

Contextualising Education Policy to Empower Orang Asli Children

Wan Ya Shin

Rusaslina Idrus



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Helena Dodge-Wan | Editing
Gareth Richards | Editing
Eryn Tan | Proofreading
Cover illustration by Ooi Huiqi

Authors



Wan Ya Shin is the Acting Research Director at the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS). Her research interests include social policy, education policy, social protection, poverty and inequality. She was a Chevening Scholar at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where she completed her Msc in Social Policy and Development. She holds a Bachelor of Economics from the University of Malaya.



Rusalina Idrus is a social anthropologist who has been conducting research on Orang Asli issues for many years. She holds a Ph.D. degree in social anthropology from Harvard University. She is a Senior Lecturer at the Gender Studies Programme, Faculty of Art and Social Sciences, and an Associate Fellow at the Centre for Malaysian Indigenous Studies, Universiti Malaya.

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Executive Summary

Despite reasonably good school enrolment rates for Malaysian children as a whole, indigenous children and those in rural areas, in particular Orang Asli children, still lag behind in terms of access to quality education. Although there have been some improvements in recent years, the education gap between the Orang Asli students and their peers remains a significant problem. This report is the second of a two-part series on access to education for Orang Asli children. The first paper examined the challenges they face, drawing on the findings of previous studies, and mapping out education policies and programmes for them. This report seeks to identify the underlying challenges that Orang Asli children face in obtaining an education and to understand the implementation and delivery of programmes and assistance provided by the government.

This study employs a qualitative methodology through the use of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded according to themes that emerged, with the aim of presenting the data in a way that highlights the voices and unique viewpoints of Orang Asli parents and students, schoolteachers involved with Orang Asli education, and other stakeholders.

Based on the feedback obtained from the students and parents, there are many evident challenges to Orang Asli education, whose implications are discussed in this report. The main issues raised by parents include poor accessibility to schools, racial discrimination, financial constraints, the absence of Orang Asli history and cultures in the school curriculum, and parental involvement. Alongside the perspectives of parents, the report also presents challenges related to education based on interviews conducted with schoolteachers teaching Orang Asli students. These include a lack of preparation and training prior to postings, negative stereotypes they experience as teachers assigned to Orang Asli schools, a lack of parental involvement, as well as teaching, learning, and infrastructural challenges.

The report also reviews the programmes and assistance provided for Orang Asli students. These comprise both programmes specifically designed for Orang Asli children – namely Program Intervensi Khas Murid Orang Asli dan Peribumi (PIKAP), Kelas Dewasa Orang Asli dan Peribumi (KEDAP), and Sekolah Model Khas Komprehensif 9 (K9) – and other assistance offered in the form of food, financial aid, school essentials, and hostels. The conclusions of each of these subsections propose recommendations that would, in our view, enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery and implementation of these programmes and assistance mechanisms.

The report also covers initiatives organised by teachers, schools, and the community. In the case of teacher and school initiatives, these are not under the aegis of centralised programmes but still play an integral part in addressing underlying issues faced by Orang Asli students. This section draws on interviews with parents, teachers, and principals on some of the initiatives that schools have carried out, including teaching and learning, after-school extra classes, building relationships with community leaders and parents, parental involvement, introducing Orang Asli cultures in the school curriculum, and awareness campaigns on the importance of education. The provision of these additional community-led initiatives, highlighted by parents, is also examined. Besides primary and secondary schools, there are other educational classes and programmes such as early childhood education offered by kindergartens and preschools, supplementary education centres, and community-organised Pusat Didikan Komuniti (PDK, Community Learning Centres).

Policies and programmes need to address the underlying challenges and create positive impacts through effective implementation. The education system consists of system-wide, school-level, and teacher-initiated policies and programmes with students' learning and motivation as the central focus. However, the education system does not function in isolation and it thus requires a good support system that creates learning opportunities outside the classroom as well to facilitate students' learning and development. Coordination with communities, a range of ministries, non-governmental organisations, and other stakeholders is also important in creating learning opportunities and providing an environment that is conducive and relevant to properly nurturing Orang Asli children. The policy recommendation section presented in this report can be summarised as follows:

1. There must be a greater focus on learning and addressing underlying challenges instead of dealing only with symptoms.
2. Indigenous cultures and history must be integrated into the mainstream school curriculum.
3. Existing programmes must be monitored and evaluated to ensure their efficient and effective delivery and implementation.
4. Teachers and school leaders who are equipped and capable of delivering quality education for Orang Asli students need to be entrusted with greater autonomy and balanced accountability.
5. Pre-posting training on Orang Asli cultures should be provided to teachers, and infrastructure and resources for teachers in Orang Asli schools should be improved.
6. Teachers should be trained in innovative and adaptive pedagogies, and platforms for knowledge sharing could be established.
7. Trust and collaboration between schools and Orang Asli communities need to be built as Orang Asli parents (and by extension their communities) are important partners in education.
8. PDKs need to be recognised as part of the support system for schools and adequate essential resources should be provided to PDKs.
9. Good-quality preschool education needs to be provided based on learning through play, social interaction, and the environment.
10. Orang Asli communities should be empowered to be their own agents of change and participate in the process of Orang Asli-related policies.
11. A positive or strength-based discourse should be created to shift away from the deficit discourse on Orang Asli.
12. The collaboration of relevant ministries must be strengthened to address the multidimensional challenges that Orang Asli children and communities face.

The issue of education inequality confronted by Orang Asli children has been recognised by the Malaysian government, with various policies and programmes implemented to address the challenges. While progress has been made, this education gap still persists and has been thus far unresolved to any meaningful degree. The aim of these recommendations is to contextualise and create a conducive learning environment in which Orang Asli students can thrive. The end goal is the creation of a community of Orang Asli learners who are empowered and have access to opportunities as any student in Malaysia should have. Education should not be a tool used to force Orang Asli to change and assimilate into mainstream society, but rather it has the potential to empower children and, by extension, the wider communities.



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Abbreviations and acronyms

FGD	focus group discussion
IPG	Institut Pendidikan Guru (Teacher Training Institute)
IPT	Institut Pengajian Tinggi (Institute of Higher Education)
JAKOA	Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (Department of Orang Asli Development)
K9	Sekolah Model Khas Komprehensif (Special Comprehensive Model School)
KAP	Kurikulum Orang Asli dan Penan (Orang Asli and Penan Curriculum)
KEDAP	Kelas Dewasa Orang Asli dan Peribumi (Orang Asli and Peribumi Adult Education Classes)
KEMAS	Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat (Community Development Department)
KKM	Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia (Ministry of Health Malaysia)
KLCC	Kuala Lumpur City Centre
KPI	key performance indicator
KWAPM	Bantuan Kumpulan Wang Amanah Pelajar Miskin (Monetary Assistance for Students from Poor Households)
MCO	movement control order
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOF	Ministry of Finance
MRSM	Maktab Rendah Sains MARA (MARA Junior Science College)
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PDK	Pusat Didikan Komuniti (Community Learning Centre)
PdPc	kaedah pengajaran dan pemudahcaraan (teaching and facilitation method)
PdPR	pengajaran dan pembelajaran di rumah (teaching and home learning)
PIBG	Persatuan Ibu Bapa dan Guru (Parents' and Teachers' Association)
PIBKS	Penglibatan Ibu Bapa, Komuniti dan Swasta (Parental, Community and Private Involvement)
PIKAP	Program Intervensi Khas Murid Orang Asli dan Peribumi (Special Intervention Programme for Orang Asli and Peribumi Students)
PIPOA	Pusat Intelek Pelajar Orang Asli (Intellectual Centre for Orang Asli Students)
PPD	Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah (District Education Office)
PSS	Program Susu Sekolah (School Milk Programme)
QR code	quick response code
RMC	Maktab Tentera DiRaja (Royal Military College)
RMT	Rancangan Makanan Tambahan (Supplementary Food Programme)
RPS	Rancangan Penempatan Semula (Resettlement Plan)
SEAMEO	Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation
SMOA	Sekolah Murid Orang Asli (Orang Asli School Children)
STEM	science, technology, engineering and mathematics
STPM	Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (Malaysian Higher School Certificate)
SUHAKAM	Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia Malaysia (Human Rights Commission of Malaysia)
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPSR	Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (Primary School Achievement Test)

I. INTRODUCTION

Education aims to empower children to fulfil their potential and to achieve their personal well-being and contribute to society and nation. This can only be achieved through good-quality education and access to education for all. Going to school needs to translate into learning in order for children to develop and grow. The issue of education inequality needs to be addressed in order to empower all children, regardless of background, ethnicity, and religion, to reach their full potential.

Malaysia has achieved tremendous growth in access to education, especially at the primary level. The current challenge is to ensure that children not only have access to just any education but high-quality education. The enrolment rates at the primary level were 98.23% in 2020 compared to 98.14% in 2019 (MOE, 2021b: 42). At the secondary level enrolment rates in 2020 were 95.30% for lower secondary with a drop to 88.02% in upper secondary (ibid.). Challenges also persist in terms of quality of education where only 58% of the students at the end of primary school in 2019 achieved the minimum proficiency in reading, compared to other developed countries such as the United Kingdom (96.83% in 2016) and Finland (98.29% in 2016) as well as lagging behind some neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia, including Singapore (97.25% in 2016) and Vietnam (82.00% in 2019) (ibid.: 45). In terms of mathematics, only 64% of the children achieved the minimum nine mathematical proficiency measures expected at the end of primary school compared to 92% for Vietnam (UNICEF and SEAMEO, 2020: 57).

Despite high enrolment rates for Malaysian children, indigenous children and those in rural areas, particularly Orang Asli children, still lag behind in terms of access to education. The national average of secondary school completion in 2008 was 72%; in contrast, it was only 30% for Orang Asli students (MOE, 2013: 4–21). In a parliamentary question and answer session in November 2021, the minister of education stated that the completion rate for Orang Asli students for completing form five was only 42.29% in 2021 (*Sinar Harian*, 2021). Although there has been some improvement over the years, the education gap between the Orang Asli students and their peers remains a significant problem.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) has acknowledged the educational gaps between Orang Asli students and their non-Orang Asli peers and established the Orang Asli Transformation Plan 2013–2018 under the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025. This is not the first implementation of policies and programmes specifically targeted at Orang Asli children. Other initiatives and programmes (such as the Pensiangan-Salinatan project) have been implemented prior to this in order to address education inequality.

This report is the second part of a two-part series on access to education for Orang Asli children. The first paper examined the challenges they face, drawing on the findings of previous studies, and mapping out education policies and programmes for them. This report seeks to identify the underlying challenges that Orang Asli children face in obtaining an education and to understand the implementation and delivery of programmes and assistance provided by the government. This study utilises primary data from interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) that were conducted with parents, teachers, principals, and other relevant stakeholders. The main body of this report has eight sections as follows: (1) methodology; (2) profile of respondents; (3) study findings on challenges faced by Orang Asli children in accessing education from the perspective of parents and teachers; (4) review of programmes and assistance from government; (5) teachers' and schools' initiatives; (6) community and other initiatives; (7) discussion on how to resolve the education challenges faced by Orang Asli children; and (8) policy recommendations.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology through the use of FGDs and semi-structured interviews while also including a review of the existing policies related to Orang Asli education. The initial design of the study involved site visits and face-to-face FGDs with parents, teachers, and schoolchildren. However, the Covid-19 pandemic and related travel restrictions made it necessary to switch face-to-face meetings to virtual meetings via online platforms and telephone interviews. We were also not able to conduct FGDs with primary or secondary schoolchildren. This limited our interviews to parents and teachers, and thus the focus were barriers and challenges as perceived by parents and teachers. We supplemented this data by conducting FGDs with tertiary students above 18 years old and also triangulating the data with existing documentation (Danker and Rusalina, 2019).¹ These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded according to themes that emerged. We aim to present the data in a way that highlights the voices and the unique viewpoints of the Orang Asli participants and the schoolteachers involved with Orang Asli education. The team interviewed a total of 41 Orang Asli parents, 18 teachers (including three principals and one Penolong Kanan Hal Ehwal Murid), five Orang Asli tertiary students, and eight stakeholders. The interviews were conducted from March to November 2021 with the bulk conducted in August and September.

The Orang Asli parents and students who participated in this study were selected through targeted recruitment (on the recommendation of partners on the ground) in order to be able to cover a range of geographic locations and sub-ethnic groups as was originally planned, and also via snowball sampling (where respondents were asked if they could recommend other respondents that we could interview). The switch to online and phone interviews also limited the interviews to parents who were comfortable with the technology and had access to both a phone and adequate phone coverage. Parents were asked about the challenges and the barriers they faced in sending their children to school, their thoughts on whether schooling was important, their recommendations on how to improve the education experiences of Orang Asli children, and their aspirations for their children's future. They were also asked about aid received for their children's education, such as from Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKOA, Department of Orang Asli Development), and their opinions on these forms of assistance.

The schools were selected to include Sekolah Model Khas Komprehensif 9 (K9, Special Comprehensive Model School 9) and non-K9 schools as well as schools in rural and more urban settings. However, we were not able to secure a meeting with representatives from an urban school that we identified. We obtained permission from the MOE to contact the schools and to conduct the interviews. We first interviewed the school principals (*guru besar*) and asked them for recommendations for other teachers in their schools to interview. Teachers were also asked for recommendations of other teachers to interview. It should be pointed out that the teachers we interviewed represent a selected group who were relatively more sympathetic to Orang Asli and active in Orang Asli education issues. Teachers were asked about their experience teaching in Orang Asli schools, the challenges they faced, and their various teaching strategies. Teachers were also asked about specific programmes (for example, Program Intervensi Khas Murid Orang Asli dan Peribumi [PIKAP, Special Intervention Programme for Orang Asli and Peribumi Students]) and also for recommendations on the improvements they would like to see to ensure better education experiences for Orang Asli students. In addition to the parents, teachers, and students, the team also interviewed stakeholders that included Orang Asli educators and professionals, non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives, and others who

¹ Stories in digital form by Orang Asli children are available on the Suara Saya, Cerita Saya website: <https://www.suarasayaceritasaya.org>.

had expertise and experience with regard to Orang Asli education. Five of the eight stakeholders interviewed are from the Orang Asli community and they brought with them their own first-hand experiences in navigating the Malaysian schooling system as minorities.

The village names of the respondents are not included in order to protect their privacy and the respondents are identified via code numbers for anonymity. While this report uses the collective term Orang Asli, we must stress that Orang Asli are not a homogenous group. An effort was made to ensure a diversity of sub-ethnic groups were represented in the pool of respondents.

3. PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

The Orang Asli parents involved in this study are from five states (Perak, Pahang, Kelantan, Johor, Selangor) with an almost equal representation from each state (Figure 1). In terms of ethnic groups, 56.1% of the Orang Asli parents interviewed are Senoi, 39% are Proto-Malay, and 4.9% are Negrito (Figure 2). This is in proportion to the current composition of Orang Asli ethnic groups in Malaysia (JAKOA, 2018). (For a more detailed distribution of the sub-ethnic categories of the parents, see Figure 2.) The parents are between 29 and 56 years old, with the majority being in their forties (Figure 3). The gender distribution of the parents was approximately equal (51.2% male and 48.8% female), with slightly more male respondents than female in the older age brackets. The average number of children is five per family. 17.9% of these respondents have attained a post-secondary education, 41.1% completed some form of secondary education, and 41.0% have some level of primary education (Figure 4).

Figure 1 Distribution of the location of Orang Asli parents interviewed
(Source: Authors)

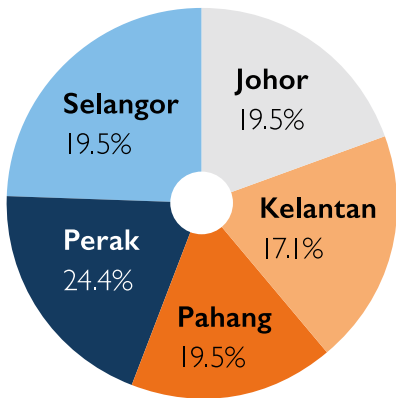


Figure 2 Distribution of ethnicity and sub-ethnic groups of Orang Asli parents interviewed (Source: Authors)

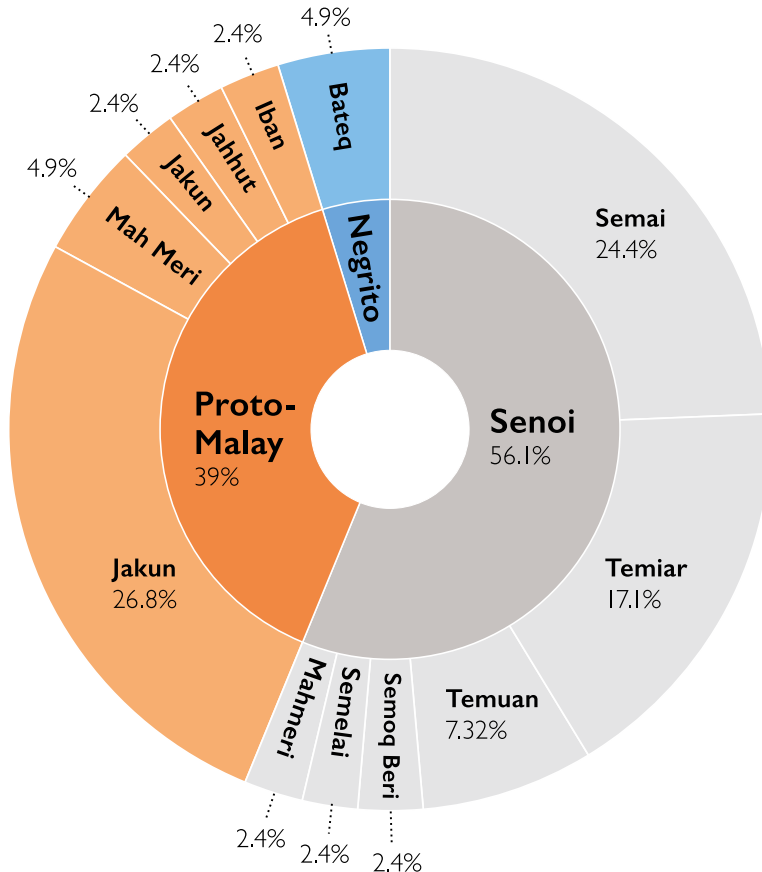
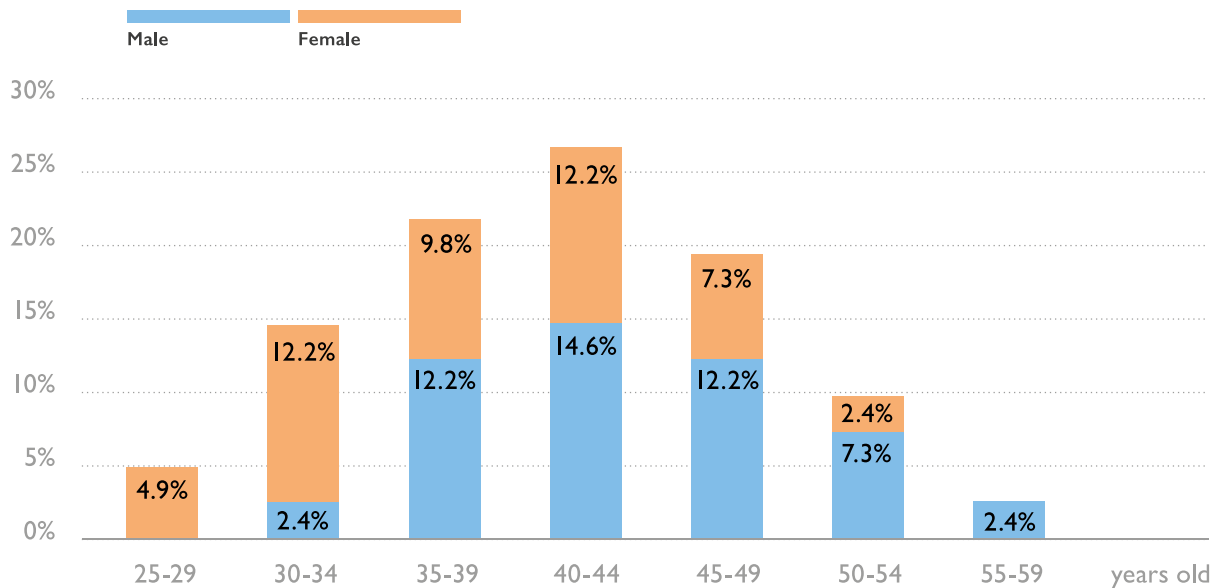
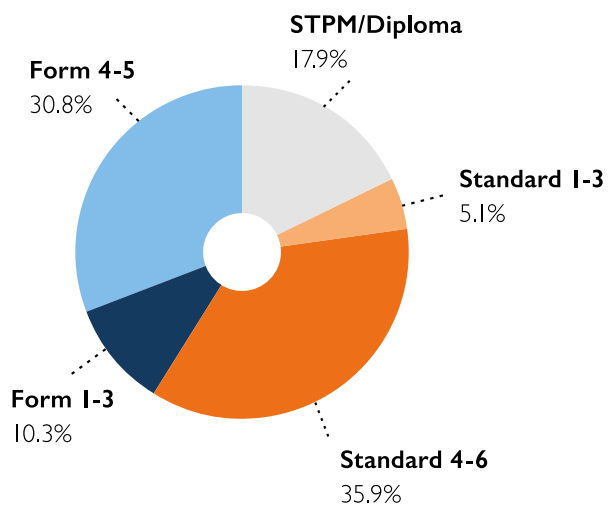


Figure 3 Age and gender distribution of Orang Asli parents interviewed (Source: Authors)**Figure 4** Educational attainment levels of Orang Asli parents interviewed (Source: Authors)

There were five Orang Asli tertiary education students who participated in the FGDs; four are in university and one is in matriculation. They are originally from Pahang and Selangor. The students are between 18 and 28 years old and three of the five students are female.

