

# EXPLORING THE SCHOOL LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF INDIGENOUS STUDENTS IN EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO EDUCATIONAL CONTINUITY

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the school learning experiences of Indigenous (*Orang Asli*) students who have successfully pursued higher education in Malaysian institutions. Employing a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, the research involved five Orang Asli students from various tribes currently enrolled in higher education institutions. The study aimed to explore their school learning experiences, factors influencing their success, and suggestions for improving educational continuity among Orang Asli students. Findings revealed four main themes affecting the educational experiences and success of Orang Asli students: (1) Distance and transportation, (2) Local language and culture, (3) Academic, parental, and community support, and (4) Family economic status. The study found that distance and transportation challenges were mitigated through the provision of dormitories, while language and cultural barriers were addressed through teaching approaches sensitive to individual student needs. Academic support from schools, parental motivation, and financial assistance from various parties emerged as crucial factors in Orang Asli students' success in pursuing university education. Based on these findings, the study proposes several measures to enhance educational continuity for Orang Asli students, including constructing schools near Orang Asli settlements, improving teaching and learning methods, implementing more structured support programs at the university level, and enhancing financial aid systems. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Orang Asli students and the factors influencing their success in higher education, providing insights for developing more effective strategies to increase educational continuity within the Orang Asli community.

**Keywords:** Orang Asli, learning experiences, higher education, educational challenges, success factors

## 1. INTRODUCTION

'There is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequals'. These wise words by the third President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson (1809), are highly relevant to the learning of indigenous children with special needs in mainstream education (Md. Ali et al., 2021). A United Nations (UN) report in 2017 stated that formal education systems for indigenous communities are often seen as a way to assimilate them into mainstream society (United Nations, 2017). Since 2009, the UN has revealed that indigenous communities feel they do not have sufficient influence over

educational initiatives targeted at indigenous students, where their views are rarely sought in the planning and implementation process of educational programs and services. As a result, implemented education programs often fail to achieve their targets due to not using local languages and failing to respect the history and cultural heritage of indigenous communities (United Nations, 2009).

Issues related to indigenous education have been the focus of various studies among researchers in Malaysia (Md. Ali et al., 2021; Nordin et al., 2020; Ainol Hamidah Ahmad Sarimin & Saemah Rahman, 2018; Siti Farhah A Aziz & Nuzha Mohamed Taha, 2018). However, most research has focused on indigenous students who are unable to continue their education in schools. There is a lack of emphasis on exploring the learning experiences of indigenous students who have successfully proven their educational continuity at the school level and have been able to pursue higher education in Institutions of Higher Learning (IHLs). A study by Shahidi A.Hamid and Marlyna Maros (2022) stated that not much research has been done to delve into and understand the difficulties faced by indigenous students in secondary schools to complete their secondary education. Therefore, exploring the learning experiences of indigenous students in IHLs is necessary as a continuation of research on the learning experiences of indigenous people at the school level for those who have successfully completed their schooling and sat for the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) examination.

In an effort to ensure the continuity of indigenous education, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) is also collaborating with various parties to empower the education of this group (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018). The MOE has formed a partnership with the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) by establishing a special committee to monitor the educational aspects of this community to ensure the educational welfare of indigenous children continues to be protected (JAKOA, 2022). According to the report in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the MOE will continue to ensure that the special needs of minority students such as the indigenous people are guaranteed. In addition, the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda also gives special consideration to the educational aspects of indigenous groups. One of the 17 aspects of the Fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4) contained in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda is to focus on inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning. The achievement of this fourth goal is necessary to ensure equitable access to education for indigenous children.

Kamarudin et al. (2019) state that there are many challenges and barriers to the educational continuity of indigenous people in learning, namely geographical factors, language and culture, as well as the attitude of indigenous students who lack motivation. A study by Mazzlida and Ruhizan (2016) identified several challenges and barriers faced, such as cultural and lifestyle gaps, as well as the location of indigenous settlements in remote or inland geographical areas. A study by Abdullah et al. (2021) has suggested further research to explore factors that encourage indigenous learning while successfully overcoming challenges and barriers to ensure continuity in education. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to (a) Explore the learning experiences in school experienced by indigenous students who have successfully continued their education to the university level (b) Explore the factors influencing the success of indigenous students who have continued their education at university and (c) Explore suggested steps to improve the educational continuity of indigenous students.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Indigenous Education in Malaysia

