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4 Poverty and primary education of the *Orang Asli* children

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The *Orang Asli* in Malaysia

One of the objectives listed in the *Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025)* (MEB) is to “increase investment in physical and teaching resources for students with specific needs” (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. E-11) including *Orang Asli* children. The Malaysian Education Blueprint (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. E-12) states:

Orang Asli students and other minority groups, and students with physical or learning disabilities will receive additional support so that they can enjoy the same educational opportunities. By 2025, these students will all go to schools with the facilities and equipment needed to create a conducive and supportive learning environment. They will be taught by teachers who have received additional training to help them understand their students’ specific contexts and challenges, and the teaching strategies required to address them. These students will also be supported by an expanded network of counsellors, therapists, and teaching assistants, as required.

The school drop-out rate for *Orang Asli* students is very much higher compared to the national average resulting in poorer educational outcomes for this group (Ministry of Education, 2013; Nicholas, 2006). According to the Malaysian Education Blueprint, “only 30% of *Orang Asli* students complete secondary school, less than half the national average of 72%” (Ministry of Education, 2013). Compared to the national average of 87%, only 61% of *Orang Asli* students pass the core subjects in the Primary School national examinations (Ministry of Education, 2013).

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The *Orang Asli* are one of the severely poor groups in Malaysia. Nicholas, Jenita Engi and Teh (2010, p. 45) highlight this point:

Statistics provided in the Government's 10th Malaysia Plan (2011-2015)...reveal that 50% of the 29,990 *Orang Asli* households in existence live below the poverty line. Of these, 5700 households (19%) are considered to be hardcore poor. In contrast, the national poverty rate is 3.8% with 0.7% being hardcore poor.

In this chapter, we look at some of the socio-cultural factors that contribute to the *Orang Asli* children's poor educational outcomes. In the recent *Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025)*, "creativity", "innovation", "knowledge", "skills", "globally competitive", "critical, creative and innovative thinking skills" are listed as the characteristics of the Malaysian student for 21st century Malaysia in the neoliberal global economy (Ministry of Education, 2013). Six key attributes listed in the MEB as being needed by every Malaysian student to be globally competitive in the neoliberal economy include leadership skills, thinking skills, knowledge, bilingual proficiency, ethics and spirituality, and national identity (pp. E-10–E-11). Yet the *Orang Asli* children in Malaysia are not even able to compete with other Malaysian students on basic education and social indicators as they are lacking in the basic necessities in life and live in the circumstances of hardcore poverty. In addition, logging and deforestation activities by the Malaysian government and private companies continue to deprive the *Orang Asli* of their economic resources and threaten their livelihood. The Malaysian Government has not been successful in lifting the *Orang Asli* out of hardcore poverty for years. While the government provides various programs and assistance, including the Department of *Orang Asli* Development's ('JAKOA') Strategic Development Plan, the *Orang Asli* continue to be further marginalized and discriminated upon in Malaysia in addition to being one of the hardcore poor groups in the country.

The *Orang Asli* (Original Peoples) comprise 0.5 per cent of the present Malaysian population and are mainly located on Peninsular Malaysia (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Nicholas, 2000). Archaeological and historical evidence indicates that prior to the arrival of the Malays, there were disparate groups of people comprising hunters, harvesters and gatherers scattered across the Malay Peninsula (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Nah 2003). Collectively, these indigenous groups are known as the *Orang Asli* or Original Peoples in present-day Malaysia. The *Orang*

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Asli are *Bumiputeras*. As noted by Nah (2003), there is a hierarchy of power within the *Bumiputera* category, with the Malay–Muslims at the top of the economic and political hierarchy. Non-Malay *Bumiputeras*, especially the *Orang Asli*, do not enjoy the same social and economic privileges as the Malay–Muslim *Bumiputeras*. In the Peninsula States, for example, Malay *Bumiputera* are clearly in the political ascendancy in relation to both *Orang Asli Bumiputera* and other non-Malay *Bumiputeras* (Andaya & Andaya, 2001).

Most *Orang Asli* communities lived closely to, or within forested areas. They had subsistence economies supplemented by trade or sale of forest products (Endicott, 2016). However, since the 1980s, most *Orang Asli* groups have been disrupted and dispossessed from their traditional lands through logging, development projects and government-sponsored re-groupment schemes (Endicott, 2016). They were being resettled because their lands were needed for activities such as logging, mining, construction of dams, golf courses and new development projects. Effects from the resettlement and re-groupment schemes have resulted in the loss of political and cultural autonomy for the *Orang Asli*. A number of *Orang Asli* communities has been grouped into a limited land area in these re-groupment schemes. There is an increase in the number of *Orang Asli* with a smaller subsistence base that includes reduced access to water, food and other subsistence material. These schemes have clearly not been successful in moving the *Orang Asli* out of their vicious poverty cycle.

