

Voices from the Ground: Towards Strength-Based and Culturally Responsive Education for Orang Asli Children

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Executive Summary

Voices from the Ground is a participatory research initiative led by the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), aimed at addressing the educational challenges faced by the Orang Asli, the Indigenous communities of Peninsular Malaysia. Historically, the Orang Asli have been excluded from decision-making processes affecting their education, leading to policies and programs that often fail to meet their needs. This project seeks to amplify the voices of Orang Asli communities, teachers, and civil society organizations (CSOs) to inform more inclusive and effective educational policies and practices.

The project focuses on three key agendas. First, it emphasizes building trust by strengthening partnerships between Orang Asli communities, schools, and government agencies such as Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (Department of Orang Asli Development [JAKOA]). Second, it aims to foster strength-based discourse, shifting from a deficit-based narrative to one that celebrates Orang Asli strengths and cultural heritage. Lastly, it focuses on addressing underlying challenges such as poverty, cultural misunderstandings, and lack of access to resources that hinder educational success.

The research employed Indigenous methodologies, including photovoice and sharing circles, to ensure the active participation of Orang Asli communities. These methods allowed students, parents, and teachers to share their experiences, challenges, and aspirations in culturally resonant ways. The project focused on three schools in Kelantan, a state with high dropout rates among Orang Asli students, and engaged stakeholders through consultations, workshops, and collaborative activities.

Key findings from the project highlight the importance of building trust between Orang Asli parents, schools, and JAKOA. Parents expressed a desire for deeper engagement with teachers, while teachers highlighted the challenges of communicating with parents due to geographical and cultural barriers. Both groups emphasized the importance of JAKOA playing a more active role in bridging these gaps. The research also emphasized the value of celebrating strengths, showcasing the talents and aspirations of Orang Asli students, particularly in areas like carpentry, agriculture, and the arts. Teachers and parents advocated for a more skill-based, experiential learning approach that integrates Orang Asli culture and knowledge into the curriculum. Additionally, the study explored underlying challenges such as poverty, lack of access to clean water, and social exclusion, which significantly impact Orang Asli students' educational outcomes. Teachers noted the need for greater cultural understanding and sensitivity, while parents highlighted the economic pressures that force children to leave school early.

Based on these findings, several recommendations were made. Educational programs should incorporate Indigenous pedagogies, moving beyond traditional academic metrics to embrace culturally responsive, experiential learning that celebrates Orang Asli strengths and talents. It is also essential to strengthen multi-stakeholder partnerships, promoting collaboration between schools, JAKOA, and Orang Asli communities to create sustainable and effective educational interventions. Building trust through engagement

is crucial, with schools and teachers encouraged to engage more deeply with Orang Asli communities through home visits, cultural exchanges, and accessible communication tools like WhatsApp. Lastly, policymakers and program implementers must address systemic challenges, tackling the root causes of educational disparities such as poverty and infrastructure gaps, while ensuring that interventions are culturally sensitive and community-driven.

Voices from the Ground accentuates the importance of centering Orang Asli voices in the design and implementation of educational policies and programs. By cultivating trust, celebrating strengths, and addressing systemic challenges, this project aims to create a more inclusive and equitable education system for Orang Asli students. The findings and recommendations provide a roadmap for policymakers, educators, and community leaders to work in unison towards empowering Orang Asli communities and ensuring their children's educational success.

Introduction

Voices from the Ground aims to provide insight shared by the Indigenous communities of Peninsular Malaysia, the Orang Asli, and the communities involved in Orang Asli education when it comes to informing decisions to implement recommendations pertaining to Orang Asli education. Oftentimes, the Orang Asli would be the last to know of any programmes or policies affecting them as they are not included as consultants or decision-makers (Nicholas et al., 2010). Through this project, IDEAS hopes to introduce participatory applied research that includes meaningful participation of Orang Asli members by listening to voices from the ground¹.

Led by Dr. Suria Selasih Angit of the Temiar community, the current publication builds on policy recommendations outlined in a prior IDEAS publication (Wan, 2020; Wan & Idrus, 2021). A summary of these recommendations are outlined below in Table 1, in which it was initially aimed to create opportunities for recommendations 1, 2, 6, 7, 10 and 11.

