
Dropout Prevention Initiatives for Malaysian Indigenous Orang Asli Children

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Abstract

This paper discusses dropout prevention initiatives by the Malaysian government for the disadvantaged indigenous Orang Asli people in the rural villages of Peninsular Malaysia. The roles of the Ministry of Education (MOE) as well as the Institutes of Teacher Education (ITEs) are highlighted pertaining to efforts at improving the quality of education for elementary school Orang Asli children. The out-reach programs and in-service courses for teachers in Orang Asli Schools are highlighted. Challenges faced in the implementation of these initiatives are also discussed.

Key words: Dropout Prevention, Elementary Education, Orang Asli, Out-Reach Programs

Introduction

'There is nothing so unequal as the equal treatment of unequal people'. These words of wisdom by Thomas Jefferson are very relevant regarding education of disadvantaged children in general. Often, attempts at reducing inequalities and facilitating social integration in the society by most education system have not been fully successful due to educational efforts and approaches that are not sensitive to the needs of these children. This is especially true in regards to the education of the Orang Asli children. They have specific needs that requires due consideration if we are serious in resolving their educational problems.

This paper looks at the educational experience of Orang Asli children in Malaysia, where there is concern about their drop out from school. In 2008, only 30 per cent of Orang Asli students managed to complete their secondary education (JHEOA 2008). This is in contrast to the national figure of 71.7 per cent (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2007). Many of the Orang Asli students drop out of school at the end of grade six and before sitting for the Malaysian Certificate of Education Examination (SPM), taken at form five (grade eleven). For example, for the Year 2000 cohort, Year 6 to 7 had the highest dropout rates, at 47.23 per cent, followed by grade 7 to grade 9 (23.26%) and grade 9 to grade 11(24.27%) (JHEOA 2008).

It seems that the public examinations are scaring the Orang Asli students out of school. It is probable that they feel academically unprepared for these examinations and that dropping out, staying home and/or looking for jobs are the more appealing and less stressful alternatives. Other reasons for dropping out often cited by their teachers are their lack of interest in schooling, low academic achievement, poor memory, high absenteeism, lack of parental involvement, poverty and transportation issues. Hence, intervention initiatives at the elementary level is crucial for the Orang Asli children to be well prepared with the skills necessary for higher levels of education. Needless to say that the problems experienced do not exclusively rise from student factors but also from the delivery system, involving teachers and others responsible for the education and welfare of these children.



Orang Asli House

In 2001, a group of educators from the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) and Teacher Training Colleges visited a remote native village in Sarawak called Pensiangan Salinatan. They were impressed and touched by the positive attitudes of the teachers in the village school despite the dire state of the school in terms of physical structure and facilities, and the poor working conditions of the teachers. They vowed that something should be done to improve the quality of education for all children, especially those with needs and special attention in remote villages. Additionally, they saw the real need to enhance the professionalism of teachers in the village schools.

Various parties are now expanding serious efforts in providing equality in educational opportunities for these disadvantaged children, namely the MOE and the Institutes of Teacher Education (ITEs). These initiatives however, need to be critically appraised in order that they are effectively executed and yield the intended results.

This paper aims to discuss the Malaysian dropout prevention initiatives by the MOE and the ITEs, in helping to enhance the education of the Orang Asli children specifically at the elementary level, and to critically appraise the results of the efforts and the challenges faced in the process. The quest for *education for all* makes it an important endeavor, even though the Orang Asli makes up a small fraction of the general population. While initiatives for the betterment of education for the indigenous population

are nationwide, which include programs for the Penans of Sarawak as well as the indigenous community of Sabah, this paper will only focus on initiatives for the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia.

About Orang Asli

The Orang Asli is the indigenous minority of Peninsular Malaysia. 'Orang Asli' is a Malay term which means 'original peoples' or 'first peoples'. Over 30 per cent of the Orang Asli still live in isolated areas, with minimal infrastructure and basic amenities. The Orang Asli comprises at least nineteen culturally and linguistically distinct groups. According to the records from the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA), in 2008 there was a total of 141,230 Orang Asli or 0.05 per cent of the national population of 28.3 million. Approximately 50.09 per cent of them are categorised as poor, out of which 32.34 per cent are hard core poor. The national figures are 6.4 and 1.4 per cent respectively (JHEOA 2008). Additionally 49.2 per cent of Orang Asli (national 11.1%) are illiterate.

These combinations of poverty, lack of education amongst parents and lack of infrastructure are factors that lead to poor school attendance and dropout problems. It is recorded that their villages lack good and accessible roads; means of transport to schools are poor and usually unsafe, while boat rides are expensive. There are some Orang Asli children who attend physically well-endowed schools, which are located in less remote areas. Still, this fact does not



guarantee the Orang Asli's children full attendance to school. An elementary school teacher lamented:

You see, this school is beautiful with ample facilities, but our students are more interested to stay home; when they go home for the holidays they stay home indefinitely.

It is interesting to note that our research pertaining to native children residing in an island in Sarawak (East Malaysia) revealed that unlike in Peninsular Malaysia, the children on the island prefer to go to school because it provides them with space and facilities for activities. Compounds of their homes are usually water-logged and are not suitable for activities. This shows that the pull factor of the school must be stronger than the pull factor of the home in order for children to be interested to go to school.

