

Chapter 8

Effective Leadership Style for Indigenous Schools in the Malaysian Context

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the indigenous peoples of Malaysia who are collectively categorized as the orang asli (indigenous people) in Malaysia. This group was selected as they face many challenges in the field of education which is often linked to poverty, incompatible teaching-learning methods, lack of facilities, and school leadership. The study investigates the role of school administrators, teachers, parents, and pupils in five selected schools in Malaysia. Five school headmasters, two administrative officials, 10 teachers, 10 parents, and 10 students took part in this qualitative study. Interviews on school leadership were explored in terms of challenges and good practices which leads to the development of a model that incorporates the findings from the study. It is hoped that the model which emphasizes sociocultural sensitivity, the need to draw on the knowledge and the skills of the orang asli for educational development, and reaching out to them will be helpful to indigenous peoples in Malaysia and other countries.

INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the indigenous peoples of Malaysia who are collectively categorised as the orang asli in Malaysia. According to the Strategic Plan for Orang Asli development, their total population is about 178,197, which is approximately 0.6% of the Malaysian population. Although they number less than 1% of the population, the government has continuously planned for their educational progress so that their educational practices are in line with the aims of mainstream schooling. Nevertheless, the progress of the orang asli children, with specific reference to the primary school level has been lagging. This is evident from the high attrition rates, absenteeism and poor performances in school examinations. These problems, though, are symptomatic of larger issues that are embedded in an educational system

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which could be incompatible with the social practices, cultural beliefs and ingrained world views of the orang asli.

Thus, a look at the academic leadership in orang asli schools or those with a predominantly orang asli population cannot ignore the deep seated relationship between school academic leadership and orang asli students who are the embodiments of a holistic lifestyle rooted in their cultural ethos and traditions. Traditionally, orang asli children have relied on non-formal means of education which shows minimal characteristics of mainstream schooling in Malaysia. Mainstream schooling in Malaysia is highly structured with a set curriculum, syllabus and learning outcomes to be achieved. Academic assessment is highly competitive and potentially determines further academic advancement and career opportunities. Educational leadership is honed towards producing good results among students with an emphasis on performance targets to be met from primary school.

The issue of orang asli informal education will not give rise to tensions within their system if there is no contact between the orang asli and the forces of development as envisaged in successive 5-year Malaysian development plans. The orang asli remain one of the poorest groups in Malaysia although efforts have been made to improve their socio economic status. The education leadership in Malaysia at school level have been assigned the important task of improving the educational achievement of the orang asli. Considering their economic necessities, parents see the students' participation in the workforce positively. The parents' economic pressures are relatively reduced if students are able to earn income or join the workforce as soon as possible. This situation is typified by Musa (2003) in his analysis of Malaysia's education system in relation to poverty. He cites the example of the poor rural fisherman to illustrate his point.

While education is the key to eradicating poverty, ironically poverty is also the greatest impediment to getting an education. While to economists the value of the foregone income of the youngster attending school is minimal, to that poor family the son being at school and not being able to help in hauling the net may mean the difference between surviving and not having a meal for that day. The solution to this problem is not simply to lecture the poor fisherman endlessly on the value of education, rather to shift the balance in that family's personal equation to make the child attending school to be worth more than having him out in the high seas. ... I discuss the novel Brazilian social experiment of paying parents to keep their children in school as one effective way of shifting that balance in the equation. (p. 32).

Although Musa (2003) refers to education in general, this situation is applicable to orang asli education in Malaysia as many of the orang asli community belong to the agricultural poor. Research works on the orang asli have variously made references to them as a marginalized group, belonging to the lower income group or a group with a high proportion of hard core poor and hence a need to improve their economic conditions (Nicholas, 2002; Duasa, Rahman, Thaker, 2017). Malaysia's 5-year plans are deemed to be the road map for nationwide development and the government hopes that no group is marginalised or becomes underclass citizens. Against this backdrop, the orang asli cannot lead a life of total geographical isolation. In the process of development, many aspects of their life are exposed to new ways of thinking, including the education system. Educational leadership, too, undergoes a transformation as orang asli schools are expected to conform to the standards expected in mainstream schools. Herein lies the challenge, as the conditions in mainstream schools lend themselves better to the demands of the Malaysian education system as compared to schools in which the orang asli children dominate. Some of the orang asli schools are at a transitional stage where they are exposed to some modern influences but

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