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Reflections on Pedagogical and Curriculum Implementation at Orang Asli Schools in Pahang

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to reflect on curriculum and education process that occur at the Orang Asli primary schools. This case study was carried out to decipher the voices of the teachers regarding the quality of their pedagogical approaches and the curriculum content for the indigenous pupils. Interviews and observations were conducted to obtain qualitative data from the teachers. The main theme emerged from the study is the indigenous pedagogy frequently narrated as the panacea in teaching indigenous pupils. The key finding shows that the pedagogical practice and curriculum content for indigenous need to be overhauled and improved.

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1. Introduction

Orang Asli or the ‘original people’ were the earliest aborigines who settled in the thick Malaya rain forest. Archaeological records from Eastern and Northern Peninsular showed that Orang Asli ancestors have inhabited the Malay peninsula since the 8th century BC (Abdul Razaq Ahmad & Zalizan Mohd Jelas, 2009). Present day Orang Asli comprised at least eighteen linguistically and culturally distinct tribes (Ramlee, 2013).

Ethnographers have classified the Orang Asli into three major groups: Proto-Malay, Senoi, and Negrito (Lin, 2008). Proto-Malay group was considered relatively more assimilated and “modern” as compared to the Negrito who lived

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in the deep forest and perceived as the most primitive. Proto-Malays can be found mainly in Pahang, Johor, Negeri Sembilan and Selangor. The Senoi are predominantly residing in Perak and Pahang and the Negritos settled in Kelantan, Perak and Pahang (Ramlee, 2013).

For after secondary school education, 408 Orang Asli students have successfully continued to public higher education level throughout the nation in 2011, and 469 in 2012 to 223 took Bachelor's Degree, Diploma (n = 18), pre-diploma (n = 6) and matriculation (n = 19). A program called 'Let's Go To University' was also introduced to increase the number of Orang Asli students entering into higher education. The program was organized by the Ministry of Education (MOE). It was attended by Orang Asli's post SPM and STPM students who are still uncertain about the direction of their education together with no internet access facilities to obtain information in their village. In 2011, there were 514 participants who went to this program and the numbers were increased to 600 students in 2012 (JAKOA 2012).

As a modern development take place, Orang Asli who once a nomad dispersed throughout the peninsula were pushed backed into the deep jungle as the mainstream population flourished and invaded their spaces and ancestral lands. Marginalization of Orang Asli is notable in the literature since they live on the fringes of the Malaysian society – poorly educated, subsidy-dependent, earning a meager living, and have a shorter live span (Siwar & Chamuri, 2007). Average Malaysians live for 73 years as compared to Orang Asli's median life span of 53 years old (Rusaslina, 2010). In the nutshell, Malaysia's development that disregards the cultural habits of aboriginal peoples may inhibit the government's effort to enhance the well-being of the natives. To enhance their standard of living, Orang Asli community must be given the opportunity to participate in decision-making regarding their life and future. In 2011, the population of Orang Asli in Malaysia is 178,197 (JAKOA, 2011) which represents only about 0.6 percent of the total Malaysia population. Orang Asli Education Transformation Program under the Education Development Plan from 2013 to 2015 was introduced to boost the quality of education of Orang Asli students along with an effort to provide a complete education landscape in their settlements. This is to ensure that nobody was left behind, including the children of the Orang Asli. The current conventional curriculum and pedagogy may not be appropriate for the indigenous pupils (Abdul Razaq & Zalizan, 2009; Ramlee, 2013).

2. Problem Statements

Among the studies that strongly emphasised the use of pedagogical aspects that reflect indigenous epistemology in the classroom include Battise (2000, 2002), Cajete (1994, 2000), Doige (2001, 2003) and McLeod (2003). In Malaysia, a study by Amir Hassan (2006) found that a highly competence teacher may produce students with high level of achievement. In addition, teachers should be trained on how to enhance the motivation, confidence and the self-esteem of their students, especially from the minority groups. In dealing with indigenous pupils, non-Orang Asli teachers should be trained to use indigenous pedagogy in their classroom. However, most non-indigenous teachers lack the knowledge about indigenous culture thus causes less interaction and uneasiness between the non-indigenous teachers and their aboriginal students (Bishop, 2008; Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Salter, 2000a; Ramlee et al., 2009; Ramle & Hood, 2007). Almost all teachers who are placed in Orang Asli's schools are not formally trained to handle and teach Orang Asli students (Ramlee et al., 2009).