There were 18 teachers who participated, including three Orang Asli teachers who are teaching in Orang Asli schools. The principals and Penolong Kanan Hal Ehwal Murid interviewed have vast teaching experience, with over 25 years each, except for one who did not mention their length of service. The teachers we interviewed comprised eight female teachers and six male teachers, with

these teachers having teaching experience ranging from one year to 13 years. The teachers and principals are teaching in Orang Asli schools located in Pahang (three schools), Johor (one school), Kelantan (one school), and Perak (one school).

In addition, this study also involved key informant interviews from other stakeholders and Orang Asli professionals. This included two NGOs (Malaysian CARE and Global Peace Foundation Malaysia), three Orang Asli professionals, a co-founder of a Pusat Didikan Komuniti (PDK, Community Learning Centre), a former lecturer in Institut Pendidikan Guru (IPG, Teacher Training Institute) Tengku Ampuan Afzan, a former Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia Malaysia (SUHAKAM, Human Rights Commission of Malaysia) officer, and a former MOE officer.

4. CHALLENGES

4.1 Parents' perspectives

In the following section, we present the many challenges related to Orang Asli education based on the feedback obtained from parents and students and discuss the implications of these challenges. We highlight recurring themes as analysed from the data collected. The main issues raised include poor accessibility to schools, racial discrimination and bullying, financial constraints, the absence of Orang Asli history and cultures in the school curriculum, and the role of parental involvement.

4.1.1 Physical access to schools

Physical access to schools was a major concern raised by the Orang Asli parents and students. This included problems with transportation, bad road conditions, and the distance from their homes to schools with school transportation topping the list of challenges faced. The issues also included the safety and reliability of the transportation provided. These problems affect students' experiences in school with students being exhausted, missing school, or eventually dropping out.

In many villages, transportation to school in the form of a van or bus is organised and sponsored by JAKOA. In more remote villages with unpaved roads, pickup trucks (such as a Toyota Hilux and sometimes lorries) serve as the main form of transportation. Parents complained that these vehicles often break down, in addition to picking up the students either too early in the morning or too late in the afternoon, and sometimes not showing up at all. In some cases, parents send their children to school using their private vehicles, incurring a greater burden in both financial cost and time. Bad road conditions and long distances to the schools exacerbate these problems.

The timing of the transportation provided affects the well-being of the students; parents reported their children being exhausted and hungry as they have to wake up very early in order to take this transportation and arrive home very late. Some students have to wait for their transportation as early as 5.30 a.m. as these vehicles have to go to multiple villages to pick up students. One parent cited this as one reason why students are tired: "*Pukul 5 budak dah bangun, pukul 6 dia dah bersedia, lori akan sampai ... dia akan habis sekolah pada pukul 1.30, maka [bas] akan hantar diaorang kampung ke kampung sebanyak 18 kampung di sini ... jadi nampak la keletihan*" (OP003). As the primary and secondary school students are often picked up in a single trip and the primary school is closer, sometimes younger students end up arriving at their schools more than an hour before school starts. Tired, cold, and sleepy, they have to find a safe space to wait for the school gates to open. One student said her school bus often came to pick them up very late in the afternoon, forcing the students to walk home due to hunger.

The rough, challenging, and poor road conditions further add to the difficult situation. As the road accesses are often dirt roads, it can be dangerous or even impassable if it rains. A parent described the situation on rainy days: "*Sebab dia hujan itu, jalan tu pecah-pecah. Kena slow-slow*" (OP003). They also said they worried about their children's safety on rainy days, stating that, "*Diaorang pergi jugalah sebab ada lori tadi yang menghantar. Tapi itulah kita ibu bapa risau sebab jalan itu licin, kita pun takut jugalah, takut ada apa-apa*" (OP003). Another parent mentioned that there had been a few times when the buses and lorries had nearly fallen into the nearby river on rainy days because of the slippery roads, "*Kalau time hujan memang teruk, ada beberapa kali dah bus nak jatuh dalam sungai*" (OP019).

There are also villages that have problems with encountering wild animals on the roads. A parent said that there are often elephant tracks on the road: *“kesan gajah memang banyak”* (OP012), which makes it dangerous when they send their children to school in the mornings. Another parent stated: *“Pukul 6.30 nak keluar dah berdepan dengan gajah, dekat tengah jalan. Itulah cabaran kalau tengah naik motor, sedap bawa motor tiba-tiba kat depan dah 2–3 ekor gajah”* (OP037).

Although some parents have their own vehicles such as motorcycles, most need to go to work early in the morning and are therefore unable to send their children to school, while for families with many children going to school, they may not all fit on one motorcycle. Some parents indicated that if they were able, they would be willing to send their children to school; however, they have to prioritise earning a living in order to support their family with one parent stating, *“[K]ita kena tanggung keluarga, ... [ahli keluarga lain] tak tahu bawa motor ... tak boleh nak hantar anak sekolah tiap-tiap hari, tapi kalau jalan tar macam di bandar bolehlah”* (OP006).

Several parents noted that the distance from their villages to the schools, coupled with poor road conditions, can leave parents with no choice but to place their children in school hostels even though their children may be too young to be on their own. Some parents may decide not to send their children to school at all due to the remote location of their villages and the unavailability of reliable transportation.

Sesetengah kawasan kampung ataupun pos pedalaman yang tidak ada sekolah rendah. Apabila tak ada sekolah rendah dia akan hantar anak dia jauh ... kalau anak yang umur [7 tahun, 8 tahun, 9 tahun] yang tak tahu mengurus diri macam mana dia duduk di asrama saya tak faham. (OP028)

As is clear from these interview excerpts, physical access to schools is a major problem facing these Orang Asli communities. Transportation may seem to be only a logistical problem but it actually affects the education quality for students. Having to wait for transport to school as early as 5.30 a.m. causes the students to be extremely tired and sleepy, thus affecting their academic performance. Arriving home late in the afternoon, they do not have much energy left to do their schoolwork. Students who get up early to wait for their transport, only for it not to arrive, become disheartened and eventually lose interest in going to school altogether. Meanwhile, parents who take the initiative to send their children to school and pick them up do so at the expense of foregoing a potentially significant part of their daily income as many work as wage labourers and have to clock in early for work. These parents also have to take on the burden of additional costs, such as for petrol and vehicle repair or maintenance. All these compounding factors add to the challenge of simply getting to school.

4.1.2 Discrimination and bullying

Racial discrimination and bullying were common experiences for Orang Asli students, especially in schools where they represent a minority of the student body. For many, this occurs when they transition from all-Orang Asli primary schools to mixed secondary schools. One parent said: *“Anak pertama saya tu, dia sekolah rendah dia ok, sekolah menengah dia tak ok. Kadang-kadang kawan dia buli dia, cakap macam-macam dekat dia. Sampai Tingkatan Empat saja dia terus berhenti”* (OP013). All the students we interviewed had personally experienced discrimination and racism in their schools. One student described her experience being the only Orang Asli student in an upper secondary residential school where a group of students would pick on her saying, *“Oh Orang Asli yang tinggal dalam hutan tu ke, yang pakai cawat tu ke?”* (FGD_OSI). The student was also taunted using the terms “Sakai” and “Jakun” in derogatory ways. Students in our interviews reported that this kind of verbal bullying was common, causing much distress in their school experiences.

Students also reported physical bullying from their peers, in particular among the male students. Generally, the Orang Asli students did not feel comfortable reporting these incidents to school authorities, choosing instead to endure the day-to-day racism as part of their school experience. When they did take the initiative to report bullying, their schools did not take action. Unsurprisingly, students and parents we interviewed mentioned that some of their Orang Asli peers and children opted to drop out of school due to bullying, especially those living in hostels, with one parent noting: *“Mereka tinggalkan asrama kerana banyak kena bulilah budak tu. Jadi sampai barang mereka dicuri, lepas tu, dua orang budak tu tak dapat nak duduk asrama. Sekarang ni saya suruh diaorang ulang-alik dari kampung ke sekolah menengah”* (OP001).

Apart from bullying from their peers, students also report facing discrimination from their teachers. One student who attended a Orang Asli-majority primary school reported how the teachers would make insulting remarks such as, *“Tak payah ajar korang ni; Orang Asli ni bodoh juga, diajar pun bodoh jugak”* (FGD_OS2). The student also reported how fellow Orang Asli students who were not able to read or complete assignments were punished by having their knuckles rapped with a wooden ruler and also made to stand outside the classroom.

Several students also raised the issue of teachers imposing Islamic values on them. One student’s father is a hunter and therefore her family eats game animals and meat such as wild boar; however, she was told by her teacher not to eat pork and that it was wrong. This student also reported having to memorise a Qur’anic verse or else face punishment, despite not being Muslim. Another student shared that when she first lived in her school’s hostel, she was expected to fast during Ramadan and pray because the other students assumed she was Muslim as her name includes the term “Binti”. A parent also brought up the imposition of dominant Malay Muslim cultural practices at school. She cited the example of teachers instructing her child to greet (*salam*) her teachers and elders by kissing their hands, which she felt was part of Malay Islamic culture, and should not be imposed on her child. Several respondents also brought up the issue of students forced to take Arabic language as a school subject.

Racial discrimination, bullying, and other negative experiences mark the experiences of many Orang Asli students. The discrimination and bullying from their peers and teachers can be incredibly traumatising and demotivating for students, causing some students to end up leaving school altogether. Significant attention needs to be given to address this problem to ensure that schools are safe spaces for Orang Asli children to learn and grow together with non-Orang Asli students and staff. Racial discrimination is structurally embedded and therefore solutions should focus on dismantling structural racism and discrimination instead of only focusing on individuals, as measures such as expelling bullies or transferring problematic teachers to other schools do not address the full scope of the problem at hand.

Schools could be more proactive in creating programmes to foster mutual understanding of different cultures in the school. Anti-bias training needs to be provided for teachers and their literacy on Orang Asli cultures improved. Orang Asli cultures and history should be included in the curriculum. Studies have shown that the inclusion of the culture and history of minority groups in the school curriculum that emphasise “the value of diversity, are also effective in fostering anti-racist norms and values in society” (Paradies, 2005: 10). Given that school-based anti-bullying programmes have been proven to be effective in decreasing bullying in schools (Ttofi and Farrington, 2011), anti-bullying programmes and zero-bullying policies should also be instituted in schools.

4.1.3 Absence of Orang Asli cultures and history

Students and parents believed that the main reason non-Orang Asli students (and staff) discriminated against them was because many had never met or learned about Orang Asli. They commented on the absence of Orang Asli history and cultures in the mainstream curriculum and recommended that non-Orang Asli students be exposed to Orang Asli cultures to change their mindset.

Awareness programmes for masyarakat yang luar yang bukan Orang Asli ... Supaya diorang tahu, oh Orang Asli ni ... diorang ada bahasa diorang juga, diorang ada budaya diorang, sebabnya kalau diorang takda awareness, mungkin dia macam, "Sakailah orang ni dia Orang Asli duduk dalam hutan, pakai cawat je, makan-makan pun makan camtu je kan" ... awareness, so diorang boleh tukar mindset, perception diorang. (FGD_OS2)

Parents also suggested the inclusion of Orang Asli cultures and languages in the mainstream curriculum, seeing this as an important part of ensuring their traditional cultures and languages continue to be passed down to future generations. The Semai language was previously offered as an elective subject available in selected primary schools, but it is unclear if it is still an option for students.

Saya harap juga, pihak-pihak kerajaan atau jabatan-jabatan terlibat untuk menambah aktiviti tentang kebudayaan kita Orang Asli di sekolah, kalau ni pun ada lihat kebanyakan Orang Asli pun dah kehilangan adat dan kebudayaan mereka, saya harap ada pihak kementerian buat milik penyelidikan pada masa akan datang, terapkan budaya dalam suatu mata pelajaran la, sebab dulu sekolah rendah saya tengok satu pelajaran dia panggil "Kajian Tempatan", dia ada [I]ban, Iban, seperti itu, saya harap ada suku kaum Jakun, kaum Semai semua pun ada dalam buku tu. (OP022)

[S]etiap kaum ataupun bangsa semua ada dia punya percakapan ibunda ni, maksudnya ibunda ni ada pelajaran dalam sekolah, cadangan – Kalau ada kerajaan atau mana-mana agensi yang untuk membantu ataupun memperkenalkan ... percakapan Orang Asli ni diserap juga dalam sekolah tak kira Orang Asli macam tu ... (OP016)

Parents felt a sense of pride and belonging when schools made efforts to include Orang Asli cultures in their school activities (see Section 6.6). This is more common in Orang Asli schools, but lacking in mainstream schools. The inclusion of the diversity of Orang Asli cultures and history in the mainstream curriculum is not only important for Orang Asli but critical for the wider Malaysian society as both Orang Asli parents and students have identified that ignorance concerning their cultures has led to prejudice and discrimination against their communities (Mohd Roslan, 2016; Mohd Roslan and Mansor Abu, 2019). The integration of indigenous cultures and history and the creation of culturally responsive programmes in schools are important in creating awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity (Paradies, 2005; Bishop, 2010). This needs to begin at the early stages of preschool and primary school with trained teachers. Community members should be included in this process.

4.1.4 Financial constraints

The students in our focus group discussion all completed their primary and secondary schooling and are currently studying at the tertiary level. All receive government funding from various agencies for their tertiary education. They said that finances were a major issue while they were schooling as they are from modest backgrounds, mentioning that some of their peers ended up dropping out of school because of financial constraints.

Sebab ada anak Orang Asli kat sini dia macam tak mampu sebab parent diorang ada yang just kerja biasa kan, so ada yang mak tak kerja, pastu parent pula, ayah pula, macam kerja kebun, so tak cukup la anak pulak. Adik-beradik pun ramai, kalau dia nak pergi sekolah, pasti dia kena beli baju, kasut, beg, pastu untuk ni lagi, untuk ... apa nama dia – duit belanja, waktu rehat diorang kena beli juga. (FGD_OS2)

Many parents noted hardships concerning the expenses needed for their children's schooling. Despite the available assistance from JAKOA, parents still have to spend a substantial amount for their children's schooling needs to purchase things like additional school uniforms, shoes, school bags, and other essential items. Parents reported spending RM200–RM300 per child in primary school and this cost may be higher for children in secondary school. Parents also have to allocate pocket money for their children to buy food as not all children receive allowances from Rancangan Makanan Tambahan (RMT, Supplementary Food Programme) or they may only receive the allocated government assistance late towards the end of year. As one parent noted, "*Bila pendapatan okay diaorang pergilah sekolah, bila tak ada duit tu diaorang tak pergilah sekolah. Sebab anak saya yang sorang dapat RMT yang sorang tak dapat RMT*" (OP004).

The start of the school year is a tough time for parents with all the additional expenses as it often also coincides with the rainy season with fewer days available for working in the plantations and for tapping rubber. There have been many cases of students dropping out of school because their families are not able to afford these expenses. Some students also drop out in order to work to support their families or younger siblings.

There are also cases of students being unable to continue to tertiary education as they do not have sufficient funds. A few parents cited their children completing form five, but they were then not able to afford to pay for their children to attend any form of tertiary level education. In one case, a student did well in her Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM, Malaysian Higher School Certificate), obtaining nine As, but was not able to go to university as her parents were unsure of how to access financial aid or find a sponsor. A villager stated: "*Sedang mencari, siapa yang nak ambil dia, sebab kita ini mana ada duit untuk pergi belajar, jadi sedang cari la siapa-siapa penaja dia*" (OP003).

Financial constraints were a major barrier cited by many parents in our interviews. The financial assistance currently available for Orang Asli was deemed insufficient and parents recommended that the rates be reviewed to take into account the rising cost of living. We take note here that the allowance (*wang saku*) has increased from RM2 to RM4 in the 2022 national budget that has been tabled, which is a welcome change. However, there remains the need for more consistent and adequate financial assistance for other school needs and supplies. Students also drop out of school so that they can work to support their families which speaks to the need for greater financial aid for families so that the burden is not shifted onto the children at the expense of their education.

4.1.5 Parental involvement

All the parents we interviewed felt strongly about the importance of education for their children's future. They had put in a lot of effort and made significant sacrifices to be able to send their children to school as they see education as a means for their children to have a better life, improve their communities, and protect their rights.

Both parents and students stressed the important role parents play in motivating students to stay in school. Some parents suggested that Orang Asli parents need to be stricter and more involved in their children's schooling by paying more attention to their children's schooling needs and problems they may face in school, and providing support and motivation.

Ibu bapa kena bagi lebih komitmen lah kepada pendidikan anak-anak contohnya, kalau takde bahan mereka kena sediakan lah, cuba untuk sediakan bahan-bahan untuk anak ... Macam kalau anak-anak ni ada masalah dekat sekolah, mereka kena tahu lah, mereka kena soal selidik anak mereka apa masalah di sekolah supaya anak mereka tak terus lemah semangat pergi sekolah dan tak drop out. Sini banyak yang drop out sebab anak mula rasa bosan pergi sekolah, takde apa yang menyeronokkan bagi mereka. Ibu bapa tak menitikberatkan masalah dropout. (OP005)

However, not all parents are able to help their children with their schoolwork as they may not be familiar with the material. Parents whose children had dropped out of school admitted they found it hard to force their children to stay in school once they had lost interest. Some observed that the Orang Asli parenting style gives a greater autonomy to children as decision-makers. As one parent said, "Itu hak dia."

Parental involvement is important to provide support for children to stay in school. School can be challenging for Orang Asli children for many different reasons and, when given a choice, they may not want to continue going to school, but parents can play a key role in helping them resolve these challenges and encourage them to stay in school. Some parents suggested the need to create more awareness among Orang Asli parents on the importance of their roles in their children's education, with one parent stating, "Saya nampak anak-anak di kampung diorang bermain sebab mungkin bapa pun tak ada, tak ada kesedaran. Mak bapak tak ada kesedaran" (OP032).

4.1.6 Pandemic-related learning challenges

As with many other underprivileged communities, the Covid-19 pandemic has posed many challenges for the Orang Asli community with regard to children's schooling, threatening to widen the education gap even more. The shift to online learning has been challenging for students due to limited internet connectivity and not having the proper devices for learning. This lack of technology was noted by the parents we interviewed: "Di kampung saya, yang ada saya rasa ada berpuluh, 80–90 murid sanakan. Ibu bapa mereka takde handphone, takde line, takde pengetahuan lah tentang hal-hal sekolah ni kan apa lagi mengajar tu kan" (OP023).