Since Independence in 1963, the Malaysian Government has adopted a policy of integration and assimilation of the *Orang Asli* into Malaysian society. However, this policy of integration has come to mean “ringing them into the market economy, asserting political control over them, and assimilating them into the Malay–Muslim ethnic category” (Endicott & Denton, 2004, p. 2). The political reason underpinning this policy of absorbing *Orang Asli* into the Malay population appears to be to eliminate a category of people arguably ‘more indigenous’ than the Malay–Muslims (Nah,2003; Nicholas, 2000; Subramaniam, 2015). There is some historical evidence that the *Orang Asli* were in the Malaya Peninsula before the Malays. This evidence is refuted by the Malay government authorities, as this undermines the *Bumiputera* indigenous status. Most of the *Orang Asli* continue to strongly resist government pressures to turn them into Malay–Muslims. This resistance has resulted in their further marginalization within Malaysian society (Nicholas, 2000; 2006).

This policy of integration and assimilation includes programs to introduce cash-crop

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agriculture so as to enable the *Orang Asli* to participate in the global neoliberal economy. There are also educational programs in which the *Orang Asli* go to national schools with national curriculums. The social organization of the *Orang Asli* community has also been transformed with the community no longer deciding on their leadership. Instead the headmen for the *Orang Asli* community are appointed by the Department of *Orang Asli* Development (JAKOA). After decades of intervention by the Malaysian government and JAKOA and its predecessors, the socio-economic status of the *Orang Asli* has deteriorated further. In addition, there continues to be a decline in their traditional structure and the content of *Orang Asli* society and autonomy.

JAKOA or its predecessors, including the Department of *Orang Asli* Affairs, is a multi-functional federal agency which develops strategies and programs for the *Orang Asli* (Nicholas, 2006; Subramaniam, 2015). This department has always been headed by a non-*Orang Asli* and staffed by a majority of non-*Orang Asli* employees, mainly Malays (Subramaniam, 2015). The Department of *Orang Asli* Development (JAKOA) Strategic Development Plan does not focus on empowering *Orang Asli* through effective consultation and self-determination (Subramaniam, 2015). The *Orang Asli* are not consulted on the resettlement schemes, choice of commercial crops grown, economic activities to be undertaken or educational programs for their children. Non-recognition of *Orang Asli* customary lands, territories and resources also prevail. Many JAKOA officers are still not well-versed in *Orang Asli* customs, culture and issues (Subramaniam, 2015; Suhakam, 2010).

Since the 1980s, the integrationist approach also focused on assimilation through the introduction of the *dakwah* (Islamic missionary activity) or the process of islamizing *Orang Asli* (Nicholas, 2000; Subramaniam, 2015). Nicholas noted that,

The assimilationist tendencies, best epitomized by the publicly expressed intention of converting all *Orang Asli* within the next ten years, undermine whatever genuine intentions the government may have for the well-being of the *Orang Asli*. At the very least, it brings the justification for attention towards *Orang Asli* one full circle – back to the early days of the British colonial government when the *Orang Asli* were merely regarded as ripe objects for the zeal of religious missionaries (Nicholas, 1996, p. 166)

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The Malaysian government, including JAKOA, adopts ethnicized neoliberal policies (Joseph, Chapter 1 in this book) in wanting to achieve high-income status and be globally competitive in the neoliberal economy while maintaining the political dominancy of the Malay–Muslims in the government/public sectors and political domains through the successor NEO programs and policies for *Bumiputeras*. While the *Orang Asli* are categorized as *Bumiputeras*, they clearly do not have the same indigenous status as the Malay–Muslims in relation to economic and social affirmative policies and privileges (Nah, 2003; Nicholas, 2000; Subramaniam, 2015). As discussed earlier, JAKOA and the Malaysian government continue to impose their own priorities on the socioeconomic and educational development of the *Orang Asli* with lack of consultation with the *Orang Asli* and non-recognition of *Orang Asli* customs and traditions.

In this chapter, we also look at the ways in which the Malaysian government and JAKOA continue to marginalize and disadvantage the *Orang Asli* children through their educational policies and practices.

