

# The Role, Experience, and Challenges to Headmasters of Indigenous Primary Schools amid Covid-19 in Malaysia

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to explore the role, experiences, and challenges of principals in Orang Asli primary schools during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study is a qualitative study using purposive sampling to select the informants. The data was gathered from in-depth semi-structured interviews with the principals. "Roles and responsibilities," "challenges during the Covid-19 epidemic," and "strategies and expectations" were the three primary themes discovered throughout the analysis. The findings of the study emphasized the critical role of principals in managing their schools, especially during unprecedented situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic. By identifying these emerging themes, principals and educational policy-makers can focus on their current efforts while facilitating and accommodating the needs of their workforce, families, and students. This study also contributed to the body of knowledge regarding the importance of leadership in school organizations.

**Keywords:** Indigenous, Orang Asli, experiences, headmaster education, Covid-19 pandemic.

## 1. Introduction

Covid-19 is a global pandemic that concerned the whole country. The government and citizens are struggling to cope and adopting various approaches in the pursuit of a new normal (Mohd Rasdi et al., 2021). This pandemic has crippled many sectors, including the educational sector, and has caused the loss of lives around the globe. One of the most affected sectors is the educational sector. UNESCO (2020) stated that more than 90 percent of youngsters globally are unable to attend school physically. Due to the pandemic, the roles of principals in schools are more challenging. Principals must maintain their current efforts while facilitating and accommodating the needs of their workforce, families, and students. Hence, there are several approaches that principals can adopt for their students during these difficult times (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020). A school's success is measured by the principal's abilities to lead and inspire teachers and students to teach and learn (Fullan, 2002). Principals have various roles, being responsible and accountable for the educational successes of their schools whilst also attending to various issues that might affect the institutions positively or negatively (Ching & Loke, 2016). For instance, principals must maintain common learning standards, which adds to the challenges in an educational setting (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020).

Hence, school principals face many challenges in implementing various programs. These challenges can vary from accountability, staffing, funding, discipline, parents, and support from various parties and departments (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017). Ching and Loke (2016) stated that indigenous communities need special attention as situations may vary compared to urban settings. With all these in mind, the Malaysian educational sector is currently facing tremendous challenges in delivering

educational services during an unprecedented event like the Covid-19 pandemic (Shamsir et al., 2021). Principals working in indigenous communities may face additional challenges and dilemmas. This is because their leadership is subject to responsiveness and acceptance by the indigenous communities to facilitate the delivery of quality education (Furo, 2018). When the pandemic, the Ministry of Education (MOE) decided to shut all schools in the country due to the Movement Control Order (MCO) from 18<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 onwards. The ensuing chaos forced school principals to consider new solutions and initiatives to ensure the stability and continuity of educational services. In reality, there are no right answers for dealing with the current crisis and school leaders are walking a tightrope without a safety net. There are no standards, practices, guides, or examples to manage schools during a pandemic. Hence, it is worthwhile to study the responsibilities and experiences of principals in indigenous primary schools during the Covid-19 crisis.

Furthermore, it is beneficial to have an open discussion on school leadership and management during an unprecedented crisis. Presently, most research studies in this area are inconclusive with minimal details on how to lead and manage during times of crisis. Zhao (2020) stated that school principals had been criticized in recent years and the Covid-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to reconsider instructions in schools. However, schools staff have not been equipped and prepared to handle this current situation. Leithwood et al. (2020) implied that leadership ought to change and have to be responsive to the varied situation due to Covid-19. Pont (2020) mentioned that strategic initiatives and improvements to strengthen school leadership are still lacking. Hence, it is important to instil proper leadership measures within primary schools for smoother operations.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the role, experiences, and challenges of principals in Orang Asli primary schools during the Covid-19 pandemic. The following research questions are formulated as a guide towards meeting the purpose of the research.

1. What was the headmasters' concern when the government first announced the MCO which led to the school's closure?
2. How did the principals manage their schools during the Covid-19 crisis in terms of actions or measures taken?
3. What were the experiences encountered by the Headmaster during the pandemic?