The indigenous community was first exposed to the schooling system in 1930 through the efforts of Christian missionaries (Hasan Mat Nor, 2019). The main objective of these missionaries was to teach reading and writing skills to the indigenous people, with the aim of facilitating the spread of knowledge and Christian teachings (Hasan Mat Nor, 2021). Meanwhile, the implementation of formal education programs among the indigenous community officially began after the establishment of the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA) in 1953 (Zainal Abidin, 2014). On January 15, 2011, JHEOA underwent rebranding and is now known as the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA). JAKOA was mandated to act as the primary agency in planning and implementing indigenous education initiatives, encompassing both short-term and long-term plans, demonstrating the government's continued commitment to advancing the indigenous community's education system (Zainal Abidin, 2018).

The education policy implemented by JAKOA for the indigenous community is generally in line with the National Education Policy (DPN). JAKOA has formulated this policy based on DPN guidelines (Norwaliza, 2016). Some of the indigenous education policies include the use of Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction and the introduction of Moral Education as a substitute for Islamic Religious Education. The indigenous education system emphasizes teaching that meets the needs of parents, especially in the early stages of establishing indigenous schools. This approach was taken with the aim of building trust among indigenous parents regarding the importance of education (JAKOA, 2020). Starting in 1996, the management of all schools for indigenous students was fully transferred under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM). This strategic move enables KPM to improve the quality of education for the indigenous community by providing various facilities (Norwaliza, 2016). Among the initiatives taken include the placement of trained teachers in the relevant schools, construction of conducive school buildings, provision of modern teaching and learning equipment suitable for current needs, and implementation of an effective monitoring system to ensure the effectiveness of planned program implementation (Indigenous Student Intellect Center, 2019).

The process of educational development for Indigenous people in Malaysia is shown in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1 Development Process of Indigenous Education in Malaysia**

Estimated Year	Educational Development Process for Indigenous People in Malaysia	Organization
1950s - 1960s	Indigenous communities were first introduced to formal education by British colonizers.	JHEOA
1970s - 1980s	Establishment of three types of schools for Indigenous people: primary schools, primary schools under the administration of MOE, and joint-venture primary schools	JHEOA

1990s - 2000s	All schools for Indigenous people were managed by MOE	MOE
2000 - present	The Mind and Education Development Division has been working to implement programs to advance Indigenous education from Pre-School level to higher levels.	JAKOA, PIPOA

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Source: Indigenous Student Intellectual Center (2019)

## 2.2. Educational Continuity of Indigenous People

Intan Waheedah (2022) in her study states that low participation among indigenous students can be seen in the local education system and still continues, where there is a trend of students failing to enter secondary school after completing primary school. In Peninsular Malaysia alone, records from 2018 show that 3,771 indigenous students completed primary school, but only 2,840 students registered for secondary school, indicating a percentage of students failing to enter secondary school of 24.7 percent. In 2019, the percentage of students failing to enter secondary school decreased slightly to 22.7 percent, where 3,812 indigenous students completed Year 6 in primary school compared to only 2,963 students who registered in secondary school, but still at a low rate (Malaysia Open Data Portal, 2021).

Despite support and efforts by the government, the educational continuity of indigenous students still lags far behind other Malaysian ethnic groups (Mohd Adnan et al., 2021). According to a report by the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KKDW) 2020, there were 2,450 indigenous students who dropped out of primary school without completing standard 6, causing them to be marginalized from education, and this number increased to 3,190 in 2021. Meanwhile, a study conducted by JAKOA has shown that the number of indigenous students remaining in secondary school until completing Form 5 is lower compared to the average number of students at the national level (Wong & Abdillah, 2017). Educational continuity among indigenous people continues to be a critical issue that has not been fully resolved (Sawalludin et al., 2020). Mohamad Johdi and Abdul Razak (2009) stated that only 2.2% of the indigenous community successfully continued their studies to higher education institutions in 2009. Shin & Idrus (2021) stated that only two percent of the indigenous population in Malaysia successfully pursued higher education in higher education institutions. These findings show that the number of indigenous students who successfully remain in mainstream education up to higher education institutions has not shown significant changes.