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in this study was based on a model of education developed for the indigenous people of New Zealand (Maori) that is known as GPILSEO model (Bishop & Sullivans, 2005). The model comprised seven elements; Goal, Pedagogy, Institution, Leadership, Spread, Evidence and Ownership. Due to the limited space in this article, the discussion will focus only on the pedagogical element of the GPILSEO model. The pedagogical aspect was believed to have a high correlation with the students' academic performance. Bishop (2008) suggested that teachers and schools should have a clear understanding, especially in terms of theories and principles of pedagogy to make teaching more effective. A relevant teaching method that suits the interests and needs of Orang Asli students is an important aspect as well as a new innovation that could used by teachers to enhance the interest of Orang Asli students towards school work. Figure 1. shows the conceptual framework of the study.

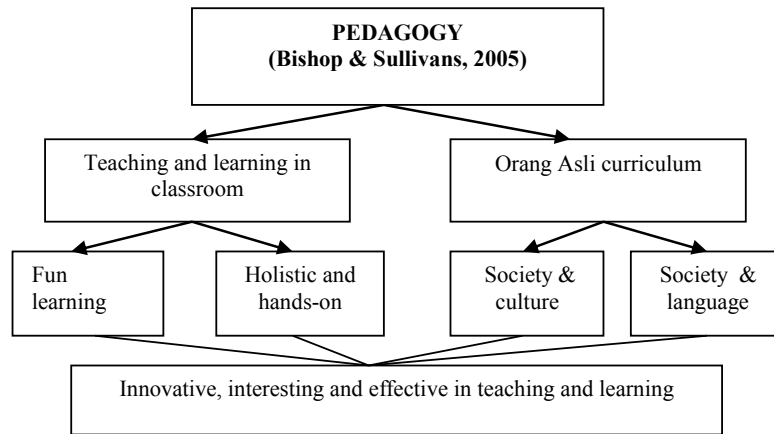


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the study

4. Research Methodology

This research used a case study method. This design was selected based on the need to understand deeply and to obtain a clearer picture (Marohaini, 2004) regarding the critical aspects of the Orang Asli schooling; curriculum and pedagogy. Hence, this study involved in-depth face to face interviews with four selected teachers aged 30 to 45 years. To maintain anonymity, participants were coded as G1, G2, G3, and G4. The selection of participants was done by using purposive sampling method from two Orang Asli schools. By using the snowball technique, one respondent suggested the other individual whom he or she believed could contribute to the study. In order to understand the perspectives of the participants the interview protocols (Marohaini, 2004) were used in the form of semi-structured questions. The protocols were developed through an intensive review of literature guided by the posited research questions. The respondents were also selected based on pre-specified criteria such as teaching experience (more than five years), knowledgeable and informed in school pedagogy and curriculum.

5. Findings and Discussions

Based on the interview and observation data, the discussion focused on four themes: i) fun teaching learning, ii) holistic and hands-on teaching and learning, iii) favourite subjects, and iv) the usage of language and society culture in classroom.

5.1 Fun Teaching Learning

Based on the interviews with the participants, the results show that all respondents who teach Orang Asli students stated that in order to attract Orang Asli students to immerse in the teaching and learning, they need to diversify the existing approach. Among the approaches suggested by the respondents is fun teaching and learning approach for students. This approach encourages students to take part in the teaching and learning process. The activities were carried out by the students with the guidance of the teachers. This would make students feel good and interested in participating in the various activities. Visual teaching such as watching television, picture cards and on-line resources seems to be able to attract and enhance the quality of learning as well as to increase excitement among the students. This was stated by a respondent (G1): *"I'm a visual learner, after watching the process then only I will understand. Well, I did feel Orang Asli pupils are very suitable for visual approaches such as watching television, observe picture cards, and on-line through the computer. This was easier for Orang Asli pupils as compared to asking them to sit, read and learn ..."*(G1).

The result also found that the use of teaching aids such as visual aids, music and attractive illustrations not only focusing on the delivery of information and knowledge alone, but also providing more opportunities for Orang Asli students to be actively involved in the teaching and learning. This finding is supported by the observation that shows Orang Asli students were seen very active and having fun when pursuing learning activities conducted in the school library. Creativity in classroom is also emphasized by Mohd Yusof et al. (2008) that the teachers should be more creative and innovative so that the lessons are always relevant and appropriate to the time and context such as to incorporate the elements of music and singing. As stated by the respondent (G1): *"Most of Orang Asli pupils are inclined towards music. If it's the music session, they are very happy. Orang Asli pupils love to sing. So if you want to teach, you have to insert or include singing event so they do not get bored...30 minutes of teaching, requests to sing, then back to teaching, do a little work then sing ..."* (G1). However, according to studies conducted by Grant and Gillespie (1993) stated that the aim of visual teaching is to improve the oral teaching rather than to replace existing teaching methods. Thus, the pedagogy could be optimized by the use of various techniques to attract Orang Asli pupils in learning.

