

# Understanding Disparity in Education and Challenges among Indigenous Communities: A Case Study

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## INTRODUCTION

The educational gap among the Orang Asli communities in Malaysia is a persistent challenge, despite the country's progress in education. A variety of ethnic groups with diverse cultures and languages make up the Orang Asli, the indigenous people of Malaysia. This paper examines the diverse educational disparities among the Orang Asli and highlights the key factors that contribute to them.

Parental influence and awareness play a crucial role in the educational success of Orang Asli children. Many Orang Asli parents have had little exposure to formal education; they are unaware of the importance of education in improving their own lives and those of their children. As a result, they often find it difficult to be a positive role model for their children, leading to poor educational performance.

Another major hurdle for Orang Asli students is poor accessibility. These communities are usually located in remote and rural areas, far away from well-developed cities and towns. Inadequate infrastructure, such as unpaved roads and bridges, and the lack of public transportation contribute to the long and arduous journey to school. This demotivates the children and hinders their progress at school.

Socio-economic factors further exacerbate the inequalities. Many Orang Asli families live in poverty, which limits their ability to provide school supplies, uniforms and transportation. Their remote location and financial burden create additional barriers to education. The education and income level of parents influence the school dropout rate, with the parents' education level being a particularly important factor. If parents do not have a higher education, it is difficult to adequately support and guide their children in their educational journey.

As Malaysia strives to provide equal access to education for all citizens, including indigenous communities, these findings highlight the need for targeted interventions. Raising awareness among parents, improving accessibility, and providing socio-economic support are important steps to reduce educational inequality among the Orang Asli.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Mazzlida M.D. and Ruhizan M.Y. identified parental influence as a major factor in the poor educational performance of Orang Asli children in a 2016 study. Most Orang Asli parents do not realize the importance of education in improving their own lives and that of their children. This is because they have had little exposure to formal education and many of them left school early to work and support their families. As a result, illiteracy and a lack of understanding of the value of education are widespread among Orang Asli parents, which means that they cannot be good role models for their children.

Furthermore, the attitude of Orang Asli parents towards their children's education has a significant impact on their children's progress at school. A 2014 study by Wan Afizi W.H., Shaharuddin A. and Noraziah A. showed that the accessibility of schools is an important factor affecting Orang Asli children's access to education. Orang Asli settlements are generally located in rural areas, far away from well-developed towns and cities with access to adequate infrastructure and facilities. The lack of paved roads and bridges and the absence of public

transportation such as busses make it difficult for Orang Asli children to reach the nearest school, which is often very far away. The long and arduous journey to school is demotivating for the children and leads to a lack of enthusiasm and poor academic performance.

Although the Orang Asli community's awareness of education is still relatively low, the number of schools built in the indigenous villages has increased. For instance, Pahang has built 430 schools for both Aboriginal and local people (Wan Afizi et al., 2014). Furthermore, the Orang Asli Development Department (JAKOA) statistics reveal that only 98 Aboriginal children received secondary school placements between 2000 and 2008. In recent years, however, this number has risen significantly. In 2010 and 2011, 370 and 408 Aboriginal children, respectively were placed in IPTAs (Berita Harian, July 26, 2012). An earlier study by Mohamad Johdi and Abdul Razak (2009) found that only 2.2% of Orang Asli who graduated in 2009 went on to further education.

Another study by Sheera Nabila and Azizan Zainuddin; Exploring the School Dropout Factors among Indigenous 'The aim of this study was to identify the factors that contribute to school dropout among indigenous students in Alor Gajah, Melaka. To achieve this, a quantitative approach was used and the data was analyzed using multiple regression tests. This research is important to achieve the Vision 2020 goal of providing equal opportunities to all citizens, including indigenous people. The results showed that income level, parents' educational background, infrastructure and basic amenities have a significant impact on the dropout rate of Indigenous students, with parental education being the most important factor. However, it should be noted that these findings only apply to Alor Gajah, Melaka and may not be generalizable to all indigenous students in Malaysia. Further research is needed to determine the impact of distance between schools and indigenous communities as an independent variable on dropout rates.