## **2. Study context**

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country, rich in various cultures and societies. The basic ethnicities are the Malays, Chinese and Indian. Additionally, Malaysia is inhabited by indigenous peoples known as the Orang Asli. The Orang Asli community consists of 19 different ethnicities with their own set of cultures, languages, beliefs, and norms. The Orang Asli make up only 0.6 percent of the total population of Malaysia, totalling more than 160 thousand (Nicholas, 2012). These communities are spread widely all across Peninsular Malaysia except for states like Penang and Perlis. There are three types of Orang Asli communities in Malaysia. Within these three groups, there are six tribes (Law et al., 2018). The Malaysian government tries to help the Orang Asli community through Eleventh Malaysia Plan (11<sup>th</sup>MP) by developing *Sekolah Model Khas* (special model schools) to reduce drop-out rates and increase literacy among the Orang Asli communities (Md Nor et al., 2011).

Yaacob (2021) stated that during the current nationwide school lockdown, their parents have faced many difficulties in terms of technologies. Furthermore, some parents are unable to provide learning facilities, including gadgets for their children. For that reason, it is not surprising that many Orang Asli students had to stop studying due to the inability to learn via the Internet, hence they lost interest in learning (Karim et al., 2021). Therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic has altered the nature of school principals' work. Nowadays, principals are expected to be exceptional managers in a time where the pace of change has increased exponentially (Pollock, 2020). Thus, this article aims to study school principals' roles, first-hand challenges, and experiences faced during the MCO to improve access to education for Orang Asli students.

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **3.1 Role of Principals**

Principals are essential in contributing to the school environment (Nasreen, 2019). They are responsible for providing leadership in an educational setting ensuring the application and cultivation of positive principles among teachers and learners (Hermann, 2016). Meador (2016) mentioned that principals play several roles involving prioritizing, organizing, and scheduling. Mestry (2017) stated that the role of principals is very challenging, requiring them to provide value-adding and refined professional development platforms. Meanwhile, Fernandez and Shaw (2020) highlighted the roles of academic leadership in providing versatile management in managing unusual difficulties, for example, by leading initiatives during the Covid-19 pandemic. School leaders should be responsible and independent (Pont, 2020). Furthermore, the roles and responsibilities of principals may vary based on needs and circumstances (Tai & Kareem, 2018).

#### **3.2 Principals' Challenges**

Johnson and Weiner (2020) observed that principals face various challenges in terms of their responsibilities and tasks. Taking on the post of principal in rural areas is even more challenging compared to working in urban areas. Delivering quality education to indigenous people is also difficult especially in providing mainstream learning whilst facing funding constraints. In addition, there were other existing issues faced by principals in Orang Asli communities before the Covid-19 crisis. Deli and Yasin (2016) concluded that underperformance among the Orang Asli community was related to low education and poor economic wellbeing that directly affected principals' leadership outcomes.

One of the most challenging aspects for principals is the school environment. The challenges faced by the principals are to provide safe and conducive learning environments. Principals must ensure there are necessary facilities to facilitate classroom teaching and learning. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) envisioned by 2025, all schools should be well-equipped with proper facilities to create a favourable teaching and learning environment for learners. Unfortunately, Du Plessis (2017) indicated that many of the Orang Asli schools are lacking in facilities.

Managing schools' budgets can also be one of the challenges faced by principals (Saidun et al., 2015). Staffing is another potential challenge faced by principals. Principals are responsible for managing their administrative staff and educators (Nadeem et al., 2020). Recruiting new educators into the institution can be challenging for principals as it requires attention to detail to ensure recruits are selected based on the staffs' capabilities, performance, and professionalism. Furthermore, issues with teacher-student interaction can also be challenging. Nasreen (2019) observed that teachers and students tend to bring up their disagreement to principals which may also involve parents coming to the defense of their children. Handling matters tactfully between the parties involved can be challenging to school leaders.