Education of the Orang Asli

The Orang Asli's primary school going children attend schools categorised as rural schools. There are no secondary schools that specifically cater for the Orang Asli students, so the Orang Asli students would generally attend schools along side the mainstream students in schools located outside their villages.

Education was the responsibility of the Department of Orang Asli Affairs before 1995. The children went to village schools and were taught by field staffs from the Department of Orang Asli Affairs or by teachers who

were not formally trained, who mostly received low level of education themselves. Students who passed their exams at the end of sixth grade could go to regular government secondary schools in nearby rural or urban areas (Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA), 2009).

In 1995, the Department of Orang Asli Affairs handed over its educational program for the Orang Asli to the MOE. Although MYR 45.5 million was allocated to develop the schools, there was still a shortage of qualified teachers, mostly because qualified teachers are reluctant to teach in the Orang Asli schools. This is due to the lack of facilities in these schools and because of the environment, which is not conducive to learning. This scenario however is still prevalent in some of the Orang Asli schools today.

There is however, an increase in the number of Orang Asli children enrolled in schools. In 1994, the overall enrolment of Orang Asli children in primary school was 13,200, and in 2009 the number doubled to 27,348. Similarly, the number of Orang Asli students in secondary schools had increased to 9,124 in 2009 from 2,694 in 1994, showing a fourfold increase (JHEOA, 2009).

The increase in enrolment is impressive, but the dropout rate amongst the Orang Asli children, still remain a great cause for concern. One of the main reasons for the problem is the students' poor academic achievement. The Primary School

Achievement Test results (UPSR 2009) for Orang Asli children nationwide revealed that more than 60 per cent did not achieve the minimum competency level in the subjects tested, specifically for the English Language, Mathematics and Science. The Malay language (comprehension and writing) papers, too, showed 42 per cent to 53 per cent of the Orang Asli students did not achieve the minimum competency level.

The Secondary Certificate Examination taken at grade 11 showed the same low achievement from the Orang Asli children. More than 70 per cent of the students did not achieve the minimum competency levels in English Language (90%), Mathematics (74%) and Science (83%). Even for the Malay language, which is the language of instruction, 51 per cent did not achieve the minimum competency levels. For all these subjects students obtained grades D, E, and F (Education Planning and Research Division (EPRD), 2009).

It seems that the Orang Asli children need to be competent in not only one but two second languages (Malay and English languages) to survive in the local educational system. This is quite a tall order for these Orang Asli children who live in remote environment, challenged by poor school facilities and teachers who are not familiar with their socio-cultural needs. The centralised educational system, common curriculum and examinations make the quest for equalising educational opportunities for this segment of our population a very challenging task indeed.

The Quest for Equality of Educational Opportunities

The educational system's role in determining the extent of equality of educational opportunity and inter-generational mobility is evidently crucial and broadly recognised. Arrow et al. (2000) cited by Peragine V. and Serlenga L. (2007) commented that the meaning of equality of educational opportunities range from:

'... securing the absence of overt discrimination based on race or gender to the far more ambitious goal of eliminating race, gender and class difference in educational outcomes,' (p2-3).

Joseph Farrell (1993) cited in Rosekrans K. (2002) offers a four-level model of educational opportunity: (a) access/input, or equal probability of entering the

school system; (b) survival or equal probability of completing a cycle of schooling, including primary, secondary or higher education; (c) output, or equal probability of learning achievement; and (d) outcome, equal probability in life conditions such as income, status and power.

Thus, an analysis of the education system's role in determining equality of educational opportunities should take into account both aspects of equality of opportunity and access, as well as outcome of education for students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Although these goals are insurmountable and difficult to achieve, specifically for Orang Asli students, efforts and initiatives need to be undertaken towards this end.

The quest for equality of educational opportunity was been given priority by the Malaysian government as early as the Second Malaysia Plan (1971-1975). Recently, the *Pelan Induk Pembangunan Pendidikan* (PIPP), which is the master plan for the development of education in this country (2006-2010), also highlighted plans to improve the quality of education for Malaysia's disadvantaged segments in the society. This is in line with the UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) goals, which are among others, to expand early childhood care and education, to provide free compulsory education for all, to promote learning and skills for young people and adults, increasing adult literacy by 50 per cent and improving the quality of education, especially in numeric, literacy and essential life skills.

While these goals have been satisfactorily achieved amongst the mainstream population, education achievements of the disadvantaged population especially amongst the indigenous population are still lagging far behind. Generally the dropout prevention initiatives for the Orang Asli children focus on basic literacy acquisition for elementary school children as well as vocational programs for secondary school children.

Government Initiatives at Equalising Opportunities

True to the goal of achieving quality of education for all, the education for rural children is one of the main focuses of the Malaysian National Education Master Plan 2006-2010. This plan has six strategic thrusts, one of which is to redress the imbalance in education between the urban and rural, between the rich and the

poor, between normal children and those with special needs. The digital divide is also addressed.