### Research Objectives

1. To analyze the influence of parental awareness and attitude on the educational participation of Orang Asli children.
2. To identify the socio-economic and structural factors that contribute to school dropout rates among Orang Asli students.
3. To assess the role of cultural beliefs and gender norms in access to education for Orang Asli children.
4. To suggest culturally relevant and inclusive strategies to improve school retention and success in Orang Asli communities.

### METHODOLOGY: SAMPLING STRATEGY AND DATA COLLECTION

A broad sampling strategy was used for the study, involving community leaders, local schools, and non-governmental organizations working with the Orang Asli. Potential participants were informed by telephone and in person of the study's objectives and procedures and were assured of the right to refuse to participate. Data collection included five focus group discussions using a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions to explore participants' perspectives on educational inequities and their ideas for improving access. A thematic analysis was then conducted to identify recurring themes that deepened our understanding of participants' beliefs and experiences. Summary of results on factors influencing the education of Orang Asli children:

### RESULTS

The results of the study show that many parents do not actively encourage their children to attend school and that many are satisfied if their children stay at home, especially girls. This observation is consistent with the 2016 study by Mazzlida M.D. and Ruhizan M.Y., which emphasizes the central role of parental influence and awareness. Mazzlida and Ruhizan's study underscores that the parents of the Orang Asli, a sizable portion of whom have limited access to formal education, often fail to appreciate the importance of education. Their illiteracy and limited understanding of the value of education make it difficult for them to be positive role models for their children.

## **Parental influence and awareness**

The research findings also highlight the widespread lack of parental awareness and influence over their children's education. Many parents in the community seem indifferent to their children's school attendance. This is consistent with the conclusions of a 2016 study by Mazzlida M.D. and Ruhizan M.Y., which highlighted the significant role of parental influence on the academic performance of Orang Asli children. The study reveals that a significant number of Orang Asli parents frequently struggle to understand the significance of education due to their limited exposure to formal education. Their illiteracy and limited understanding of the value of education present them with significant challenges when it comes to being positive role models for their children.

## **Attitudes of Orang Asli's parents**

The attitudes of Orang Asli parents toward their children's education have a significant impact on their progress in school. A study in 2014 by Wan Afizi W.H., Shaharuddin A., and Noraziah A. emphasized the issue of accessibility. Orang Asli settlements are often located in rural areas with inadequate infrastructure and transportation. The long and arduous journey to school demotivates the children and affects their academic performance.

Despite the low level of awareness, the number of schools in indigenous villages has increased. For instance, Pahang has built 430 schools for both Aboriginal and local people. Statistics from the Orang Asli Development Department (JAKOA) show that the number of Aboriginal children attending high school has increased significantly in recent years.

## **Factors contributing to school dropout among Indigenous students**

School dropout among Indigenous students is a pressing issue that is influenced by a combination of economic, social and cultural factors. Research has identified several key reasons why Indigenous students leave school early, including financial constraints, language barriers, cultural expectations and the influence of modern technology. Addressing these factors requires a holistic approach that takes into account the unique challenges faced by Indigenous communities.

A major factor contributing to school dropout rates is financial hardship. Many indigenous families face economic problems that prevent them from consistently supporting their children's education. According to Sheera Nabila and Azizan Zainuddin (2021), low household income has a significant impact on a child's ability to attend school. Parents often prioritize their immediate financial needs over long-term educational goals, especially when school costs such as uniforms, books and transportation create additional burdens.

Cultural expectations also play an important role in school dropout rates. In many indigenous communities, the cultural emphasis is on children helping their parents with housework or income-generating activities. This cultural norm frequently prompts parents to pull children out of school to assist with family responsibilities. Parental beliefs that downplay the importance of formal education further exacerbate this problem. For example, some parents believe that traditional knowledge or skills are more valuable than formal schooling, especially in rural or subsistence-based economies.

The influence of modern technology, especially cell phones, has recently proven to be a problem. Many parents report that their children's excessive use of cell phones distracts them from learning and contributes to a lack of interest in attending school. This technological distraction, along with other existing barriers, increases the likelihood of students dropping out of school.