Students also find it hard to understand their lessons and complete assignments without face-to-face interaction with teachers. This caused the students to feel frustrated, leaving them unable to understand their teachers and follow the lessons.

Kalau online ini, diaorang memang tak faham diaorang cakap, macam diaorang boring kan. Belajar pakai online ini, tak ada orang yang ajar. Ha, jadi diaorang macam bosan la sikit nak belajar pakai online ini.... Cikgu ada ajar yang diaorang tak faham, kalau pakai online ini susah sikit diaorang cakap, tak faham, itu memang diaorang tinggal je macam itu. (OP031)

The parents we interviewed did not receive any assistance in terms of electronic devices, such as tablets, laptops, and smartphones, though they have heard of instances elsewhere where Orang Asli students received such assistance. Many students have had to rely on using their parents' handphones to be able to attend online classes. Often siblings have to share a single phone, taking turns accessing online learning: *"Saya stress; saya ada satu handphone, ada tiga orang anak, dua menengah satu sekolah rendah, saya punya [phone] itu boleh hang, boleh hang"* (OP003). One parent said:

Macam sekarang ni, musim [Covid-19], banyak cabaran dia. Sekarang ni budak dah tak sekolah so mereka bagi melalui telefon kerja sekolah mereka. Jadi cabaran dia, saya di sekolah rendah ada dua orang. Jadi kedua-dua kelas tu bagi kertas kerja dengan telefon yang sama jadi saya pun susah nak focus mana satu nak belajar. (OP001)

Some parents have had to purchase a second handphone for their children, especially for those attending secondary school. This poses an additional hardship on parents, many of whom have had reduced incomes as they were not able to work or sell their agricultural products during the Covid-19 lockdown periods. Parents also incur added costs as they have to top up their phone credit when free internet access is not available. A parent in Johor told us that the network assistance they received via their children's school often does not work, sometimes breaking down for two weeks at a time. In some villages, a working internet connection is not available at all, while in others students have to walk several kilometres to find a spot with connectivity. Students do so at the risk of their personal safety and of being fined by the authorities for violating lockdown measures.

Budak terpaksa pulak keluar daripada kawasan kampung ke lebih kurang [empat kilometer ke lima kilometer] baru dapat ... dapat akses internet ... Tak boleh nak buka khemah sebab sekarang ni MCO [Movement Control Order] takut nanti polis datang ahhh satu hal lagi dia cakap... Apa cuma saya cakap ... dengan ketua polis ... tu. Saya cakap tuan kena paham la dengan kita tak ada akses internet haaa ... budak pulak terpaksa belajar dekat luar takkan tuan nak kenakan kompaun apa semua tuan kena fikir sendiri ni kena pada kami kalau kena pada tuan. Tuan akan rasa apa yang kami rasa. (OP040)

In light of this problem with the lack of connectivity and mobile devices, some schools have opted for offline learning with teachers taking the initiative to provide physical worksheets that parents can pick up at designated locations or are delivered to their villages. Parents appreciated this option, with one parent praising the teacher in her child's school for preparing folders with all the worksheets for the week in one place. It was easier to handle compared to the multiple instructions and links from teachers sent via WhatsApp which she found harder to keep track of.

Despite teachers providing hard copies of worksheets, some assignments still required internet connectivity as they included QR (quick response) codes that linked to information that could only be found online. For both online learning and worksheet packages, students found it challenging to do the assignments on their own. Parents were not able to guide or assist their children as they were unfamiliar with the materials, with some parents being illiterate themselves.

Kita terpaksa kena ajar benda yang kita tak tahu cikgu bagi kerja sekolah itu, contohnya macam kerja sekolah sains kan, kita kena faham kan anak itu kita terpaksa buat uji kaji dekat rumah, benda yang simple la. Bagi diaorang faham. matematik pun sama. So kira macam satu cabaran la, kita pun macam tak semua lah ibu bapa ini boleh ajar, kadang-kadang ada mak bapak yang buta huruf, so memang satu cabaran time belajar PdPR [pengajaran dan pembelajaran di rumah] ini. (OP037)

Saya dengan isteri bekerja ah, anak saya tinggal dengan nenek, dia memang tak tau apa nak ajar tentang pembelajaran yang dia buat tu ... Selalu anak saya tak dapat nak ikut la, tapi takda cara lain, itu saja cara yang ada, saya pun bekerja ... jadi tak banyak masa untuk bantu pendidikan ... masa pembelajaran sebelah pagi, selalu kecikiran la, tak faham apa dia belajar, jadi tak ba banyak.... Saya jarang di rumah saya, saya kerja di hutan, bila saya balik pun saya pun boleh semak bantu sikit sikit saja lah, uh macam isteri saya pun dia pun agak kurang kurang faham dalam handphone ni, dia susah juga, jadi kita boleh ajar sikit la. (OP022)

Parents conceded that they needed to play a bigger role in monitoring their children's schooling during the pandemic as their children were more easily distracted. It was challenging for parents to get students to sit down and focus on their online learning. Students who usually enjoyed schooling lost interest in their schoolwork without face-to-face interactions. However, not all parents have had the time to spend on helping their children with their education as they have to work.

Masa online ini, cabaran itu la, bila kita suruh, bila cikgu telefon dia buat tak tahu la, malas la itu la ini la ... kadang-kadang bila dah lama lockdown, kira dia macam tak biasa, kelas online dengan kelas real tak sama, suasana itu la ... cuma sekarang dia macam cikgu beri kerja sekolah, dia WhatsApp kat ibu bapa, ibu bapa kena suruh dia buat kerja sekolah itu, kalau nak harapkan dia, memang ... itu la cabaran dia, kadang-kadang dia buat tak tahu. Suka main sebab tak pernah [macam ni] kan. (OP024)

In some villages, parents reported that there was no online learning or worksheets provided by the schools at all. One parent complained that even though their village had internet connectivity his children's school did not initiate any online learning. Parents also said that students found it hard to study without a proper quiet space to do their schoolwork. Often they have to share a space with the rest of their family who may also be busy with their own activities: "Tak ada tempat yang sesuai untuk anak belajar. Sebab maklum saja lah bilik berkongsi, di ruang tamu ada television, yang tak ada television pun ada adik-adik kecil main semua. Jadi dia tak ada tempat itu untuk dia belajar" (OP028).

The following are some of the suggestions from parents interviewed:

1. Provide for and allow teachers who are willing to stay in the villages to facilitate learning and conduct classes outside of school grounds: "... kalau boleh kita kena cari cikgu ... yang berhampiran dengan kita ... Seminggu sekaligus untuk pelajar-pelajar [m]enengah kita ni, buatlah kelas dimana di mana" (OP021).
2. Distribute physical homework instead of online learning for those in areas without a stable internet connection: "[K]ita ubah pembelajaran alam maya pastikan cikgu turun ke padang untuk hantar semua kerja sekolah dan ambil kerja sekolah ini" (OP017). "[K]erja sekolah guna WhatsApp la, Google Classroom la. Google Classroom tak boleh masuk sebab line internet dekat kampung kami ini tak berapa elok. Hanya WhatsApp itu je la" (OP026).

3. Provide mobile devices for those in areas with access to internet and teach the children and parents how to use the devices: “Kalau ada peruntukkan untuk alat-alat elektronik [peranti] ni mungkin membantu sedikit sebanyak ... kena ada latihan lah kepada bapa ibu lah terutama sekali bagaimana nak tekan” (OP023).

4.2 Challenges faced by teachers

In the following section we present the concerns and discuss the challenges related to Orang Asli education based on the interviews conducted with schoolteachers teaching Orang Asli students. Some of the challenges raised were the lack of preparation and training they had prior to their postings, negative stereotypes they experienced as teachers assigned to Orang Asli schools, teaching and learning as well as infrastructure challenges, and a lack of parental involvement.

4.2.1 Preparation and training

Teachers assigned to Orang Asli schools for the first time described experiencing culture shock: “Bila saya masuk ... mengajar murid Orang Asli, like first tu honestly saya rasa macam cultural shock, saya sendiri macam cultural shock” (FGD004). For many, it was their first time in an Orang Asli community and meeting Orang Asli students. In general, they were not prepared for what to expect and were not familiar with the education issues and cultures of the Orang Asli.

First masuk tu, ada terkejut la, sebab masa masuk tu memang lain la compared to – because sebelum tu saya first school dah memang sekolah pedalaman ... tapi bila masuk sekolah asli ni, rasa lagi different ... macam we have to start from the beginning. I was quite shocked juga la bila kita tengok macam mana dia punya – different dia punya culture pun lain, lain lah. (SK007)

Teachers explained their cultural shock included finding the students to be extremely shy and reluctant to speak when they first met them. Some attributed this shyness due to the students' lack of confidence and exposure to the outside world, “Jadi cabaran saya sebagai guru ... pada peringkat awal memang lah ... pelajar memang kurang keyakinan diri, dengan sikap pemalu, mungkin kurang pendedahan dari sudut dunia luar ...” (FGD004). Teachers described being surprised when they first started teaching as they found many students behind in terms of their learning benchmarks and year group syllabus, and thus had to adapt the curriculum to the students' abilities, though not all teachers did this with some students being left behind. Teachers also commented that Orang Asli students were less able to focus in class.

Cabaran saya mula-mula sekali adalah saya rasa students [sekolah] ni ... [Mereka] lemah 3M – membaca, mengira, menulis. Tu lah sebab macam bila mengajar ... saya tak boleh ajar betul-betul ikut syllabus, saya kena rendahkan level, macam saya bagi yang basic je. (FGD004)

Mereka kurang [fokus] juga dalam kelas especially untuk BI [Bahasa Inggeris] la, sebabkan mereka kurang mahir dalam subjek BI so bila kita ajar tu mereka macam tak fokus, so most of the time saya memang ajar dalam Bahasa Melayu. (FGD004)

These teachers had received briefings before their outstation assignments though most noted they had no real training or exposure to Orang Asli cultures or culturally relevant pedagogy. The exceptions were teachers graduating from IPG Tengku Ampuan Afzan in Kuala Lipis, Pahang. IPG Tengku Ampuan Afzan has a centre for indigenous pedagogy and pioneered the development of “Rimbagogi”, a nature-based learning pedagogy. IPG Tengku Afzan also has an Orang Asli special intake programme which provides a

pathway for Orang Asli students to train as teachers. Teachers who graduate from IPG Tengku Ampuan Afzan are exposed to Orang Asli communities through the centre as well as through their practicum during which teachers are attached to Orang Asli schools.

Saya dari zaman IPG memang didedahkan dengan pendidikan Orang Asli, dan lecturer saya juga, ... merupakan penggubal "Rimbagogi" tu sendiri, jadi waktu kami berada di IPG kami ada kursus bahasa Semai dan kami diperkenalkan dengan budaya Orang Asli tu sendiri. Sebabnya di IPG tu sendiri ada cikgu Orang Asli tu sendiri. Dia akan memperkenalkan what is the dos and what is don'ts [sic] dekat dalam nak mengajar [O]rang [A]sli tu sendiri. Dan IPG saya juga dia ada hasilkan pelbagai kajian dan modul berkaitan dengan pendidikan Orang Asli. Memang terdedah lah pelajar-pelajar IPG tu mengenai pendidikan Orang Asli dan arah tuju pendidikan asli tu sendiri. (FGD001)

Teachers felt that their training at university and college did not adequately prepare them to teach in such different settings. One teacher pointed out that the skills they need exceed just knowing specific pedagogies. Rather they require adopting a different teaching philosophy altogether that focuses not only on creating lesson plans but understanding the bigger picture in education delivery in a minority community.

If you want to look at teacher education, I was not exposed to this. It was very theoretically based even if we were exposed to practical experiences ... what was observed was basically what's on paper – how your lesson plans have been delivered. We were not encouraged to somehow look at the bigger picture – how do we solve problems for the kids, how do we connect with the community, how do we get the children's trust – we were never taught any of these. My teacher's college and my university did not prepare me for this at all. (SK014)

Teachers agreed that it would be helpful to have some specific training and exposure to new teaching and learning strategies before being transferred to Orang Asli schools and that they would benefit from having a better understanding of Orang Asli cultures. Some state education departments, notably Johor, do provide annual training for teachers from Orang Asli schools exposing them to new modules and teaching methodologies to engage Orang Asli students. Overall, it is important for teachers to feel prepared and supported in their teaching. A mechanism or space for teachers to exchange ideas and share best practices should also be encouraged.

4.2.2 Negative stereotypes

There is a stereotype among educators (and to some extent the general public) that teachers who are assigned to Orang Asli schools are being demoted or punished. This can be demoralising for the teachers. One teacher described this experience as "“Oh, you're from [SK Orang Asli]” immediately, whatever I had to say was not important, because they deemed that I was a bad teacher, that's why I was sent to this school” (SK014).

Similarly, at the state level, according to some teachers, there is a tendency to look down on Orang Asli schools as weak links as they are seen as pulling down each state's education key performance indicators (KPIs). There is a strong focus on increasing attendance rates across Orang Asli schools as they are below the national average. However, this singular focus on attendance rates may overshadow other important issues on the ground. The focus remains on persuading Orang Asli students to attend school, shifting the responsibility on the students, rather than examining the reasons why these students do not come to school.

This negative perception (see Section 8.6.1 on deficit discourse) also extends to the Orang Asli students who are viewed as deficient students without the capacity to do well in school. This is reinforced in new teachers when they are told by more experienced teachers, “You don’t have to do so much because they are just Orang Asli kids” (SK014). There are also teachers who believe that Orang Asli students innately have low memories and are slow students. Some Orang Asli parents we met have also internalised this discourse, thinking that there is something genetically wrong with their children, giving them a decreased learning ability.

It is important to combat such negative stereotypes about Orang Asli schools and students. Orang Asli children are just as capable as other students to learn and do well in school. The deficit discourse is detrimental, denying the capabilities of Orang Asli children. Alternatively, the focus should be on a strength-based discourse and a culturally responsive pedagogy that take into account the students’ cultural backgrounds and life experiences as valuable resources.

4.2.3 Teaching, learning, and infrastructure

Teachers noted that a number of the challenges they face in their teaching and learning are related to the remoteness of the schools and the lack of resources. In the urban settings where they were trained or previously worked, they could just go to nearby shops to purchase any materials needed when they wanted to prepare visual aids or other classroom supplies. But in remote settings, these teachers must plan ahead and purchase all their supplies before travelling to the villages, or else make do with whatever resources they may have: “*Sebab kalau berbanding dengan sekolah luar kita boleh terus pegi kedai beli barang, tapi kalau kat sini nak adakan bahan pengajaran sebegitu perlu persediaan lebih awal*” (FGD004). Teachers are also not able to use technology in their classrooms because of the poor or non-existent internet connectivity.

Kalau kita nak guna teknologi pula macam medium [Kahoot!], ... yang tu pun terhalang ... medium tu bagus tapi kita tak boleh apply kat sini. Sebab, satu takda internet, satu lagi tak cukup prasarana untuk kegunaan murid-murid. (FGD004)

Overcrowded classes due to a lack of classrooms and teachers are another issue affecting the quality of teaching and learning with one principal stating that their school lacked six teachers: “*Masalah sekarang ni kami kekurangan guru enam orang pastu kami pula dalam satu kelas budak ramai*” (GB002). Class sizes are too large for optimal teaching, with around 45–50 students per teacher. These large class sizes mean that teachers are not able to ensure all students understand the class material. This is a critical problem because students come in at varying levels of competency.

Cuma mungkin satu lagi cabaran kami ... ialah pelajar tu ramai ... Jadi cabaran kepada kami, guru-guru di pedalaman dengan pelajar yang ramai, facility saya tak nafikan, mungkin dari sudut basic kita cukup, tapi kepadatan dari sudut pelajar dari sudut dalam kelas, saya rasa cabaran la ... bagaimana [ramai] tu dalam kelas tu sampai 45–50. (FGD005)

Another challenging situation that was raised is remedial learning (*pembelajaran pemulihan*). This happens when students who have never attended school enter at a later age. For example, if a student enters school at 12 years old, they are placed in standard six regardless of their reading and writing abilities. Many students also come from families that are illiterate or lacking in formal education so their parents are not able to help them read or do their schoolwork at home. Teachers have the difficult task of helping these students catch up to the appropriate age group standards: “*Memang yang umur 12/11/10 tahun memang tak ada pendidikan normal di mana-mana sekolah.*

Dan ibu bapa diaorang, hanya ada 1–2 orang yang boleh membaca, jadi di rumah sekali pun mereka tak ada pendidikan formal 3M” (FGD001).

Teachers also noted low attendance rates as a problem. For example, students may not show up to class during fruit season as they are helping their parents with harvesting. During the rainy season the roads are inaccessible making it hard for students to go to school. Students may also stop going to school if they are upset due to conflicts with other students or teachers. Some teachers have had to follow up by going to the students’ homes to convince them to come back to school. Many Orang Asli schools have instituted initiatives which include home visits in an effort to increase attendance rates (see Section 6 on teachers’ and schools’ initiatives).

4.2.4 Parental involvement

Similar to what parents said, teachers also identified parental involvement to be vital in encouraging students to continue studying and to stay in school. According to some teachers, Orang Asli parents do not emphasise the importance of education to their children enough. Teachers attribute this to the parents’ own education level and the lack of exposure to the importance of education. This opinion was countered by the stakeholders interviewed who suggested it is not that parents do not view education as important, but that the parents may feel disconnected and do not have the tools and knowledge necessary to motivate their children to stay in school.

Mungkin secara keseluruhannya kita sedia maklumkan tahap pendidikan ibu bapa ... tu kurang, mungkin pendedahan kepada peranan pendidikan tu ... kurang la, motivasi kepada anak-anak tu. Jadi sedikit sebanyak memberi apa peluang kepada pelajar tu, [d]ia tak kisah berbanding dengan ibu bapa di luar, anak tu tak datang ke sekolah mungkin dia akan marah kan. (FGD004)

Saya rasa macam pendedahan pendidikan ibu bapa tu kurang pada anak dia. Jadi anak dia pun macam kurang lah tarikan dia untuk datang ke sekolah bila ibu bapa dia tak dedahkan perkara yang sebenar tentang kepentingan pendidikan. Saya rasa cabaran yang paling utama, pendidikan terhadap ibu bapa. (FGD005)

Teachers also provided examples of parents letting their children make the final decision in choosing to go to school or not. They attributed this to the Orang Asli culture of giving children more autonomy in decision-making, stating: “Budaya masyarakat di sana memang begitu la, kalau anak dia tak nak, dia tak boleh buat apa, dia macam kalah dengan anak dia. [J]adi susah la kita nak mengatasi masalah itu, tak ada kerjasama [daripada] ibu bapa” (GB003). Teachers cite this as challenging as they need the support and cooperation of parents to ensure students continue their schooling.

While some teachers viewed the lack of parental involvement as cultural, others suggested that part of the problem is because parents are too busy earning a living that they do not have much time to focus on their children’s schooling. As a number of Orang Asli parents are wage labourers or are involved in agricultural work, they need to work very hard for very long hours to support their families.

Kalau ibu bapa asli ni, mungkin masuk hutan tak dapat banyak macam tu. [S]ebab tu mereka bekerja dengan tempoh yang lama dan kerap. Jadi masa untuk bersama dengan anak-anak mereka kurang. Jadi untuk ... pembelajaran tu agak kurang jugalah sebenarnya. (FGD004)

Another reason for parental non-involvement as cited by some of the stakeholders interviewed is that parents feel uncomfortable with and disconnected from the school system. As with other communities where the school system is unfamiliar to many indigenous parents with different structures, values, and focuses than the ones they are familiar with at home and in their cultures (Pushor and Murphy, 2004), this too may apply to Orang Asli. For example, in their communities Orang Asli children learn via hands-on methods by following their parents to the forest or their farms, and there is an emphasis on sharing and working collectively, non-confrontational approaches, and patience in learning new skills. A study by Misnaton Rabahi et al. (2015) shows that parental involvement at home – for example, ensuring students wake up for school in time, preparing breakfast, establishing routines, and showing pride in their children's achievements – “is not visible to educators in the school, thus the common perception of the lack of Orang Asli PI [parental involvement]” (ibid.: 9).