5.2 Holistic and hands-on teaching and learning

Based on the researchers' interviews with the participants, respondent G1 was using teaching and learning methods that linked to the holistic teaching approach with Orang Asli pupils. Through the observation, one respondent (G1) was seen to use materials that can easily be found around the Orang Asli community such as leaves, wood, stone and so on. Here is the statement made by respondent G1: *"...when you teach Orang Asli pupils, you do not need to use sophisticated teaching equipment. Just use the materials that can be found near the school. If Year One pupils, I ordered them to bring rubber seeds to learn how to count in Math class. Each student brings 10 pieces. Then start teaching them counting 1 to 10 using the rubber seeds..."* (G1).

Besides using materials that can be found around the school, the respondent (G2) also asked Orang Asli pupils to make crafts commonly used for daily life such as weaving, painting and handcraft. Teaching the students using a holistic approach by relating the world of indigenous with the school environment, it would make learning more interesting and effective (Klug & Whitfield, 2003). Orang Asli pupils found that it was fun and exciting to participate in this teaching and learning process and at the same time they could produce a creative handworks. As respondent G2 stated: *"...teaching hands-on skills to Orang Asli students make them happy and keen to learn. Orang Asli pupils are very interested when we asked them to do work involving handmade crafts like paintings and sculpturing..."* (G2). Exposing Orang Asli students to novel environment would provide a new experience and knowledge. Teaching and learning methods used by the teachers in this study are in line with Cleary and Peacock (1998) opinion who stated the holistic approach used in the classroom as integrated learning experiential, hands-on skills and tour study (field trips) could bring indigenous students out of their cocoon and see things from different perspectives.

5.3 Favourite Subjects

Interviews with the respondents show, many Orang Asli pupils were interested in subjects that do not require the use of high cognitive level such as Art Education, Physical Education, Music and Life Skills especially for students who are relatively weak in academics. This is because in this subject, Orang Asli students do not have to use high level of cognitive abilities but more to psychomotor skills. Orang Asli pupils were also interested in the extra-curricular activities. One of the respondents (G3) commented: *"Usually if there is physical education classes then the attendance will be full. They will excitedly asking me what the activity is early in the morning..."* (G3). Through observation in classroom, Orang Asli students do not like to sit still in one place for a long time. The longest time shown was 30 minutes.

According to one teacher (G3), Orang Asli pupils were interested in subjects such as Music Education, Arts, Physical Education (PE) and Life Skills. In these subjects, the approach used was more hands-on compared to the other subjects such as English, Malay, Science and Mathematics. This were expressed by respondents G1 and G2: *"... my students love when PE because they can play football. The day when they have PE classes, the attendance usually full..."* (G3). Nevertheless, the research also found that Orang Asli pupils were also interested in learning of other subjects such as Malay, English, Mathematics and Science if they like and were comfortable with teachers who

taught these subjects. As one of the respondents (G3) explained: *"A student also assessed the teachers who taught them as well. If they like the teacher then they are willing to learn. Like in my class, the students like the BM classes and Math. Especially if teachers are nice and not stern ..."* (G3).

5.4 The usage of language and society culture in classroom

This study also found that Orang Asli pupils have difficulty to understand what is delivered by teachers because some of them have not master the intermediary language which is Malay language in school. Orang Asli society has their own tribal language. Apart from the students, teachers also found it was difficult to explain some terms to Orang Asli students to make them understand. Communication problems due to differences of language were also agreed by Garcia (2006) stating the problem can cause a bigger problem which make the students feel isolated, unhappy and unsuccessful in education. This was stated by one (G3) of the respondents: *"It is hard for some of the students to understand what we teach because at home they speak Semaq Beri not Malay language. I also could not understand what they are saying, especially students in level one. If level two students they usually can speak Malay..."* (G3).

The use of native languages and cultures of indigenous society in the classroom teaching have shown strong evidence that students were able to get good results in academic education, reducing dropout rates, improving school attendance percentages, reduce clinical symptoms and improve the behaviours of students (Smith, Leake, & Kamekona, 1998; Stiles, 1997; Yagi, 1985). However, the observation results found that this does not happen in the classroom. Teachers admit that students were having a major problem due to the use of the Malay and English for Orang Asli students. This was stated by a respondent (G1): *"I think their main problem is language. I learned a little bit, but it's difficult to remember but students like it when I talk in their language. Then they were eager to teach me (laughs). When I teach comprehension, I gave the picture to students, under the picture I wrote the words..."* (G1).

