

Strategies for Addressing Indigenous Education Dropout

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ABSTRACT

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The issue of indigenous education dropout among the indigenous community has deep roots, despite various efforts being made. These efforts include educational assistance such as transportation allowances, pocket money for primary and secondary school students, dormitory personal needs, fees, and school uniforms for Standard 1 and Form 1 students. Similarly, there are initiatives like the Education Incentive Scheme (SBGP) managed in collaboration with the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA), aimed at encouraging indigenous students to pursue higher education. However, the education dropout issue among the indigenous at the secondary school level not only hinders educational progression but also makes it difficult for the younger generation of this community to secure better employment due to the lack of required minimum qualifications. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to explore strategies for addressing indigenous education dropout in Sungai Siput, Perak. Through semi-structured interviews and purposive sampling, the researcher conducted interviews with several teachers, parents, and indigenous community members in the district of Sungai Siput, Perak. Additionally, direct observations were made in schools, homes, and indigenous villages to reinforce the interview data. The study findings outlined strategies in the context of efforts needed by various parties to address indigenous educational dropout. The results indicate that addressing indigenous education dropout requires the involvement of various parties, establishing culturally responsive education, developing indigenous community educational recovery, and enhancing teacher training and professional development in indigenous schools. This study has

important implications for addressing the issue of educational dropout among indigenous students from various angles.

Contribution/Originality: The paper's primary contribution is finding a comprehensive strategy to address the dropout rates in indigenous education, particularly at the secondary school level. This strategy encompasses multi-stakeholder involvement, culturally responsive education, community-based educational recovery, and teacher training and professional development.

1. Introduction

Education dropout is an important and often discussed issue in line with Malaysia's educational aspiration to narrow the education gap between urban, rural, and interior communities. According to the [Department of Statistics Malaysia \(2019\)](#), approximately 5.8% out of the estimated 32 million Malaysian population are not attending school or have dropped out of the national education system. The report for the year 2022 also indicates that a total of 24,941 candidates did not sit for the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) examination in 2021. The [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(OECD\) \(2016\)](#) reported that education dropout leads to an imbalance in the economic status of society, ultimately slowing down the socioeconomic development process of a country. In Malaysia, the indigenous community is among the groups at risk of experiencing educational dropout due to various challenges faced by the community, such as geographical location factors, weak infrastructure, low parental education levels, poverty ([Ya, 2020](#); [Nordin et al., 2020](#)), and so on. Although the government has established a total of 98 indigenous National Schools located within indigenous communities to facilitate educational access, educational dropout still occurs, especially at the secondary school level. As of now, there are only two secondary schools specifically for indigenous, namely Panggung Jaya National Secondary School in Gua Musang, Kelantan, and Bawong National Secondary School in Sungai Siput, Perak. Meanwhile, many indigenous students still attend 768 mainstream national secondary schools on the peninsula ([Department of Indigenous Development, 2020](#)).

The indigenous people's attachment to the ecology of the forest and wilderness leads them to prioritize survival over education ([Kahriman-Pamuk & Ahi, 2019](#)). According to [Nor et al. \(2018\)](#), indigenous children who do not continue their education from primary to secondary school often engage in self-sustaining activities by collecting forest products. For them, mastery of the 3Rs, namely reading, writing, and arithmetic, is considered sufficient for carrying on with life ([Abdullah et al., 2019](#)). The occurrence of educational dropout indicates that the indigenous community prioritizes basic needs over learning and the future of their children ([Mazdi Marzuki et al., 2014](#); [Norhayati et al., 2018](#)). In addition, the dropout rate of indigenous students from primary to secondary school also showed an increase of 22.67% in 2019 compared to 16.75% in 2016 ([MOE, 2020](#)). This situation is even more concerning when studies found that 80% of the younger generation of indigenous do not complete their education in secondary school ([Wei, 2020](#)). This results in a prolonged cycle of educational dropout among the indigenous community.

1.1. Research Objective

Exploring strategies to address the educational dropout of indigenous from the perspectives of the indigenous community

2. Literature Review

In Malaysia, there still exist indigenous tribes that live in remote areas, such as the Bateq tribe in the vicinity of Kelantan and Pahang, the Mendiq tribe in Kelantan, and the Senoi people around the slopes of the Titiwangsa mountain range, specifically in the hinterlands of Perak, Kelantan, and Pahang. Previous studies have shown that factors such as poverty and a preference for living in remote areas contribute to the occurrence of educational dropout ([Khalid et al., 2018](#)). According to [Yusoff et al. \(2019\)](#), who studied the Jahai indigenous community in the state of Perak, economic development among the population still remains below the poverty line, with an average household income of less than RM500 per month. Meanwhile, [Lee et al. \(2018\)](#) found that nearly half of the indigenous population in the vicinity of Pahang engage in traditional occupations such as logging, farming, with a small percentage involved in the private sector or running small retail businesses.