Education and the *Orang Asli* children

Several economic, geographic, and cultural factors contribute to *Orang Asli* students' poor educational performance in Malaysian schools. Higher poverty rates and the tendency to live in remote locations means that many *Orang Asli* students do not attend preschool and therefore they start from a low literacy and numeracy base in Year 1 (Ministry of Education, 2013; Nicholas, 2006). In addition, *Bahasa Malaysia* which is the medium of instruction in the national education system is not the mother tongue for most *Orang Asli* students. The existing teacher training program also does not prepare teachers and educators for the complexities of working with *Orang Asli* communities. The educational assistance for the *Orang Asli* through the JAKOA is minimal and not sufficient to help them in their children's schooling for example with school fees, transportation, textbooks and extra-curricular activities (Nicholas, 2006).

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Orang Asli communities and children lack some of the basic necessities in relation to educational and social resources to move them out of the vicious cycle of poverty (Karubi, Goy & Wong, 2013; Kenayathulla, 2013; Nicholas, et al., 2010). *Orang Asli* children do not have electricity during the day and night to do their studies and other activities. They do not have the access or money to buy educational toys, study and reading materials, and to watch educational programmes on television. Their parents are not educated and are unable to influence their children's learning process and academic performance. *Orang Asli* families spend less in private tutoring as compared to other ethnic groups in Malaysia mainly due to the low level of income and literacy of the head of the household.

There are also major differences in the pedagogy and ways of learning within the *Orang Asli* community. Research indicates that *Orang Asli* children learn differently compared to other Malaysian children (Endicott, 2016; Karubi et al., 2013; Nicholas, 2006). They learn through the indigenous language, arts, rituals, folklore and taboos which do not have a fixed syllabus and timetable of learning. The village is the schoolhouse and the teachers are the parents, extended family, elders, neighbours and the community. *Orang Asli* children learn about the riches of their environment including the forest from their elders (Nicholas, 2006). The current Malaysian school curriculum, including the pedagogy and teaching approaches in the national school system, does not suit them and disadvantages them (Nicholas, et al., 2010). When the children enter Primary 1, they take a relatively longer time than other students to catch up, given that they are not at all fluent in Bahasa Malaysia and also lack basic educational amenities at home. A majority of the *Orang Asli* children do not have the chance to attend kindergarten before entering Primary 1 and this drawback is reflected in their slow learning process of speaking, reading and writing. Abdull et al. (2011) found in their research that the majority of the *Orang Asli* students have problems reading *Bahasa Malaysia*. They measured the students' ability by looking at their reading, writing and numeracy skills. They found that the *Orang Asli* children had good skills in singing, playing and eating.

Warren, Baturo and Cooper (2010) conducted a study on indigenous students in rural Queensland (Australia) and concluded that teachers should take into consideration the remote background of these indigenous students in developing their curriculum and pedagogical approaches. The approach to teaching mainstream urban students is different from teaching rural indigenous students. It is argued that contextualization is one of the key components in

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teaching indigenous students from low socio-economic backgrounds. In fact, the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, examined the results from the development of a contextualized curriculum tailored to *Orang Asli* in 2007 and found that the students learning with this curriculum were more confident, and achieved higher levels of literacy and numeracy (Ministry of Education, 2012). However, the report on education of *Orang Asli* students produced by the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam, 2010) stated that the attendance rates of the *Orang Asli* students were still not consistent with those of other groups after the implementation of the new curriculum (Suhakam, 2010). The curriculum is called the Primary School Curriculum for *Orang Asli* and Penan Students (Kurikulum *Orang Asli* dan Penan – KAP). In 2007, the first phase of KAP was implemented in six schools and in 2008 the second phase added another 14 schools (Table 4.1).

<INSERT TABLE 4.1 HERE>

In general, KAP is divided into two levels. Level 1 is for Primary Year 1 to 3 and Level 2 is for Primary Year 4 to 6. In KAP level 1, the main themes are “Come to School” and “Come and Learn”. The main focus is to prepare the indigenous students to use effectively the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, to read, write and count. In KAP level 2, the main focus is to help students apply their knowledge, skills and values into other subjects such as English, Mathematics, Science, Visual Art, Moral Education, Culture and Heritage and others through the use of indigenous pedagogy (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2015).