Table 1: Summary of the 12 policy recommendations from Contextualising Education Policy to Empower Orang Asli Children (Wan, 2020)

1. There must be a greater focus on learning and addressing underlying challenges instead of symptomatic issues.
2. Indigenous cultures and histories must be integrated into the mainstream curriculum.
3. Existing programmes must be monitored and evaluated to ensure their efficient and effective delivery and implementation.
4. Teachers and school leaders, who are equipped and capable of delivering quality education for Orang Asli students, need to be entrusted with greater autonomy and balanced accountability.
5. Teachers should receive pre-posting training on Orang Asli cultures, and infrastructure and resources for teachers in Orang Asli schools should be improved.
6. Teachers should receive training in innovative and adaptive pedagogies, and platforms for knowledge sharing should be established.
7. Trust and collaboration between schools and Orang Asli communities need to be built, as Orang Asli parents (and by extension, their communities) are important partners in education.
8. PDKs need to be recognised as part of the support system for schools, and essential resources should be provided to them.
9. High-quality preschool education should be provided, focusing on learning through play, social interaction, and the educational environment of the students.
10. Orang Asli communities should be empowered to act as agents of change and actively participate in the development of Orang Asli-related policies.

¹ Voices from the Ground is part of the Inclusive Education for Orang Asli Children, a project by IDEAS to convene and equip civil society partners championing Orang Asli education programmes, with the aim of eventually developing a network of organisations involved in this project. The project also pilots education programmes that are adapted to the culture of Orang Asli students.

11. A positive or strength-based discourse should be fostered to shift away from the deficit discourse on Orang Asli.
12. The collaboration among relevant ministries must be strengthened to address the multidimensional challenges faced by Orang Asli children and communities.

Through *Voices from the Ground*, we pilot a form of applied research to reflect on creating an adaptive and inclusive learning environment for Orang Asli students, supported by insights from teachers and civil society organizations (CSOs) working closely with the Orang Asli children. We hope that through this experience, future programme implementation can be guided and derived from the voices of those with lived experiences when it comes to facing challenges in the present education system. We also hope this publication will encourage policymakers and programme implementers to meaningfully engage with the Orang Asli community through each step of policy or programme development and implementation.

Building on these foundational insights, this report highlights the importance of incorporating findings into practical, ground-level interventions, addressing the unique challenges faced by Orang Asli students, and for IDEAS to move towards an implementation phase that integrates the community's aspirations and strengths. As such, we aim to inform not only policy but also the execution of educational initiatives in a way that recognizes the aspirations, strengths and needs of the Orang Asli communities. The publication begins with an overview of the present paper in relation to the wider issue of translating policy into practice, followed by a review of the literature on appropriate research practices rooted in Indigenous methodologies, and then an overview of the methods that were utilised, before the findings were outlined. The paper concludes with a discussion based on the findings and recommendations that were derived based on the findings.

Voices from the Ground: An Overview

Voices from the Ground was centred on creating platforms for dialogue, collaboration, and knowledge-sharing regarding Orang Asli education, acting as a prelude for IDEAS' journey in identifying ways to design educational programmes that cater specifically to the needs of Orang Asli students at participating schools, with collaboration from our network of partners. By engaging with the voices of the community, we sought to uncover the unique challenges and aspirations that would inform the development of more effective educational solutions.

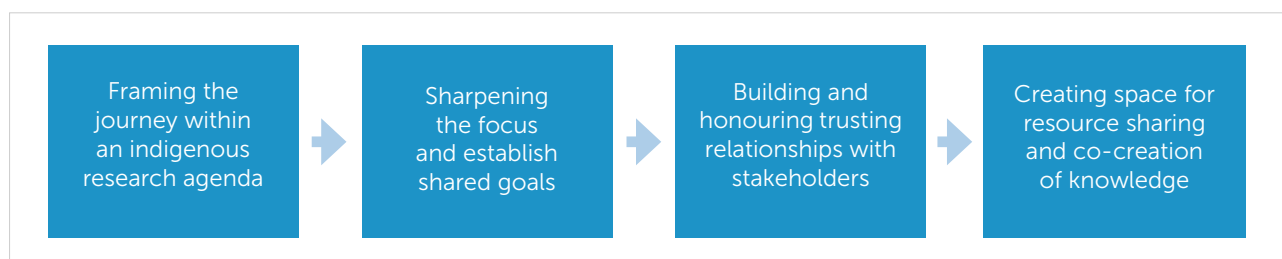
Considerable research done on Orang Asli education has highlighted the barriers and lack of access faced by Orang Asli children, particularly as a marginalised group (Abdullah et al., 2013; Renganathan, 2016, 2021; Wong & Abdillah, 2018). A substantial body of research has outlined the culture and values disparities in instructional approaches between teachers and Orang Asli students. The rigidity of mainstream curriculum has also compelled Orang Asli students to assimilate and adopt a new persona, prioritising