The former Minister of Education emphasised that,

‘The Ministry of Education will strive to redress the imbalance in education for every segment of the society. Due attention will be given to poor students, students in remote areas, Orang Asli students and students from other ethnic groups and students with special needs, in order to ensure that no segments of the society is deprived from taking part in the development of our country as envisioned by Vision 2020.’ (New Year speech, 2006)

Financial Assistance for Poor Students

A crucial element in ensuring the success of educational programs is funding. For the 8th Malaysia Plan (2005-2009), the government allocated approximately MYR 6,770,826,300 to be distributed directly to poor children including the Orang Asli students, in the form of stipends, bursaries and scholarships, and to schools to support supplementary food programs, text book loan schemes, adult classes for the Orang Asli children’s parents, tuition classes and the like.

This paper will now highlight initiatives by the MOE to enhance the education of the indigenous children or children of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia.

Programs by Ministry of Education to Increase Orang Asli Students’ Achievements and Professional Development of their Teachers

In 2003, the Teacher Training Division of the Ministry of Education (BPG, MOE) launched the *Pensiangan Salinatan* program to improve the Orang Asli students’ academic achievements. Named after the village mentioned above, the program aims to enhance the professional developments of Orang Asli schools’ teachers and the achievement of their students. In that year too, schooling was made compulsory for all children at age six, which meant that more serious efforts need to be expanded so that the Orang Asli children have access to quality education too.

These programs by the MOE encompass aspects which aim to improving the basic facilities at remote schools, providing incentives in the form of hardship allowance for their teachers and staff, enhancing the education of their teachers, and providing out-reach programs to

facilitate the academic programs. Initiatives include the supply of electricity, telephones, clean water for the schools and housing for teachers. The *Balik Kampung* (going home) allowances and special allowances based on locations and the level of hardship experienced in the villages were also given.

The Out-Reach Program and In-Service Courses for Teachers in Orang Asli/Penan and Island Schools

Initiatives to make learning meaningful and interesting to indigenous students became the biggest challenge to ITEs, that are directly responsible for the training of primary school teachers and the implementation of programs for the Orang Asli community. The in-service teacher education programs are directly geared to this end, while elements relevant to rural teaching are incorporated into the courses offered to pre service teachers. All ITEs with the support of the relevant departments of the MOE, were involved with the planning and implementation of the out-reach programs and teacher professional development courses. These out-reach programs were specifically geared to improve the Orang Asli students’ skills in Reading, Writing and Arithmetic (3Rs) and their teachers’ skills in teaching them. This paper will now highlight the important aspects of the initiatives.

The Pensiangan-Salinatan Model of Remote Schools Teacher Professional Development Program (PMPS)

The objectives of PMPS are to increase remote school teachers’ knowledge in the subjects they teach, increase their skills in indigenous pedagogy, and enhance their personal development towards excellence. The training of these remote school teachers are facilitated by the adoption of Orang Asli/Penan schools by the ITEs. Each ITE is responsible for monitoring and helping the schools implement the out-reach programs. The in-service program for Orang Asli/Penan school teachers include among others; a short course organised by ITEs, a four weeks course in special remedial programs for Orang Asli and Penan students, a 14-weeks course for Orang Asli/Penan teachers, effective pedagogy course for Orang Asli/Penan teachers and the training for professionalism development of Orang Asli school teachers. These courses are designed to help teachers carry out the out-reach programs, namely the special programs for early intervention, The KIA 2M program,

Redefining Schooling Program (KAP) and the Orang Asli/Penan Adult Class Program (KEDAP). Details of these programs will be discussed later.

Apart from the above short courses, the Bachelor of Education Program is offered to increase the academic achievement of remote school teachers. These teacher trainees attend lectures during the school holidays in the selected ITEs and are taught by the lectures from the ITEs. The program is carried out nationwide, in collaboration with Open University Malaysia (OUM). These teachers are required to teach in their own school after completing the program. The curriculum for this program is designed to increase their pedagogical skills, in the hope that they can apply the knowledge and skills in their future teaching deliveries.

The Out-Reach Programs

Out-reach programs are programs that aim to improve the Orang Asli students' basic literacy skills and enhance their teachers' skills in teaching them. These programs are in line with meeting the National Education Quality Result Areas (NQRAs) needs, which specifies that all students must be able to master the 3Rs after three years of primary education by 2012. The programs discussed below are the Early Intervention Program (KIA 2M), the Redefining Schooling Program, the Asli Penan Curriculum (KAP) and the Adult Education Classes program (KEDAP).

Reading and Writing Intervention Class (KIA 2M) Program

In 2005, the Reading and Writing Intervention Class (KIA 2M) program was introduced as an intervention program for the Orang Asli children who were not able to read and write in the National Language (Malay language). This program is now (early 2010) replaced by the more comprehensive LINUS program, which incorporates basic numerical skills too. However, this paper will continue to highlight the implementation of the KIA 2M program because there were not much changes done to the reading and writing component of KIA 2M in LINUS.