Another challenge is the students themselves. Handling student discipline is one of the toughest responsibilities and it is an unpleasant experience for principals as well as educators (Choi et al., 2017). Baxter and Meyers (2019) observed that indigenous students especially have poor attendance rates in schools. Renganathan (2016) stated that running from school is a common problem among Orang Asli students. It is mentioned that 50 percent of students from the indigenous community are not further to secondary education after completing their primary level (Ghazali et al., 2019). Kamaruddin and Bernama (2018) reported that only half of the Orang Asli students enrolled in Form One and completed their SPM. Jantan and Ahmad (2013) also stated that the Orang Asli students in Malaysia experienced psychosocial issues such as cognitive capabilities, language barrier, small family revenue, cultural differences, and curriculum issues that hamper them from attending school. However, it is believed that principals can manage these challenges by encouraging educators to embrace the uniqueness of the Orang Asli culture and utilize these strengths within the classroom (Bernama, 2020). The final aspect of the challenge is related to parental and community support. This support allows parents, community, and principals to develop a positive mindset and work hand-in-hand to improve the students' educational environment (Lara & Saracosti, 2019). Principals also faced challenges due to a lack of parental support for their children's education due to several circumstances (Rafidi, 2020). Jantan and

Ahmad (2013) found that educational literacy among Orang Asli students will be better if psychosocial issues are resolved. Rabahi et al. (2017) found that parents of the Orang Asli students are concerned that their culture is being ignored in schools. This is mainly because the Orang Asli has various practices and languages that the government has potentially underestimated its efforts to improve the community.

### **3.3 Challenges of Principals during Covid-19 Pandemic**

Presently, managing the current pandemic is one of the most challenging tasks for school principals. The pandemic has reset routines, making things unclear and exposing poor leadership (Li & Lalani, 2020). On 9<sup>th</sup> November 2020, the Ministry of Education (MOE) instructed the closure of schools nationwide (Sidek et al., 2021). It was not easy for school leaders and educators to adapt to immediate changes. Besides ensuring the safety of the schooling community, there are other sources of challenges that principals faced during this unprecedented period.

Suryaman et al. (2020) stated that the sudden shift from the physical classroom to digital learning had attracted much undesirable feedback from learners, teachers, and parents. Scully et al. (2021) agreed that not every individual who engages in digital learning would benefit from the lessons. Learners need a stable internet connection or access to proper broadband internet infrastructure. He also pointed out that the Malaysian education system is unprepared to embrace online learning, especially in rural areas. Hence, principals are responsible for ensuring governments give due attention to problems faced by students in the new normal (Cutter, 2017; Sim et al., 2021).

During the pandemic, another challenging aspect for principals is managing the educators and students. Sokal et al. (2020) stated that many teachers are being burned out and tired, which may affect schools and students. This is because teachers need to put in extra effort in preparing virtual lessons. Managing students virtually may cause mental exhaustion in teachers. Harris et al. (2020) highlighted that Covid-19 had increased stress levels amongst school leaders having to adopt technology to facilitate teaching and learning since some teachers need new devices to deliver their lessons.

In summary, there are various challenges faced by principals either in urban or rural areas. The degree of challenges may vary depending on circumstances. Johnson and Weiner (2020) suggested that principals face tremendous challenges in performing their tasks in this demanding society. Nevertheless, even though the challenges may vary, school leaders must exercise their leadership role in curricular and learning areas (Hermann, 2016).

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Design**

This study aims to explore the roles, experiences, and challenges of Orang Asli primary schools' principals during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of the previous research on principals' experience has used quantitative methods (Choi et al., 2017). This study is to understand their experience through a detailed inquiry into the individuals' experiences, rather than proving or refuting predetermined hypotheses. For this reason, the study adopted the qualitative research method by utilizing a subjective methodology through meetings to get point-by-point data from the informants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

### **4.2 Participants and Procedure**

Purposive sampling is one of the techniques used in qualitative analysis. The researchers identified that most of the Orang Asli schools were located in the district of Kuala Langat, on the West Coast of Malaysia. According to MOE's (2020) list of schools, there are seven Orang Asli schools under the Kuala Langat's District Education Office. For this study, six Orang Asli primary schools' principals were selected and being interviewed via email and telephone calls. Three experts reviewed the research questions to ensure that they met the study's objectives (see Table 1). The researchers then proceeded to make necessary arrangements with the informants. Data were gathered from individual interviews conducted by the researcher. Firstly, the informant was briefed on the study's objectives. Then, the researcher obtained consent from the informants to record the interview sessions. All informants were

guaranteed confidentiality. The researcher gave sufficient time for the informants to respond. The researcher reached saturation point after the sixth interview. During the first interview, the researcher engaged with each participant and recorded their responses. Triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks were utilized to promote internal validity and trustworthiness throughout the data collection process (Leung, 2015). Finally, the researcher ensured that the informants' responses did not add to predisposition, and no tokens were supplied to the informants for them to engage in the study or even before the interview.

