Keywords: *Culture, Education, Mainstream Curriculum, Orang Asli, Teachers*

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian Government has put in continuous efforts to improve the living standard of Orang Asli since its independence in 1957 and to ensure that the Orang Asli community can be assimilated into mainstream society (Khor & Mohd Shariff, 2008). With the recent number of Orang Asli people that accounted for 13.8% of the national population in 2015 (IWGIA, 2021), various economic and social development programmes were introduced by the Government. These include provisions such as land development for commercial crops, skills training, agriculture inputs, and other social development assistance that focused on housing, education, and health (JAKOA, 2011; Abdullah, 2011). The development programmes managed to improve the Orang Asli lifestyle. More specifically, the economic development project generated a substantial impact such that the level of the community’s income and socioeconomic status are improved (Abdullah, 2010). The statistic reported in the Government’s Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011-2015 revealed that almost 50% of the 29,990 Orang Asli households live below the poverty line, with 19% of the same households falling in the hard-core poor category. An improvement is recorded based on recent 2019 statistics that show 99.2% are now within the B40 income group (Jamal & Ganapathy, 2021). These statistics show a significant reduction in relation to the severe poverty rate in the 1990s, which was documented at more than 80% (Abdullah, 2010; Abdullah et al., 2013). These indicate that the government initiatives in localizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda to ensure “no one is left behind” have long been implemented and are progressively showing success.

Whilst various development programmes undertaken by the Government have led to improvement in the rural development and Orang Asli's economic lifestyle, there have been no significant changes that can be seen from the educational perspective. The Malaysian government has introduced various educational initiatives to elevate the education quality of the indigenous society to ensure better well-being and achievement of a first-class mind. This can be seen from the 2021 Budget Speech where a total of RM50.4 billion was allocated for schools and education, i.e., 15.6% of the total government expenditure. Despite the huge educational support and effort put in by the government, the educational achievement of Orang Asli students is still weak and lags far behind relative to the other Malaysian ethnic groups (Mohd Adnan et al., 2021). It further adds to the concern of the school dropout problem among Orang Asli students with no indication of the trending rate to be reduced.

The observed trend of students dropping out of secondary school after completing their primary education requires serious attention. In Peninsular Malaysia alone, the year 2018 record shows 3,771 Orang Asli pupils completed primary schools, however, only 2,840 pupils registered for secondary schools, indicating a dropout rate of 24.7 per cent. In 2019, the dropout rate was slightly reduced to 22.7 per cent, where 3,812 Orang Asli pupils completed Year 6 in primary schools compared to only 2,963 pupils registered in secondary schools (Malaysia Open Data Portal, 2021). Prior research shows that only two per cent of the Orang Asli population in Malaysia is successful in striving for higher education in tertiary institutions. The need to establish a continuous effort to ensure that students are motivated to pursue education to a higher level remains crucially imperative.

Motivated by the educational crisis in the indigenous community, this research will explore the Orang Asli students' educational concerns and difficulties in classrooms, that have led to problems associated with low school attendance and retention. The findings of this study may contribute to a greater understanding of the underlying causes of schooling problems, which, in turn, may suggest recommendations for resolving school dropout and lagged academic achievement issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges of the Mainstream Curriculum in Orang Asli Education

The concept of "Leaving No One Behind" promoted in the SDG is an important principle not only to eradicate double standards in society but also to enable community members to grow on their own and achieve a certain degree of empowerment. In the case of Orang Asli, the traditional development approach would commonly disregard these people, where they are treated as an object of development and have them accept the development planned for them by others. This state of affairs has reduced the Orang Asli to being passive in the development itself and has rendered them being left behind from becoming actors in the country's development (Amir Zal, 2021). The educational advancement of the Orang Asli children remains a major obstacle in achieving the SDG vision of "education for all". The Ministry of Education (MOE) has attempted to narrow the educational gap between indigenous students and other major ethnic students (Seow et al., 2013). Various initiatives were implemented, including the Indigenous Education Transformation Plan (PTPOA) which was introduced from 2013 to 2017. Nonetheless, the PTPOA failed to achieve its objective due to the lack of cooperation given by the indigenous people who refuse to accept educational development (Nordin et al., 2020).