More efforts should be made to connect with parents and increase their involvement in school. Rather than putting the blame on parents for not being involved in their children's school activities, efforts should be made to re-examine how schools can invite their involvement (Pushor and Murphy, 2004). For example, schools can have open days and reach out to parents to attend and make an effort to get to know them better. Some schools have taken this initiative to reach out to parents through home visits and seen positive results (see Section 6). Schools could also invite parents as a resource to share about Orang Asli cultures and traditions to both staff and students. Orang Asli parents and their communities therefore will feel a greater sense of ownership in the school and gain confidence in their role as an important partner in the children's education, rather than being seen as a problem. More communication and discussion between teachers and parents could create a better support system for Orang Asli children. Opportunities for both parents and teachers to convey some of the problems faced in the students' education may enable them to come up with solutions.

Putting the blame on Orang Asli parents is common in public discourse. On the contrary, the parents we interviewed all strongly believed in the importance of education. While parental involvement is important, placing the blame on the parents takes attention away from the larger structural problems within the education system that cause high dropout rates.

4.2.5 Intra-agency coordination and cooperation

One of the key challenges identified by teachers and administrators is the coordination of assistance between schools and JAKOA. While the schools themselves are under the management of the MOE, many other aspects of Orang Asli students' education such as transportation, financial assistance, and subsidies are handled by JAKOA. Coordination and collaboration between the two agencies are therefore important. As one teacher explained it, when students are in school the school takes care of them; however, the process to get to and from school is handled by JAKOA. Like the parents interviewed, teachers also expressed concern about the safety and reliability of the transportation for students. Teachers and administrators called for an evaluation of the efficiency and efficacy of these services.

JAKOA adalah [penting] kepada proses pengurusan ataupun pembangunan sekolah SMOA [Sekolah Murid Orang Asli]. Jadi saya rasa kena tengok balik dari sudut efficient setiap perkara yang diperuntukkan; contohnya dari sudut pengangkutan. Macam mana prosesnya, ada ke kekangan dan sebagainya. Sebabnya, sekolah ... tidak terlibat secara langsung dalam proses pengurusan ... jadi kita just menerima pelajar daripada pintu pagar, jadi prosesnya macam mana dan sebagainya, pengangkutan tu macam mana, cukup ke, atau apa cabarannya.... Pelajar kami naik atas Hilux yang 30, 40 orang! Kita takut dia jatuh terbalik habis, masuk dalam longkang nanti kan. Jadi proses itu kita kena tengok balik peruntukan yang turunkan, bagaimana pelaksanaannya secara efficient. (FGD004)

The distribution of pocket money for secondary students is another problem that affects the attendance and performance of students in school. In one remote school, students are provided RM2 per day (for a total RM40 per month) that is directly deposited into their bank accounts. However, even accessing these funds means students have to travel to town to go to a bank, incurring even more costs. These financial transfers are also often delayed. With no pocket money, students cannot afford to buy food from school canteens and go hungry during school. Some students soon stop coming to school altogether because of this, choosing instead to help their parents with agricultural work to make money. The school administrators have appealed to JAKOA to exchange the funds with RMT for secondary school students so that the students have food to eat when they come to school, similar to the setup that exists in primary schools.

Sebab pelajar ni bila tak hadir kami buat outreach, [mereka] kata [mereka] takde duit nak pergi sekolah. [Tak ada] duit makan sebab makan tak disediakan ... Sebab kekangan itu menyebabkan kehadiran [menurun]. Saya dah bawa ke pihak JAKOA supaya tengok balik. (GB002)

Wang saku adalah RM2 setiap kali dia datang la, attendance dia datang ke sekolah kan. Dan duit tu diorang akan claim setiap akhir bulan, berbanding dengan sekolah rendah yang sepenuhnya mendapat bantuan rancangan makanan tambahan ... Jadi bila pelajar menengah – , apabila dia datang ke sekolah dia tak ada proses RMT tu. Jadi nak tunggu ada duit bank ni ... Jadi proses tu kadang ada cepat, kadang lambat berbulan, kadang delay dan sebagainya. Jadi pelajar menengah dia lebih nampak lebih baik dia tak datang sekolah, dia tolong bapak dia masuk hutan, menoreh dapat duit, datang sekolah dia lapar. (FGD004)

JAKOA provides many forms of essential assistance for Orang Asli schooling. However, there are clearly some critical issues in the mechanisms of delivery of this assistance. There needs to be a strengthening of collaboration and coordination between JAKOA and the MOE.



Photo by Capturing The Human Heart / Unsplash

5. REVIEW OF PROGRAMMES AND ASSISTANCE

This section reviews the programmes and assistance provided for Orang Asli students. The first part covers programmes specifically designed for Orang Asli children, namely Program Intervensi Khas Murid Orang Asli dan Peribumi (PIKAP), Kelas Dewasa Orang Asli dan Peribumi (KEDAP, Orang Asli and Peribumi Adult Education Classes), and Sekolah Model Khas Komprehensif 9 (K9). The second part looks into other assistance offered in the form of food, financial aid, other school essentials, and hostels, including the process of delivery and implementation of these aid programmes. The last part of each subsection discusses specific recommendations that would enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery and implementation of these programmes and assistance.

5.1 PIKAP, KEDAP, and K9²

5.1.1 Program Intervensi Khas Murid Orang Asli dan Peribumi (PIKAP)

The MOE revised Kurikulum Orang Asli dan Penan (KAP, Orang Asli and Penan Curriculum) starting in late 2017 to 2018. The new revised module was renamed PIKAP (MOE, 2018). The objectives of PIKAP are the same as KAP which aims to improve the basic literacy and numeracy skills of Orang Asli and Peribumi students with the inclusion of three additional subjects (Malay language, English, and mathematics).

None of the teachers and principals that were interviewed had used PIKAP for teaching yet. Some teachers informed us that they had attended PIKAP training in 2020: "*saya pernah pergi kursus dia [PIKAP] tahun lepas [2020]*" (FGD005). However, the training is only for selected teachers and not all teachers have attended the training. There are teachers that are not familiar with PIKAP modules or have only heard about it briefly: "*Honestly, tak terlalu banyak sebabnya saya pun tak diberi pendedahan secara meluas mengenai itu [PIKAP], saya tahu mengenai kurikulum tu ketika saya buat kajian sarjana saya*" (FGD001).

Of those who have attended the training or have knowledge about the contents of the module, most did not have a clear opinion about the modules as they have yet to implement them in class: "*PIKAP ini kita dah dimaklumkan dengan PIKAP ini, cuma pelaksanaannya belum lagi. Setakat ini tak nampak lagi*" (FGD002). Many of the schools have postponed the implementation of PIKAP because of school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic: "*sejak PKP [Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan] tu banyak budak tak hadir ke sekolah jadi kita tutup sekolah jadi saya tak sempat guna lagi modul tu*" (FGD005).

One of the teachers who has tried using PIKAP for English teaching commented that the module would be helpful for Orang Asli students as the modules' mastery levels are suitable for the students. However, the teacher noted that the levels in the modules do not differ greatly from the mainstream curriculum and are not too different, but the activities make the PIKAP classes more interesting for the students.

[T]api kalau yang PIKAP memang sebab saya guna sepenuhnya sebab PIKAP Bahasa Inggeris, level dia tu memang bolehlah untuk budak-budak walaupun agak tinggi tapi boleh lah ... dia [aras minimum] tak ada jauh beza sangat tapi dia banyak aktiviti saya rasa macam PIKAP ni yes dia lebih memudahkan cikgu ... [beri] panduan untuk cikgu macam mana nak buat ... mudah lah sikit untuk saya mengajar tu sebab dia banyak aktiviti jadi kita ikut aktiviti tu, murid kita seronok. (FGD005)

2 More details on the evolution of these programmes are described in the first paper of this research project (Wan, 2020).

One of the teachers said that the PIKAP training that she recently attended was virtual training online. The modules taught employ a pedagogy and activities that would be suitable for Orang Asli children:

kalau khas untuk cikgu-cikgu SMOA, kami hadiri bengkel-bengkel khas untuk subjek-subjek yang tertentu ... saya pernah pergi ke bengkel PIKAP. Melalui Google Meet yang baru-baru ni ... kan ada [Bahasa Melayu, Bahasa Inggeris, Matematik] tu, untuk PIKAP. Jadi yang itu kita boleh belajarliah, macam mana nak ajar budak-budak [Orang Asli] ni, dengan pedagogi [dan] aktiviti mana yang kita boleh guna dalam PdPc [kaedah pengajaran dan pemudahcaraan] kita. (FGD004)

The individual Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri (JPN, State Education Department) conduct training from time to time for schoolteachers teaching Orang Asli students. JPN Johor was cited as one department that provides this regular training (about twice a year) which included learning new modules aimed to better engage Orang Asli students. In 2018–2019 selected teachers from Orang Asli schools received training on delivering PIKAP modules but the programme has yet to be fully implemented in many schools.

The application of PIKAP is still in its early stages while its implementation plan is unclear to most teachers. More training and support are needed to ensure that PIKAP is effective in guiding teachers in formulating adaptive and suitable lesson plans for Orang Asli students. PIKAP does have the potential to be a good guideline to help teachers improve the classroom engagement of Orang Asli children.

5.1.2 Kelas Dewasa Orang Asli dan Peribumi (KEDAP)

The KEDAP programme aims to provide classes for Orang Asli parents and those in rural communities who are illiterate so that they can learn to read and write. It is hoped that by learning to read and write, parents would be better able to guide and encourage their children to learn and attend school.

The parents who commented on the KEDAP programme were not supportive of the programme, stating it is not effective in educating the parents and the budget could be used for other educational programmes instead. The duration of lessons was insufficient to help the parents obtain basic literacy and numeracy skills as the classes only run for one hour per day from Monday to Thursday on a weekly basis. In addition, some parents stated that some of the parents attended KEDAP classes repeatedly in order to get an allowance for participating in the classes, "... [KEDAP] tidak begitu beri banyak apa-apa impaklah kepada pendidikan anak-anak ... tahun ini, sebahagiannya orang yang belajar tahun lepas ... tujuan dia belajar... sebab ada dibagi duit" (OP006).

Among the teachers interviewed, two teach at schools with a KEDAP programme. One of the teachers was in charge of the KEDAP programme and explained that she had attended training to coordinate it. Parents are selected through an examination, with those who fail being rejected. Out of the 40 parents who came for the examination 25 were selected. The teacher stated that the programme provides teachers with an opportunity to guide and share with the parents on how to help their children with their schoolwork at home.

[S]aya juga merupakan guru KEDAP... [bengkel penyelarass KEDAP] kami diberitahu dan didedahkan [bagaimana mengajar] pelajar-pelajar KEDAP... aktiviti-aktiviti yang bersesuaian dengan mereka, dengan situasi dan persekitaran ... yang boleh menarik minat peserta-peserta KEDAP datang ke sekolah, [dan] sebagainya... kami akan bagi ujian, tetapi KPM tetapkan hanya 25 peserta yang boleh menyertai ... ramai juga yang datang, kali ni lebih kurang 40 yang datang... [kami memilih] orang yang gagal ujian itu... Kami guru-guru KEDAP boleh membimbing mereka, [sekurang-kurangnya] bagi mereka tahu [bagaimana] mereka boleh ajar anak-anak mereka. (FGD004)

Another teacher from a different school shared that their school used to have KEDAP classes but that they had recently stopped. She commented that KEDAP was a good platform for parents who are illiterate to have an opportunity to learn basic literacy and numeracy skills and help the parents to understand how their children learn in school. It may also be beneficial in influencing children to stay in school when they see their own parents learning in school. However, this programme has stopped as the school was not selected to continue to run the programme.

KEDAP sebelum ini ada tapi sejak kebelakangan ini tak ada dah ... dia ada jam kredit dia kan, kalau di sekolah ini dia buat petang ... kesian la dekat ibu bapa, mana yang tak kenal huruf dan buta huruf itu memang dapat belajar ... ada sebab anak-anak ke sekolah, ibu bapa pun ke sekolah juga... antaranya mak bapak dia boleh faham macam mana anak-anak dia belajar ... rasanya macam sekolah kita tak terpilih kan. (FGD002)

The issues highlighted here are similar to those noted in a study by Sharifah Md Nor et al. (2011) which examines the KEDAP programme among other educational outreach programmes. In the study, teachers had positive feedback on KEDAP and were of the view that it provided participants with an opportunity to learn what they may not have had when they were of schooling age (ibid.: 50). Parents also helped to motivate their children to learn to a greater extent but wanted the sessions to be extended. However, challenges that teachers may face in teaching KEDAP classes were not mentioned in our interviews with the teachers.

Although there was some negative feedback on KEDAP, namely the insufficient time provided for participants to master basic literacy and numeracy skills, teachers have indicated some success in creating awareness and understanding of education among illiterate parents. It also has the potential to promote lifelong learning. This programme could bring positive changes and impact to the communities with continued and effective implementation but needs long-term implementation and continuity along with increased funding and support to see more significant results.

5.1.3 Sekolah Model Khas Komprehensif (K9)

Sekolah Model Khas Komprehensif (K9) are special schools with residential facilities that aim to provide indigenous students and students in rural communities with an education from standard one to form three for a total period of nine years (MOE, 2013). The founding of these schools aimed to prevent these students from dropping out during the transition year from standard six to form one. In September 2021, the government announced the implementation of Sekolah Model Khas Komprehensif K11 (K11, Special Comprehensive Model School II) under the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021–2025). K11 schools will be similar to K9 schools but provide education from standard one all the way up to form five for a total period of 11 years.

A parent suggested starting a K9 school in his village in Johor because there is a tendency to drop out after two years of secondary school: *“Saya menyarankan ... K9 ni diwujudkan ... Sebab apabila budak habis Darjah Enam, pergi ke sekolah menengah mereka masuk Tingkatan Satu, Tingkatan Dua, mereka akan berhenti sekolah sebab mungkin dari segi pergaulan, tak berapa nak campur dengan orang”* (OP040).

From the interviews we conducted, there do not seem to be many differences between K9 schools and non-K9 schools except that K9 schools are equipped with hostel facilities and the inclusion of secondary school classes from form one to form three. Among the teachers and principals interviewed only one school has counsellors and it is a K9 school.

One of the principals interviewed noted that since their school has become a K9 school, there are fewer cases of dropping out because students automatically continue on to form one after standard six, indicating that this K9 school is achieving its main aim. Most of the cases of dropping out happen when students have to attend a secondary school that is further from their villages, compared to their original primary schools:

sebab dia sekolah K9, dia tak ada cicir sangat, sebab dari Darjah Enam dia terus naik ke Tingkatan Satu. Yang berlaku cicir tu biasa bila dia pindah sekolah. Sebelum dulu, sebelum K9 dulu, memang begitu la, ... Yang tu banyak cicir, sebab ni dia akan pergi sekolah yang berhampiran. (GB003)

However, cases of dropping out also happen after form three when the students have shifted from the K9 school to form four in another school. The principal added that some are assigned to secondary schools that are far away.

Tahun lepas, ada enam orang yang tak lepas. Kita pun tak tahu dia pergi mana, tak dapat dikesan.... Bila Tingkatan Tiga ke Tingkatan Empat, situ berlaku keciciran ... bukan semua pergi ke [nama sekolah], dia ada yang pergi ke jauh ... jadi yang tu tak dapat kesan ... cumanya yang kita dapat kesan, kalau kita dapat maklumat daripada ibu bapa. (GB003)

Another principal has suggested that their school's hostel should be expanded as it has already reached its maximum capacity, indicating that there are many students who want to stay in the hostel.

The interviews suggest that the underlying reason for dropping out of school during the transition year is because the students are assigned to other schools that are far away from their villages. K9 schools do help to address the problem of students dropping out in the transition year from standard six to form one but some cases still happen after form three when the students have to move to another school. Moving schools closer to the proximity of the communities instead of forcing students to attend schools in towns far from their homes may help to resolve the high dropout rates among Orang Asli.

K9 schools have the potential to be a knowledge-sharing hub for other Orang Asli schools within the district. As one of the K9 schools in this study has counsellors in the school, this indicates overall better provision in terms of infrastructure and the number of teachers. Teachers and technical specialists on Orang Asli education could be stationed in K9 schools and provide guidance and support to surrounding Orang Asli schools to help them identify gaps and create new solutions based on the sharing of knowledge and experiences of the teachers. K9 schools could be an additional choice for Orang Asli parents.

5.2 Assistance

5.2.1 Transportation

As noted in Section 4.1.1 (Access to schools), transportation to school is mostly provided by JAKOA. Most of the children of parents interviewed here have access to transportation provided by JAKOA. In some villages, instead of providing transportation, JAKOA provides a fuel allowance for parents who send their children to school themselves. However, challenges highlighted by parents include a lack of safety in these vehicles due to overcrowding and poor vehicle condition, poor service of transportation, and a lack of proper complaint channels to report poor service. There are also some students who are left out and do not have access to transport provided by JAKOA.

The poor vehicle condition (buses, vans, lorries, or four-wheel drives) was one of the most highlighted issues with regard to transportation. There have been cases where the vehicles provided are not in good condition, with one parent commenting:

“Se[tiap] tahun dia akan tukar-tukar van. Van yang tukar tu sama juga la. Tak pernah van yang berkualiti.” Some vehicles do not have a roof and if it rains students get drenched and are exposed to the elements. A parent said: *“Ni cabaran dia musim hujan lah kepada anak-anak orang kita. Sebab dia punya kenderaan tu tak ada atap. Kalau time hujan, banyak lah budak-budak tu kadang-kadang basuh, buku basah”* (OP001).

Parents also reported that the vehicles were overcrowded as the drivers try to take as many children as possible with seemingly no limit to the number of children each vehicle takes. Parents expressed concerns about the safety of this transportation, especially when students have to stand in the beds of pickup trucks while traversing muddy and bumpy roads. When it rains, there have been incidents where students got hurt falling off trucks.

Memang beberapa pernah berlaku tetapi kes itu tidak pernah sampai ke pengetahuan pihak kerajaan la. Memang ada kes pelajar jatuh, dia jatuh dari kenderaan.... Dia tak limit [berapa budak yang mengikut sebuah kenderaan]. (OP006)

Teachers also raised concerns about the safety of the students as highlighted in section 4.2.5. Teachers have asked for the allocation for transportation to be re-examined: *“jadi proses tu kita kena tengok balik peruntukan yang turunkan, bagaimana pelaksanaannya secara efficient”* (FGD004).

Some villages are left out and do not have access to transportation. A parent mentioned that among the 10 villages in Pos Lenjang, the farthest one or two villages do not have transportation provided for them. Children from these villages are instead dropped off at a point some distance from their villages and they have to walk back home. The parent added that at the time of signing the contract, there was miscommunication between the village head (*tok batin*) and contractor providing the transportation, resulting in some villages not having access to the transport.

Kampung-kampung serpihan tak ada pengangkutan sebab kampung ni tak diiktiraf dalam daftar JAKOA jadi tak ada kemudahan pengangkutan. Jadi ibu bapa yang kena hantar, [jika] ibu bapa tak dapat nak hantar, jadi anak mereka akan drop out. (OP005)

Satu atau dua kampung kurang-kurang yang jauh daripada sekolah yang paling jauh dari sekolah itu. [B]iasanya tidak akan sampai di sana lah ... Jadi budak-budak akan turunkan di satu kawasan ... budak-budak akan jalan kaki balik. (OP006)

There are complaints that the contractors who are engaged to provide transportation services are not efficient. One parent informed us of inefficient transportation arrangements where drivers do not arrive at the appointed times and mismanagement: *“transport pelajar ni selalu kadang-kadang terkandas-terkandas dengan driver tak sampai la, dengan keadaan contractor yang tak tentu hala ... pengangkutan ni kurang cekap dia punya pengurusan”* (OP016). Numerous complaints have been made to JAKOA but the issues have not been resolved. The parent raised questions about the transparency of the procurement process: *“sudah maklum dengan JAKOA negeri tapi ada masalah sikit, sebab contract yang dilampir ni adalah contractor yang ada berhubung dengan orang politik”* (OP016). This parent also mentioned contractors not following through on contractual obligations, noting that *“semua melibatkan sekolah dia wajib tapi tak ada teraturlah apa yang dia dijanjikan tu oleh contractor,*

bila kita adulah, ada juga yang bermacam muka, tak bertegur dengan kita, hanya keluhan masyarakat dan penduduk” (OP016).