**Table 1.** Interview Protocol

<b>Background Data</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How long have you served as an administrator?</li> <li>2. Did you enroll in the Teacher Training Courses?</li> <li>3. What is the demographic composition of the students at your school?</li> </ol>
<b>Perceptions of School Life and Expectations Concerning School Principals</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Have you been a principal elsewhere? If so, what schools and/or assignments have you had?</li> <li>2. Do you have leadership experience? If so, what were they?</li> <li>3. What is the criterion to be a school principal in Malaysia? Kindly explain the training given for the principal if any?</li> </ol>
<b>Principal's Roles and Experiences</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Could you share with me, regarding your experience as a principal in this school?</li> <li>2. What do you think of the environment setting in this current school?</li> <li>3. Challenges encountered in an Orang Asli school/ strategies used to address the challenges?</li> <li>4. Could you explain the situation in your school before the Covid-19 pandemic?</li> <li>5. There are surely interesting and challenging situations during this pandemic, could you share with me those situations?</li> <li>6. How does working in an Orang Asli community impact parents'/community involvement?</li> <li>7. What strategies have you attempted to use which did not seem to be effective? Why do you feel that this was so?</li> </ol>

#### **4.3 Data analysis**

The researcher processed the audio recording by transcribing, analysing, and coding the vital data points into themes. Using Atlas.ti (v. 8.4.5), the researchers first analyzed the transcripts without prior defined categories. The software is also used to compile, analyze, and make connections between the themes. The constant comparative method was used to compare and refine the emerging themes concerning the varying experiences of the participants (Ritchie et al., 2014).



**Table 2.** Themes are based on the experiences of the principal

No.	Theme	Sub-theme	Sample Transcripts
1	Roles & Responsibilities	Management of organization (n = 5)	“... I am responsible to all matter in school especially performing every task on MOE’s policy ... to make sure the school operation within academic year period”.
		Adapting the organization (n = 3)	“Actually...I was surprised... to be posted in this school because all this while, I was in mainstream schools... but I have experience with the Orang Asli community as I am an NGO member, we do a lot of community services in rural areas...I came here to do a program before being a principal here... We enter different Orang Asli villages to see how they live and their needs”.
		Talent development (n = 4)	“...this is an Aborigine school with Temuan students... I study all about their lives, culture, ability, and socio-economics condition before I can make any plan and action together with my colleagues...” “... students’ attendance has improved about 90% last year and we did quite well for UPSR in 2019...” “... for your information, we have an international painter in this school... His name is Ishak. Most of the students here like arts especially when we have lessons and teach them on arts...”
2	Challenges during Covid-19 pandemic	Inadequate Facilities (n = 4)	“... we did not know on what to do for about a month during the MCO in March... teaching and learning were put on hold... waiting for MOE directives...”. “Not every family has the gadgets especially cellular and almost every family don’t have any computer facilities and their villages doesn’t have internet cafes. Lack of ICT skills especially internet-based knowledge and capability to get enough data for cellular...”.
		Lack of Parental Support (n = 4)	“...mainly the attitude of the parents... some parents don’t care about their children’s education... even if the students don’t want to come to school, parents won’t force them...Homework doesn't even do it, parents not forcing... Parents used to say “I don't want to go to school ...”
		Lack of Students’ Awareness towards Education (n = 3)	“Before the pandemic 90% attendance, after the MCO... 70% ... We also can’t force them to come to school due to the pandemic...” “...not everyone can afford to own a device like computers and laptops. Some even don’t have a phone, so how to do online lessons...”
3	Strategies & Expectations	Concept of schooling (n = 4)	“... be realistic, evaluate your capability and do whatever you can.....” “...character Nordi was living in the Kota Permainan... so when I become a teacher, I always imagine the school to be Kota Permainan... Hmmm... I like the concept of Fun Schools... When students come to school, they feel like they are in a fun place.”
		Syllabus (n = 5)	“... I feel the Orang Asli should have their syllabus... because they cannot catch up... So in this school, I told the teacher if they can get the basic mastery pun... good enough...” “... I hope the KPM can come up with a syllabus for these Indigenous students in the rural schools, maybe something simple for them...”
		Sponsorship continuation (n = 4)	“...this school is in the rural suburbs with a minimum of basic facilities and surrounded by low-income socio-economic society... because... I don’t care who can give us benefits for the people and pupils, I will grab it...”. “... we can get easily from government agencies, NGO’s and corporate sectors. We have already been sponsorship previously by Maybank Investment.... Hmmm... Peransang Selangor (GLC), Orang Asli Department of Development and NGO’s like Muslim Scholars Association.”

