

The Discourse

Bridging the educational gap

Unequal access to education between the country's indigenous and non-indigenous schoolchildren has been a long-standing issue. A think tank is urging the government to look into solutions instead of focusing on symptoms.

Stories by SANDHYA MENON
sandhyamenon@thestar.com.my

POLICIES have been implemented, and continuous forums and discussions are held, but the education gap between Malaysia's indigenous and non-indigenous schoolchildren continue to persist.

In a comprehensive study spanning over 10 months, Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs Social Policy research manager Wan Ya Shin highlighted the disparity in access to quality education for indigenous schoolchildren, particularly Orang Asli students.

Her research areas include education policy, social protection and inclusive growth.

In her paper titled "Educational Policies in Overcoming Barriers Faced by Orang Asli Children: Education for All", published on Oct 22, she said a report by the Education Ministry revealed that only 59% of Orang Asli students completed their secondary education in 2014.

The paper is the first of a two-part study and examines the evolution of the policies and programmes for Orang Asli children since 1995.

It also examines how effectively the Orang Asli Transformation Plan 2013-2018, under the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, is in addressing the challenges faced by these children.

The dropout rates for these students was also constantly above 17% from 2016 to 2018, with 2017 recording a huge leap to 26% of Orang Asli students dropping out. Comparatively, the national dropout rate for the same period was consistently below 4%.

The dropout rates among Orang Asli students are more prevalent in Kelantan and Terengganu, adding further to the disparity between them and their peers around the country.

This could be due to state-level governance of schools and support, which varies between state and district levels, and is causing further disparity in their access to quality education.

"(Additionally), enrolment rates for Orang Asli students are not reported in the Malaysia Education Blueprint annual reports, so the per-



Improve access: Poverty and lack of infrastructure and utilities are among the contributing factors in the disparity in access to quality education for indigenous schoolchildren. - File photo

centage of Orang Asli children who are not attending school can't be ascertained," said Wan.

Even other indicators of Orang Asli students' access to formal education are still lagging behind compared to the national average. This includes transition rates and completion rates.

The idea to carry out the study began when Wan visited an Orang Asli village to understand their challenges and how they are more vulnerable than their non-indigenous

peers in accessing quality education. Despite the negative narrative she's often heard about the community, she realised that the children are as active and curious as non-indigenous children their age.

"So why are they lagging behind in their access and attainment of education?"

One of the main barriers she and her research team stumbled upon was that programmes available focus too much on the symptoms such as dropout and attendance,

instead of addressing the problem.

To add to the dilemma, implementation gaps such as the lack of training for teachers to execute modules and programmes existed.

In her 40-page report, Wan broke down the main barriers and challenges Orang Asli students faced into four points (see table).

Targeted policies

Through her study and ground-work, Wan saw a need to have education policies that suit the Orang Asli children's environment.

She outlined seven policy recommendations to provide better access to quality education for them.

The policies are based on the barriers highlighted in previous studies and also an analysis of the government's policies and programmes for these children.

"There are good existing programmes that should be expanded and continued, such as the Orang Asli and Indigenous Adult Classes (Kedap), which is an adult literacy programme for parents.

"This will help reduce their illiteracy rate and help them be more involved in their children's studies.

"There should also be platforms and consultations with the Orang Asli communities to understand their challenges and to voice their opinions on policies and programmes."

Supporting learning centres operated by Orang Asli communities will also empower them to serve, build and increase awareness of the importance of education in their communities.

*See the mindmap below for Wan's policy recommendations.