In 2006, the ITEs were encouraged to adopt two Orang Asli schools each, to aid their teachers to carry out the KIA 2M program. All together the 27 ITEs adopted 54 Orang Asli schools in Peninsular Malaysia and Indigenous schools in Sabah and Sarawak. In 2007, five schools were adopted by ITEs. Each ITE formed a

committee to coordinate the program. The District Education office and the JHEOA rendered their assistance when needed.

The program was tailored to assist Grade One students who failed the screening test administered at entry (end of January). The KIA 2M program focuses on students who do not have the basic skills in reading and writing in the Malay language. The program was incorporated into the Malay language, Music Education, Visual Arts and Physical Education classes for the teachers to execute. Nineteen hours a week was allotted to this program, with 12 hours of the Malay language class, three hours of the Physical Education class and two hours in Music Education and Visual Arts classes respectively. Two qualification tests were carried out within 3-6 months of the program. Students who passed the first test can join the mainstream students. Those who failed need to follow the program until they pass the second test. Those remained unable to acquire the basics are referred to remedial classes. It is hoped that at the end of the program the students will be able to grasp the basic skills of reading and writing and increase their confidence and interest in learning.

The ITEs were responsible for helping teachers implement the program. Lecturers of ITEs facilitated workshops on pedagogical skills, team teach with school teachers, coached teachers, provided Teaching and Learning (T&L) modules, held motivation and counseling sessions with teachers and students, and created networking with parents and the local village community. The lecturers themselves, too, were involved in teaching the students reading and writing. Parents were also involved in the program, where they were given briefings regarding the program. The ITEs held meetings with school teachers, children and parents involved in the program.

The techniques and approaches used in teaching the 2Rs are based on the basic principals that offer the best way to developing the learning of disadvantaged children. Research shows that all children can learn to read but not all children learn to read in the same way or at the same pace (Ken Rowe, 2007). Research has also revealed that instructional technologies most beneficial for these children are those which address the individual learning style, provide active learning opportunities, promote collaborative learning, improve students' attitudes, and engage students' interest (Schargel cited in Smith, J. and Schargel, P., 2004). Thus, the KIA 2M program's goal is to make

learning fun, instilling elements of singing, playing, music and dancing in the teaching and learning process. Good moral values are also stressed in the T&L process.

The advantage of the indigenous pedagogy lies in the empowerment of teachers to develop their own approaches to T&L that is sensitive to the cultural, social and economic circumstances that color their pupils' learning styles. Some of the approaches teachers undertook included learning and using basic local native words, using materials from the students' environment, as well as incorporating native games and dance in the T&L process.

Evaluation of KIA 2M Program

Each ITE did an evaluation of the KIA 2M program in their respective adopted schools. While the findings of the evaluation generally revealed that the program had succeeded in increasing the number of students who can read and write in Grade One, there are still students who have not mastered the basic skills after the second and the third qualification test. The failure rate can be as high as 50 per cent in some schools. Lecturers involved in the program also lament on the time consuming nature of the program due to the long journey to the schools that needs to be undertaken for each visit; the large number of pupils in the classroom and the level of understanding and commitment of the teachers and school administrators towards the program, while they (the lecturers) continue with their duties as lecturers in their respective Teaching Institutions.

A qualitative study by Mohd Kamal Mohd Ali (cited in Chee Kim Mang, 2009) on how teachers cope with teaching in indigenous schools involved in the KIA 2M program revealed that to make the program successful, teachers need to have or do the following: 1) having good rapport with their students and even visiting their homes, 2) having knowledge and understanding of the indigenous language and social cultural background of the indigenous community, 3) use a lot of drills and practice as pupils tend to forget easily, 4) be highly committed and motivated to teach and 5) be able to handle the students' behaviors. Teachers need to also think of incentives or rewards to encourage children to come to school. Above all teachers teaching in these schools need to be highly creative and resilient with ample multicultural competence.

The Integrated Curriculum for Orang Asli and Penan Schools (KAP)

The Orang Asli's children low achievement are reflected in their inability to acquire the basic skills in the 3Rs and their low engagement to learning had educators thinking that probably the standardised national curriculum is not suitable for them. In 2007, the Integrated Curriculum for Orang Asli and Penan Schools (KAP) deemed suitable for these children was developed and piloted in six Orang Asli schools in Peninsular Malaysia and Penan schools in Sarawak. In 2008, it was extended to eight more Orang Asli schools in Peninsular Malaysia and six Penan schools in Sarawak. The KAP is an important initiative to 'redefine schooling' for the Orang Asli children.

The KAP was developed to increase the proficiency of students in the 3Rs, based on the belief that a curriculum that takes into considerations their socio-cultural needs, experience and norms will attract them to go to school. The KAP is based on the principles of the national primary school curriculum (KBSR) but are modified in its content and the T&L process to suit the socio-cultural background of the Orang Asli children.

The aim of KAP is to develop knowledgeable Orang Asli children with good morals, and love for school and their socio-cultural heritage, and at the same time being able to integrate themselves with the mainstream social milieu. Lecturers from ITEs visited pilot schools to help teachers implement the curriculum, specifically in terms of materials, teaching strategies and to discuss modules with the teachers involved.