## **5. Results**

The data analysis led to the development of three major themes (see Table 2) as follows:

### **5.1 Roles and Responsibilities**

This study explored the experiences of the selected principals. Based on the interviews conducted, the informants mentioned the importance of roles and responsibilities of a principal in primary schools.

#### **5.1.1 Management of Organisation**

The informants mentioned as principals are responsible for managing the schools' environment such as organizing the schools' operations within the academic year, implementing educational policies by the government, and keeping records on the enrolment of the indigenous students. The informants stated that managing an organization is not something new to them as they have experience being assistant principals.

#### **5.1.2 Adapting the Organization**

Adapting to a new educational setting, especially in rural areas, brings changes to the informants. According to the informants, mainstream schools and the Orang Asli schools are different in terms of management, understanding their way of life, social environment, and interaction. They indicated that it is not difficult dealing with the Orang Asli community. In addition, the informants believed that there are many opportunities for the Orang Asli students to improve their current living standards if they put effort to make a difference as they were willing to invest time into making changes in the schools.

#### **5.1.3 Talent Development**

The informants highlighted the talents and achievements of the Orang Asli students in their schools. For instance, one of the informants believed that the Temuan tribe students have the potential to achieve greater accomplishments. He also highlighted the potential of the students and his best experiences being a principal. The informant also shared his satisfaction in increasing students' attendance and the UPSR results for the year 2019. Overall, based on the interviews regarding roles and responsibilities, the researchers concluded a unique set of principles in managing Orang Asli schools and developing Orang Asli students.

### **5.2 Challenges during Covid-19**

The Covid-19 pandemic being a huge barrier on the educational sector was unprecedented and affected all the informants in their role as principals. Most educational institutions including rural schools struggled to cope with significant changes due to Covid-19. The pandemic caused a major disruption in the educational system, and the informants highlighted multiple challenges faced by their schools and their team of educators. These challenges were unprecedented such as the difficulty in ensuring ongoing teaching and learning throughout the pandemic, especially in rural areas.

#### **5.2.1 Inadequate Facilities**

According to the informants, during the first month of the MCO, school administrators were puzzled and unable to work owing to the numerous ambiguities that arose as a result of this unforeseen circumstance. The informants explained the difficulties of not being able to conduct online lessons. This was mainly because there were inadequate learning aids for Orang Asli students. For example, poor internet connection, lack of gadgets, and inability to obtain enough cellular devices data. Most parents work during the day and students cannot afford their own devices due to financial constraints and they

are dependent on their parents to use the devices. Despite this, the informants cited alternatives implemented by the schools to ensure the continuity of lessons.

### **5.2.2 Lack of Parental Support**

Another point of discussion during the interviews was regarding the lack of parental support during the pandemic. The informants highlighted various issues related to the lack of parental support during the pandemic. Parents of the Orang Asli community do not concern about education during the pandemic. Most parents were not supportive in ensuring their children complete the tasks assigned by their teachers. They rather have their children accompany them to work. According to the informants, teachers do monitor attendance and if students are absent more than thrice in a row, teachers will inform parents to find out the reasons for the absenteeism.

### **5.2.3 Lack of Students' Awareness of Education**

Lack of students' education awareness is common to the Orang Asli community. The informants mentioned that motivating students to attend school is a real challenge. Students from the Orang Asli community seem less interested in schooling and the pandemic has further affected their levels of motivation to attend school. With the efforts and dedication of the schools, student attendance was almost 90 percent before the school closures due to the Covid-19. The majority of informants were devastated by the declining attendance due to the pandemic. When school reopened for about three months after the MCO, the informants realized that most students were not eager to come to school as they preferred their free and easy lifestyle. The informants mentioned that most students lack interest in education and schooling due to the inability to participate actively in lessons especially online learning conducted. This happened due to insufficient data, connection issues, lack of information technology knowledge, and not owning a device to facilitate learning during the pandemic.