academic achievement and often requiring the abandonment of their traditional cultural norms and behaviours (Othman, 2022). The systematic exclusion of Orang Asli knowledge and culture has set a precedent wherein their societal value is undermined, resulting in low self-esteem among Orang Asli students, bullying and mistrust between Orang Asli and non-Orang Asli students, and their disinterest in education, contributing to high drop-out rates (Nordin et al., 2020).

In response to these challenges, the current paper emphasizes the active involvement of Orang Asli communities in designing educational solutions. Building on critiques of the educational system's failure to integrate Orang Asli culture, this approach aligns with Indigenous-led research frameworks, inspired by both global and local Indigenous scholars, who advocate for the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in research and decision-making. The project integrates participatory methodologies, such as photovoice and sharing circles, to ensure that Orang Asli voices remain central, encouraging a collaborative and culturally responsive approach to education. This methodology challenges historical exclusion and promotes self-determination.

In line with these goals, our project journey is structured around four key stages, each aimed at addressing these issues and improving educational outcomes for Orang Asli students:

Figure 1: Our Journey in this Project



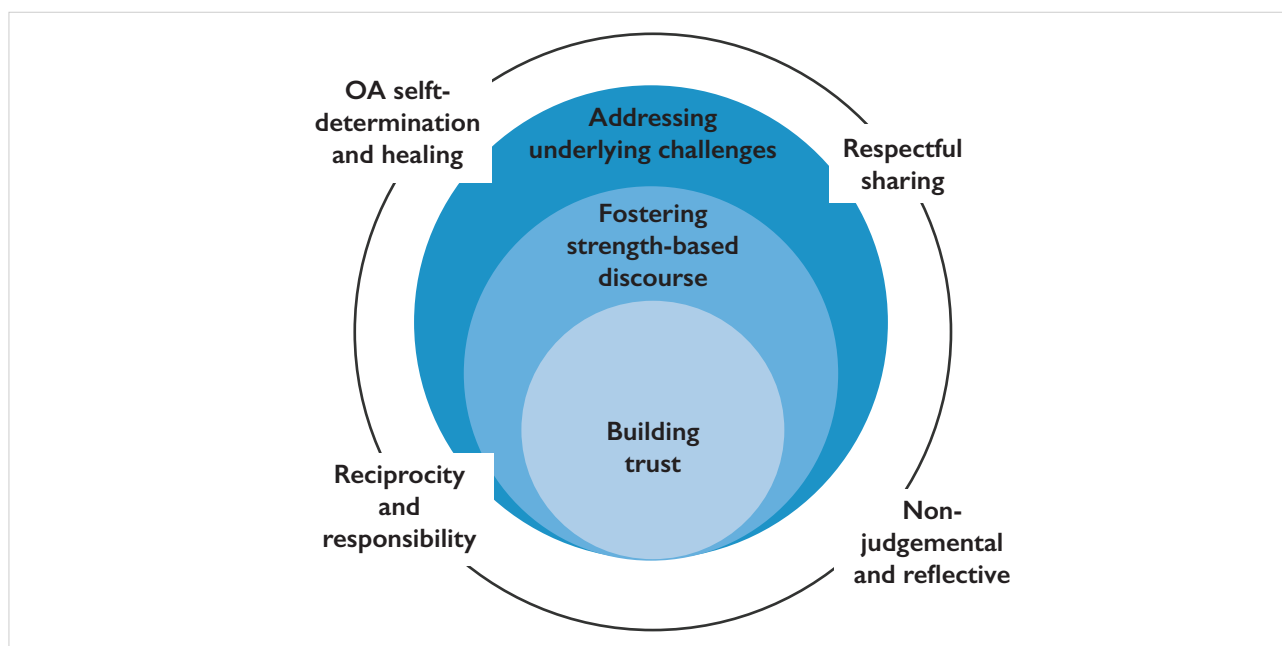
Aligning Present Project with Indigenous Aspirations