Similar to Warren et al.’s study, Yen (2009) found that the indigenous students in the Taiwanese context could not catch up with others using the syllabus due to the irrelevance of the curriculum to the students’ personal lives. According to Nettleton (2008a), due to poverty and the remote location of Timbang Island in Sabah, the primary school enrolment has decreased dramatically between 1991 and 2001. In order to address the enrolment problem, a new program called DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) has been introduced in 30 schools across Sabah and Sarawak with collaboration between UNICEF and the Malaysian Ministry of Education. The main objectives of the program are to make learning interesting and increase students’ attendance at the school. In this program, teachers use educational games to

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attract the interest of the children and promote reading habits. Furthermore, students in this program learn pronunciation, vocabulary and spelling through computers.

Johari (2002) found in his study that Malaysian children from upper and middle class families fit in easily and adapt themselves relatively faster in school compared to those who come from poor families including the *Orang Asli* children. Children from upper and middle class families have access to educational resources and opportunities that clearly put them ahead of children from poor families such as the *Orang Asli*, who are struggling to meet basic needs. Salleh and Ahmad (2009) in their study found that *Orang Asli* parents see the school as a place where they can send their children for free food, given that they struggle with their daily subsistence due to displacement caused by logging and deforestation.

The distance between school and home, and the experience of the teachers have a significant impact in the *Orang Asli* students' academic performance (Johari & Nazri, 2007; Nettleton, 2008b). When the school is far from the homes of the *Orang Asli* children, enrolment and attendance decreases. In some instances, the local education authority provides a van to transport the students from home to school and vice versa. However, the children have to depart from their home as early as 5:30 am in the morning. With no electricity and running water in their homes, these children have to bathe in the cold river catchment water and their parents have to make breakfast for them at very early hours of the morning.

For the purpose of tailoring the syllabus to cultures and the learning styles of the *Orang Asli* students, the Ministry of Education Malaysia and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in a project developing new learning materials for the *Orang Asli* children in primary schools have incorporated folk stories and storytelling techniques that these children can easily understand (Nadchatram, 2007; Nettleton, 2008a). The aim of introducing storytelling techniques in the classroom of *Orang Asli* students is to encourage reading habits and improve their writing skills. Chupil and Joseph (2003) in their educational work with one of the *Orang Asli* communities used songs to educate the *Orang Asli* children and adults by incorporating the issues of land problems, gender and children's education into the lyrics. Other than that, Ghazali et al. (n.d) examined the use of drama technique in teaching Bahasa Malaysia in selected primary schools of *Orang Asli* and found this technique to be effective for teaching and learning the language.

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In order to elaborate further on the issue of the education of the *Orang Asli*, we must understand the challenges and difficulties faced by them. Therefore, it is very important to understand their background and history, which we elaborate in the following section.

The Orang Asli community of Pos Sinderut

In this chapter, we discuss some of the educational and cultural challenges faced by an *Orang Asli* community, *Pos Sinderut*, in the state of Pahang in Peninsular Malaysia. This case study provides valuable insights on the ways in which the *Orang Asli* community continue to negotiate poverty and discrimination in present day Malaysia. This case study also highlights the contradictions between government policies (including the Malaysian Education Blueprint) and lived experiences of *Orang Asli*.

‘Pos’ refers to the settlement or group of villages of *Orang Asli* in Peninsular Malaysia. Pos Sinderut is located in the district of Kuala Lipis, in the state of Pahang. It is about 65 km (approximately 3 hours and 20 minutes drive) from the town of Kuala Lipis, Pahang. To be more specific, the journey from Kuala Lipis town to the entrance of Pos Sinderut through a tar-sealed road is about 1 hour and 20 minutes by car. Then it takes another 2 hours to travel on the 35 km long unpaved road to reach the school which is located in *Kampung Sinderut*.

The establishment of ‘Pos’, or the *Orang Asli* settlement back in the 1940s was indeed a form of the resettlement scheme initiated by the colonial government to curb the infiltration of communist forces among the nomadic *Orang Asli* back then. Pos was established in order to better control the movement of the *Orang Asli* as well as to prevent the communists from getting the support of *Orang Asli*.

It is believed that the *Semai* (one of the ethnic groups of Indigenous people in Peninsular Malaysia) of Pos Sinderut originated from a hill known as ‘Lon Kulou’ which is located nearby Kuala Sinderut and Hulu Sinderut. Their roaming land extended up till the border of the state of Perak and the *Semai* of Pos Sinderut also considered the *Semai* of Perak as part of

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their kin. The Semai of Sinderut began to establish settlements in the current Pos Sinderut during the emergency period to curb communist forces. It started off with the establishment of a temporary camp at the furthest village now known as *Kampung Labu* which was soon after followed by a permanent settlement in Kampung Kuala Sinderut. Pos Sinderut was named after a nearby river, known as Sungai Sinderut, which flows throughout the Pos.