Despite the various educational development attempts, the educational needs of the indigenous peoples have not essentially been given much attention (Abdullah, 2010). The educational curriculum and instructional programmes were designed to suit mainstream education, disregarding the assimilation of the traditional Orang Asli culture (Veloo et al., 2021). The mainstream curriculum essentially emphasizes acceptable behaviours, practices and knowledge that are most valued. Carter Andrews (2009) contends that when engaged in the mainstream curriculum, these marginalized students are affected since they will need to reconcile their culture-related norms and behaviours with

those deemed necessary for achievement. The mainstream curriculum employs certain ways of organizing, applying, and transferring knowledge to students based on the dominant local cultural framework. Within this conventional educational setting, students are expected to adhere to the “correct” culture and language and forego their common manner of speech and learning (Vang, 2006). This suggests that if Orang Asli students wish to succeed in education, they must develop a new persona, one that is academically focused and compatible with modern society's ideals and traditions, which often clashes with their own. The inflexibility of the mainstream curriculum that fails to reflect the unique indigenous life experiences results in a marginally improved indigenous educational outcome. The mainstream curriculum is not only seen as assimilating, but it also poses a potential threat to the indigenous learners' cultural identity (Mustapha, 2020).

The Orang Asli children develop an identity through the cultural and language traditions of their families that are taught from birth. This identity shapes how they see themselves, others, and the outside world. Indigenous children have often been trained to be self-sufficient in their everyday lives and to learn mainly by observation, which often clashes with the educational structure and environments. Hughes et al. (2004) show that at home, indigenous students often learn from their actions and face adversarial consequences as a result of bad decisions. Moreover, cultural influences, ancestors' customs, and local beliefs have led the indigenous people to lead a comfortable life in their cocoons. These are also among the factors that contribute to the resistance among the Orang Asli to educational development in various ways (Ahmad & Jelas, 2009). In many circumstances, children with a distinct culture and language are commonly viewed as having a disability (Voltz et al., 2003) resulting in unsuitable educational delivery methods being applied in schools. The common impression that Orang Asli children are slow learners (Mohd Adnan et al., 2021) needs to be examined before this stereotype is established. School awareness that the Orang Asli students are transitioning from an oral to a literate educational medium is vital. Hence, implementing the mainstream educational approaches may be inappropriate for indigenous pupils. For them to excel in learning, indigenous students have to strive to learn to read and write. This is made more difficult by the fact that they have to do so in a language other than their mother tongue. For example, findings by Mihat (2015) reveal that the Penan Asli Curriculum (PAC) which was implemented in accordance with the Malaysia Education Development Plan 2013–2025, was deemed less appropriate for indigenous students. This is because the Ministry of Education's language standards in the KSSR are much higher than what indigenous students could attain.

The mainstream educational curriculum is also seen in the way that classroom practices undermine the indigenous cultures, such as by excluding the teaching of Orang Asli cultural studies (Nordin et al., 2020). In line with the view by Mooney and Craven (2005), the systematic exclusion of Orang Asli studies delivers a strong message to the students, families, the school community, and others that the Orang Asli heritage is undervalued in Malaysian society. Schools for the Orang Asli minorities should instead be able to offer culturally appropriate education to enhance academic achievement and support the Orang Asli students' cultural identity. In addition to cultural and linguistic conflicts at school, the indigenous students also encounter discrimination and injustice where racism such as bigotry against people of colour, low expectations and stereotypes are present in the learning environment. In certain circumstances, students are marginalized when teachers have poor learning expectations from minority students. The talents of the minorities are often not acknowledged, and their cultural norms at home are commonly blamed for weak academic achievement and low attendance (Renganathan, 2016).