Difficulties Orang Asli students face

CHALLENGES	DESCRIPTION
Socio-economic Background	
(a) Poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The 2009 poverty rate of the Orang Asli was at 49%, while the national poverty rate was only at 3.8%. Their monthly income were less than RM300, with most not having permanent jobs and were classified as hardcore poor. Hard for Orang Asli parents to prepare sufficient money for school expenses during the wettest period of the year - November and December Going to school means a trade-off to earn a livelihood with their parents. Coming from a low-income family means limited or no access to supplementary classes, educational television programmes, educational toys, reading and studying materials, and private tutoring. Most Orang Asli children do not have the opportunity to attend preschool, resulting in delayed ability to read, write and speak.
(b) Parents' educational level and awareness of the importance of education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Orang Asli literacy rate was only 51% in 2008. In a study of a Semal community in Perak, Orang Asli parents lacked basic literacy and numeracy skills to help their children in their schoolwork. Parents knew they were not aware of happenings in school and recognised they were disadvantaged due to their lack of education. Teachers said many Orang Asli children are not enrolling in schools because parents lack awareness and apathy towards education.
(c) Birth registration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cost of travelling to a National Registration Department, lack of documentation and lack of awareness of the importance of birth registrations.
Geographical Barriers	
(a) Living in remote areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children as young as seven leave their families and stay in hostels because there is no school near their village. Parents unwilling to let their children stay in hostels opt for their children to drop out of school. It takes two hours on a four-wheel drive to go from the farthest village to school on dirt road. Orang Asli parents cannot afford transportation costs. Lack of proper roads increases the difficulty for Orang Asli children to access education. Limited access to basic amenities, such as electricity, water, sanitation and telecommunication infrastructures including telephone, television and Internet connectivity.
(b) Lack of infrastructure and utilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Orang Asli children face language barriers when they enter primary school as most of them speak their mother tongue. Majority of teachers in Orang Asli schools are not Orang Asli and do not speak the students' mother tongue. Orang Asli students have trouble understanding lessons and instructions from their teachers. (Wahab and Mustapha, 2015) They learn from their environment; songs, rituals, arts, crafts, legends and folktales. Teachers must recognise that it is a transition from an oral culture to a literate culture when Orang Asli children enter primary school. Children need time to adjust and adapt to a different learning process.
Language and Cultural Barriers	
(a) Diversity of languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The national curriculum is based on the culture and environment of children of other majority ethnic groups. The education system is less sensitive to the needs of Orang Asli students. Classroom environment is a foreign setting; students are used to playing in the jungle. Difficult for students to understand and remember something they have not seen or is not part of their lives. When students do not retain what they have learnt, teachers adopt rote-learning techniques, which does not help in their understanding of the subject matter or develop their thinking skills. Teachers who used fun-learning pedagogy, holistic and hands-on approach, provided incentives, rewards and practised adaptation of their culture and language in class enhanced Orang Asli students' learning and improved their academic performance.
(b) Different culture and way of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers complain about Orang Asli students' poor memory retention. One of the reasons is because they were not exposed to the subject taught. Health and nutritional conditions of the students are often overlooked. Orang Asli children face bullying in schools, so most choose to leave school rather than confront the situation. Orang Asli children are discriminated against, considered dirty, are called names by their non-Orang Asli peers, and choose to stick among themselves. Many isolate themselves due to low self-esteem. Many face stigmatisation and are often viewed as inferior to their peers teaching in mainstream schools Most teachers lack training in indigenous pedagogy and understanding of their culture. Lack of infrastructure such as Internet access and pathways to training make it difficult to alter teaching and learning that fits in with the local culture.
Challenges in School	
(a) Misalignment of mainstream curriculum and pedagogy to their culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The national curriculum is based on the culture and environment of children of other majority ethnic groups. The education system is less sensitive to the needs of Orang Asli students. Classroom environment is a foreign setting; students are used to playing in the jungle. Difficult for students to understand and remember something they have not seen or is not part of their lives. When students do not retain what they have learnt, teachers adopt rote-learning techniques, which does not help in their understanding of the subject matter or develop their thinking skills. Teachers who used fun-learning pedagogy, holistic and hands-on approach, provided incentives, rewards and practised adaptation of their culture and language in class enhanced Orang Asli students' learning and improved their academic performance.
(b) Poor memory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers complain about Orang Asli students' poor memory retention. One of the reasons is because they were not exposed to the subject taught. Health and nutritional conditions of the students are often overlooked. Orang Asli children face bullying in schools, so most choose to leave school rather than confront the situation. Orang Asli children are discriminated against, considered dirty, are called names by their non-Orang Asli peers, and choose to stick among themselves. Many isolate themselves due to low self-esteem. Many face stigmatisation and are often viewed as inferior to their peers teaching in mainstream schools Most teachers lack training in indigenous pedagogy and understanding of their culture. Lack of infrastructure such as Internet access and pathways to training make it difficult to alter teaching and learning that fits in with the local culture.
(c) Social interaction in schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The national curriculum is based on the culture and environment of children of other majority ethnic groups. The education system is less sensitive to the needs of Orang Asli students. Classroom environment is a foreign setting; students are used to playing in the jungle. Difficult for students to understand and remember something they have not seen or is not part of their lives. When students do not retain what they have learnt, teachers adopt rote-learning techniques, which does not help in their understanding of the subject matter or develop their thinking skills. Teachers who used fun-learning pedagogy, holistic and hands-on approach, provided incentives, rewards and practised adaptation of their culture and language in class enhanced Orang Asli students' learning and improved their academic performance.
(d) Lack of training for teachers and challenges they face	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The national curriculum is based on the culture and environment of children of other majority ethnic groups. The education system is less sensitive to the needs of Orang Asli students. Classroom environment is a foreign setting; students are used to playing in the jungle. Difficult for students to understand and remember something they have not seen or is not part of their lives. When students do not retain what they have learnt, teachers adopt rote-learning techniques, which does not help in their understanding of the subject matter or develop their thinking skills. Teachers who used fun-learning pedagogy, holistic and hands-on approach, provided incentives, rewards and practised adaptation of their culture and language in class enhanced Orang Asli students' learning and improved their academic performance.