A key decision made was to align our framework with the aspirations of the Orang Asli. Given the lack of established local frameworks, inspiration was drawn from global Indigenous wisdom and scholarship such as from the works of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021), Michael Hart (2010), and Bagele Chilisa (2012). These scholars emphasize the importance of Indigenous-led research that respects and incorporates Indigenous worldviews. Tuhiwai Smith's (2021) book advocates for empowering Indigenous communities to shape research that serves their needs. Similarly, Hart (2010) asserts the importance of developing an Indigenous research paradigm that centers the knowledge and perspectives of Indigenous people. Chilisa (2012) on the other hand, reimagines the researcher as a transformative healer, collaborating with Indigenous communities as co-researchers to create a more participatory and impactful research process. Drawing from these perspectives, our framework seeks to address the exclusion of the Orang Asli from

policy-making by ensuring their active involvement in research and the co-creation of solutions that reflect their values and aspirations.

On the local front, works by the current project’s lead researcher Suria Angit (2020) and Colin Nicholas (2022) of Center for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC) have also been instrumental in guiding us. Given the extensive literature on Indigenous research methods based on Indigenous communities in other countries that may not be relevant for the local context, these scholars’ works provide more applicable insights on the lived realities of the Orang Asli in Malaysia. Suria Angit is an Orang Asli academician within the education field who has been vocal in advocating for better practices within the Malaysian education system to center the Orang Asli students’ needs. Meanwhile, COAC’s advocacy work with the Orang Asli spans over three decades whereby their efforts include raising awareness of Orang Asli issues and supporting legal cases related to their rights. Weaving insights from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars together, the following framework outlines our main research agenda and the key principles guiding our overall project journey:

Figure 2: Main Research Agendas and Guiding Principles



As illustrated in the diagram above, the framework is centred around three main agendas we aim to achieve in accordance with Policy Recommendations 1, 7, and 11 that were reported in IDEAS’ previous publications (Wan, 2020; Wan & Idrus, 2021):

1. **Building trust:** Trust and collaboration between Orang Asli communities and other stakeholders need to be built in a more intentional and meaningful way, as Orang Asli parents (and by extension, their communities) are important partners in education .
2. **Fostering strength-based discourse:** A positive or strength-based discourse should be

advocated to shift away from the deficit discourse on Orang Asli.

3. Addressing underlying challenges: There must be a greater focus on learning and addressing underlying challenges instead of symptomatic issues.

Specifically, these agendas are guided by interconnected principles reflecting universal Indigenous values which are:

- Respectful sharing
- Non-judgmental and reflective
- Reciprocity and responsibility
- (Orang Asli) self-determination and healing

It is worth noting that the guiding principles outlined above are also intertwined with the values upheld by many global Indigenous communities (Bagele Chilisa, 2012; Hart, 2010; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). Moreover, in our efforts to establish trust and build relationships with key stakeholders, particularly with the participating Orang Asli communities, we recognise the significance of the 'sense of place'—the profound connection to the land upheld by Orang Asli communities and other Indigenous groups globally (Kovach, 2021; Marques et al., 2020; Masron et al., 2013; Nicholas, 2022; Smith, 2021). For example, Masron and colleagues (2013) highlighted the cultural and spiritual values attached by the Orang Asli to their land. Our commitment to immersing ourselves physically in the settings as much as possible within the available means and resources reflects our intention to pave the way for the integration of more Indigenous worldviews and knowledge into possible future programmes. This aligns with the broader goals of Indigenous research methodologies, which emphasize community involvement and self-determination, ensuring that Orang Asli voices are not only heard but central in shaping the research process.