It was also pointed out that prior to getting these transportation contracts, some bus contractors promised to send the students for all school activities, including after-school classes and sports activities, but they ended up renegeing on these promises after securing the contracts. Students reported that they did not participate in extracurricular activities or extra classes as they did not have transport to go to school or return home: *“Kelas tambahan yang macam study group ke, belajar, extra ko-koke [kokurikulum], saya memang akan skip sebab bila saya balik, bila saya seorang, driver tu macam tak nak ambil, sebab hanya seorang, memang saya akan ponteng waktu tu” (FGD_OSI).*

As noted in Section 4.1.1, the issue of transportation has caused Orang Asli children to drop out of school. There was a case reported by a parent where the children used to travel by boat to school as their village was far away. This meant the travel time was around an hour each way with fuel for the boat being too expensive for the family. Although JAKOA provides a fuel allowance, this funding is slow to be disbursed to parents. This resulted in the eldest son dropping out of school. The matter was resolved when the children were moved to another school which was nearer and could be accessed by road.

Bukan yang baru ni kita dapat yang penukaran sekolah dekat [nama tempat] sikit. Kalau dulu kita orang melalui bot, naik bot ... lebih kurang satu jam lebih la nak sampai ke sekolah tu ... [anak sulung berhenti sekolah] bukan jauh, sebab kita orang dah tak mampu nak beli minyak nak pergi balik ... [elaun untuk minyak] agak lambat sikit ... Sudah berhenti lah. (OP002)

Parents have suggested the following remedial measures in relation to transportation:

1. Provide transportation for all children as most parents need to go to work and sending and picking up their children from school disrupts their working time.
2. Provide transportation for the new settlements (*kampung serpihan*) and villages that are left out. It could be possible to drop the children at specified locations so that they could still have transport to go to school: *“bas tu boleh berhenti untuk ambil budak-budak daripada kampung serpihan” (OP005).*
3. Designate safe waiting spaces for the children in school: *“Budak kalau dah balik memang keluar macam tu saja ... tak jaga sangat la mereka. Sangat risau” (OP033).*
4. Provide smaller and more vehicles instead of a single large bus to cater to many villages and reduce travel time for the children. Some villages need a smaller vehicle to access the village due to poor road conditions: *“perlu kenderaan yang kecil” (OP010).*
5. The transportation system provided may be adequate for some villages but it needs to be implemented more efficiently: *“kita ada sistem [pengangkutan] yang saya rasa sudah cukup cuma kita nak buat supaya sistem itu benar-benar berfungsi” (OP006).*

Transportation is one of the most important provisions for Orang Asli children to go to school. The majority of the respondents' children benefited from the transportation provided but there are still those who are left out, especially in new settlements. The provision of a fuel allowance could be a useful alternative for those parents who are able to send their children to school. The choice of fuel allowance or provision of transportation would enable more flexibility to cater to the individual needs of each Orang Asli family.

There needs to be more effective monitoring and evaluation of the provision of transportation to ensure the reliability and safety of transportation. The number of vehicles to transport the students needs to be increased if there are too many students. JAKOA should set up a proper complaint channel for parents to inform them of transportation issues to address and resolve these issues efficiently and effectively. The procurement and evaluation processes of the contractors or vendors providing the transportation need to be transparent, with the renewal of contracts based on the good provision of transportation in terms of reliability, vehicle condition, and good services as determined by the parents and students. There needs to be greater accountability of contractors to ensure safe and reliable transportation.

A study by the Education Global Practice and Development Research Group of the World Bank has shown that reducing travel time to school is effective in increasing the learning-adjusted years of schooling (Angrist et al., 2020). With many Orang Asli children needing to prepare to go to school very early in the morning and returning home late in the afternoon due to long travel times, it is unsurprising that the quality of their education has been negatively affected. Transportation should seek to reduce this travel time in addition to establishing more schools nearer to villages. This section on transportation challenges (as well as Section 4.1.1) highlights the significant hurdles Orang Asli children face in order to get to school. While transportation is largely a matter of logistics, it has a great impact on ensuring that children do not drop out of school and complete their education.

5.2.2 Rancangan Makanan Tambahan (RMT)

Food assistance is provided for primary students from low-income households under Rancangan Makanan Tambahan (RMT). The aim of the programme is to improve the health, physical growth, and eating habits of students at a young age. To be eligible, students must either come from a household below the poverty line, have special needs, or attend Orang Asli or Penan schools. Each eligible student in peninsular Malaysia is allocated RM2.50 per day for 190 school days and the financial assistance is channelled to schools that then prepare and provide food for the students (MOE, 2020b). Program Susu Sekolah (PSS, School Milk Programme) is currently implemented along with RMT and both programmes are under the purview of the MOE. Apart from these programmes, Orang Asli students who live in hostels are provided with food. There are other food programmes managed by JAKOA and NGOs, but here we only look at RMT and PSS as they are the major food aid programmes mentioned by respondents in our interviews. RMT and PSS do not cover Orang Asli secondary students as they are provided with an allowance from JAKOA for school expenses. (This allowance and monetary assistance are discussed in Section 5.2.3.)

Most Orang Asli children are eligible for the RMT and PSS programmes as they are from low-income households. Generally, parents have no complaints about RMT in schools and stated, “*bantuan makanan untuk anak-anak sekolah itu tak ada masalah*” (OP014). However, a few parents highlighted that sometimes one or more of their children do not receive RMT: “*Hari itu kakak dapat tapi [hari] ini dia cakap dua-dua dah tak dapat*” (OP004). Another parent said that their children no longer receive RMT since the family moved to a new village: “*Sana dia dapat RMT dan lain-lain bantuan. Bila kita ke [nama tempat di Pahang] dia dah tak dapat RMT*” (OP005).

One of the parents from Perak stated that their children stopped going to public school and are now schooling at a Pusat Didikan Komuniti (PDK) because of a RMT food poisoning incident that occurred in 2015, after which the parents in the community lost trust in the school's management.

Kita tak boleh bagi anak-anak kita belajar dekat sekolah, dekat yang RPS ... berlaku kes keracunan 2015 dulu ... keracunan makanan untuk RMT ... kita buat laporan polis ... KKM [Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia] kata nak bawa sample sampai hari ini tak jumpa. Dia orang minta nak tutup kes itu ... Jabatan Pendidikan pun tak peduli sampai hari ni ... kena bawa hospital [seramai] 138 orang ... Alasan mereka [pihak sekolah] makanan daripada RMT. (OP012)

Teachers said that the primary students are attracted to the different varieties of food served in schools under the RMT programme. This has encouraged the students to come to school:

main kepada galakan pelajar [sekolah rendah] untuk datang ke sekolah. Sebab mungkin menu di sekolah dia dapat makan benda yang tak ada dekat rumah dia. Jadi dia seronoklah datang ke sekolah ... dia seronok sangat makan nasi lemak, dapat makan nasi lauk ayam, dapat makan bee hoon goreng. (FGD004)

The quality of the food, in terms of nutrition and hygiene, provided under the RMT is the important determinant of the quality of the programme. Good implementation of the programme could help to address the issue of malnutrition among Orang Asli children. Moreover, a wide variety of food would also be a good incentive for the children to come to school.

A study by Hesham M. Al-Mekhlafi et al. (2011) examines the nutritional and socio-economic factors that affect the cognitive functioning and educational achievement of Orang Asli children. The study finds that apart from the levels of household income and maternal education, iron-deficiency anaemia is significant in influencing cognitive functioning and educational achievement. Therefore, effective measures to improve the nutritional and socio-economic status of Orang Asli children would have a beneficial impact on their education.

Malnutrition and undernutrition are issues that need to be addressed and require collaboration from the MOE, the Ministry of Health, and JAKOA (Wan, 2020). Further research on the issue and critical assessments are needed to expand and improve the programmes (Jarud Romadan and Tan, 2020). From the interviews we conducted, the provision of food in school has generally been positive. Nevertheless, the quality of food in terms of nutrition and hygiene needs to be monitored. Consultation with nutritionists and dieticians to create guidelines on balanced and nutritious school meals could help schools to improve on the implementation of RMT and other food programmes.

5.2.3 Allowance and monetary assistance

Monetary assistance highlighted by the respondents includes the government's provision of back-to-school financial aid at the beginning of the school year under the Bantuan Awal Persekolahan scheme. This back-to-school aid is a one-off payment of RM100 per student to cover their school fees and other school expenses (such as exercise books and stationery) and is available for both primary and secondary school students from low-income families (MOE, 2019b). This amount will be increased to RM150 according to the 2022 budget (MOF, 2021c). Respondents also mentioned another form of aid, Bantuan Kumpulan Wang Amanah Pelajar Miskin (KWAPM, Monetary Assistance for Students from Poor Households) from the MOE. KWAPM is a similar programme as it also provides a one-off payment at the start of school year for students from low-income families up to form one (RM100 for primary students, RM150 for form one students). This is one form of KWAPM aid programme with the other two aid schemes being a monthly allowance and an emergency fund (MOE, 2019a).

JAKOA provides an allowance of RM2 per day for secondary students. The 2022 budget announced that this amount will be increased to RM4 per day (MOF, 2021b), helping to cover the expenses for food for these students who do not receive RMT.

Among the parents, 73% acknowledged that they had received aid at the beginning of the school year. The rest of the parents either did not receive the aid, were not sure if their children have received the aid, or were not eligible to receive the aid. Although many parents noted that they received KWAPM, they only mentioned the aid they had received at the beginning of the school year. The monthly allowance is from JAKOA and is for secondary students. There is a possibility that parents get confused between the two programmes since both are similar for primary students: *“dibawah KWAPM yang itu semua dapat ... sama ada sekolah menengah atau rendah ... kecuali yang bawah OKU...[bantuan] khas untuk dia [OKU]”* (OP021).

One of the issues highlighted is that some students are left out of the aid programmes, with one parent saying they did not receive any aid at all: *“KWAPM ada juga yang tercicir ... tak dapat apa-apa”* (OP006). There are also a number of Orang Asli children who do not have access to government financial aid as they lack birth certificates or proper documentation and are thus considered stateless: *“tak ada yang tertinggal kecuali dia tak ada dalam system ... dia tak ada surat beranak”* (OP021).

Parents are grateful for the assistance from JAKOA but considered the amount of assistance to be insufficient with the rising cost of living, and that there is a lack of transparency in the process. Parents still have to come up with a relatively substantial amount of money to pay for fees, school supplies, school uniforms, and other needs for their children: *“Yang dapat [RM100] tu untuk bayar yuran lepas itu beli baju sekolah, beli buku, macam tak cukup lah”* (OP023). Some schoolteachers deduct school expenses from the RM100 and then parents top up the remaining balance: *“kami minta [cikgu] potong lepas tu kami tambah baki”* (OP023). The costs add up. One parent estimated she spends about RM200–300 per child at the beginning of each school year. As noted earlier, the start of the school year usually coincides with the rainy season when Orang Asli parents tend to make less money if they are working in plantations or tapping rubber for a living.

The allowance is deposited directly into the student’s bank account. As noted in Section 4.2.5 on intra-agency coordination and cooperation, the cost for students to travel to the nearest town to withdraw the money could be as much as the monthly stipend itself. Students only receive the allowance for the previous month and not the upcoming month. As a result, some secondary school students go hungry as they receive the allowance at the end of the month, especially as the process can be slow with frequent delays. This has resulted in absenteeism where the students would rather help their parents at work.

A parent suggested increasing the allowance: *“menaikkan duit poket ... kerana barang-barang mahal. Duit untuk makan di kantin pun RM3.50, baru dapat nasi lemak”* (OP017). This interview was done before the revision of the allowance in the 2022 budget. The increase to RM4 would be just enough for children to buy a single packet of simple *nasi lemak* with very little left to spend on other expenses. The food quality and prices in school canteens need to be monitored to ensure that schools are providing healthy and affordable food.

The need to increase the allowance and back-to-school aid for Orang Asli students has been addressed in the 2022 budget allocation and this is a welcome change. However, there remains a need for more consistent and adequate financial assistance for other school needs and supplies. There should be periodical revision of the allowance amount and other monetary assistance to take into account inflation. However, what is more important is the timeliness of the assistance to ensure that children have the

money to spend for their schooling expenses when it is needed. From our interviews, it is clear that the late delivery of financial assistance has impacted on the students' school attendance and resulted in a loss of learning or even dropping out.

Children going hungry in school due to the late delivery of allowances and banks being far away from the communities needs serious consideration and remediation. One recommendation would be to provide alternative methods of disbursement for schools in remote areas or to provide cash directly to students via their school's administration. Another alternative would be to provide food or food vouchers for secondary schoolchildren through schools.

At the national level, access to bank accounts and finance needs to be expanded to serve communities in remote areas. The government has allocated additional funds for mobile banks to reach out to communities in rural regions (MOF, 2021a). This is a good measure to ensure that the communities are not left behind in terms of access to financial services, government aid, and cash transfer programmes, which are distributed mainly through banks.

5.2.4 School essentials and other items

JAKOA provides school uniforms for Orang Asli students. Almost half the parents interviewed said that JAKOA has provided school uniforms for their children in the past. However, there were two issues that were highlighted. The first was a common complaint that the size of uniforms did not fit the children: *"sekolah menengah tu bantuan dia daripada JAKOA, budak tak dapat pakai. Dia punya saiz [besar]...kena beli juga ... Sekolah rendah bantuan dia baik, dia ada ukur"* (OP018). As with other forms of aid, the second issue is one of late delivery: *"[I]bu bapa kena sediakan. Kita nak harap kepada pihak sekolah mereka kadang-kadang bagi lambat"* (OP001). Apart from uniforms, JAKOA also provides school shoes.

Some other school expenses such as exercise books are partially subsidised by JAKOA but provision of this type of aid may have been reduced. As one parent commented, it may be because JAKOA wants the parents to be more responsible for their children's education: *"Dulu semua JAKOA yang tanggung. Sekarang kita kena [bayar] separuh. Dia mungkin nak kita tanggungjawab dekat anak"* (OP018).

The delivery of aid from JAKOA varies among districts and states. Of the parents interviewed, some received more JAKOA aid than others. One of the parents commented that there are different provision for schools with a greater proportion of Orang Asli students compared to schools with fewer Orang Asli students: *"perbezaan dia sebab sekolah dekat [nama tempat] ni nama pun [nama sekolah] ... jadi banyak yang JAKOA cover, hampir menyeluruh dari segi bantuan. Bila kita pindah ke [nama tempat]... student Orang Asli rasanya 30%–25% adalah kanak-kanak [O]rang [A]sli, jadi bantuan tu dia ... kepada yang [di]utama[kan]"* (OP005).

NGOs and faith-based organisations also play a part in providing other school essentials to Orang Asli students in the form of in-kind aid such as stationery, school bags, and school shoes, leaving the remaining school expenses to be covered by the parents themselves.

The provision of uniforms and shoes needs thoughtful consideration in the implementation, such as getting the children's correct sizes before purchasing the items, which some schools have done well. School essentials, stationery, and other items should be suitable for Orang Asli students and their specific classroom needs. In-kind provisions are straightforward and direct assistance could help to reduce the burden of education expenditure for low-income households.

5.2.5 Hostels

The parents interviewed had mixed opinions about sending their children to hostels and boarding schools. Some parents said that it was better to send their children when they are older while others sent their children to hostels at a young age, including at kindergarten age. On the other hand, a number of parents would not allow their children to go to hostels at any age and some who sent their children to hostels felt they did not have a choice in the matter. There were also parents who want to send their children to hostels but these facilities are either not provided or they do not have the means to do so. In addition, there are some parents who send their children to Pusat Intelek Pelajar Orang Asli (PIPOA, Intellectual Centre for Orang Asli Students) in Rompin, Pahang, homes run by faith-based organisations, and other institutions, such as a Maktab Rendah Sains MARA (MRSM, MARA Junior Science College) in their state or Maktab Tentera DiRaja (RMC, Royal Military College) in Kuala Lumpur.

PIPOA was started in 2012 by JAKOA and aims to nurture Orang Asli children who have shown academic potential to pursue higher education (*Sinar Ahad*, 2020). The centre provides conducive hostels and extra co-curricular facilities, and has a strong focus on academic achievement. The students are selected based on their Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR, Primary School Achievement Test) results. PIPOA is only for lower secondary students, after which they are either sent to an MRSM, RMC, Kolej Vokasional (Vocational College) or other boarding schools for upper secondary school.

According to a parent with a child currently in PIPOA, the requirement to be selected is a minimum of two As in UPSR. However, their child who only obtained one A was selected as those with better results had declined the offer: “*sebab kebanyakan yang [dua A] ni dia orang tak nak masuk*” (OP040). The parent also commented that the conditions in PIPOA are good: “*dekat PIPOA semuanya ok*” (OP040). According to the parent, as the Pentaksiran Tingkatan 3 (PT3, Form Three Assessment) examinations were cancelled in 2021, there is now a possibility that the students completing lower secondary school will be moved to another intellectual centre for upper secondary Orang Asli students in Terengganu.

The two main reasons for parents to send their children to a hostel are the long distances from their homes to the schools and to ensure that their children receive a good education.

Primary schools are usually nearer to the villages compared to secondary schools. Most secondary schools are located further from villages and are either in towns or the outskirts of towns. There are also more secondary schools with hostels compared to primary schools, with these hostels easing the burden on parents in making sure their children get to school every day. JAKOA provides help and funding to run hostels with Orang Asli students and provides transport on a weekly basis to take the children home on weekends and back to school afterwards. Parents may be more likely to agree to send their children to hostels if transportation is provided for them to return home regularly.

[Masuk asrama] sekolah menengah la kalau boleh ... kalau boleh pelajaran kita ni jangan kita abaikan ... anak yg boleh masuk asrama terus hantar. Kalau kita tak ada kemampuan kita akan jumpa JAKOA minta bantuan sikit. Masalah kewangan nanti JAKOA boleh uruskan ... [Kalau] macam pergi dia hantar, balik dia ambil, dia orang setuju. (OP002)

Parents are also keen to send their children to hostels to ensure that their children receive a better education. A parent indicated that he sent his children at a young age to a home run by a faith-based organisation because he wants his children to have more opportunities in the future: *“Mereka ini [masih di tadika] mereka sudah pergi ke [asrama di luar kampung] ... saya nak cari peluang untuk masa depan anak-anak kita. Bukan ada pihak luar [yang] menghasut kita ... ini kita punya kemahuan sendiri”* (OP034). The home provides not only lodging and care but also extra tuition and a chance for Orang Asli children to mingle with children of other ethnic groups.

The common perception is that Orang Asli parents do not send their children to hostels because they do not want to part with their children. Although it is true that it is hard for parents to send their children to hostels and boarding schools for extended periods, especially at a young age, this was not the main reason cited by parents. The most common reason was mistrust in the governance of school hostels with many parents worried for the safety and welfare of the children: *“Kita sebagai ibu bapa, kurang kepercayaan kepada pihak sekolah untuk menjaga terutama dari sudut keselamatan ... dari segi kebersihan ... ada kes juga lah”* (OP006).

As noted earlier, there are incidences of bullying, food hygiene issues, and other challenges that Orang Asli children face when attending school and these may be exacerbated when living in hostels. Some parents also shared their own bad experiences when they were in school: *“Masa di sekolah menengah, kami selalu ada selalu diejek ... yang Orang Asli ni semua mengotor, lembap ... Selalu ejek-ejek kami la. Dan selalu bergaduh”* (OP022).

If hostels are not well managed, parents will be in a dilemma as to whether they should risk their children's safety and well-being to get an education or risk them being not educated by not sending them to a hostel. A parent said that although he sends his children to a hostel, he was reluctant and felt he had no choice in order to ensure that they receive education.