Three modules were developed for KAP, namely, 'Lets Go to School' module, Malay language and Mathematics modules. All these modules use the Minimal Adequate Syllabus approach. This means that the level of the syllabus covered is lower compared to that of the mainstream syllabus. While these modules were developed by a panel of experts comprising of members from the Curriculum Development Centre, ITE lecturers and selected Orang Asli school teachers, the modules can be modified by school teachers to suit their classroom situations. The 'Lets Go to School' module contains units that guide teachers to plan activities and lessons, such as the interaction of parents and children (unit 1); social skills (including cleanliness) and communication (unit 2); knowing oneself, ones abilities, dreams and interests (units 3-6); knowing where one is and how one is in terms of confidence and potentials (units 7 and 8). This module



Learning
Hygiene

aims to attracting students to attend classes as the learning process is interesting and non-threatening, and aims at improving students' attitude and increases their joy of learning.

In KAP, for the first three years of the primary school, students only learn to master the 3Rs. Students are exposed to the other subjects that are found in the national curriculum such as Science, Civics, Moral Education, Local Studies only at grades 4 to 6. However, these subjects, too, are simplified to suit the abilities of the Orang Asli students.

Overall KAP is flexible where teachers are free to use their creativity in modifying the curriculum and also in their T&L process. Given that the important aspect of the education of the Orang Asli children is to attract them to come to school and be engaged in the learning process, teachers found that the need to expand on the curriculum and T&L strategies is to include 6Rs instead of just 3Rs. This means that apart from Reading, Writing and Mathematics; Music, Play and Food were emphasised as important elements of the curriculum and teaching strategies.

Evaluation of KAP

The evaluations of KAP were done by the ITEs. Generally, they found that there was an improvement in the number of students being able to acquire skills in the 3Rs, and the attendance rate improved. Students seem to enjoy their lessons better and parents are

more supportive of their children's education. However, the findings revealed that the modules are only effective when the modules are modified by the teachers to suit the needs of their students. This drives the point that the teachers play an important role, hence, their training and their professional development is vital towards the success of the educational initiatives planned for the Orang Asli children.

Another aspect of KAP that needs consideration is the lower level of the standard of skills acquired. After completing six years of primary education, students are required to sit for the national examination. Yet, the KAP does not prepare students for this standardised examination. This lack of preparation will consequently deny the Orang Asli children the opportunity to sit for the examination and to compete with students in the mainstream. Educators in MOE are now deliberating over this issue. There seems to be a plan to maintain KAP not as a specific curriculum for the Orang Asli children, but as an approach to teaching. The 'Lets Go to School' module is seen to have the potential to be retained as an approach to the T&L process.

Orang Asli and Penan Adult Education Class (KEDAP) Program

Parental involvement in their children's education is an important prerequisite to their children's success. Most parents of the Orang Asli children however, are



themselves illiterate and are unable to assist their children academically. Furthermore, the Orang Asli parents are also bound by their beliefs that their children should not be punished and their requests cannot be denied. The parents hold on to the tradition of 'hukum syait', which takes the word bood (don't want) by their children seriously. Thus, if their children refuse to go to school, parents will abide.

The KEDAP program was initiated in 2008 by the MOE to reduce the illiteracy rate amongst the Orang Asli adults, to increase their quality of life as well as to be enable them to be involved in their children's learning. The classes were held for two hours per session for 100 days per year. These adults are paid allowances to attend the classes to compensate for income foregone, to pay for food, clothing, books & materials, and health check-up. About 2,375 Orang Asli and Penan adults attended these classes in 2009. In 2010 however, the number of participants of this program were reduced dramatically to 1,675 participants. The number of class hours was reduced to 70 days per session. For the 2008-2009 session the allocation for KEDAP was RM12,187.00, while allocation for 2010 was 2,635.00. This highlights the vulnerability of programs for the disadvantaged that is dependent on funds and changes that happens in funding policies.

Instructors of KEDAP, who are school teachers, are trained by selected ITes. The curriculum include the Andragogic teaching approach, knowledge in Guidance and Counseling, the Concept of Remedial

Education, the Socio-Cultural aspects of Orang Asli and Penan. A big challenge to the instructors was the shy disposition of the adult students. They had to devise teaching approaches that drew the Orang Asli adults out of their shells.

The KEDAP curriculum is aimed at enabling the Orang Asli adults to speak, write and understand simple words in Bahasa Malaysia; to be able to recognise and understand numbers and to solve simple arithmetic; to increase their communication skills and to develop positive attitudes towards the welfare of their family; towards hygiene and cleanliness; towards their health and civic consciousness, and towards their livelihood and safety.

Feedbacks from teachers regarding the effect of the education program on their students showed some positive results. Parents showed more confidence in their interaction with teachers, whereby more were answering questions and giving opinions in class. They were also showing more care in their dressings and appearances when visiting their children's schools. They were able to motivate their children to study hard and take the opportunity to study, which they never had when they were young. The parents were able to read simple books and they appreciated getting the education, and so, were no longer putting too much importance on the allowances received. Many parents were applying to attend these classes. Their children became motivated too, upon seeing their parents' enthusiasm towards learning. Interviews with



their elementary school children revealed that they now do their homework (their own and their parent's) together.