## 2.3. Challenges and Barriers to Educational Continuity of Indigenous People

Understanding the forms of challenges and barriers to educational continuity of indigenous students through exploring their learning experiences in school will help uncover factors influencing the success of indigenous students in reaching university. Moreover, this understanding is significant in identifying the support systems needed by indigenous students to

succeed. Therefore, it can be used to compare and contrast experiences between successful and unsuccessful students, thus providing valuable input for indigenous educational continuity.

### ***2.3.1. Geographical Location***

Generally, indigenous settlements are spread across inland areas. JAKOA reports show that 31.7% of indigenous villages are located in inland areas, 61.45% in suburban areas, and 1.38% in urban areas (Norwaliza, 2016). This explains why their lives are lagging behind and marginalized from the modernization process. Their geographical position, located far inland, is a major factor in their belief that their children are not interested in participating in the formal education system at school, which ultimately causes indigenous children to fall behind in their studies. Although modernization has brought changes to some indigenous communities, many still live marginalized from development in inland areas. Indigenous villages are located in inland areas, and school attendance has indeed been an ongoing issue due to the journey to school. According to a study by Md Nor et al. (2016), Batek children in Taman Negara Pahang receive free transportation to school via pickup trucks, which has helped encourage children to attend school even though their villages are located on the edge of the National Park Forest. They also stated that geographical location plays an important factor in attracting students to school. This scenario proves that distance to school can influence the school attendance of indigenous students (Mazdi et al., 2018).

Based on a study in Cameron Highlands, most indigenous people face difficulties because most of their villages are located far from main towns (Doris et al., 2019). This is supported by findings from Md Nor et al. (2016), which state that indigenous villages lack good roads, causing transportation to school to be unsatisfactory and usually unsafe. Therefore, it is necessary to improve their access to quality education considering they do not get the same opportunities as children from other races who do not have problems traveling far to gain knowledge (Mahdzar et al., 2021). Shah et al. (2020) suggest that indigenous schools should be built near their settlements in line with the government's role to create awareness in the indigenous community about the importance of education. Hence, the government has introduced learning centers near their settlements to give indigenous people the opportunity to receive education. For indigenous families who are too far from learning centers, schools will provide dormitory facilities to facilitate their attendance at school.

### ***2.3.2. Local Language and Culture***

Language and cultural factors play a crucial role in influencing the educational continuity of indigenous students. They are the primary means of interaction with them. There are many indigenous tribes, and each tribe has a unique language and belief system, for example, indigenous tribes such as Semelai, Mah Meri, Jahai, and Batek (Rabahi et al., 2016). Indigenous local culture is another challenge in education. Rosniza et al. (2017) explain that the education of indigenous communities is related to the environment of their living surroundings. Most indigenous people still focus on the environment as their financial resource, and they are comfortable with that environment. Many indigenous children do not attend school because they need to take care of younger siblings when parents go out to find food. Some children also work in the forest to earn a living by helping their parents, and this is one of the problems causing absenteeism in school.

Most indigenous families rely on natural resources as their main income, and they hope their children will focus more on helping them rather than continuing their education at school. Indigenous income is still low, but they are comfortable with that income by selling all the products they obtain from their environment (Doris et al., 2019). Due to their culture that does not focus on the importance of education, students are not motivated to support initiatives created by others (Afizi et al., 2014). They are in their comfort zone and do not need to adapt to new environments and cultures. Indigenous people have valuable knowledge about practices for sustainable natural resource management, and this is recognized by the Government (Rabahi et al., 2016). A study by Nik Nur Azizah et al. (2018) found that indigenous communities still adhere strongly to their ancestral customs and traditions, despite various efforts and incentives provided by the government to improve their educational standards. The life of indigenous people is still closely linked to nature, with the forest being the main source of livelihood. As a result, they tend to be content with their traditional way of life and find it difficult to accept changes, especially in aspects of education.