Pos Sinderut consists of 19 villages comprising *Kampung Belau, Kabang, Chempian, Bertang, Tual A, Tual B, Regang, Janggal, Rangan, Kenik, Lubok Muman, Sinderut, Bukit Long, Tigol, Saweh, Tidol, Rokam, Cherong and Labu*. The names of the villages are arranged according to the nearest distance from the entrance to the end of the Pos. In general, every village in Pos Sinderut is headed by a *Tok Batin* (community leader cum village elder). Some of the small villages which split from the parent village, share the same *Tok Batin*. There are approximately 553 households in the 19 villages in Pos Sinderut with a total population of about 2,846 residents.

It is common that each Pos has a centre of administration established by JAKOA in one of the villages. In the case of Pos Sinderut, the centre of administration is located at Kampung Kuala Sinderut. This is where most of the development projects such as the primary school, health clinic and office of JAKOA are located.

In terms of education, The Ministry of Education Malaysia and the Department of *Orang Asli* Development (in Malay: *Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli*, JAKOA) have provided a pre-school and a primary school in Pos Sinderut. The Department of *Orang Asli* Development is the Malaysian government agency that oversees the affairs of the *Orang Asli*. This body is under the Malaysian Ministry of Rural Development, and was first set up in 1954. According to the 2010 JAKOA Annual Report, the education department of JAKOA allocated RM263,000 to the Pahang state in 2010 for education development. The primary school provides education to children from ages 5 to 12 as well as their parents as the school offers classes for any adults who are interested to acquire basic reading, writing and calculating skills.

The primary school in Pos Sinderut had 32 teachers and 518 registered students in 2015. This included a total of 150 students who lived in the school hostel. Due to the limited capacity of the hostel, it only could accept students who lived far from the school. Meanwhile, those who

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dwelt nearby could walk or use the transportation provided by JAKOA to commute from their home to school and vice versa. As stated in the 2010 JAKOA Annual Report, RM2.7 million was allocated to provide transportation to the *Orang Asli* children in Pahang to commute between home and school in 2010.

The research reported in this chapter came about when UNIMAS Institute of Social Informatics and Technological Innovations – Centre of Excellence in Rural Informatics (ISITI-COERI) was given the opportunity by the Economic Planning Unit of Malaysia to set up telecentres for *Orang Asli* West Malaysia development specifically in Pos Balar and Pos Gob in Kelantan and Pos Lenjang and Pos Sinderut in Pahang (Centre of Excellence for Rural Informatics, 2012).

The setting up of telecentre facilities aims to provide access to better communication facilities among rural community, to close the digital information divide between the haves and the have-nots and to connect the rural indigenous community with the outside world. This initiative is in line with Malaysia's national IT policy and strategy, which has high expectations of the impacts of IT on every Malaysian citizen's life and livelihood. The principal idea of the project focuses not only on achieving universal access to ICT facilities but also on creating a chain effect in facilitating the socio-economic development of the *Orang Asli* through the usage of ICT. For instance, it provides the *Orang Asli* with access to useful information and knowledge relating to health care, education, agriculture, and perhaps it will become a catalyst for other local development processes such as furnishing the local community with entrepreneurship-trade opportunities.

We conducted a case study at the *Orang Asli* settlement in Pos Sinderut, Kuala Lipis, Pahang. The data were collected primarily using a qualitative approach, and individual in-depth interviews and focus group meetings were conducted with the school teachers, villagers, parents and students. The majority of the teachers in Sekolah Kebangsaan Sinderut were non-*Orang Asli* including the school headmaster. Most of them were Malays but a few teachers were *Orang Asli* though they were from a different sub-ethnic group such as the *Jah Hut*. All teachers placed in the school were trained in public teacher training institutes. However, most of them were fresh graduates of the training institutes.