Despite the positive feedback, the ITEs are cognizant of the fact that much more need to be done to improve the program, specifically in improving the teaching modules and the teaching approaches of the teachers. Problems arising from transport for the parents need to be given due attention. It seems that distance and expensive fares are denying many parents a chance to attend these classes. Additionally participants of the program opine that the program should be extended to a higher level as 100 hours of time allocated is not sufficient for them to go beyond the basics of the 3Rs. These words of an Orang Asli parent from the Jahut tribe who refused to attend KEDAP as narrated by the Chairman of the PTA of an Orang Asli school shows this sentiment:

The Jahuts do not want to go to KEDAP because they do not want to do things half way, if it's two or three years then they feel its worthwhile.

The National Indigenous Pedagogy Centre of Excellence (PKPPK)

It is conceivable that all efforts and initiatives undertaken by the ITEs for the education of the indigenous population need to be documented, showcased, researched and the knowledge shared. This

role is taken up by The National Indigenous Pedagogy Centre of Excellence, which was established in the Tengku Ampuan Afzan ITE campus located in the state of Pahang. This ITE was chosen to be the site of the centre because the state of Pahang has the highest number of Orang Asli communities in the country.

In their 5 Year Plan (2010-2015), the Centre of Excellence highlighted three main focuses. The first is on the generation of knowledge, which emphasises on the creating of an ecosystem of research and innovation, and a networking of experts towards enhancing the education of the Orang Asli people. The second is on the professionalism of Orang Asli school teachers, and the third is on the sustainability and preservation of the Orang Asli's culture. These focus areas will be implemented through the Central Incubator project and the Rangkaian Gerbang Titiwangsa project. The Incubator Centre will have a Teaching School specifically for indigenous students, a resource center and library, a gallery, and research and development of indigenous pedagogy. The Rangkaian Gerbang Titiwangsa initiative which is a collaboration of the ITEs and other agencies are helping to improve the facilities and infrastructure of Orang Asli schools such as hostel facilities and also investing in the introduction of online learning. The T&L in multi grade classrooms and the like are also emphasised.

The Challenges

There is nothing more challenging than trying to achieve equality of educational opportunities for a segment of population for which location, poverty, socio-cultural make up and level of literacy serve as serious impediments towards this end. These impediments however, were overcome by a small number of Orang Asli people who had succeeded in enrolling for higher studies and some becoming successful professionals. In 2008, approximately 116 Orang Asli students were accepted into various tertiary institutions mostly for the Diploma and Certificate levels. They now have an Orang Asli Senator, university lecturers, a pool of engineers, teachers and this year a small number of bright students obtaining scholarship to study overseas. This shows that it is not an impossible feat to excel when opportunities are seized and fulfilled.

It must be noted here that the educational problems of the Orang Asli children come in a package. Teachers and their pedagogical skills, the curriculum, the quality of leadership of school administrators, the climate of the school, the school facilities, infrastructures, parental involvement and the socio-cultural milieu of the Orang Asli society are all in this package. As much as these elements pose challenges to educating the Orang Asli children, these problems should be undertaken by those responsible for their education.

The most important challenge is to reduce risk factors, which lead to early dropout from school or poor achievement amongst these students. Despite the attempts at reducing the dropout problem, parents and teachers still lament at the lack of interest these students have towards learning; they are worried about the children's poor memory, their preference for home and play rather than for school and their passive behaviors in the classroom. Teachers, too, worry about the negative influences of parents on their children's education. These are risk factors which need to be overcome. It is clear that much more need to be undertaken by the responsible parties pertaining to the education of the Orang Asli children.

Improving the delivery system

Attracting good teachers and headmasters to remote schools

Risk prevention efforts by the school should focus on improving the delivery system, which are often overlooked because the students and their parents are

often blamed for the dropout problem. Yet, teachers' and the school's roles in increasing students' attachment and sense of belonging towards their school, and their engagement towards learning must also be emphasised. This means that Orang Asli children need quality teachers who can make lessons interesting and meaningful for them and school administrators whose vision and foresight can help build a positive culture and climate for the school. Thus, sending the right teachers and administrators to these schools is crucial.

We hear of a successful remote Orang Asli school with creative and responsible teachers emulating their headmaster, who is a good role model. We also hear of the failure of a not too remote Orang Asli school with indifferent teachers modeled after their headmaster. The contrast between the abovementioned schools evidently points to the fact that the success of a school is dependent on the quality of teachers and administrators, and this is true regarding to remote schools. The infrequent visits by the inspector of schools and other education officers can also leave these schools free to their own device, which may not always produce favorable outcomes.

However, there are various issues to be tackled pertaining to attracting quality teachers and administrators to teach in remote schools. Approximately 70.9 per cent of teacher trainees of ITEs are females, but it has been identified that male teachers are more suitable for remote rural schools. Yet, attracting male candidates into the teaching profession is a challenging task in its own right, let alone attracting them to teaching in remote areas. Incentives in the form of hardship allowances may be able to help attract teachers to remote schools, but can this guarantee quality teaching from these willing teachers? Recently, it was suggested that the hardship allowance be further increased. While this may be a good compensation for remote school teachers it does not stop one from wondering if the money is better spent on much needed facilities for the schools instead.