### ***2.3.3. Academic, Parental, and Community Support***

Academic support for indigenous students through a conducive school environment for learning is a highly emphasized aspect. Any issues or problems related to the learning process of indigenous students need to be addressed efficiently (Rabahi et al., 2016). Close cooperation among school members that successfully extends to the external indigenous community, including society, parents, or guardians of indigenous students, will provide more awareness about why decisions are made and how they should be implemented in the context of their children's education. Mahdzar et al. (2021) state that lack of encouragement from parents due to lack of information and exposure about education is also one of the main reasons indigenous people do not focus on their studies. Doris et al. (2019) state that most of their parents did not receive education and they also do not encourage their children, resulting in low involvement of indigenous students in the learning process at school.

In addition, their parents lack self-awareness about the importance of education to convince their children in education. Most indigenous parents do not care whether their children go to school or not and do not focus on their performance at all (Afizi et al., 2014). They believe that without education, their lives are still good, and their parents before them also did not receive educational exposure. Indigenous people do not get good results in school, and because of this, parents will ask their children to help the family by working instead of going to school (Doris et al., 2019). According to them, when students do not attend school, parents prefer to remain silent because the children will help them at home or search for forest products.

## **3. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1, Distance and Transportation**

The learning experience of indigenous students is greatly influenced by distance and transportation factors. The study findings show that four out of five research participants lived far from school, with one participant reporting a distance of 12 kilometers from home to school. Haliza (2018)



emphasizes that accessibility and distance to school can influence absenteeism among indigenous students. This experience reflects the geographical challenges faced by indigenous communities, which are often located in remote areas.

Factors influencing the success of indigenous students to university level include institutional support in overcoming the barrier of schools being far from home. Four out of five research participants reported living in dormitories, indicating the importance of these facilities in ensuring their educational continuity. This aligns with the view that providing dormitories for indigenous students is a sound initiative in addressing the issue of school distance. In fact, there are innovative examples where religious institutions also play a role, as stated by Participant 02. This shows that the success of indigenous students depends on collaborative efforts of various stakeholders in providing practical solutions to geographical challenges.

In the context of suggestions to improve educational continuity for indigenous students, research participants suggested building schools closer to indigenous settlements in remote areas. This suggestion, as stated by Participant 04, indicates the need for a more holistic and community-centered approach in providing educational access to indigenous students.

*"In my opinion, an initiative that stakeholders can take is to establish a, what people call a school or anything that can educate indigenous children in remote areas to make it easier for them to go to school... because for me, the main reason indigenous children don't go to school is the distance, which makes it difficult for them to get to that school.."*

In conclusion, distance and transportation influence the learning experiences of research participants. Their success to university level is driven by institutional support in overcoming these barriers, especially through the provision of dormitories. Additionally, to improve the educational continuity of indigenous students, there is a need to create educational infrastructure closer to their communities to ensure indigenous students continue to stay in school. This is because transportation costs also pose a subsequent challenge for them to attend school and follow learning sessions due to families not having their own vehicles.

### **3.2. Local Language and Culture**

The learning experience of Indigenous students in school is greatly influenced by local language and cultural factors. Three out of five study participants reported facing language and cultural challenges, especially in schools with diverse ethnic groups. Participant 01's findings show that the learning experience of Indigenous students involves not only language challenges but also cultural issues and new perspectives on social acceptance. This challenge was clearly stated by Participant 01: *"...near my school too, there was racism...meaning the acceptance of ethnic groups was somewhat lacking."*

Through analysis of the research findings, the challenges and barriers of local language and culture were successfully overcome by study participants through an enjoyable learning environment and effective teaching methods. This can be seen from the positive experience reported by Participant 01. Participant 01's experience shows that exposure to various languages and cultures can be a

success factor rather than a barrier. Success in overcoming language challenges can be realized through a more individualistic approach as stated by Participant 03. An intensive approach can meet the language skill level needs of Indigenous students. Participant 03 states: *"...The thing that supported me during primary school...was class separation, meaning there were classes for less intelligent and intelligent students...it was also by subject, like the Chinese Language subject that I mentioned was challenging...it became easier because in the class I mentioned for less intelligent students, the teacher would teach slowly. Meaning they would teach one by one each Chinese word."*

In conclusion, the learning experience of Indigenous students is greatly influenced by language and cultural challenges. Their success in reaching university level is driven by a positive learning environment and effective teaching methods. To improve the educational continuity of Indigenous students, there is a need for teaching approaches that are more sensitive to individual student needs, especially in the context of language and culture. This aligns with the view that teachers should know their students before teaching and that a "one size fits all" approach will not be effective. The experiences of countries such as New Zealand, South Africa, Norway, and Peru in maintaining and recognizing Indigenous languages can serve as examples in efforts to improve the educational continuity of Indigenous students in Malaysia (Mohd Roslan, 2016, 2018).