## **5.3 Strategies and Expectations**

The informants discover opportunities to create the ideal school environment for Orang Asli students. They were implementing integrated and intensive strategies by analysing the environment. Firstly, they appointed volunteers among parents, held meetings, and briefed teachers and staff. Secondly, the informants shared the expectations of their school by exploring thought-provoking ideas and anticipations. According to them, the Orang Asli community cannot be compared with the mainstream communities as there is a vast difference in terms of ideologies, mentalities, and even lifestyle. The Orang Asli community also has a different level of understanding due to different background experiences compared to the individuals from mainstream primary schools. Therefore, the informants applied SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis to assist them in planning their strategies with their colleagues.

### **5.3.1 Concept of Schooling**

The informants stressed that principals must act as agents of change in this challenging situation. It is also essential to be realistic with goals. Most principals always try to be realistic with their goals and achievements. An informant explained the reasons why he wanted to create the concept of 'Fun Schooling' to make his school a better learning environment for the Orang Asli students to increase their interest to attend school. Unfortunately, the pandemic disrupted the implementation of the school's 'Fun Schooling' concept.

### **5.3.2 Syllabus**

The informants also shared their expectations regarding using the current syllabus to educate the students at their schools. According to them, all government schools, mainstream, and rural schools must use a common syllabus. In contrast, they considered that the existing curriculum employed in Orang Asli schools was detrimental to students. Orang Asli students have difficulties in understanding



the current syllabuses in use. The informants hope that the government considers producing a syllabus that is suitable for Orang Asli students. This is because there remains a huge gap between the mainstream and the rural school students in terms of culture and costumes.

### **5.3.3 Sponsorship continuation**

As for the final part of the interview, the informants highlighted the need for sponsorship from various organizations. The informants shared their concerns on the importance of getting sponsorships for their schools to improve the overall schooling environment. The informants were also encouraged by sponsorships from NGOs and governmental associations who prioritised Orang Asli schools.

## **6. Discussion and Implications**

This study applied a qualitative research methodology that was exploratory, descriptive, and context-based. The transcribed and analysed data were categorized into themes and subthemes which coincided with the literature on the subject matter. The results of the data analysis focused on the research questions, the themes, and most importantly the experiences of the principals from Orang Asli primary schools during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Roles and responsibilities of principals also include other elements as highlighted by the informants during the interview sessions such as; i) management of the organization, ii) adapting the organization, and iii) talent development. Baker et al. (2019) mentioned that school principals play several roles involving prioritizing, organizing, and scheduling. The informants mentioned the importance of the roles and responsibilities of principals in educational organizations. Meanwhile, one of the informants stated that managing an organization is not something new to him as he has experience being an assistant principal. He stated that he is responsible to ensure smooth operations of his school throughout the academic year including seeking sponsorship from various parties to finance the cost of school educational programs. Arhipova and Kokina (2017) observed that principals are often subjected to pressure in managing school operations. In terms of adapting the organization, as newly appointed principals, the informants mentioned that mainstream schools and the indigenous schools are different requiring distinct management styles, with their way of life, social environment, and interaction. Oplatka (2017) stated that principals who are new to their schools might take some time to adapt to the new culture. The informants shared colleagues' great support and cooperation when appointed as principals. Talent development is part of the informants' roles and responsibilities as principals. The informants wished to show the potential of the Orang Asli students as they believed that they could achieve greater heights given the right support and encouragement. Lara and Saracosti (2019) stressed the need to develop talented students whilst also placing equal importance on academic development.

The informants shared their experiences on the challenges of pandemic Covid-19. These challenges can be categorized into three subthemes; i) inadequate facilities, ii) lack of parental support and iii) lack of students' awareness towards education. The availability of facilities to support learning can enhance students' motivation and academic achievement (Sihombing et al., 2021; Utomo et al., 2020). Unfortunately, Orang Asli schools are lacking in facilities to support teaching and learning. Orang Asli communities also lack facilities at their home. It becomes the technical difficulties faced by teachers to conduct online lessons. The socio-economic situation facing Orang Asli students also contributed to their inability to own learning devices much to the disappointment of the informants.