Preparing teachers for disadvantaged children

Teachers sent to teach in remote schools would be less apprehensive if they are prepared carefully for the job. Pre service courses offered at ITEs and the Bachelor of Teaching programs are generally geared towards enhancing the teachers' knowledge in the content, pedagogies and the socio-psychological foundations,

as well as theories of T&L. These are basic principals and components of teaching, which can be applied in the teaching process. The same is true for the in-service Bachelor in Education program designed for teachers teaching in remote schools. While knowledge from these courses is relevant for teachers, there is, however, specific knowledge that is needed to help teachers teach in remote areas. There is a need for specific courses related to indigenous pedagogy, courses that enhance the understanding of teachers towards the psycho-social make up of indigenous communities and courses that help trainee teachers develop their personality and increase their love for their calling.

Hence, the pre-service and in-service courses should prepare teachers who want to be challenged, who are creative and critical thinkers who are skillful in varying their teaching approaches to suit the psycho-social needs of their students, who are not too dependent on prepared curriculum and modules, and who are fair and sensitive to the needs of the indigenous children. It is these teachers who are armed with a wholesome knowledge about teaching Orang Asli children, who are best prepared to teach all types of students, especially the disadvantaged.

Recruitment of teachers, thus, should be more selective. Given that the teaching profession is the most attractive occupation available for unemployed graduates, with the salary being reasonably high, and the job ensuring economic stability; the motivating factor may be more focused on the prospect of income rather than the love to educate. A case in point is the KPLI program, which is an intensive one-year Diploma of Education course for graduates from various fields of study. After their training, these teachers are sent to teach in rural schools (which is the practice now). Unfortunately, due to their background and the short training program they are exposed to, they are generally unprepared in many ways to teach, let alone to teach in rural schools. They feel lost and in need of much encouragement and help. We hear of novice teachers who are sent to difficult schools developing a hatred for the profession. These are generally teachers who enter the teaching profession as a last resort. Hence, not only getting the right people to teach in remote schools is a big challenge, there is a bigger challenge waiting on site. Thus, it is imperative that these teachers are consistently motivated and their commitment sustained by all parties especially by lecturers from ITEs, the Inspectors of Schools and the

experienced teachers and the headmaster of the school.

This paper suggests that the best teachers for rural schools are the *homebodies* who are teachers who come back to teach in their own villages. More efforts need to be undertaken to train and recruit such teachers and to encourage them to return and serve their villages. Sadly, more often than not these teachers refuse to return to serve in their villages.

Making learning more meaningful

Another big challenge to educators is the curriculum and the T&L approaches for the Orang Asli children. In an examination oriented system like ours, the standardised curriculum and standardised examination are deemed to be the fairest methods of ensuring equity. The system, however, makes schooling less meaningful for the Orang Asli children because they learn things unfamiliar to them and sit for examinations to test knowledge they have not learnt or cared to learn. It is a challenge to provide a different type of curriculum such as the KAP and a different way of evaluating them, while meeting the requirements that ensures that the Orang Asli children are able to compete with mainstream students for their educational and career advancement. This has been a dilemma in our education system that touches at the root of equity issues. However, equality of educational opportunity means more than merely equal treatment for all, it should also mean 'unequal' treatment of curriculum and assessment tools based on the needs of the students. It is imperative that the education system adopts a more flexible approach in order to meet the demands of varying students' need mapped out in the country.

More research should be undertaken to understand the best practices involving the education of these potentially at-risk students who also have specific needs. A research project undertaken by Sharifah *et al* (2009) pertaining to 'turned around at risk schools', found that one of the most successful ways to entice difficult students to feel attached to their school and to engage them in learning is through co-curricular activities, mainly through sports. Orang Asli students love sports and they excel in them. Participation in sports and other extra curricular activities, which these students excel in, can boost their confidence and self-esteem, which can indirectly increase their engagement to learning.

Another challenge pertaining to the education of these children is developing thinking skills. There is a tendency for teachers to resort to drilling to ensure that their students remember what they've learned. However, this rote-learning technique does not help students understand what they've learned in order to transfer their learning to other situations. Thus, the T&L process in the classroom needs to encourage the participation of students in activities, which can enhance their thinking skills.

Efficiency in the dissemination of aid and resources

Teachers, and other parties operating at the ground level often complain of delays in getting funds allocated for stipends, bursary and other materials and services needed to facilitate children's learning. This has negative implications on the children as well as their parents. We hear cases of children not attending school because of the inability to pay fees or because their only transport to school is in need of repair and was left unattended for the whole year. We also hear of aid from the Poor Students Trust Fund given by the government are inaccessible to some of these children although they are eligible for the aid because they do not have identity cards, which in this country is an important prerequisite for the aid.

Improving accessibility

Making all remote schools accessible by road or other means of transport is expensive, making reaching the Orang Asli children a big challenge and a daunting task. Yet, accessibility is an important prerequisite for the development of remote schools and the education of the Orang Asli children. Resettling the Orang Asli in new settlements near schools is another effort that is considered and undertaken by the authorities aimed at improving accessibility of children to schools. It is however, a challenging task to make the indigenous people to leave their villages, which have long been their ancestral home and move to a new place with a different lifestyle than the one that they are accustomed to.