[K]ita tak ada pilihan sebab memang itulah polisi pihak kerajaan daripada dulu, di Sabah [dan] Sarawak pun sama ... banyak kes dan masalah timbul tetapi tidak begitu diambil berat [oleh pihak sekolah] ... bukan semua sekolah, ada juga sekolah yang mengambil berat ... tapi ada segelintir sekolah memang tidak begitu mengambil berat. (OP006)

Some of the other suggestions from parents include providing a warden who could monitor students' studies in the evening and providing tuition teachers for students in the hostel.

The decision for Orang Asli parents to send their children to hostels is not an easy one. On the one hand, they hope that their children will get the best possible education. On the other hand, they do not trust the governance of these hostels due to their own unpleasant experiences or those of others in their communities. This dilemma could be resolved by improving the governance of hostels to ensure the safety and physical and mental well-being of students. In addition, the infrastructure for hostels needs to be in good condition with expansion of hostels that are reaching their maximum capacity.

6. TEACHERS' AND SCHOOLS' INITIATIVES

The various initiatives organised by teachers and schools are not under centralised programmes but play an integral part to address the underlying issues faced by Orang Asli students. Principals and teachers are the frontliners who are in direct communication with the students, parents, and their communities. This section draws on the interviews of parents, teachers, and principals on some of the initiatives that the schools have carried out. Here we also present findings about their experiences to understand what has worked and what has not. One limitation is that these respondents may not be fully representative of all the teachers and schools involved in Orang Asli education.

6.1 Initiatives in teaching and learning

The teachers we interviewed realised that a key problem their Orang Asli students faced was not the students' inability to learn but the way they experienced teaching and learning. Orang Asli students, in general, react more positively towards interactive, problem-based learning, and nature-based learning. Thus, teachers have to create more opportunities for such forms of learning experiences.

Jika kita tengok perbezaan antara budak luar dan budak dalam ni juga, dari segi dia punya eager of learning lah. Cikgu macam kena prepare more. Kita tak boleh masuk kelas show and talk. Video pun tak cukup sebenarnya. Kita kena go for extra length. (FGD001)

Teachers stressed the importance of active listening, working with the whole community, and learning to adapt to students' needs so that the learning experience better caters to them. According to one teacher with nine years of experience teaching in an Orang Asli school, mutual learning and respect is important in creating a safe learning environment:

I listened, I reflected, I evaluated, I got feedback from the community and the kids and then I revamped it again. So that process happens actively. I was not trying to fit the curriculum to my students, it was the other way around. So what a lot of teachers do is, "[T]his is the curriculum, I have to follow it", and [I] don't think it works that way, it'll never work. (SK014)

Teachers we interviewed have also experimented with different pedagogies and technology. One of the teachers said that he adopted the "Rimbagogi" pedagogy that connects the curriculum with nature: "*mengenai pendidikan kita kaitkan sekali dengan alam sekitar*" (FGD001). He has also used virtual reality to help students understand the world beyond their environment and village. For example, as they have not seen the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) and Petronas Twin Towers, he used virtual reality to help them visualise the busy city centre which is a foreign environment to them.

[S]aya telah try untuk eksperimen kita gunakan virtual reality untuk ajar comprehension dalam [B]ahasa Inggeris sebabnya diaorang ni memang akses nak pergi luar susah ... saya explain KLCC contohnya,... dia tak register [apa] KLCC look like. So I have to bring KLCC to them ... kalau guna video semata-mata budak short term kan, video sikit je tengok tak banyak masuk. So saya try guna virtual reality bila 360 [darjah] tu diaorang ada dalam tu, boleh tengok orang KLCC itself. (FGD001)

Teachers who take on a more holistic approach do so against the grain. They often have to initiate projects on their own, using their own funds and resources, before getting any support from school administrators and other more sceptical teachers. Sometimes, they have had to use a significant amount of their own money to buy resources for the students, with one teacher saying, "*Saya memang ada 10, 20 biji tablet saya bawa masuk dalam ... Saya beli sendiri*" (SK007). Box 1 highlights some of the initiatives

that teachers have undertaken for the Orang Asli students. However, there does seem to be increasing backing from administrators and, in fact, some administrators have made an extra effort to encourage teachers with their new initiatives by helping look for funding and other help. NGOs and foundations play an important role here in boosting these efforts.

Box 1: Cikgu Faiz, Teacher Samuel Isaiah, and Cikgu Subaidi

Cikgu Faiz

Orang Asli children have a strong relationship with their land and nature. In an effort to make their lessons more meaningful, Cikgu Faiz, a teacher at an Orang Asli primary school in Gua Musang, Pahang, initiated Project Kindness, a safe space for Orang Asli children through community collaborations.

With an awareness that Orang Asli communities have only recently made the transition from an oral tradition to a literate one, he learned that the key to sustainable literacy development is their relationship to the land and nature. This led him to build an Orang Asli-themed learning park for teaching, learning, and recreation called the Project Learning Hut. This functions as a learning hub or makers' space for sustainability projects (like hydroponics and recycling projects), experiential learning activities, project-based learning, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) activities, and generally serves as a safe space for the children. It was built through a collaboration between teachers, school staff, and the Orang Asli community. Friends, families, and the community contributed through monetary donations, teaching aids, learning materials, and books, among other forms of assistance.

In 2018, before the project and the new learning ecosystem was implemented, the passing rate for the students in the school was zero for both English comprehension and English writing in the UPSR examinations. In 2019, there was a significant improvement with 15 of 40 students passing the English comprehension and five of 40 candidates passing English writing.

Teacher Samuel Isaiah

When Teacher Samuel was first deployed to teach at a primary school in Pahang, he noticed that one of the main obstacles to education for Orang Asli children was the common perception among teachers that indigenous children cannot be taught. To make learning and education more accessible to Orang Asli children, he conducted a needs analysis of his students. He decided that following the existing syllabus was not effective as the children were unable to read.

To adapt the curriculum to the needs of the children and the community, he engaged extensively with the latter. Through community engagement, the children are able to have a strong say in educational decisions that are made for them, making it a collaboration and sustainable intervention.

Some of the initiatives founded by Teacher Samuel include:

1. Edufication: an NGO to gather like-minded teachers who want to make a difference and create a critical education discourse.
2. Cikgu Kickstart: to mediate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on education, he empowered teachers to contextualise solutions for their students by giving them resources and training (Teach For Malaysia, 2021).
3. Speak Up With Poetry: to improve students' vocabulary, he created guided videos to help the students read and speak in English using poetry, including poetry based on Orang Asli cultures (Bernama, 2020). These videos use a range of musical instruments, particularly the ukulele, to teach English words in sync with song chords (Goodnews, 2019).
4. Tree School: under the shade of trees, he teaches English twice a week outside of normal school hours in a more laid-back setting (Alagesh, 2020).

Cikgu Subaidi

Cikgu Subaidi, a teacher from a primary school in Johor, stressed the importance of using “Rimbagogi” and giving teachers more autonomy. The former is the insertion of daily, environmental, and cultural elements into the teaching while the latter is a lifting of syllabus restrictions so that innovation can flourish.

Cikgu Subaidi's most recent innovation is an attempt to draw a connection between “Rimbagogi” and technology. For example, he made use of virtual reality technology to situate the students into environments that they had not been previously exposed to. Through this method, his students were able to understand simple English instructions better. He pointed out that although videos and teaching materials are essential, they are not sufficient for Orang Asli students' long-term memory – virtual reality can jog students' memory as they engage more senses such as sight and touch. Cikgu Subaidi also used board games to strengthen students' vocabulary and spelling. From 2016 to 2019, the English passing rates for his students was 100%.

6.2 After-school extra classes

There are schools which provide extra classes for the students and sponsor the cost of these classes; this reduces the additional financial burden on parents: “*bayar ni kita tak perlu ... dia orang [sekolah] bagi sponsor*” (OP009). Some other schools provide these classes for the students starting from the year before they sit for their examinations: “*Macam yang sekolah rendah tu dia ada Tahun Lima atau [Tahun] Enam ... Sekolah menengah memang kalau Tingkatan Empat dengan [Tingkatan] Lima setiap hari memang ada kelas tambahan daripada hari Isnin sampai Khamis ... Pilihan lah siapa yang rasa nak kelas tambahan tu*” (OP029).

Several parents suggested that extra classes would be helpful, especially for Orang Asli children who are falling behind in school as teachers could provide more attention to these students outside their usual classes that are often crowded.

6.3 Building relationships with community leaders and parents

Trust and relationships between schools, communities, and parents are important to guarantee that parents are assured of their children's safety and education. Several good examples of teachers building relationships with communities were mentioned in the interviews. A parent said that teachers from their local school have celebrated Orang Asli festivals and visited their homes during these celebrations: *"guru kat sini memang boleh bercampur gaul sekali dengan masyarakat Orang Asli ... [mereka] join sekali. [Mereka boleh] bergaul ... makan dengan kita, Orang Asli semua, datang rumah kadang-kadang"* (OP036). Outside special occasions, some teachers or principals have also visited the communities in the village: *"kadang-kadang cikgu masuk dekat kampung"* (OP009).

Teachers who were interviewed said they need to build good relationships with the communities to encourage parents to share the challenges they face in sending the children to school: *"Kita turun ke kampung untuk jumpa bersama ibu bapa, tok batin, kita nak tau apa masalah pelajar berkenaan"* (FGD004). However, some teachers believe there are children who drop out as their parents are not engaged in their child's education: *"sekolah memang sentiasa berhubung dengan ibu bapa tapi ada juga ibu bapa yang tidak peduli dengan pendidikan jadi anak-anak akan tercicir"* (FGD002).

Some of the initiatives the teachers have undertaken within communities were mentioned; these included outreach programmes and activities. One of the teachers noted that they invited the community and parents to help them build a hut and clean the school. The community was very helpful and willing to work together with the teachers.

Kita ada banyak bekerjasama, kalau ada program gotong-royong kita akan panggil dan mereka akan bantu. Contoh kita buat, dulu kita ada buat pondok ... Memang ramai yang datang. Kita bersihkan tangki ... kita panggil orang kampung sekali ... dari segi kerjasama memang baik, cuma kita kena jaga sensitiviti, apa yang dia orang tak nak, kita tak buat, kalau diaorang ada benda kampung, kita tak boleh campur, walaupun bukan kepercayaan kita. (FGD001)

Another teacher referenced the many programmes they do for outreach, such as Amalan Guru Penyayang (Practices of Caring Teachers), a collaboration with teacher training institutions, NGOs, and other stakeholders. The main focus of the Amalan Guru Penyayang programme is to improve attendance:

banyak program ... program-program dengan kerjasama IPT [Institut Pengajian Tinggi] dengan NGO, PIBKS [Penglibatan Ibu Bapa, Komuniti dan Swasta], dengan YB [Yang Berhormat], malah program-program yang melibatkan dalaman pengurusan sekolah tu masa dengan kolaborasi panitia dan sebagainya lah, ... antara program yang tetaplah yang kita selalu jalankan untuk memastikan – kalau kita fokus kepada kehadiran – pada program [A]malan [G]uru [P]enyayang. (FGD004)

One of the principals said that teachers need to have a positive spirit in order to establish relationships with the communities: *"sebab kita positif tapi bila positif senang lah masuk. Memang berhubung rapat dengan [O]rang [A]sli"* (GB002).

6.4 Parental involvement

Many of the parents interviewed are not involved in school activities and are not aware of their children's progress in school. At most, they meet with teachers twice a year to get their children's report cards and discuss their academic performance. Nevertheless, there are some Orang Asli parents who are active in Persatuan Ibu Bapa dan Guru (PIBG, Parents' and Teachers' Association) activities and are up to date on their children's progress.

There are schools that held PIBG programmes with the involvement of Orang Asli parents in organising these activities to establish relationships with them. One parent said that the school organised a PIBG programme for them to show and teach handicrafts to the children: "*dia buat program untuk PIBG, nak bagi kraf-kraf tangan budak-budak, ada la berjumpa dengan dia [cikgu], bincang dengan dia, tanya macam mana anak [di] sekolah*" (OP009). Parents are also involved in helping with sports activities: "*pihak sekolah akan hubungi [tok batin] untuk menyediakan peralatan untuk sukan untuk Orang Asli ... dia panggil ibu bapa sekali beserta dengan pelajar*" (OP016). However, not many parents reported examples of such involvement.

Only a few parents were involved in PIBG meetings. According to them, the common issues discussed were children's academic performance, discipline issues, and attendance: "*selalunya pasal budak tak sekolah, sikap budak-budak tak sekolah, prestasi lah*" (OP019). Teachers also asked about parents' views on some of the challenges students face: "*bincang masalah macam-macam. Masalah anak semua, kedatangan ... minta pendapat kita la*" (OP031). Parents who are PIBG committee members were the main channel of communication between other parents and schools: "*pengerusi JAKOA lah dia yang mengurus tadbir di kampung. Dia lah yang selalu kerap berhubung dekat sekolah*" (OP020).

6.5 Communication with parents and students

Generally, we found that teachers do not communicate often with parents. However, there are some teachers who go the extra mile to visit the children if they are absent from school.

Sekolah pun dia ambil tahu, pelajar tak datang dia datang ke rumah tanya kenapa tak datang ... Kalau dulu sekolah budak tak datang sekolah, dia takkan datang rumah. Biar je tapi sekarang ni tengok budak tak datang satu minggu ke tiga hari mesti cikgu akan datang. (OP004)

Although not many parents reported that teachers communicate with them regularly, a few parents did say that they had good communication with some teachers. A parent said that their children's school contacted parents if the children were absent or late to school: "*cikgu-cikgu akan bertanya buat apa budak tak hadir, mengapa kadang-kadang lewat ... kita akan hubungi apabila pelajar tak hadir lah*" (OP016). Another parent remarked that teachers informed parents about the progress of children:

Tapi baik la cikgu ... Kadang-kadang kita cakap ohhh budak ni dah buat kerja sekolah, dia cakap dah buat, kita tak tahu kan. Rupa-rupa dia tak buat. Bila cikgu bagi tau macam tu [baru] kita tahu. Kita ajak anak pergi jumpa cikgu. (OP018)

There has been an increase in communication between parents and teachers due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As schools were closed, teachers created WhatsApp groups with parents to make announcements and to update them on the students' progress: *"Bagus sebab kita pun ada group dengan cikgu dalam WhatsApp jadi apa-apa masalah boleh tanya cikgu. Cikgu pun kalau ada apa-apa masalah akan tanya kita"* (OP004). These groups are also a platform for parents to share the experiences of their child in school with one another: *"Boleh tahu apa pengalaman [di] sekolah, anak-anak macam mana"* (OP004).

Parents have suggested that Orang Asli parents should be more involved and play a role in PIBG: *"pentingnya peranan ibu bapa bila ada PIBG mereka kena libatkan diri, mereka boleh bagi tahu cikgu apa masalah anak mereka. Tapi kuranglah ibu bapa di sini yang nak libatkan diri dalam mesyuarat PIBG"* (OP005).

6.6 Orang Asli cultures in school and curriculum

The diversity of the school and inclusive environment are important in helping students to feel a sense of belonging and learn to interact with students of other ethnic groups and backgrounds. One of the ways to ensure that students feel included is to provide avenues to share their culture with others and learn about other cultures. Having a teacher of their same ethnicity who can relate to them would also help students adapt to an unfamiliar school environment.

From the interviews with parents, there is a lack of cultural exchange in schools and there are schools that segregate students according to ethnic groups. Parents have said that there are no activities or avenues for Orang Asli groups to showcase their cultures in schools: *"sekolah dekat sini saya belum pernah lagi tengok, ... nak pameran [budaya Orang Asli] ketengahkan untuk macam budak-budak [Orang] [A]sli"* (OP009). A parent highlighted the segregation of students by ethnic group, with the reason given that Muslim students have Islamic studies while non-Muslim students have moral studies. He raised this matter and tried to change the system in the school: *"di mana masyarakat ni [Orang Asli] dia letakkan dalam satu kelas ... Bagi saya saya rasa itu tidak adil sebab kalau khusus satu kelas tu Islam, baik buat kelas tu [a]gama ... Jadi saya pun campur tangan untuk memperbetulkan"* (OP007).

By contrast, there are some schools that are inclusive and provide platforms for Orang Asli to share their cultures and traditions with others. There is a school that celebrates Orang Asli festivals and provides a corner in the school compound to exhibit Orang Asli culture: *"ada satu sudut [di] taman ... macam pondok ... yang memang khas untuk menunjukkan tentang kebudayaan Orang [A]sli"* (OP039). Several parents also mentioned that a *tarian sewang* (a traditional Orang Asli dance) is performed at events and activities in school. One parent mentioned an Orang Asli teacher from another state who performed her traditional dance: *"ada seorang guru [O]rang [A]sli dari Pahang, dia juga buat satu sembah, tarian tradisional [O]rang [A]sli, ... saya cukup seronok tengok bila kelompok Orang Asli, jarang buat macam tu kan ... saya tengok kali pertama cikgu buat [macam tu]"* (OP010). This is not just an opportunity to know about other ethnic groups but also to know about other sub-ethnic groups of Orang Asli given that they are not a homogenous people.

Teachers also play an important role in teaching children to respect one another. A parent highlighted how a teacher in their children's school taught the students to respect each other's culture: *"budak-budak [di] sana cikgu ajar dia orang supaya menghormati tak kira apa bangsa atau tak agama ... diaorang cakap macam tu, hormat-menghormati"* (OP027).

Parents have suggested that it would improve children's interest in learning if there were Orang Asli teachers in their school as it would help these children relate to the teachers more. A parent also said that it would encourage more children to be teachers in the future:

Sebab tu perlu ada guru [O]rang [A]sli supaya ada di antara kalangan pelajar tu yang rasa dia sendiri nak turut sama dalam nak menyedarkan masyarakat [O]rang [A]sli sendiri lah kan, tarik minat murid untuk jadi guru pada masa akan datang contohnya macam tu lah. (OP035)

Parents interviewed made the following proposals:

1. Introduce Orang Asli languages as additional subjects in school: “[S]etiap kaum ataupun bangsa ada dia punya percakapan ibunda ... Kalau ada kerajaan atau mana-mana agensi yang untuk membantu ataupun memperkenalkan percakapan Orang Asli ni diserap juga dalam sekolah ...” (OP016).
2. Integrate the cultures of Orang Asli into the mainstream curriculum: “terapkan budaya dalam suatu mata pelajaran, sebab dulu sekolah rendah saya tengok satu pelajaran dia panggil ‘Kajian Tempatan’, dia ada [I]ban, Iban, saya harap ada suku kaum Jakun, kaum Semai semua pun ada dalam buku tu” (OP022).

6.7 Awareness campaign on the importance of education

School also contributes in raising awareness about the importance of education and encouraging the parents to stay committed in helping their children complete their studies. A parent from Pahang shared that their local school and JAKOA organised a campaign called Program Jejak Kasih (Trails of Caring Programme) which aims to encourage parents to send their children to school. As part of this outreach campaign, JAKOA representatives and school staff go from village to village to understand and discuss the challenges that parents face: “JAKOA, dia akan buat setiap kampung, dan ada pihak sekolah daripada program Jejak Kasih kampung ke kampung, jumpa ibu bapa bermasalah untuk bincang baik-baik ... Tapi yang kita nampak, ibu bapa ada semangat muafakat” (OP003).

Furthermore, a parent noted that they had to sign a commitment form to show support for their children who are going to sit for their UPSR examination: “UPSR tu, ... kita dah berjanji dengan anak kita, kita kena didik anak kita juga ... janji dia akan boleh belajar macam tadi la” (OP010).

7. COMMUNITY AND OTHER INITIATIVES

Besides primary and secondary schools, there are other educational classes and programmes such as early childhood education provided by kindergartens and preschools and also community-organised PDKs. This section examines some of the provisions of these other educational classes and programmes highlighted by parents and other respondents.

7.1 Early childhood education

Parents indicated that early childhood education is needed to prepare children before they start primary school. A parent noted how important it is and remarked that it is best if children attend two years of kindergarten: *"Sangat penting. Sebab saya hantar anak saya setahun saja, jadi sebaik-baiknya dua tahun lah"* (OP005). Another parent said that early childhood education centres run by Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat (KEMAS, Community Development Department) prepare children for standard one and standard two: *"KEMAS, dia dah beri satu pendidikan awal dari taska, tadika kan, itu memang bagus ... bila mereka sekolah rendah, Darjah Satu [dan Darjah] Dua memang ok"* (OP007). It also helps them to make new friends and learn to socialise: *"penting [untuk] berkawan daripada tak buat apa-apa di rumah"* (OP017). However, one respondent mentioned that not all parents are supportive of sending their children to kindergarten or preschool because they are lazy: *"kadang-kadang dia orang tak hantar, dia orang cakap malas nak hantar"* (OP031).