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In brief, eight focus group meetings were conducted in eight *Orang Asli* villages, namely, *Kampung Bertang*, *Kampung Tual A*, *Kampung Tual B*, *Kampung Kuala Sinderut*, *Kampung Hulu Sinderut*, *Kampung Regang*, *Kampung Saweh* and *Kampung Labu*. In-depth interviews were conducted with the headmaster and five school teachers in the school area and with ten *Orang Asli* parents during visits to their houses. The focus group meeting and interviews were discussed issues of the *Orang Asli* in general and issues of the education of the children in particular. For example, the issues of school enrolment, attendance, learning progress, perceptions of the parents about their children's education, and the relationship between teachers and students. The meetings and interviews were conducted in *Bahasa Malaysia*, the national language with the assistance of a translator (a local who could speak well in both languages). Most of the *Orang Asli* can converse in *Bahasa Malaysia* and the translator intervened only when they needed help in explaining the issues using their own terminologies.

Poverty and education

Generally, the *Orang Asli* are very poor. In the tenth Malaysian Plan (2011-2015), the poverty line in Peninsular Malaysia was RM763 per household (Malaysia, 2010). We found in our interviews with our research participants that the household monthly income of the interviewees was less than RM300 per month. Almost none of them had a permanent job. Most of my research participants fell in the category of extreme poverty as their average monthly income was less than RM460 per month (Idris, 2015). In order to sustain their life, they engaged in farming, fishing, hunting and collecting forest products such as rattan, bamboo and traditional herbs. My research participants, the *Orang Asli* parents told me during the interviews that sometimes they had to sacrifice their children's schooling due to their poor financial situation and living environment. As mentioned by one of the fathers in the interview:

sometimes I asked my son not to go to school... he needs to go to the jungle to collect jungle produces for the purpose of family-consumption and selling.

In 2012, the Centre of Excellence for Rural Informatics (CoERI) and Faculty of Social Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak conducted a survey in four Pos (2 in Kelantan and 2 in Pahang) with 1120 *Orang Asli* respondents. About 72% of the *Orang Asli* men from Pahang

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and Kelantan (2 Pos in each state) earned around RM60 monthly. The Malaysian government has provided some allowances to *Orang Asli* students through JAKOA in its attempts to address the poverty amongst this group of students (see Table 2). However, this government assistance is quite minimal.

<INSERT TABLE 4.2 HERE>

Their poor living conditions means that sustaining their basic daily lives takes precedence over their children's education. In our field observations, we observed that the houses in Pos Sinderut are made of bamboo (see Figure 1). Some of the villagers stay in full brick houses (see Figure 2), funded by the government through PPRT (*Projek Perumahan Rakyat Termiskin*), a housing project for the poor. There are also villagers who stay in half brick and half bamboo houses funded by Christianity NGO groups (see Figure 3). A majority of the houses do not have an electricity supply and only a small number of houses have access to electricity during the night by using personal generators. For those families which have no generator, it is very challenging for *Orang Asli* children to do their schoolwork including writing and reading. Moreover, there is no treated water in the Pos and the villagers' main sources of the water come from the mountain (gravity water), rainfall and river for the usage of drinking, cooking and showering. As reported by Nettleton (2007), indigenous parents are not very interested in education. However, their consciousness of the need for education grows when outsiders (visitors and researchers) show interest in their children's education.

One of the parents told us during the interview:

we (as parents) are aware of the importance of education for our children but we cannot help our children as we didn't go to school ourselves

Some of the *Orang Asli* parents felt that their children were not making much progress in school as indicated in the interview quote below by one of the *Orang Asli* parents:

some of our children don't know how to write their own name even [though] they are in Year 2 or 3 of primary school

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<INSERT Images 4.1, 4.2 AND 4.3 ABOUT HERE>

Other than the issues of income and poor living environment, another factor that affected the school enrolment and learning process was transportation to school as most of the *Orang Asli* could not afford a car. Some of the *Orang Asli* owned motorcycles but these had limited capacity for riders.

Primary school enrolment and transportation

The availability of transport and the distance between school and home plays a significant role in the primary school enrolment of *Orang Asli* children. When we visited *Kampung Bertang* (a remote village) during our fieldwork, we observed that many *Orang Asli* children aged between 7 and 12 were at home when they were supposed to be at school (see Figure 4). When we asked their parents and elders about this situation, they told me that they faced major issues of transportation when it came to their children's school enrolment. According to them, transportation and the distance from their homes to the school constituted a major problem. The parents told us that they did not have transport to even enrol their children in the primary school. Even f those *Orang Asli* parents who were able to enrol their children, the challenge of sending their children to school and picking them up after school was still a major obstacle.

<INSERT IMAGE 4.4 about HERE>

However, the transport provider told a different story. According to Mr J, the transport provider, he used to send his four-wheel drive to *Kampung Bertang* to pick up the children but there was no one there. Thus, after a few times, he stopped doing so. He blamed the parents for not being concerned about their children's formal education. He told us that transport was not the issue.