Addressing Educational Controversies in Teaching Orang Asli Students

Many reasons were identified to explain the high dropout rate among Orang Asli students. These include poverty, low self-esteem among Orang Asli children (due to bullying and stigmatization), lack of parental understanding of the value of education, negative feelings toward education (e.g. apathy, laziness, preference for work), and inaccessibility due to isolation and

remoteness, which made it impossible for children to attend school on a constant basis (Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, 2005, as cited in Malaysia Open Data Portal, 2021). Even though the government institutions are seen to be dedicated to delivering fair and equal education to the indigenous people, the community continues to feel neglected by the current educational system (Rosnon & Talib, 2019). Despite the concerted efforts toward developing the education for Orang Asli students, training educators to become teachers capable of supporting indigenous students' persistence in learning continues to be a trivial task (McLaughlin, 2013). The educational setting of "one-size-fits-all" to professionalize teaching is implemented in response to addressing concerns on teaching quality (Mohd Salim et al., 2020). The fundamental premise of these 'top-down' policies and programmes is that teaching is primarily a technical, rational, and predictable task (Oleson & Hora, 2014). Technical and administrative skills, in addition to discipline, are essential in determining students' success both within and outside the school (Ramsden, 2003). Nonetheless, teaching covers a wider spectrum of social and affective domains that are hard to measure. Effective teachers are those who are willing to communicate with students in a variety of ways, including through emotional connections. On the other hand, teachers are often unable to cope with sensitive pupils and other related emotional complexities, including racism in the classroom (Zembylas, 2013).

There are concerns that teachers assigned to Orang Asli schools are not formally certified to deal with and educate Orang Asli pupils (Mihat, 2015). Prior studies have shown that teachers' failure to recognize the Orang Asli students' cultural traits and background has led to teachers' misperception of their classroom behaviour and students' academic underachievement. Due to the conflicting cultural traditions embedded in the way how classrooms operate, Malin (1997, p. 140) discovered that 'the characteristics and skills of indigenous students that were positively valued, or merely deemed natural at home, became irrelevant in school'. According to Renganathan (2016), cultural variations were observed in how the classroom was conducted and the teachers' values, and their communications with the Orang Asli students in class. Cultural clashes inside the curriculum eventually resulted in students being socially and academically marginalized, whilst the instructor misinterpreted the students' motives and behaviours (Malin, 1997). Renganathan (2016) discovers that students dislike strict and harsh teachers and that the old stereotype of teaching methods demotivate them. The Orang Asli has their way of nurturing their children where the parents hardly punish their children physically (Renganathan, 2016). The incident in Pos Tohoi, Gua Musang, exemplifies how the Orang Asli children fled their school hostel because they expected retribution from their teachers (BBC, 2015). This catastrophe not only claimed the lives of five children and left the two survivors scarred for life, but it also demonstrated that fear of retribution culminated in weak academic engagement.

In addressing issues related to students' improved outcomes, Hudspith (1996) uses the phrase 'explicit visible pedagogy' to describe students' ability for achievement can be increased when the learning and message processes are rendered explicit to students. The author reported on the success of an instructor who demonstrated unique interactions with her Aboriginal students. The teacher's success was evidenced by the academic advancement of her students, which she accomplished by providing them with effective and practical instructional assistance. The teacher further assisted them in understanding the learning expectations through clear communication. She also integrated the students' culture in class, became acquainted with the families and communities who later became regular visitors to the class, and established a close connection with the students. The teacher's pedagogical activities were shown to be socially and culturally supportive and inclusive, which had a beneficial effect on the students' classroom performance (Hudspith, 1996).