There are challenges in accessing kindergartens in Orang Asli communities. Not every village has a kindergarten. A parent highlighted that because there is no kindergarten in their village, parents have to walk over an hour to send children to one in another village. Many parents are unable to do so because of the distance and they are busy with other household matters: *"Sebab jauh, ibu bapa pun begitu, kadang-kadang busy. Nak hantar nak jalan kaki ke seberang sana"* (OP001). The same parent said that there is a teacher who is teaching at home and has applied to JAKOA to run a kindergarten in their village. However, there was still no approval given at the time of our interview, despite the request being raised over a year previously: *"Tapi dia dah mohon sejak, tahun berapa hari itu, sampai sekarang pun pihak JAKOA tak ada buat tadika"* (OP001).

Parents also need to pay kindergarten fees as there is no government assistance for early childhood education. Teachers have been understanding of this situation and allowed parents to pay according to their own means: *"tadika dia tak ada [bantuan], ibu bapa sendiri yang bayar. Cikgu suruh kita bayar ikut kemampuan dulu, bayar yang penting, [seperti] insuran atau pendaftaran"* (OP015).

Parents highlighted that some of the teachers in KEMAS early childhood education centres lacked teaching skills. One parent from Johor said that he sent his child to a different preschool instead of one run by KEMAS because there is only a volunteer helper instead of a qualified teacher. As a result, other children of his child's age who go to the KEMAS-run centre still could not read and write: *"dia hanya volunteer pembantu [KEMAS] jadi dia tak ada kemahiran [seperti] guru KEMAS ... jadi ada sedikit masalah ... yang sebaya dengan anak saya, biasa lambat ... tak tau membaca, tak tau mengira"* (OP0022).

Another parent from Johor also mentioned a similar experience. Since there is no trained teacher in her local KEMAS centre, she sent her children to the nearest preschool instead which is nine kilometres away: *"memandangkan tadika dekat sini cikgu dia tak ada jadi saya hantar dekat pra sekolah la ... saya fikir kalau tak hantar dekat pra[sekolah] bimbang bila masuk Tahun Satu tak boleh baca, tak boleh ikut apa yang cikgu aja"* (OP0037).

7.2 PDKs as preschools and supplementary education centres

Each PDK functions as a preschool and supplementary education learning centre, and provides education for dropouts and disabled children. It is a community-initiated education centre which aims to educate Orang Asli children through a pedagogy and curriculum that focuses more on indigenous elements. PDKs are an initiative endorsed by the MOE and they have received support from various foundations and private funders. Each community is responsible for setting up its own committee to oversee and manage the operations of the PDK in their village (Wan, 2020). There are currently PDKs in Pahang, Perak, and Selangor.

Since PDKs are community initiatives, there are differences in the way each one operates. One of the parents is involved in setting up a PDK with an NGO in Pahang. This PDK includes indigenous elements in the syllabus and provides supplementary education for children. The NGO is responsible for preparing resources such as the physical building, classroom materials, lesson plans, and an allowance for volunteer teachers, while the community provides the volunteer teachers, land, and students. The classes are conducted in Malay and the children are able to speak in their mother tongue. Some of the classes include storytelling of Orang Asli cultures and legends, and in the school's second phase there is a plan to introduce a new syllabus on Orang Asli learning.

Struktur, bahan-bahan semua kita sediakan sehingga ke elaun lah. Lesson plan, syllabus, buku-buku, alat-alat tulis, [semua kita yang sediakan]. Orang-orang kampung cuma perlu sediakan cikgu, budak-budak dan tempat ... kita [ber]bahasa Melayulah tapi mereka boleh berbahasa ibunda bila mengajar ... fasa kedua, kita masukkan satu syllabus baru iaitu [Orang Asli] learning ... Storytelling sebenarnya sekolah ada buat, tapi mereka tak lebih kepada culture [O]rang [A]sli, ... jadi kita buat dalam culture [O]rang [A]sli iaitu menceritakan tentang histori kampung, mitos ataupun sejarah mereka di suku kaum mereka. (OP005)

Another parent shared views about a PDK in a village in Perak which provides supplementary education for the children to help them to master reading, writing, and counting before they attend mainstream schools: “sekolah komuniti jadi sebelum pergi ke tadika, kami ada cikgu-cikgu komuniti akan ajar ... lepas tu bila dah umur 5–6 tahun kami hantar ke luar dan mereka balik pun sambung sekolah sini” (OP023). This community school also functions as a preschool for younger children and is supported by an NGO in Perak.

A parent with a disabled child noted that his child had stopped going to school since she had problems walking. The disabled child goes to a PDK and the parent is happy that at least she receives some form of education there: “Tak pergi sekolah tapi ada pergi PDK la setiap hari ... sejak Tingkatan Tiga ... Saya pun gembira dia dapat sekolah la” (OP041).

Parents have suggested some recommendations in relation to PDKs:

1. The government to recognise PDKs as supplementary community schools and provide funding to support these initiatives.
2. Schools need to recognise the cultures of the Orang Asli children and the syllabus used in PDKs which include indigenous cultures. This syllabus could be used as materials for additional classes in schools or even during moral education classes.

Box 2 focuses on a mobile school initiative run by Global Peace Foundation Malaysia.

Box 2: Global Peace Foundation Malaysia's Mobile School³

The seven-month mobile school programme was an effort to improve literacy and numeracy rates among Orang Asli children (Global Peace Foundation Malaysia, 2021). The pilot programme was carried out at Kampung Orang Asli Petoh, Kampung Terubing 2A, Kampung Teraling, Kampung Patah Jelutong, Kampung Cerampak, and Kampung Bukit Biru, located in Muadzam Shah and Rompin, Pahang, from February 2020 to January 2021. The programme consisted of two sessions each week for two hours per session.

The programme was guided by three main principles: (1) learner-centred; (2) play-based; and (3) focused on building literacy skills. To stimulate increased interest in learning, the programme primarily focused on functional literacy, numeracy, and life skills which are relevant to the students' personal needs and interests. The students were shown how literacy and numeracy skills can be used to solve daily problems and find information. Additionally, it was a play-based programme where the teaching involved games, arts, and sports to foster greater interest in learning. The syllabus also included STEM activities which allowed the students to conduct enjoyable interventions such as a "rain cloud in a jar" and "jumping animals" experiment.

Despite most participants not having much formal education, a post-programme assessment revealed that there were significant improvements in both literacy and numeracy skills after the seven-month programme. Global Peace Foundation Malaysia envisioned a high possibility that some children would return to school or pursue vocational education in the future as a result of this programme.



Photo by Mick Haupt / Unsplash

³ This Box draws from the Mobile School Final Report prepared by Global Peace Foundation Malaysia in 2021.

8. BRIDGING THE GAP: CHALLENGES TO POLICIES

The previous sections have identified some of the challenges faced by Orang Asli children and parents; analysed the programmes and assistance provided by the government and others; and presented teachers' and schools' initiatives as well as community and other initiatives. Specific policy recommendations to enhance the existing programmes and assistance have also been discussed in the previous sections. This section seeks to provide policy recommendations on macro-level or system-wide issues to bridge the gap to reduce and eradicate the education inequality faced by Orang Asli children. The recommendations also include recommendations from the parents and stakeholders interviewed.

8.1 Policy direction

The challenges faced by Orang Asli children have been identified in previous studies and acknowledged by the MOE. As noted earlier, the Orang Asli Transformation Plan 2013–2018 under the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 was implemented to close the education gap between Orang Asli children and their non-Orang Asli peers. The plan to transform education for Orang Asli students and other indigenous and rural communities continued in 2019 and 2020 with the aim of providing education that is more accessible and relevant to the needs of these communities (MOE, 2020a, 2021a).

The general policy direction of this plan is a good one. However, as discussed above, one of the main challenges that Orang Asli students face is that the mainstream curriculum are not totally relevant to their environment and culture. Moreover, access to education does not naturally translate into learning, and a shift to focus on the quality of education would ensure that the specific needs of Orang Asli students are addressed.

The right policy direction needs to be complemented with effective and suitable programmes to achieve the results as stipulated in the transformation plan. In the 2020 annual report of the MOE, the general focus seems to be on increasing attendance and improving the transition from standard six to form one (MOE, 2021a). The focus on reaching a minimum standard for UPSR has been removed as UPSR was abolished in 2020, with a new focus that appears to mainly prioritise access to school. There needs to be a concrete focus on how to effectively implement and provide relevant and high-quality education for Orang Asli students. Although examinations and standardised tests are not the best indicator of learning and have their flaws, they are still a method to test whether students are learning in class. With the removal of the UPSR examinations, there is a need for other means of identifying if students are learning in schools. The risk of not having any means to monitor the learning and progress of students might result in some weaker students not being able to master basic literacy and numeracy skills when they are in upper secondary, by which time it might be too late to rectify. In 2019, only 29.9% of Orang Asli students achieved the minimum standard for UPSR (MOE, 2020a: 22). This means that a more concerted commitment is needed to ensure that they receive equal access to high-quality education that is relevant for them.

Although their focus is not entirely clear, there have been good programmes laid out under Transformasi Pendidikan Orang Asli dan Peribumi (Orang Asli and Indigenous Students Education Transformation) in 2019 and 2020 to address some of the underlying issues that Orang Asli children face. One is to encourage knowledge sharing among teachers through colloquiums in order to provide them with opportunities to share their teaching experiences with their peers and encourage the exchange of ideas to address the specific challenges that teachers face in Orang Asli schools. Program Jom Belajar (Let's Learn Programme) and other campaigns raise awareness to encourage Orang Asli children who

have never been to school to have a greater interest in learning. The Jom Belajar Program involves not only the MOE but also NGOs and communities (MOE 2021a: 60), and this programme has resulted in the admission of 22 Bateq children in school (MOE 2020a: 23). There are initiatives such as Program Ikon Murid Orang Asli (Orang Asli student Icon Programme) and Program Kesedaran Kerjaya (Career Awareness Programme) to provide role models for Orang Asli students and career guidance for those who want to pursue higher education.

Good policy strategy will only result in positive impacts through effective implementation that is complemented by monitoring and evaluation. The next two sections discuss implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

8.2 Efficient and effective implementation

The main obstacle in the delivery of the programmes and assistance lies in their implementation. Despite the many programmes and assistance provided by the government for Orang Asli children, there are many issues with their implementation, as highlighted above. What is needed is not another programme or form of assistance but effective implementation of existing programmes. There are four aspects to consider in enhancing assistance: (1) quality; (2) adequacy; (3) suitability; and (4) timeliness.

The quality of the provision was often cited as an issue. Transport safety, food hygiene, and uniform sizes, among other issues, were identified as often not being up to acceptable standard, though there were cases where the quality was reported to be satisfactory. Therefore, quality control of the provision of assistance needs to be monitored regularly.

The adequacy of the provision was often insufficient. For example, the allowance provided to secondary school students was not enough to buy food from school canteens. Transportation was overcrowded with accidents happening due to overcrowding coupled with poor road conditions. More vehicles are needed to transport children to school. There are good adjustments such as the recent increase of allowances and back-to-school aid announced in the 2022 budget.

Suitability is another aspect to consider. In the case of uniforms, the size of the children should be taken into account. It is not just the provision of a uniform that matters but that of a suitable size that children are able to wear. A good example cited by the teachers is that a variety of food would incentivise children to come to school with good-quality food also improving nutrition rates.

Timeliness of delivery and implementation are important. In the case of allowances, students go hungry because they are disbursed at the end of the month. Timely delivery of back-to-school aid, uniform and school shoes, and other assistance is also vital. The many programmes and assistance show that there is some understanding of the needs and challenges faced by Orang Asli children. As part of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025, the Orang Asli Transformation Plan 2013–2018 was implemented to address these challenges. It is time to enhance these programmes and assistance further to eliminate the educational challenges that Orang Asli children face. It is not a single destination but a continuous process.

8.3 Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation of programmes and assistance are important to ensure that objectives are achieved, and any issues and unforeseen problems are identified and addressed throughout the process rather than at the end of the programme or after several years of implementation. This would have serious implications for the students who depend on these programmes and assistance to ensure that they can go to school to receive a quality education.

In a paper by Wan Ya Shin (2020), the programmes and policies for Orang Asli children were mapped and evaluated in terms of their design and impact. The main issue identified was that though there are many programmes and initiatives that have evolved over the years, in essence the programmes and initiatives have not changed significantly due to a lack of monitoring and evaluation. Most of the programmes and initiatives seek to address dropout rates or low proficiency of basic literacy and numeracy skills but have not been adjusted and improved to address current obstacles. Clear targeting and progress tracking need to be enhanced so that the progress made is on the right track. However, the problem of “hitting the target but missing the point” needs to be avoided (ibid.: 44).

The findings on the delivery and implementation of the programmes and assistance discussed here reveal that there is a lack of monitoring and evaluation with seemingly no mention of monitoring and evaluation plans to periodically check the progress and milestones of each programme. For example, the multiple challenges with transportation, as noted earlier, would benefit from the close monitoring and evaluation of the transport contractors. The late delivery of allowances and uniforms also indicates a clear absence of monitoring given how often they are late. Moreover, better evaluations are needed to adjust programmes to address issues that may arise, such as the high cost for students to travel to banks from their villages to withdraw allowances; this could be resolved with a proper evaluation and adjustments to cater to the needs of students.

8.4. Schools’ and teachers’ autonomy and accountability

8.4.1 Adaptive pedagogy and teachers’ autonomy

The needs of the Orang Asli children need to be contextualised within their environment and cultures. Therefore, the mainstream curriculum need the interpretation of a teacher to tailor them to the needs and levels of their class. It is a very challenging task for teachers who are sent to Orang Asli schools for the first time, especially if they have had no prior experience with Orang Asli communities.

The teachers that were interviewed displayed great creativity and were adaptive in their pedagogy. It is not about using the “right” pedagogy but being able to adopt different methodologies that works for Orang Asli students. As highlighted in Section 6.1 (Initiatives in teaching and learning), teachers have to understand and listen to the children in order to formulate lesson plans customised to their needs. And they must do so while still following the prescribed curriculum to prepare students for national examinations in order for them to have a chance to pursue further education, get into good schools, and obtain scholarships. To do so, teachers have to undertake needs analyses and a large amount of planning, which require additional time and effort. It is challenging for teachers as they are also mandated to complete the set national curriculum within the given time. They have to go the extra mile to deliver interesting and effective teaching in order for Orang Asli children to learn effectively.

Teachers need to have the autonomy and flexibility to experiment and adapt the curriculum to the needs of Orang Asli children in each class. These teachers have spent additional time, money, and other resources in order to better contextualise the curriculum for their students. The initiatives highlighted in the previous sections are largely driven by teachers and principals who invest their time and effort in realising these initiatives.

Teachers also stressed autonomy as a central component in creating a conducive environment where teachers can innovate, solve problems, and focus on achieving learning objectives instead of just completing the assigned syllabus. This room to grow allows for a richer teaching and learning experience for both teachers and students.

Saya rasa dalam keadaan bagaimana sekalipun, sepatutnya guru tersebut diberikan freedom dalam pengajaran dan how diaorang nak deliver the lesson ... sepatutnya, kita tak perlu memaksa sangat guru untuk follow sangat [syllabus/scheme of work] tu, as a guideline, at the end kita boleh tengok bahawa sampai atau tidak objective pengajaran tersebut.... Sebab by the end of the day, kita bukan nak tengok hari ini siri apa tercapai, at the end of the day, ... kita nak tengok kemenjadian murid tu.... Untuk capai benda tu, autonomi guru tu penting. Bila kita ada freedom, kita akan lebih tak terikat dan lebih selesa untuk membina inovasi ... autonomi kuasa guru tu lah saya rasa paling penting dalam pendidikan negara kita ni. (FGD001)

As noted by this teacher, at the end of the day the system needs to be flexible and enable teachers and schools to have autonomy to experiment and adopt different pedagogies and methodologies. There is no guarantee that all experiments and innovations will be successful, and so the education system needs to allow for experimental methods that may not succeed. Teachers need to have the space, effort, time, and resources to test out their creativity and contextualise the curriculum, teaching, and learning for Orang Asli children.

8.4.2 Schools' autonomy

Schools should also be given the autonomy and resources to implement programmes that they see fit for Orang Asli students and communities. Each community has its own individual culture, challenges, and environment. A one size fits all approach would not be able to sufficiently address all the problems that each community faces. A former MOE officer who has extensive policymaking experience suggested providing a technical specialist who would help each school to identify their gaps and develop a customised plan to overcome their challenges. This would enable a contextualised and customised plan that is based on the specific needs of each school. From there, schools could develop programmes that address specific challenges that the school, students, and communities face. This would require that schools be given the autonomy and resources to plan and develop their own development plan.

Strong leadership is important so that they ensure that the changes are sustainable. As one teacher stated:

I think it should start with leaders if the leadership is strong – set these principles, these ways of learning, needs analysis, being reflective in your practice, being data and evidence-based, engaging with communities – if they value these elements, the school will follow through, the teachers are expected to do the same, but unfortunately they are not. And this is not just a problem in [Orang Asli] schools, with other schools as well. (SK014)

8.4.3 Teachers' and schools' accountability

With greater autonomy, the greater the need for accountability and responsibility from teachers and schools. Impacts and outcomes would rely more heavily on autonomous teachers and schools to deliver teaching and learning effectively to students. Training, preparation, and sufficient resources for teachers and school leaders would be a prerequisite for teachers to effectively deliver teaching and learning, and for school leaders to govern and manage their schools well. Their capacity needs to be enhanced before delegating more autonomy to teachers and school leaders.

Each state's JPN and Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah (PPD, District Education Office) could provide the support that each school needs to develop and execute its own customised development plan with the MOE's role shifting to monitoring rather than planning the implementation. When greater autonomy is given to teachers and school leaders, there should be a monitoring and evaluation system in place to ensure that they are equipped with the necessary skills and resources and are providing a quality education to their students.

Schools within a single district or state could also form a network of knowledge sharing. It is important to embrace the spirit of experimentation and enable the sharing of useful suggestions among educators. It could also provide a support system for teachers to come together to overcome similar challenges that they may face and promote professionalism among the teachers, enabling them to participate in providing solutions and innovations rather than just executing top-down policies and instructions.

8.5 Supplementary education

Education is not just about school. It is important that Orang Asli children are exposed to as many learning opportunities as possible. There are some supplementary classes and programmes alongside formal education that have helped Orang Asli children to learn. Some of these initiatives are mentioned above such as PDKs, extra classes provided by teachers, and NGO-run classes. It is important to cultivate an environment that promotes learning for Orang Asli children.

One of the suggestions by parents is to establish mini libraries that would serve as public space for children to read: "*budak nak rujuk sumber pembelajaran ... macam dekat luar tu kan ada perpustakaan desa*" (OP0040).

A teacher also suggested the opening of schools as spaces for community learning:

Kita boleh ada satu kelas ataupun komuniti punya program untuk ajar budak2 ataupun mungkin komuniti member tu sendiri untuk gunakan kemudahan apa yang ada di sekolah. Kiranya sekolah tu jadikan pusat untuk komuniti berkumpul dan belajar bukan terhad kepada pelajar sahaja. (FGD005)

PDKs which are driven by the communities are a good bottom-up approach to motivate everyone involved to prioritise education. The recognition of the Orang Asli syllabus and provision of basic resources for these PDKs would enhance each community's pride in their own culture. This would help them to be more aware of the importance of education.