### **3.3. Academic, Parental, and Community Support**

The learning experience of Indigenous students in school is influenced by factors of academic support, parental support, and community support. Although four out of five study participants reported a lack of community support, they received strong support from schools and parents as explained by Participant 01. Participant 01's experience shows that family and school support play a crucial role in the learning experience of Indigenous students, despite the lack of support from the wider community.

Factors influencing the success of Indigenous students in reaching university level include academic support through schools and parental support. All five study participants stated that they received academic support from schools through free additional tutoring classes. This indicates that the factor of academic support is closely related to financial support. Additionally, parental support and sacrifice become a strong source of motivation, as narrated by Participant 01, illustrating how parental sacrifice can be a powerful motivation for Indigenous students like them to continue succeeding in their education.

Through analysis of suggestions to improve the educational continuity of Indigenous students, study participants emphasized the need for more comprehensive support from all parties, especially from the community. Participant 04 stated that there is a need to establish more planned support programs and a more formal support structure at the university level for Indigenous students. Their success in reaching university level is driven by strong support, particularly from schools and parents. The study by Irma Yanti et al. (2018) states that parental support, regardless of family history background, culture, or economic status, plays a crucial role as a catalyst for children's success in overcoming challenges and barriers in learning.



### 3.4. Family Economic Status

Family economic status influences the learning experience of Study Participants in school. Four out of five study participants come from low-income families, sharing their own perspectives on various challenges in ensuring their educational continuity. The Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) (2017) states that nearly 60% of students who fail to continue schooling are from low-income families. The experiences of these study participants align with IDEAS' findings, demonstrating how family economic status can affect school attendance.

The factor influencing the success of Indigenous students in reaching university level in overcoming financial-related challenges is financial assistance from various parties. Four out of five study participants expressed the need for financial support and assistance to continue their education. This is demonstrated through the experience of Participant 02, showing how financial aid in the form of scholarships from schools and JAKOA (Department of Orang Asli Development) as well as private agencies can be a crucial factor in enabling Indigenous students to continue their education. *"...what I remember during primary school, every term there were several welfare organizations that came, one of them is Tzu Chi...this is one that helped the most...I saw they helped with finances, food as well...they would visit from house to house."*

Khalid et al. (2018) state that the majority of parents who belong to poor communities have lower educational backgrounds, which can influence children's motivation to pursue higher education. However, the findings of this study show that with adequate financial support, Indigenous students can overcome these challenges and successfully continue their education to the university level.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

In overall conclusion, the rationale for the study 'Exploring the School Learning Experiences of Indigenous Students in Higher Education Institutions: Challenges and Barriers to Educational Continuity' has provided an opportunity for Indigenous students who have successfully reached higher education to voice their views, opinions, and insights about their learning experiences in school. The main findings of this study show that Indigenous students are capable and indeed possess clear perspectives on their school experiences. When given the space, they express these views with confidence, honesty, and transparency. This proves that Indigenous students have valuable perspectives that need to be considered in efforts to understand and improve the continuity of this group in the education system.

The perspectives of Indigenous students in higher education institutions regarding their own schooling experiences until their success in reaching higher education open eyes not only to researchers and stakeholders interested in Indigenous education but also to any individual who wants to get a clearer picture of the phenomena faced by Indigenous students in educational continuity. Perceptions about the backwardness of Indigenous people, laziness, and other negative portrayals of this unique minority population may be reconsidered in the process of building a more contemporary picture of Indigenous life and the education of Indigenous youth for the years to come.

The four main themes from this research - distance and transportation, local language and culture, academic support, parents and community, and family economic status - are findings that need to be studied more specifically involving more study participants in an optimal time frame, so that they can be generalized to Indigenous students across Malaysia. With concerted efforts by all stakeholders, it is hoped that more Indigenous students will be able to continue their educational journey, at least on par with the majority ethnic groups of this country.

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