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According to Mr J,

I used to send my four-wheel here but no one wants to go to school. The parents didn't place their children's education as their main priority.

Some parents who enrolled their children from other villages did tell us that commuting to school daily was a major problem especially to those who lived far away from the school. This was more pressing when the parents did not own any mode of transport. The village headman told us during the interview:

the school is too far away...we do not have transport to send our children to school

The expected duration to commute from school to the farthest village was about two hours by four-wheel drive along the earth road and it was not accessible in all weather. Several four-wheel drive vehicles were provided by two transport providers and JAKOA (The *Orang Asli* Welfare Department) payed for the service. Most of the four-wheel drives were five-seaters and due to the limited seating capacity of the vehicle, the majority of the students had to stand at the back of the vehicle, as shown in Figure 5.

<INSERT IMAGE 4.5 about HERE>

Other than the issue of transportation, a further challenge which the *Orang Asli* in our study – and more generally – had to face is language. Having little exposure to the national language before entering Year 1 of primary school undermined the learning progress of the students.

Language

Language plays a very significant role in the process of teaching and learning of the *Orang Asli* children. The mother tongue of the tribe in Pos Sinderut is *Bahasa Semai* and the children have very little exposure to the national language, *Bahasa Malaysia*, before attending school. However, the majority of the *Orang Asli* children do not have the privilege to attend pre-

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school or kindergarten before entering Primary 1. This does not only mean that they are not prepared for formal education, but that they are also not prepared to speak *Bahasa Malaysia*.

One of the teachers told us that one of the main factors which impeded the students' learning process was language:

It is very difficult to teach the Primary One *Orang Asli* children...they do not understand *Bahasa Malaysia*.

The teachers told us that teaching the Year 1 students is very difficult when they are not able to converse and understand *Bahasa Malaysia*. Research has shown that young children who have had the opportunity to attend kindergarten show faster learning process and perform relatively better in primary school than those who have not. In the case of the *Orang Asli* children in our study, there were major communication problems between teachers and students given the marked difference in their language proficiency in their own language, *Bahasa Semai* and *Bahasa Malaysia*, the medium of instruction in Malaysian schools. Some of the students in my case study told me:

Teacher always punish me, I do not know why.

As explained by the teacher:

They do not understand what I say and cannot follow instructions....When I tell them not to make noise in class...they continue to make noise. I also tell them that they cannot leave the classroom without my permission...but they leave the classroom as they wish to.

During our interviews with the *Orang Asli* parents, we did ask them if they preferred if the teachers in the school could converse and teach in Bahasa Semai. Most of the parents told us that this would disadvantage their children, given that the Malay language is the national language and medium of instruction in Malaysian schools. One of the parents said:

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I do not want my children to be taught in *Semai* in school. I want them to learn *Bahasa Malaysia*. If they can, I want them to master English as well.

However, one father had a different perception of the children's complaints. According to him:

Sometimes we cannot believe the reasons given by the children about their slow learning progress. Sometimes the children did not put in an effort in learning. When they did not progress, they blamed the teachers for not teaching them correctly.

After getting to know the *Orang Asli* in Pos Sinderut, the authors realised that the way the *Orang Asli* children learn is completely different from the ways of urban children. The *Orang Asli* children learn from their parents and elders through folklore, arts, rituals, and taboos, whereas urban children learn through their educated parents, books, educational programmes, and teachers from pre-school.

Conclusion

After many decades, the Ministry of Education and the government of Malaysia is still working hard to address and improve the education issues among the *Orang Asli* children. The ministry as well as the government have acknowledged that a one size fits all curriculum may not be suitable for children of indigenous communities due to the numerous disadvantages that they faced – lack of conducive learning environments due to poverty, lack of proficiency in *Bahasa Malaysia*, lack of educational support (illiterate parents, lack of awareness among parents on the importance of education, especially early education) as well as geographical limitations (problems in commuting to school due to its location far away from their village).

Therefore, upon recognizing the importance of developing a different educational framework, the Ministry of Education has come up with a few initiatives that can fulfill the needs of the *Orang Asli* children. The educational programme listed in the Malaysian Educational Blueprint (Ministry of Education, 2013) was formulated based on the pilot project of the same

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course with a few groups of *Orang Asli* children. Among others one initiative is the development of a contextualized curriculum known as *Kurikulum Asli dan Penan* (KAP) tailored to *Orang Asli* and *Penan* students. KAP was formulated based on a pilot project conducted in 2007 involving 14 *Orang Asli* and 6 *Penan* schools. It contains two important elements, a minimum adequate syllabus and a curriculum that has been contextualized to the context of *Orang Asli* and *Penan* communities.