The informants also highlighted the lack of parental support during the pandemic. As it stands, Indigenous parents do not value education, and during the pandemic, it became further clearer that the majority of parents are uninterested in their children's education. The informants also stated that after the MCO was lifted; some parents did not send their children back to school for various reasons. Munje and Mncube (2018) stated that parental involvement is critical to functioning schools to ensure quality education. According to the informants, the lack of students' awareness of education is a common feature of the Orang Asli community. This is consistent with Singar and Zainuddin's (2017) findings regarding the level of awareness among students.

For settling their responsibilities, highly motivated principals must have a set of strategies and expectations to ensure their schools' success. Lee and Wong (2020) highlighted that principals require strategic leadership and the ability to make changes. Principals must have certain expectations to attain

and achieve certain standards for their institutions (Erdoğan, 2015). The informants shared their strategies for their schools and implemented integrated and intensive strategies by analysing the environment. In terms of expectations, the informants observed the syllabus for them should be their level of understanding. The informants believed that they struggled to cope with the standard syllabus. Similarly, Wahab and Mustapha (2015) observed that the current content of the curriculum and pedagogy is not appropriate for Orang Asli students. Educators have to appreciate the current state of their students before assigning tasks especially in rural or remote areas that require constant guidance. The informants also stated that it is sufficient for them to acquire a basic mastery of the syllabus and would be sufficient for their survival.

Researchers from educational faculties should focus on the studies of indigenouness and non-indigenouness in terms of relevance in the Malaysian context. This finding may support Orang Asli students and enrich the overall education culture in Malaysia. Researchers and experts need to empirically study various types of leadership (e.g., transformational, transactional, etc.) among principals in Orang Asli primary schools. They may also propose effective leadership styles suited for it. Moreover, longitudinal studies can also be carried out to examine the long-term effects of principals' roles on Orang Asli students' success, learning, and personal growth. Finally, the results of this study can be used by educational policy-makers to create guidelines and policies for principals in Orang Asli schools. This will help to change their perception of the potential of Orang Asli students to succeed in education especially in terms of goals. More crucially, online learning tools can help ethnic minorities catch up with kids in mainstream institutions. Universities can potentially collaborate with principals from Orang Asli schools to support them with the latest e-learning techniques and knowledge. This can help to create more equitable school systems in the long term.

## **8. Conclusion**

In conclusion, being a principal can be very challenging in every aspect. Schools need to ensure advancement, institutional self-assessment, and institute long-haul changes to handle the challenges posed by the present world. Principals play huge roles in the educational setting in terms of decision making, distribution of responsibilities, ensuring smooth administration and well-being of the community. Additionally, principals handling ethnic minorities during a pandemic require a whole new level of responsibilities, including considering the socio-economic capabilities of households and providing support for the community. The informants shared several strategies and expectations that they envision for their schools to have a better future.

## **9. Recommendations**

Researchers are encouraged to conduct additional research on the experiences of the Orang Asli students facing the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of feeling, management of lessons, and the impact on their learning. Based on this study's findings, policymakers such as the Malaysian Ministry of Education should investigate the standard curriculum and pedagogy implemented in Orang Asli schools. As mentioned earlier, the current syllabus is not suitable for the Orang Asli students to cope with and acquire knowledge. Policymakers need to prioritize this and provide appropriate solutions so that students can acquire quality education in indigenous schools. Policymakers have to ensure there are adequate facilities in rural schools. Inadequate facilities in schools disrupt the process of teaching and learning. Therefore, equipping schools with necessary facilities enable the smooth transition of lessons that can boost academic achievement among students in these schools. The government must collaborate with school headmasters to guarantee that Orang Asli schools continue to operate smoothly throughout Malaysia.

## **10. Limitations and Direction for Future Studies**

This research focused on principals of Orang Asli primary schools. Hence, the findings cannot be generalized to others. The principals were selected using purposive sampling designed to identify and select informants who were capable of in-depth knowledge of a particular issue. This case study is not meant to be generalized to the entire population but rather to explore in detail a specific

phenomenon. However, due to school closures, the researcher was unable to explore other aspects such as the experiences of students, staff, or even teachers. As for future studies, other researchers can focus on the current literature by certain understanding and perspectives. It is recommended to expand the research on a larger scale by including principals of mainstream schools or even Orang Asli students of different subgroups all over Malaysia or including various age groups in future studies such as kindergarten, primary and secondary students.

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