Source: Economic Planning Unit 2016, Bemien Win Keong Wong and Kiky Kirina Abdillah "Poverty and primary education of the Orang Asli children, 2018", Dr Sumathi Ranganathan "Educating the Orang Asli children: Exploring indigenous children's practices and experiences in schools, 2016", Unesco Institute for Statistics "Adult and Youth Literacy: National, regional and global trends, 1995-2015", Child Rights Coalition Malaysia "Status Report on Children's Rights, 2012", The Star "Orang Asli: Build schools near our villages" 2016, Norwaliza Abdul Wahab and Ramelee Mustapha "Reflections on Pedagogical and Curriculum Implementation at Orang Asli Schools in Pahang" 2015, Azlina Abdul Aziz "A critique of an Indigenous English Literacy Program in Malaysia" 2010, Md Nor et al "Dropout Prevention Initiatives for Malaysian Indigenous Orang Asli Children" 2011.

The Views

Why there is inequality

There are a number of reasons that contribute to the big disparity in access to quality education for Orang Asli schoolchildren. Even for teachers; a fresh graduate who is posted to an Orang Asli school will need to learn to adapt to the environment, living conditions and learn their culture and language simultaneously.

It is a difficult task that requires plenty of support in terms of training, peer-to-peer support and resources. We hope this study will be considered by the Government when revising and improving policies concerning Orang Asli schoolchildren.

It could contribute to better programmes for Orang Asli schoolchildren, subsequently enabling access to quality education and empowerment. Some of the key recommendations of this paper include obtaining the voices of Orang Asli in the formulation and implementation of programmes to provide an education that reflects their culture and environment.

We plan to engage with the Education Ministry and the Department of Orang Asli Development, as well as other relevant ministries. Such efforts require cross-ministerial contributions to help address the challenges these children face. There are no perfect policies but we can make it better together.

Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs Social Policy research manager Wan Ya Shin



Access to education for Orang Asli children is a multifaceted issue. Factors like the mismatch in the formal educational system, the imbalance of power dynamics between Orang Asli communities and mainstream society need to be looked at. For any educational programme to work, we need to first realign our thinking and approach.

All this while, we've focused too much on 'developing' the communities and teaching Orang Asli children about the mainstream world and how to fit in. This one-sided approach takes away their pride and identity and it doesn't help in bridging the gap between them and the non-indigenous world.

Moving forward, we need to educate our society about the Orang Asli cultures and communities.

More Orang Asli voices need to be foregrounded, and more positive things about them need to be highlighted. At the same time, we need to empower Orang Asli children by making their indigenous identities more visible and relevant in the formal educational system. We also need more Orang Asli role models for the young ones.

University of Nottingham Malaysia Assistant Professor Suria Selasih Angit is a researcher specialising in Orang Asli education and is an Orang Asli from the Temiar tribe.

It is unfair to expect schools to be frontrunners in addressing these problems alone. Comprehending how and why education can work for Orang Asli is a crucial first step for engagement and empowering the community and students.