Apart from the focus on curriculum, in order to address the issue of distance and transportation problems which have significantly contributed to cases of school dropouts among *Orang Asli* children, the Ministry of Education is pushing forward with the development of a Comprehensive Special Model School (K9) which provides residential facilities to indigenous children from Year 1 to Form 3. This program too was piloted in 2007 and thus far, it appears that the attendance rate of students has been increasing every year, from 85.7% in 2007 to 97.6% in 2010.

Another major issue surrounding the *Orang Asli*'s lack of educational attainment is contributed by the language factor. Having said that, the new Malaysian Educational Blueprint 2013 has taken a proactive action by including indigenous and other minorities' languages in the curriculum in the hope that this can help facilitate the educational process among the indigenous students. Under the new KSSR introduced in 2011, the Ministry also expanded the elective language choices to include *Iban*, *Kadazan*, *Dusun* and *Semai*.

The Ministry also recognized the importance of parenting support in facilitating children's educational progress. Therefore, the Ministry has taken up the initiative to support the *Orang Asli* parents through the provision of *Kelas Dewasa Orang Asli dan Pribumi* (KEDAP) in order to provide them with sufficient literacy and numeracy skills to support their children's learning.

In anticipation of further successes with the pilot project, the Ministry of Education has also enlisted these initiatives in the forthcoming Malaysian Education Blueprint. For instance, to cope with the issue of minimizing school drop-outs among indigenous students, the ministry is planning to expand the number of K9 schools from two to six, followed by infrastructural upgrades for existing schools and residential facilities as well as the prospect of the

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construction of new residential schools in other districts. Other initiatives also include the process of updating KAP to ensure alignment with the design framework and principles of KSSR and the broadening of Basic Vocational Education or the *Pendidikan Asas Vokasional* (PAV) curriculum at secondary schools to provide more options for the indigenous students.

Another important initiative for the improvement of *Orang Asli* students' education involves human capital by which, the government through the Ministry of Education aims to improve, support and provide more training to existing teachers to better equip them with the right skills for teaching indigenous children. Apart from that, the Ministry also plans to increase the number of *Orang Asli* candidates in teaching programs as well as strengthening resources for indigenous education research at the five National Centers of Excellence for Indigenous Pedagogy. In order to support teachers in terms of classroom learning activities, the Ministry is planning to expand the number of teacher assistants recruited from the *Orang Asli* communities. This step is seen as important not only because it acts as a mechanism of facilitating the children's learning in terms of transitioning from local language to Bahasa Malaysia but it also serves as an investment in human capital among the *Orang Asli* communities themselves. And last but not least, the parent engagement toolkit that is being rolled out to all schools in Malaysia will also contain specific information for teachers and principals on working with indigenous and minority communities.

Overall, *Orang Asli* parents understand the importance of formal education to their children. However, there is a very minimal contribution they can provide to their children in terms of formal education as they themselves have low levels of literacy. Thus, through the provision of the KEDAP initiative, it is hoped that *Orang Asli* parents will have the opportunity to be more involved and contribute indirectly to the learning process of their children as well as other children in the community. Apart from that, the government should also think of ways to better improve the socioeconomic conditions of the *Orang Asli* community. This is because the findings of our study show that the incidence of poverty markedly undermines the learning progress of the children as they have to skip school to assist their parents in farming and hunting. In addressing the issue of accessibility to education, besides establishing more K9 schools, the school also needs to find ways to distribute school enrolment forms to the villages which are located far from the school as some parents said that they did not collect the form from the school due to the constraints of transportation and distance. And last but not

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least, it is worth noting that language is indeed an important element in the process of teaching and learning. Understanding the complexities derived from the language barrier has enabled the Ministry of Education to formulate initiatives such as offering *Semai* language as an elective language choice in schools as well as recruiting more teacher assistants among the *Orang Asli* communities to facilitate learning processes and progress of the *Orang Asli* children. This is because the Ministry acknowledged that without effective communication in the classroom, the learning process will be undermined and conflicts will escalate. Therefore, all parties, namely JAKOA, teachers and parents, have to work hand in hand to address the issues and solve the problems of education in the villages of the *Orang Asli*.

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