Bishop et al. (2007) developed the Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations theory emphasizing culture, interactive dialogic and spiral learning, power-sharing, and adherence to a shared goal for educational excellence. Consistently, Rahman (2010) further discovered that explicit instructional and teacher support were crucial determinants for effective engagement with indigenous students in school. Based on the interview by Rahman (2010, p. 96) with the Aboriginal students, students claimed that they improved their learning and comprehension of their work when teachers

gave detailed information and guidance for student assessments, went through the criteria and requirements, and then translated them into a "student language". This is supported by Kieran and Anderson (2019) that culturally responsive pedagogy encouraged educators to design educational instruction by incorporating the idea of students' diversity as a strength rather than a weakness. McDonald (2003) conducts a similar study to examine the outstanding activity of a teacher interacting successfully with his indigenous students. The researcher discovered that the teacher had created a culturally relevant lesson plan to involve his indigenous students effectively in the activity. The teacher allotted time even after class to assist students with their classroom presentations. Apart from receiving regular feedback on their work, students were offered the opportunity to practice in front of smaller groups of audiences, which helped them build their confidence and communication skills. Students were assessed on class activities only when the teacher believed they were prepared and ready. Studies such as Rahmat et al. (2020) and Halif et al. (2020) concurred that similar teaching practices used were found effective which resulted in a positive outcome for students' learning.

An effective teacher-indigenous student interaction would determine student performance and academic achievement. Without the knowledge of the Orang Asli students' lives, teachers will not be able to surpass cultural borders and gain a profound understanding of how culture and language affect students' learning outcomes (Jegatesen, 2019). Having the school cultural knowledge and applying successful teaching methods, such as fun-learning pedagogy, is crucial for indigenous students to attain academic achievement in mainstream education (Wahab & Mustapha, 2015). The school has to identify and improve the mainstream educational curriculum to address issues of educational gaps and lower student achievement. Students require a variety of learning opportunities and fair assessments that consider their preferred learning styles, as well as their perspectives, experiences, and worldviews. Nielsen et al. (2008, p. 37) argue that "curricula and pedagogy need to be respectful of and responsive to students' traditional cultures and ways of coming to know about the culture, its knowledge structures, and its practices". This would mean that the mainstream educational curriculum "should bridge the knowledge and experiences students have with the knowledge and experiences they need to acquire", but not at the cost of students' cultural background, language, or identity (Vang, 2006, p. 25).

CONCLUSION

A significant disparity in indigenous and non-indigenous student outcomes creates concern, especially regarding student attendance and student retention. The high dropout rates, particularly during the transition from Year 6 to Form 1, which occurs between the ages of 11 and 12 years, demonstrate the severity of the issue. This was verified by data from the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, which revealed that the transfer rate from primary to secondary school in 2020 was 77.7 per cent, which is not significantly different from 71.3 per cent in 2010 (Malaysia Open Data Portal, 2021). Many indigenous students find school challenging, alienating, and discouraging, and many react to their dissatisfaction with school by resisting or withdrawing from education (Gray & Partington, 2003). When there are feelings of deprivation in the classroom, indigenous students' resistance to structured education is also seen as a cultural reaction to schooling (Rahman, 2010).

There is limited evidence to suggest that indigenous students should gain school cultural knowledge and excel academically at the cost of their cultural identity, traditions, and worldviews (Rahman, 2010). This study is of the view that the mainstream educational curriculum needs to assimilate the traditional Orang Asli home culture and language to ensure the indigenous children's adaptability and co-existence with other majority ethnicities.

Whilst there may be a mismatch between the mainstream school practices and the cultural practices of the indigenous minority, this is where teachers can play their role to build a closer relationship with the students and get to know them much better. The feeling of losing one's own cultural identity and the risk of being alienated can be minimized, hence supporting more positive educational development and reducing high dropout rates among the Orang Asli children. Fostering a healthy

teacher-student relationship often inspires, motivates, and appeals to students to be more positive in educational learning (Whitley, 2014). Teachers assigned to Orang Asli schools may also be given periodic professional training in indigenous pedagogy through additional classes, workshops, or seminars. With such initiatives, teachers are expected to become more resourceful and capable of teaching the Orang Asli children more efficiently.

To accomplish this, there is an increased need for a strong collaboration between the government, authorities and communities to develop strategies that work for rural people in ensuring that they are not left behind. This would mean better aligning the mainstream curriculum with students' varied backgrounds facilitating enhanced learning outcomes and ensuring indigenous students become bi-culture learners who are knowledgeable and proficient in both mainstream and home culture, hence yielding effective sustainable development.

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