According to [Nor Azrul and Noordeyana \(2018\)](#), low socioeconomic status affects students' motivation to continue their education because many indigenous children choose to work at a young age rather than pursuing formal education. This situation poses a challenge for indigenous parents to provide a conducive educational environment for their children, especially given the low socioeconomic status of the indigenous community. Additionally, the practice of using the native language within the indigenous community slows down the learning process for children in school, as they may not be proficient in the medium of instruction used in schools ([Shahidi et al., 2018](#); [Chin et al., 2021](#)). This also contributes to low literacy levels, which in turn leads to high dropout rates ([Rosly & Mokhtar, 2021](#); [Zakaria & Ahmad, 2022](#)).

[Ciotti et al. \(2019\)](#) conducted a study on leadership aspects for the Hawaiian Native American community's education in the United States. They found that school leadership through culturally-based communication can enhance students' academic achievements and consequently reduce the dropout rate of Native American students there. [Shay and Miller \(2021\)](#), who studied the academic excellence of Indigenous students in several high schools around Torres Strait Islander, Australia, identified the importance of leadership in supporting school and student excellence. The qualitative study also found that schools that incorporate Indigenous knowledge and perspectives, supporting the well-being of Indigenous students, and have specific strategies to engage with the local indigenous community play significant roles.

[Bryan et al. \(2018\)](#) conducted a study on the involvement of schools, parents, and the community from the perspective of school counselor leadership. Quantitative data obtained from 546 school counselors found that counselors play a crucial role in enhancing school, parent, and community involvement practices. Among the dimensions of leadership required are high self-efficacy in building partnerships, roles in sharing, collaborative climate, and overarching expectations. The study also suggests that counselors should take the lead in ensuring successful collaboration between schools, parents, and the community.

3. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design using a case study approach. The data collection process involves conducting interviews with three school representatives: the principal, the deputy head of Student Affairs, and the school counselor. The interview data also includes ten representatives from the Indigenous communities, comprising two Tok Batin (leaders), four parents, three community members, and one representative from the Department of Indigenous Development. The interviews were conducted through fieldwork located in Sungai Siput, Perak. The selection of the 14 participants was based on purposive sampling with several criteria, including:

- a) Representatives from Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Bawong, Sungai Siput, Perak,
- b) Members of the indigenous communities in Kampung Perwor, Kampung Beswok, and Kampung Yum, Sungai Siput, Perak.
- c) Stakeholders serving within the indigenous community.

The interview questions are semi-structured in nature and are developed based on the research objectives and the data obtained has been subsequently analyzed thematically.

4. Results and Discussion

The research findings indicate four strategies for addressing the educational dropout of indigenous: multi-stakeholder involvement, culturally responsive education, community educational recovery, and teacher training and professional development.

4.1. Involvement of Various Parties

Involving various parties is one of the crucial strategies for addressing the educational dropout of the indigenous. The analysis identified two sub-themes within stakeholder involvement, which are building external relationships and partnerships. Transcript analysis of interviews revealed that other agencies, whether government ministries or non-governmental organizations, often visit several villages but with different objectives. Study participants believed that building partnerships between the Ministry of Education and external agencies is essential so that expertise can be combined in a collaborative effort. These are as stated below:

"I see that collaboration among various parties including the District Education Office (PPD), State Education Department (JPN), and the Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM) needs to involve frequent field visits and sending staff to work together or enhance cooperation with other agencies". - SP (School Participant)

"... I see that the KPM also needs to collaborate with the Ministry of Youth, for example. These students will become youth, and when they have skills, the youth sector can take them in". - SP

"Actually, there are quite a few volunteers from various external agencies who come to these villages. So, in my opinion, it would be good for the school or the ministry to seek their cooperation. In my opinion, teamwork is important. There are more resources, and

expertise varies. What I mean is, working together, but with a clear direction, which is to address this dropout issue". - CP (Community Participant)

Findings also revealed the second sub-theme for stakeholder involvement, which is partnership. Partnership refers to the collaboration with other indigenous schools. Based on the interviews, participants expressed the view that schools need to actively share and exchange successes and expertise with other indigenous schools. This sharing can take the form of experiences or ideas that can enhance appropriate approaches, particularly in the context of indigenous education. Community participants expressed the following:

"In my opinion, we can share excellence. Actually, there are many excellent indigenous schools. Whether it's Indigenous secondary schools or primary schools, we should learn and take examples from other indigenous schools, especially in addressing this educational dropout issue". - CP

According to [Stokes et al. \(2019\)](#), involvement is seen as a continuous process where the processes of designing, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation are carried out with the involvement of various parties. The measure of success for an educational system is based on its ability to develop the target groups, especially students, and subsequently ensure a future society that is more advanced and capable of competing internationally. This success requires the strength of involvement from both within and outside the educational organization ([Epstein & Sheldon, 2016](#)). Schools, on the other hand, serve as formal educational institutions in society to provide comprehensive education to students. School administrators, teachers, and staff are the leaders of an excellent and effective school through careful preparation and planning for any changes to achieve the school's mission and vision. Studies indicate that schools involving various stakeholders are said to have characteristics of a healthy organization, including a readiness to change and being more responsive to changes ([Mohamoud et al., 2020](#)).

4.2 Culturally Responsive Education

The research findings indicate the strategy of addressing indigenous educational dropout through culturally responsive education. Culturally responsive education refers to educational experiences that support academic excellence, develop cultural identity, and enhance students' social and emotional well-being. Culturally responsive education is divided into two sub-themes: indigenous Education Curriculum and Collaborative and Inclusive Learning Environment. Interview findings revealed that indigenous students require curriculum adjustments that are culturally-oriented towards the indigenous practices. The indigenous education curriculum should also be based on the abilities and interests of indigenous students, influenced by their way of life and environment. Among the elements that need improvement in teaching are specific skills, especially those related to their livelihood practices. This was expressed by several participants as follows:

"In my opinion, indigenous schools cannot use the same curriculum as other schools. indigenous students are better suited to acquire skills. We have actually planned to submit a proposal regarding the skills that need to be imparted to indigenous students. These skills should align

with the interests of the indigenous and take into account their environment... For example, herbs like tongkat ali... how they are processed..., bamboo, for instance, can be used to make ladles. We invite experts from here to teach these skills. We cannot expect the indigenous to become like the Malay community; they have their own perspective... their culture is different. So, the curriculum needs to be different. When the curriculum does not align with their activities, for example, indigenous children go into the forest, enter oil palm plantations and collect fruits... at school, they learn formal subjects. This is why they skip school... they are not interested. They are interested in the forest, plants, and trees...."- SP

"...Like the curriculum, all learning activities need to be tailored to their needs and abilities. It should align with what they like, rather than forcing them to memorize something they may not even understand. It's not about anything else; we know they are in a conflict with their mother tongue that they practice. So, let it be in line with their existing practices"- CP

Furthermore, the sub-theme of creating a collaborative and inclusive learning environment is also an important aspect in implementing culturally responsive education. The indigenous school environment needs to be enhanced by creating spaces that reflect indigenous culture. Additionally, collaboration between schools and the indigenous community in creating a culturally rich learning environment needs to be initiated to attract the interest while creating the sense of belonging of the indigenous students to remain schooling. One participant expressed the following:

"In my opinion, the school environment needs to be adapted to the indigenous culture. How do we implement this culture? We must involve the indigenous community. The voice of the indigenous needs to be heard, and they should be welcomed to contribute ideas. Because, in their villages, they actually help each other and have great respect for their leader, Tok Batin. So, the school should wisely establish a relationship with the indigenous... so that they feel like the school belongs to them, not something imposed from outside. The school is built within the indigenous community, so they should feel that the school belongs to them". - SP

The findings are consistent with the study conducted by [Trumbull and Nelson-Barber \(2019\)](#), which investigated the education of indigenous people in the United States and found that the curriculum, teaching, and assessment for the education of indigenous students need to be developed in accordance with the knowledge, way of life, and environment practiced by their communities. [Rosliza Aznie et al. \(2017\)](#) stated that the education of the indigenous community is closely related to the environmental surroundings of their living spaces. The study conducted by [Wahab et al. \(2020\)](#) in designing the forest school framework found six elements of knowledge and expertise possessed by the indigenous community, namely music, herbs and medicine, crafts, hunting tools, and forestry. The learning environment for indigenous students should align with practices learned indirectly within the indigenous community. Meanwhile, parental support for the education of indigenous students needs to be enhanced so that parents, schools, and the indigenous community can work together ([Bang et al., 2019](#)).