8.6 Deficit discourse

Much of the policy and discourse surrounding Orang Asli education are framed by a deficit discourse (Misnaton et al., 2016; Renganathan, 2016). In writing about the representation of Aboriginal people in Australia, Cressida Fforde et al. (2013: 162) “use the term ‘deficit discourse’ to describe a mode of thinking, identifiable in language use, that frames Aboriginal identity in a narrative of negativity, deficiency and disempowerment.” This type of deficit discourse frames much of the representation of the Orang Asli in Malaysia today. Stereotypes of the Orang Asli as backward, primitive, and deficient frame public discourse, media representation, and policy related to their communities. As others have observed, the prevalent discourse in Orang Asli education “assumes a deficit perspective where the lack of educational achievement among the Orang Asli children is often attributed to their culture and community” (Renganathan, 2016: 275). Parents and students are often blamed for the Orang Asli students’ lack of interest or underperformance (Renganathan, 2016; Wan, 2020). Some teachers believe that Orang Asli students are innately slow learners while others believe Orang Asli culture hinders them from having academic success. This is also observed in comments made by policymakers and educators, and even by academic researchers. These biases permeate discussions and trickle down to policy design for Orang Asli communities. To a certain extent the existing deficit discourse is also internalised by Orang Asli students and parents. Putting the blame on the community does not address the contextual differences and the larger structural issues of inequality.

The lack of focus on their lessons among Orang Asli students is commonly attributed to their “nature” of being shy, passive, and having a short memory, instead of re-examining the delivery of teaching and learning in the context of the students’ environment and culture. Students may find it hard to understand and focus because the material presented is unfamiliar and does not fit in the context of their daily lives. One teacher pointed out that if a lesson refers to KLCC, the students cannot imagine it because they have never been outside their village or seen high-rise buildings. Additionally, the primary medium in schools is Malay, which for many Orang Asli children is a second or third language. It takes them longer to understand because they are trying to grasp new concepts in a new language. Many also do not have access to pre-schooling, and are therefore at a disadvantage when they enter standard one as their literacy and numeracy skills are lacking compared to their non-Orang Asli peers. Some students also belong to the first generation of their family to attend school, and therefore may not have enough support at home for assisting them with homework and revision. Many of these factors may cause teachers to assume that Orang Asli students are slow learners or have learning disabilities.

Teachers also describe one of the challenges for Orang Asli students is that they are “non-competitive” which is framed as a negative trait. However, this could instead be seen as a positive attribute, and learning can be promoted in a more collaborative way. As many teachers noted, Orang Asli students have responded better to nature-based learning and problem-solving, thriving in learning environments that are participatory and interactive. Changing the framing from a deficit discourse to one that foregrounds strengths can shift how problems are examined and addressed (Bishop, 2010; Fogarty et.al., 2018).

8.6.1 Gender dimensions

We were not able to obtain gender-specific data to examine the gender breakdown of students who drop out from school. However, our interview data and observations on the ground suggest that more male students drop out than female students. Some of the reasons cited for male students dropping out are due to bullying and racial discrimination in school, as well as working to support themselves and their families, often helping their parents with agricultural work. Some also end up leaving school following the example of their peers, as one parent described “*ikut kawan*”. According to the parents, these male students were easily bored at school as they were not able to relate to what they were studying. One parent suggested that classrooms need to be more interactive like computer games that the students enjoy playing. This suggestion indicates the need for more interactive learning.

There were also cases where female students dropped out to get married. This usually affects students in upper secondary school around the ages of 16 and 17 and this issue of child marriage needs to be paid more attention to. Female students may also leave school to take care of the elderly family members or to babysit their younger siblings, in addition to bullying in school and finding work. There is an urgent need for gender-specific data and further research on the gendered dimensions of Orang Asli educational issues.

8.7 Representation

Representation matters. First, Orang Asli students need to see their culture and people’s history represented in mainstream education. The invisibility of Orang Asli culture and history perpetuates the marginalisation of Orang Asli in Malaysian society. Orang Asli students continue to feel disconnected from the education system. Indigenous cultures, traditional knowledge, and history need to be included in the national curriculum. This will counter negative stereotypes and deficit discourses about Orang Asli, and instead create a strength-based discourse that celebrates indigenous heritage.

Second, it is important for Orang Asli students to have role models from their community that can inspire them. This can be a student from their school who has done well in their studies, or someone from their community who has had a successful career. For example, one of the students we interviewed cited Dr Juli Edo, a professor and former JAKOA director as an important role model for her.

Sebab aim saya kan, uh saya nak jadi orang yang berjaya macam apa – pengarah JAKOA tu, [Prof. Dr Juli Edo] tu. Dari situ saya macam, wah, dia boleh berjaya, takkan kita tak boleh kan. Lepastu saya dapat info ada doctor Orang Asli, dulu saya memang mencita-cita jadi doctor, tapi tak nampak la sebab ... saya tak cukup kan. So saya macam oh takpe la mungkin kita boleh tolong – kita boleh jadi orang lain yang boleh tolong masyarakat kan, sebab saya punya macam, anda kata saya kan, saya nak tolong masyarakat saya lah. Saya nak diorang sudut education, sudut pekerjaan tu, and then ... uh, sebab saya nak bangunkan ekonomi diorang, andaikan kata kan, saya ada ... apa? Macam NGO kan. So saya nak pergi ke kampung ke kampung, lepastu tolong mana yang patut la. Ah, yang tu aim saya. (FGD_OS2)

Third, having role models in the family is also important in creating pathways for other family members. In families in which a family member such as an elder sibling has had the opportunity to enter university, there is a higher chance of other siblings following suit. More opportunities and support should be provided for first generation university candidates from Orang Asli families. This could be in the form of mentorship programmes and scholarships or special university pathways for first generation Orang Asli candidates.

8.8 Choices and voices

In the final analysis, education can empower Orang Asli children to be agents of change for themselves and their communities. It is hoped that education can be able to provide them with a wider range of choices to fulfil their potential in life. It is important to listen and incorporate the voices of the communities in overcoming the education challenges that Orang Asli communities face. One of the parents interviewed suggested organising consultations for parents and other stakeholders to meet and discuss education challenges faced by Orang Asli children:

Kita kena buat satu perjumpaan, seminar ibu bapa, guru, bawah JAKOA, maknanya hal ibu bapa itu boleh dibuka pada seminar, kita kena berkongsi dan selesaikan masalah [Orang Asli], pelajar itu ... macam saya nak luah apa masalah kaum saya ini, [baru] kita boleh selesaikan masalah pelajar. (OP0021)

It is not about forcing Orang Asli children to go to school in order to assimilate them into mainstream Malaysian society but to provide high-quality education to empower them to have greater choices and voices for themselves and their communities in the future.

9. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy and programmes need to address underlying challenges and create positive impacts through effective implementation. The education system consists of system-wide, school-level, and teacher-initiated policies and programmes with students' motivation and learning at the centre of focus. However, the education system does not function in isolation and it requires a good support system that creates learning opportunities outside the classroom to facilitate students' learning and development. Coordination and collaboration with communities, other ministries, NGOs, and other stakeholders are also important in creating learning opportunities and providing an environment that is conducive and relevant to properly nurture Orang Asli children. This section summarises the policy recommendations discussed above and provides suggestions for a way forward.

1. **There must be a greater focus on learning and addressing underlying challenges instead of symptomatic issues.** As simply going to school does not necessarily translate into learning, the general school culture and system-wide focus must prioritise learning instead of examinations or rote memorisation. High-quality education that can motivate and nurture students is needed to build the skills and mastery needed for Orang Asli students to be independent learners. Policies and programmes need to address underlying issues instead of only dealing with symptomatic problems at a surface level which do not resolve or eradicate these issues.
2. **Indigenous cultures and history must be integrated into the mainstream curriculum.** It is very important that indigenous cultures and history be included in the mainstream curriculum and that Orang Asli should not be represented as an exotic "other" but celebrated as part of the diversity of peoples in Malaysia. Schoolchildren should be taught about different Orang Asli sub-ethnic groups, where they live, their contribution to nation-making, their arts, and their cultures that are closely linked to the natural environment. Orang Asli history should be included in learning about Malaysian history, such as the role of Senoi Prag during the Malayan Emergency. Aspects of Orang Asli cultures can be introduced through appreciating Orang Asli arts, such as through the work of the Semai writer Akiya (Mahat Anak Cina), the Temuan contemporary artist Shaq Koyok, and the Mah Meri choreographer and musician Maznah Unyan. The Orang Asli environmental ethos and indigenous knowledge of the natural environment, and their rights to self-determination should also be included in mainstream education.

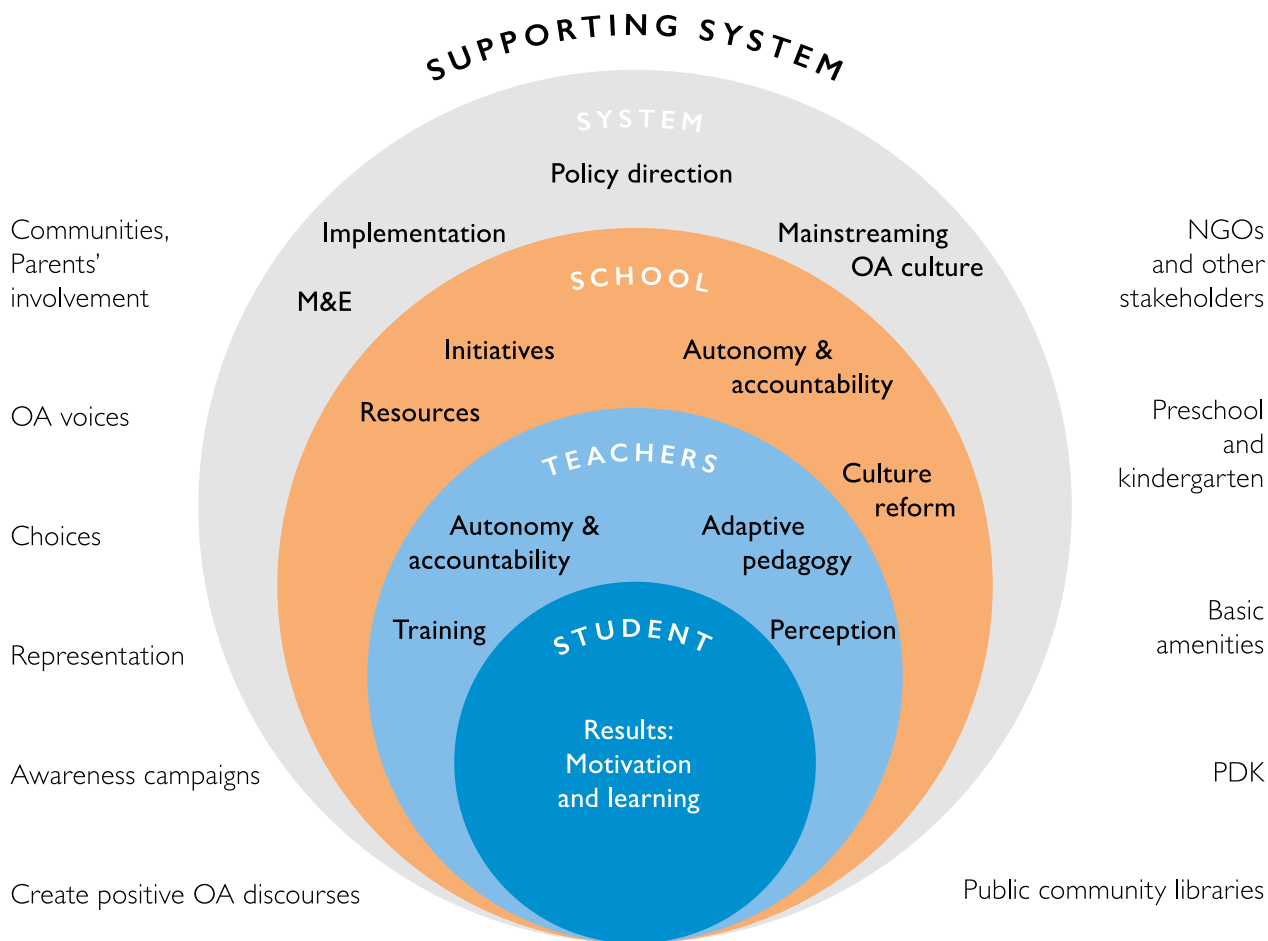
3. **Existing programmes must be monitored and evaluated to ensure their efficient and effective delivery and implementation.** Periodical monitoring and mid – and post-programme evaluations are needed to ensure that programmes remain on track and are adjusted to and aligned with new issues that may arise. This monitoring and evaluation needs to be considered at the beginning of the original programme design. It is important to have clear targeting and the right indicators to track progress, so that programmes do not “hit the target but miss the point” (Wan, 2020: 44).
4. **Teachers and school leaders who are equipped and capable of delivering quality education for Orang Asli students need to be entrusted with greater autonomy and balanced accountability.** Teachers and school leaders who are able to enhance the quality of education for Orang Asli students could be the agents of change to drive shifts in school culture and implement adaptive pedagogies to tailor lessons to their needs. This autonomy needs to be balanced with accountability. Teachers and school leaders need to be trained and equipped to fully leverage this autonomy to deliver effective teaching and learning along with the efficient allocation of resources.
5. **Pre-posting training on Orang Asli cultures could be provided to teachers and infrastructure and resources for teachers in Orang Asli schools should be improved.** Teachers who are posted to schools with Orang Asli students should be provided with training to introduce them to the history and culture of the particular Orang Asli sub-ethnic group they will be teaching. It is useful for teachers to have an overview of the demography of their students to understand their situation better. This preparation module could also include implicit bias training to create self-awareness of learned racial biases against Orang Asli and to counter the prevalent deficit discourse. Teachers who are posted in Orang Asli schools often take up many different responsibilities outside the classroom, such as taking care of students after school and maintaining the school's infrastructure. These teachers should be given more support and increased allowances for the added responsibilities they take on. Their living conditions and teaching infrastructure could also be improved.
6. **Teachers should be trained in innovative and adaptive pedagogies, and platforms for knowledge sharing could be established.** Teachers (both before and during their postings) should be introduced to different teaching tools such as culturally responsive and adaptive pedagogies. An example of this is “Rimbagogi” as developed by teachers at IPG Tengku Afzan. Experienced teachers can share their best practices and offer advice to new teachers. An annual conference of best practices could be organised for teachers to share their experiences with each other and have a support network. A user-friendly knowledge sharing platform can also be established (or existing ones enhanced) as a resource for teachers. Teachers often use their private funds to create innovative teaching tools. They should be supported and a teaching and learning fund be made available to teachers with easy access to it. Recognition should be given to teachers and schools for their best practices.
7. **Trust and collaboration between schools and Orang Asli communities needs to be built as Orang Asli parents (and by extension their communities) are important partners in education.** Their involvement is critical in creating a supportive environment for Orang Asli children. Schools and communities should have open communication and work collaboratively. Schools can also draw upon the community's expertise and local knowledge as part of the learning experience for their students.

8. **PDKs need to be recognised as part of the support system for schools and adequate essential resources should be provided to PDKs.** Support and recognition should be given to PDKs for their important role in community education. PDKs provide preschool education, after-school programmes and in some cases alternative schooling for children without access to public schools or those who have dropped out. Some PDKs also provide learning opportunities for adults in the community. PDK teachers are mostly from local communities and are based in the villages. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, we observed how PDKs provided an important role in supporting the continued education for Orang Asli children. Many PDKs include indigenous knowledge, languages, and skills as an integral part of their curriculum. Support can be in the form of funding and resource assistance to PDKs; however, their autonomy should remain an important feature of their governance structure. Government or external assistance could be channelled to PDKs, such as creating a library or resource centre (with infrastructure such as computers and reliable internet connectivity) for each village.
9. **Good quality preschool education needs to be provided based on learning through play, social interaction, and their environment.** Orang Asli students without access to preschools are at a disadvantage when they enter standard one. The curriculum assumes that students can already read, write, and count as soon as they enter school. Orang Asli students who have not had any preschool education are thus automatically behind when they begin schooling. They find it difficult to catch up with their peers and teachers have to pay special attention to teach them basic reading and writing skills. This may not be possible given large class sizes. Students who attend preschool may also be more confident in their abilities and are able to transition to schooling life better. There are many villages without access to preschools and the founding of more PDKs could play an important role in providing preschool education for Orang Asli children for villages without either kindergartens or PDKs.
10. **Orang Asli communities should be empowered to be their own agents of change and participate in the process of Orang Asli-related policies.** The voice of Orang Asli in the process of policymaking is important in order to incorporate their cultures and views. Education issues and challenges should be addressed with Orang Asli parents and communities at the school, state, and national levels. There have been Orang Asli conferences and consultation on education issues at the national level in the past and this should continue at every level. The creation of an Orang Asli education council comprising Orang Asli leaders, education policymakers, principals, teachers, and other relevant stakeholders to govern and monitor the progress of policy and programmes for children would help to ensure voices of the Orang Asli are fully taken into account and are involved in the close monitoring of any programmes.
11. **A positive or strength-based discourse should be created to shift away from the deficit discourse on Orang Asli.** Policy and programmes for Orang Asli education should shift away from a deficit discourse framing to one that is positive or strength-based. A deficit discourse framing explains Orang Asli students' high dropout rate and gap in educational achievement as simply due to their culture and way of life. For example, teachers cite the students' lack of focus in class, or blame parents for not prioritising their children's education as part of Orang Asli culture. An anti-deficit approach focuses on strength-based framing and culturally responsive teaching (Bishop, 2010). This is described as "making school learning relevant and effective for learners by drawing on students' cultural knowledge, life experiences, frames of reference, languages, and performance and communication styles" (Education Hub, 2019: 5).

12. **The collaboration of relevant ministries must be strengthened to address the multidimensional challenges that Orang Asli children and communities face.** Multiple agencies need to coordinate in order to provide children with access to high-quality education. This includes building schools that are close to the villages so they are not hindered by long distances, providing safe and reliable transportation, ensuring roads are safe and accessible, and providing financial and resource assistance to families and schools. Infrastructure such as hostels, libraries, computer centres, and internet connectivity are also desperately needed. Basic amenities such as electricity and clean water for villages are all also vital for the well-being of students. Currently, all matters related to Orang Asli infrastructure are delegated to JAKOA (other than schools that are under the MOE's purview). However, JAKOA's funding is limited and may not be able to adequately address all the infrastructural issues. Other ministries and departments, as well as the cooperation of NGOs and other charitable foundations, are needed in this effort. Information flow and transparency on the availability of assistance also need to be addressed so that parents and students are aware of and have access to the assistance and resources available to them.

Figure 5 summarises the policy recommendations at the level of students, teachers, schools, and wider systems.

Figure 5 Summary of policy recommendations (Source: Authors)



10. CONCLUSION

The issue of education inequality faced by Orang Asli children has been recognised by the Malaysian government, with various policies and programmes implemented to address the challenges. Despite some progress, this education gap remains unresolved.

In light of this, the present paper has consulted directly with Orang Asli communities on the underlying challenges that children face and reviewed the implementation and delivery of programmes and assistance provided by the government. The study focuses on reviewing experiences on the ground. Its primary data are drawn from the interviews and FGDs that were conducted with parents, teachers, principals, and other stakeholders. Findings from this study have highlighted the challenges as perceived by parents, students, and teachers, and reviewed the implementation of assistance and programmes, identifying the gaps and shortcomings in the implementation and delivery of the programmes. This previous section offered some policy recommendations, with a focus on addressing underlying challenges rather than the symptoms of long-standing problems.

The aim of these recommendations is to create a conducive learning environment in which Orang Asli students can thrive. The end goal is not captured by statistics and data but the creation of a community of Orang Asli learners who are empowered and have access to opportunities as any student in Malaysia should have. Our view is that some foundational changes need to be addressed. These include the integration of Orang Asli history and cultures into mainstream education; the training of teachers for a culturally responsive and adaptive pedagogy; a move away from a deficit discourse to a strength-based approach; and the building of trust and collaboration between schools and communities. Alongside this, there is a pressing need to strengthen coordination among relevant agencies, and the monitoring and evaluation of existing programmes to ensure effective delivery. An important aspect of the overall project of bridging the education inequality gap is respect for the Orang Asli right to determine their choices and their agency as genuine partners in advancing progressive change for their communities.

Education should not be a tool used to force the Orang Asli to change and assimilate into mainstream society. Rather it has the potential to empower children and, by extension, the wider communities. The time for a concerted effort to bridge educational inequalities is long overdue.

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