Apart from the physical infrastructure, the issue of accessibility to education also involves making sure that that poverty is not a hindrance to these children to get the education they deserve. Education is free for Orang Asli children that include hostels, school uniforms, shoes, and textbooks, which are all provided for. However some unintended effects were observed.

With handed out freebies, there is a tendency for some parents to no longer feel the need to work hard to provide for their children's education. At the same time, the parents do not feel any loss if their children do not go to school as they have not invested in their children's education. The 2009 UPSR result revealed that as high as 28 per cent of Orang Asli students were absent from the examination. There were also cases of students who registered early in the year, then disappeared only to reappear one year later. Thus, equal access to education is not fully ensured through merely monetary assistance but the immediate challenge is first to change the Orang Asli parents' attitude towards education and their children.

Partnership with parents

Partnership with parents and communities regarding the education of the Orang Asli children is a big challenge too. An interview with a successful Orang Asli who returned to his village with an intention to help develop his people reveals his frustration at the very slow pace his people are moving. He said his people are 50 years behind the Malays. He attributes it to the over dependence of his people on others because of their low self-confidence and low self-esteem. He summed up in three words commonly used as a generic term in his native language that translate into 'couldn't care less attitude' as an example to his village comrades response in enhancing their personal development Words such as *nyet* which means 'I don't want to do it, I am lazy, you do it', *panday* meaning 'if you are so clever, why don't you do it' and *ansur* which means 'just let it be I am not interested' are often expressed as a retort when his people are asked to do things to better themselves.

The lack of education amongst Orang Asli adults and the lack of exposure to the outside world may be the cause of this negative attitude. Hence, exposure to the outside world is important. It is observed that academically successful Orang Asli students have parents working with the government, or those who attended schools with mainstream children.

The soft and polite ways the Orang Asli interact with their children and among themselves is also seen by the abovementioned interviewed Orang Asli individual as a culture which makes it difficult for field officers to be assertive in dealing with them and for teachers to discipline their children. The *hukum syait* tradition as mentioned above also pose problems for the school in terms of ensuring students attendance. Thus,

programs such as KEDAP, which can help turn parents into positive partners for the schools, needs to be expanded. In addition, schools should capitalise on parent's awareness of the importance of education as the result of attending KEDAP by planning and executing more activities and programs involving parents.

The knowledge gained and the potential of exposure to interesting experience and interactions can help boost their self-confidence and self-esteem, and also help develop positive attitudes towards change. They too can be active advocates to ensure quality education for their children, and respected enough by teachers and the school at large to demand the best services for their children. Thus, tardy teachers and absent headmasters would be kept diligently on their toes.

Coordinating initiatives and the generation of new knowledge

Coordinating initiatives, specifically by the various departments of the MOE to improving the education of the disadvantaged is yet another challenge that needs to be faced, but it is important to avoid overlapping and needless expenditure. Additionally, research plays another important aspect in contributing to the development of new knowledge pertaining to all aspects of education for all types of students. In this respect, the National Centre of Excellence for Indigenous Pedagogy faces the challenging task of conducting research, documenting and dispensing research findings and networking with researchers from the ITEs, universities and other interested parties. Research grants however, are not easily available to researchers from the ITEs unlike their counterparts in the universities. It is, thus, conceivable that in line with their status as a degree conferring institution, ITE lecturers should be given the opportunity to build a research culture facilitated by easy accessibility to research grants.

Sustainability of change

Programs such as KIA2M, KAP and KEDAP were piloted in some Orang Asli schools. Evaluation of these programs showed positive results. However the question regarding the sustainability of these programs need to be seriously considered to reduce uncertainties regarding the programs. For example, the KEDAP program does not have a long term plan to include more families, to receive more funds, to be extended to higher levels of learning or even to be

continued next year. Likewise, the extension of the KAP to other schools is put on hold pending the Ministry's deliberation on the equity issues of the program. This uncertainty not only affects those involved in carrying out the programs but the students too. Furthermore these initiatives have shown positive results for the education of the Orang Asli children and their families and should be developed further to reach all of the Orang Asli children.

Conclusion

Giving quality education to 'difficult to reach' poor children is a problem faced universally, namely by most developing countries and many teething problems need to be addressed. Thus, it takes serious political will, commitment and clarity of purpose and planning to enable a small segment of the population such as the Orang Asli people to gain access to quality education enjoyed by the more advantaged children in the mainstream. Needless to say that improving their economic standing and reducing poverty amongst them are crucial towards the overall development of Orang Asli. The KEDAP program would have better results in terms of parental involvement with their children's education if parents can spend more time with their children instead of having to leave home into the jungles to fend for their families.

There is also a need for a nationwide dropout prevention network in which the sharing of new knowledge of best practices concerning the education of disadvantaged are shared. Ours is still a long journey towards achieving equality of educational access, output and outcome for all. So, nothing short of a serious concerted effort by all relevant parties is needed to reach this end.

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