4.3 Community-Based Education Recovery for Indigenous

The community also plays a crucial role in addressing indigenous educational dropout. Given the challenges faced, the empowerment of indigenous community education recovery needs to be strengthened so that education is not only confined to schools but also practiced within the community itself. The analysis results identified three sub-themes for indigenous community education recovery: community competency development, community education, and parental guidance. The first sub-theme, community competency development, means enhancing the community's abilities, particularly in the context of addressing indigenous educational dropout. Interview findings revealed that the capability of the indigenous community begins with the leadership of Tok Batin because the indigenous community greatly respects and obeys Tok Batin. However, Tok Batin needs to take active steps and have the ability to influence his community to obtain social involvement from all parties. This was expressed by a representative of the community participants as follows:

"I see one good thing about the indigenous community, they respect their Tok Batin as their leader. They just follow what Tok Batin plans, but in the context of education, it depends on Tok Batin's efforts to influence his followers. That's what I'm saying, there is power, but the influence is lacking. Maybe because education has not yet become a priority in the indigenous community here". - SP

"If possible, JAKOA and external agencies could collaborate to create a recovery program for the indigenous. The indigenous community wants to teach their children, but they themselves may not be proficient in reading and writing. Even in Malay, they may not be very fluent". - CP

The next finding pertains to the sub-theme of community education. Community education needs to be enhanced considering the low level of education in the indigenous community, with many still not proficient in the Malay language. The interview findings revealed that the practice of promoting education is not actively implemented. Based on observations conducted in several villages, there are efforts to create reading corners in the village community halls. However, the culture of reading is not actively practiced, and books are left neglected and not well-maintained. This indicates the need to establish a culture of learning and a conducive learning environment. Additionally, the interviews also highlighted the importance of education within the community so that children can be guided, and various educational activities can be carried out within the community. The statements are derived from the following interview excerpts:

"What I mean is that it takes time and consistency to build a relationship with the indigenous. Then, we want to gain their trust and confidence. All of this requires continuous effort so that they are clear about the direction of education. In my opinion, the culture of giving assistance should be changed to a culture of providing knowledge, so that they realize how important education is for future generations". - SP

"...there are still many indigenous who are not able to guide their children because they themselves don't know how to teach. So, in my

opinion, establish education within the community. This means expertise from various parties or the aforementioned collaboration, they contribute their efforts to teach... not just students, but teach all layers of society. Guide them so that they cultivate a culture of reading books, for example. Or there are many other educational activities that can be carried out in this community". - CP

In relation to community education, parental guidance is also identified as an element that needs to be enhanced because the study found that parenting skills among indigenous parents are low. This is due to a lack of knowledge about parenting and a lack of awareness among indigenous parents about the importance of education for their future. Although there are some young people from the Temiar tribe who have succeeded, their role and responsibility in guiding their children to continue their education is weak. This refers to the following statement:

"They need guidance, they need to know what they should do for their children. This includes awareness, motivation, and so on. The way to do this is through successful individuals from the Temiar tribe, regardless of whether they have become teachers, police officers, or any other profession". -CP

"Perhaps parents also need guidance from various parties so that they realize their important role for their children". - CP

Based on the findings above, the education of the indigenous community needs to be developed, and this is in line with the study by [Pacis and Vanwynberghe \(2020\)](#), which found that the role of the community in education needs to align with the implementation of education in schools. This includes planning teaching and learning in schools that should be supported by the local community to be in harmony with the culture and environment inhabited by the community ([Cebrian et al., 2021](#)). These findings are also supported by the study of [Ratcliffe and Boughton \(2019\)](#), which examined the relationship between low adult literacy levels and continuous alienation of the indigenous community in making decisions, especially regarding education. The study found that low levels of indigenous literacy pose a challenge for the community to engage in education, besides having to compete with the outside society that has better literacy skills.

4.4 Teacher Training and Professional Development

Teachers play a crucial role in influencing students' interest in completing their education. Enrollment records of teachers show that 100% of the teachers teaching in the studied indigenous schools come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds ([MOE, 2019](#)). Therefore, strategies to enhance teacher competence need to be implemented to address the challenges faced by teachers in dealing with indigenous students. This study has identified three sub-themes for teacher training and professional development: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The interview findings emphasize that knowledge about indigenous culture is crucial. Understanding the indigenous culture can strengthen the relationship between teachers and indigenous students by aligning with their way of life and thinking, thereby adapting their interests to the pedagogy practiced in the classroom. Engaging pedagogy can capture students' interest in continuing their education, subsequently enhancing their academic

performance according to their individual abilities. Here is an excerpt from a community participant in the interview:

"Teachers need to know... they need to understand... and be sensitive to indigenous culture. Only then can they get to know and be closer to the students. indigenous students are different from other students. Their values are shaped by their way of life and environment. So it's important for teachers to immerse themselves in the indigenous community. It's not just about teaching, but also about adapting to the environment and the indigenous students themselves". - CP

"Teachers who teach at indigenous schools, first and foremost, they need to have an interest in teaching indigenous students. How to develop that interest? They need to learn about their culture. Indigenous are unique. They're not the same as other students. When teachers understand the student's culture, they can tailor their teaching to the student's abilities and interests". - CP

In addition to cultural knowledge of the indigenous, this study also found that interpersonal skills in dealing with indigenous students are important for teachers to practice. The interview findings indicate that teachers need to enhance their interpersonal skills and master the students' native language to gain their trust, ultimately sparking the students' interest in continuing their secondary education. Tok Batin and parent representatives stated the following:

"to become a teacher in an indigenous school, one needs to have skills in... how to connect with the students, how to build a close relationship with them. In my opinion, teachers should learn a bit of our native language. Just a little, simple sentences. Eventually, as the teacher becomes more proficient, the students will feel comfortable and believe that the teacher understands and likes them. Then, the students will be happy to come to school. When they see the teacher, they'll be eager to learn their language". - CP

"As I mentioned earlier, in the past, one of the requirements to become an indigenous teacher was to master the indigenous language. So one of the strategies is that... the teacher who wants to teach must be able to speak the language, for example, here in Temiar language, they need to know Temiar. Then, the teacher who wants to teach must have a genuine interest in indigenous children. When there's interest, they will make an effort to get to know and accept indigenous as they are". - CP

Subsequently, the next sub-theme is the attitude of teachers who teach at indigenous schools. The findings of the study indicate that a positive attitude of teachers towards students is crucial. Since teachers deal with indigenous students from different cultures and languages, the way teachers think, behave, and emote will be a concern for students who are going through the process of adapting to a new environment. Therefore, it is important for teachers to understand and embrace the indigenous community, accept students as they are, and be prepared for any circumstances that may arise. A teacher who is from the Semai tribe of the indigenous expressed it as follows:

"...because teachers will be the focus of students' attention. Students will observe a teacher from various aspects, from their attire, the way they walk, the way they speak... everything. I've noticed that indigenous students, if they like a particular teacher, they will like them very much. But if they don't like them, it's a bit difficult because they have their own way of resisting. They don't openly rebel, but later on, they won't want to go to school because they don't like the teacher. That's why it's important for teachers to have the skills to handle indigenous children". - SP

The statement aligns with the study conducted by [Bishop and Vass \(2020\)](#) in the context of the professionalism of teachers and indigenous students. The study found that teachers need to be professional in the teaching process and in planning teaching and learning that is relevant to the knowledge and abilities of students. Meanwhile, [Baxter and Kilderry \(2021\)](#) examined the practices of engagement between teachers in three primary schools in Melbourne, Australia, with parents in low socioeconomic environments who practice different cultures and languages. The focus of this qualitative study is on the approaches taken by teachers to involve parents in learning at school and the guidance provided to parents so that learning can continue at home. The findings indicate that the efforts of teachers to enhance parental engagement require different approaches, especially in terms of using language during interactions, conducting activities that are relevant to parents' knowledge, and building friendly relationships with parents and students.

5. Conclusion

Overall, addressing the issue of indigenous educational dropout requires serious attention and involvement from various parties to ensure that goals, directions, and efforts are aligned with the plans set by both schools and the indigenous community. Additionally, to improve indigenous students' attendance in school and secondary education completion, culturally responsive education must be established to celebrate the culture of the community. The study also concludes that teachers play a crucial role and exert great effort to ensure that students are able to engage effectively in learning. Concurrently educating the community is important because they are parents and such education would enable them to be involved and engaged in educating their children too. Therefore, the expertise of teachers teaching in indigenous schools needs to be strengthened through training and professional development to ensure that teachers are sensitive and attentive to the culture and needs of this community. Furthermore, addressing the educational dropout of indigenous necessitates the revitalization of indigenous community education, which is still perceived to be lacking and affecting the interest of children in continuing their education. Despite the monetary funding and aid, there is a consideration needed by The Ministry of Education to look into the syllabus and curriculum for the indigenous community whether there is a requirement for specially developed curriculum to enable the indigenous to be able to fit in and excel in secondary education because of the notable lacking and needs from studies conducted as findings are parallel to this study. For future study, there is a need for similar study to be conducted to other indigenous community in other states of Malaysia.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of University Technology Malaysia (RECUTM). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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