Language barriers further complicate the situation. Indigenous students often have difficulty understanding the language of instruction at school, which is usually not their native language. This linguistic disconnect can lead to frustration and a sense of alienation, reducing their motivation to continue formal education. UNESCO (2019) emphasizes the importance of culturally and linguistically inclusive education as a means to improve the retention rates among Indigenous students.

Structural issues such as inadequate infrastructure, poor access to transportation and low-quality education discourage students from attending school. Schools in remote areas often lack basic facilities, trained teachers

and appropriate learning materials. The study by Sheera Nabila and Azizan Zainuddin (2021) emphasizes that these factors combined hinder students' ability to stay in school and perform well academically.

In addition, social challenges such as bullying and discrimination in schools create an unwelcoming environment for Indigenous students. Many reports feeling ostracized by their peers or teachers, which contributes to low self-esteem and a sense of isolation. This toxic environment can make schools feel unsafe and unwelcoming, leading students to drop out of school.

Finally, family issues such as early marriage or the need to care for siblings disproportionately affect female students in Indigenous communities. Traditional gender roles and societal expectations often force young girls to prioritize family responsibilities over their education.

In summary, school dropout among Indigenous students is a multi-faceted problem influenced by financial constraints, cultural expectations, language barriers and the influence of technology. Addressing this problem requires a concerted effort by governments, educators and community leaders. Culturally sensitive measures such as providing financial support, integrating Indigenous languages and culture into the curriculum and ensuring access to quality education can play an important role in reducing dropout rates and improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students

#### School Dropout Factors

This research identifies several key factors contributing to school dropout among Indigenous students. These include financial constraints, long distances to schools, prevailing parental beliefs that downplay the importance of education, and a cultural emphasis on children assisting their parents. Additionally, many parents report that mobile phones have become a significant factor, as their children's excessive use of phones leads to a lack of interest in attending school. This distraction has resulted in some students refusing to prioritize their education.

These findings align with a study by Sheera Nabila and Azizan Zainuddin, which explored the determinants of school dropout among Indigenous students in Alor Gajah, Melaka. The study revealed that income level, parental educational background, infrastructure, and access to basic amenities significantly affect school dropout rates, with parental education being identified as the most critical factor.

It is important to note, however, that these findings may be specific to the context of Alor Gajah and should not be automatically generalized to all Indigenous students in Malaysia.

### **Socioeconomic factors and Parental influence**

Poverty is common in many Orang Asli communities, and economic constraints can limit their ability to provide their children with necessary school supplies, uniforms, and transportation. Economic factors can be a major barrier to education. The attitudes and influence of Orang Asli parents on their children's education have a major impact on academic progress. Parental education, income levels, and access to basic amenities play a role in school dropout rates.

### **Lack of awareness and Cultural sensitivity**

Many Orang Asli parents have limited awareness of the importance of education in improving their own lives and those of their children. This is often because they themselves have had little exposure to formal education, as many dropped out of school early to work and support their families. Nevertheless, traditional customs and beliefs of the Orang Asli are not always compatible with the formal education system, leading to disengagement and curriculum irrelevance.

### **Addressing inequalities and Future prospects:**

The Malaysian government, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders have actively worked to address these inequalities. These include policies and programs to improve access to education, create inclusive and culturally sensitive learning environments, and support teacher training and development in Orang Asli communities. Addressing educational disparities among the Orang Asli is a complex challenge that requires a multi-faceted approach. It involves improving infrastructure, overcoming language barriers, raising parental

awareness, and developing culturally relevant education programs to ensure that Orang Asli children have equal opportunities for a quality education and better prospects for the future.

In summary, the study highlights the urgent need to address the lack of parental encouragement, particularly for girls, within the Orang Asli community to attend school. The findings are consistent with previous research and underscore the central role of parental influence and awareness in shaping educational success. Although challenges remain, the growing number of schools in Indigenous villages and the increasing enrolment of Aboriginal children in secondary schools are positive developments. To bridge educational disparities among the Orang Asli, collaborative efforts focused on socioeconomic challenges, awareness, cultural relevance, and parental empowerment are essential to ensure equal access to quality education and improved prospects.

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