In addition, this study found that teachers were not able to include the elements of language and culture in the teaching because they do not have adequate knowledge and skills in integrating these two aspects of their teaching. This was stated by the respondent (G2): *"I've long taught this Orang Asli school but still cannot speak their language. When I was in college, we never learned about the Orang Asli ..."* (G2). The study also found that student's cultural environment was relevant to effective pedagogy as what is learned by students in the classroom could be linked to the cultural experience of the students. For example, indigenous students prefer to be placed in an environment similar to the culture and environment of their homes (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). The findings and the observations of the teachers who taught Orang Asli pupils could not identify lessons to be served by the existing experience and knowledge of Orang Asli students. This was expressed by one of the teachers (G1): *"When I teach new things, such as, related to the sea, for instance, waves, beach, boat... It is difficult for Orang Asli pupils to understand because they never see the sea (laughs) ... but when I asked about their experiences in the wild, they could tell non-stop..."* (G1). This is because Orang Asli pupils cannot remember things which are strange and never seen by them. The findings were in line with the findings by Alton-Lee (2006) that specifies the time in the classroom is wasted because the instruction imparted does not match the memory capacity of students.

In sum, the use of elements of language and culture in teaching and learning do attract Orang Asli pupils to continue schooling and at the same time the teacher could interact more effectively with their parents to broaden their minds about the importance of education. This is because the school activities that consist of indigenous knowledge and the use of tribal language plays a dominant role and has a positive influence on the academic achievement of indigenous students (Slaughter & Lai, 1994). Failure to understand the culture and the psyche of the indigenous people may be detrimental to the schooling system. They argued that it could be minimised if the teachers are able to master the knowledge and skills needed to integrate the indigenous norms and culture in the classroom (Tippeconnic, 2000; Agbo, 2001).

6. Implications of the study

This study found that Orang Asli pupils were interested to immerse in the teaching and learning in classrooms if the teachers could diversify teaching methods to be more fun and meaningful. The findings were consistent with the findings by Amir Hassan (2006) which states that teachers with high competence in teaching, produce high levels of

students' achievement. In terms of strategy and organization in the classroom, the teachers who are excellent in managing the classroom and able to adapt their teaching strategies could attract the indigenous students to learn. One of the aspects neglected by most of the teachers is implementing indigenous pedagogy in the cultural context of the Orang Asli. According to Little Soldier (1988), informal learning in the classroom with cultural element activities and teamwork would improve student achievement in education. Teacher-centered teaching mode or "teacher-centered direct instruction approach" used in many classrooms often fail to meet the needs of indigenous students (Cleary & Peacock, 1998).

Orang Asli pupils were known for their shyness thus, it may be difficult for teachers to obtain responses from the students especially if they did not understand the questions. Nevertheless, indigenous pupils may respond if the teacher asked questions related to the context of their cultural background (McCarty et al., 1991). Urgently, the pedagogical practise of the teachers in indigenous schools must be resolved immediately. The need for special courses for these teachers in indigenous pedagogy should be provided in teacher training institutions (IPGM) and universities. These institutions should also need to equip prospective teachers with knowledge about indigenous curriculum and pedagogy so that they are ready to be placed in an Orang Asli school. In addition, teachers whom were placed in Orang Asli schools should be given professional training from time to time about indigenous pedagogy through further courses, workshops or seminars. Hopefully, through this transformation, the teachers will be more resourceful and able to teach indigenous children more effectively.

This study contributed in terms of the curricular and pedagogical aspects that are relevant to the interests and abilities of Orang Asli students, especially in primary school. The findings may assist those who involved in the designing the curriculum for indigenous students to consider the critical elements that should be included in the syllabus. Some of the elements include history, cultural traditions, music, folk stories, flora and fauna, and languages. The findings are also expected to provide input on teachers' professional training in Orang Asli schools. According to Sharipah and Samsilah (2009), the teachers who are sent to teach in rural areas will be better prepared if they are well trained and able to improvise the teaching methods in the classroom. Previous studies have shown the importance of Orang Asli culture in teaching the indigenous children because the students can relate to the learning in a similar situation with the home environment and their lives, especially in the areas of language, Science and Mathematics. Besides that, the use of the mother tongue in learning has been found to improve performance in education because it is easier for them to understand the new terms that are foreign to them.

In conclusion, this study has identified the weaknesses of the teaching practice among non-indigenous teachers teaching the Orang Asli pupils in selected primary schools in Pahang. The supportive factors that emerged from this study include teachers have to use fun learning, employ holistic hands-on approach, provide incentives and rewards, and capitalise on the students' culture and language. In other words, a new innovation in pedagogy and curricular activities should be implemented in Orang Asli schools. To achieve the objectives of the new pedagogical approach and curriculum, new training programme for the teachers need to be devised. Overall, the main finding from this research shows that the pedagogical practise and curriculum content in Orang Asli schools should be re-examined. The study suggests that indigenous pedagogy and indigenous-friendly curriculum to be implemented in aboriginal schools in Malaysia.

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