To indigenous communities around the world, the quality of knowledge is holistic rather than compartmentalised, teaching and learning methods are interactive and demonstrative rather than instructive, and the social values that govern learning attitudes are co-operative rather than competitive.

Schools, education departments and non-governmental organisations that work with the Orang Asli community often do so in silos and at the expense of the Orang Asli themselves.

A top-down, "we know what is best for your community" attitude is prevalent in the absence of an organic and inclusive process. This not only forsakes the voice of the Orang Asli, but also jeopardises sustainability and eradicates the sense of belonging.

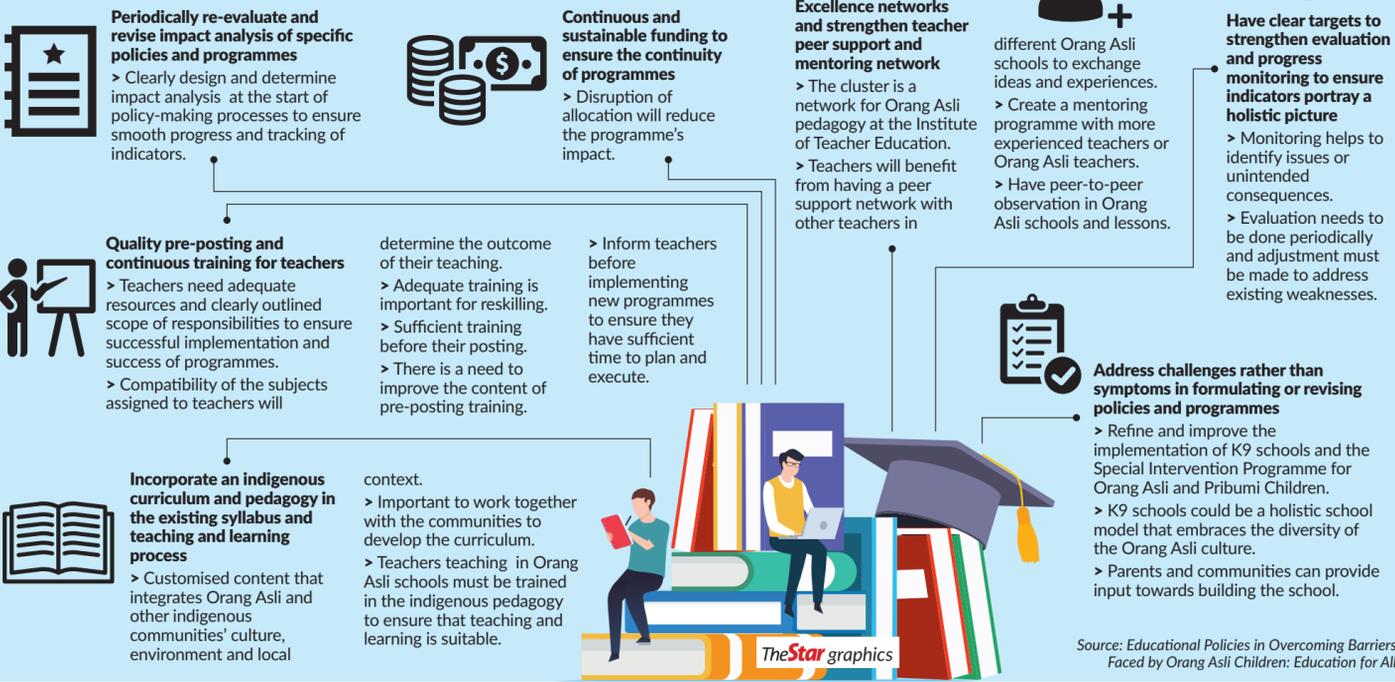
Future efforts must focus on bringing the community into the decision-making process as active contributors. We need to put our differences aside by working and learning together, with and for the community.

Orang Asli school SK Runchang (Pahang) teacher and Varkey Foundation Global Teacher Prize 2020 Top 50 finalist Samuel Isaiah



We can do better

Policies that can help Orang Asli students succeed



Source: Educational Policies in Overcoming Barriers Faced by Orang Asli Children: Education for All

TheStar graphics

TheStar graphics