Incorporation of Indigenous Research Methodologies and Participatory Approaches

For many Indigenous communities, research practices especially when conducted by non-Indigenous individuals bring forth negative connotations, due to largely exploitative and extractive practices in which Indigenous communities are merely used to be studied on in harmful research practices (Burnette et al., 2011; Russell-Mundine, 2012). Castellano (2004) narrated the frustration voiced out in a session involving over 80 Indigenous individuals involved in research including as academics, lawyers, graduate students, project staff and consultants, community leaders of their communities of being "researched to death" as research practices carried out were often misguided and do not consider self-determination of the communities themselves.

It is acknowledged that the mentioned literature is centred to Indigenous communities in Western countries, and may not be representative of the Orang Asli experiences in Malaysia. However, the frustration by Indigenous communities over self-determination is a concern shared by the Orang Asli in Malaysia. In Lye's (2011) essay on the history of Orang Asli studies, which spans from colonial-era reports to more contemporary analyses, the author highlights the persistent neglect of Orang Asli agency in earlier research, much of which was shaped by an imperialist perspective. Lye also points out that despite an increase in research conducted by non-Orang Asli scholars, there is still insufficient effort to engage with sources in Orang Asli languages or perspectives, which limits the depth and accuracy of the findings.

This lack of engagement with Indigenous voices and knowledge systems mirrors a key issue highlighted by Renganathan (2021), who analyses research publications concerning the education of the Orang Asli community. Renganathan's study identifies two main perceptions in existing research, one that attributes the educational challenges of the Orang Asli to the communities themselves, and another that frames the cultural differences between the Orang Asli and the majority culture as incompatible with formal education. These findings emphasise the need for future research to better frame issues surrounding Orang Asli education, incorporating their perspectives to ensure more accurate and supportive outcomes. Therefore, it is essential for contemporary research to actively incorporate the Orang Asli's perspectives, languages, and cultural knowledge. In alignment with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007), the current project aspires to ensure the Orang Asli communities' interests and involvement in determining the project direction are integrated through the usage of Indigenous research methodologies.

Indigenous research methodologies challenge traditional Western-centric practices, by emphasising the importance of community, culture, and traditional knowledge in research processes. As noted by Williams and Shipley (2023), culturally inappropriate data collection and analysis undermines the need for research to be conducted "by, with, and for" these communities. Indigenous research methods prioritise principles such as respect and reciprocity, ensuring that research is in alignment with Indigenous worldviews and cultural protocols. However, challenges persist, particularly as Indigenous researchers navigate the expectations of Western academic standards while striving to maintain their cultural identity (Silan & Munkejord, 2023). Advancing Indigenous research methods thus requires an ongoing commitment to decolonization and the active involvement of the Orang Asli in defining and directing research processes that impact their lives. This is especially so when Indigenous communities, including the Orang Asli, have often been subjects of research rather than active participants, resulting in narratives that reinforce deficits and stereotypes (Drawson et al., 2017). One such process of inclusion is through participatory research methods.

Participatory research emphasises the importance of collaboration and shared decision-making between researchers and communities, particularly in contexts involving Indigenous peoples. This method challenges traditional power dynamics by actively involving community members as co-researchers rather than passive subjects (Nadeau

et al., 2022). Unfortunately, many forms of research fall short, with tokenistic involvement where community voices are merely heard but have no impact on outcomes. In contrast, community-based participatory research prioritises the needs of those directly affected by the issues studied, cultivating partnerships that centre community expertise and ensure that decisions are made collaboratively (Drawson et al., 2017), including that of the Orang Asli. This approach not only respects Indigenous knowledge systems but also aims to address historical imbalances by valuing the lived experiences of community members (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). A key feature of community-based participatory research is the need for sustained trust and long-term relationships that extend beyond single projects (Dadich et al., 2019). Ultimately, participatory research represents a shift towards more equitable research practices, promoting a model of “nothing about us without us,” which is essential to push for meaningful change and empowerment within Orang Asli communities.

Two widely used participatory research methods involving the voices of the Indigenous communities themselves are photovoice and sharing circles. The photovoice concept was introduced by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (1997) as a photographic data collection technique that could help identify and represent issues in a community. It is a participatory technique conducted by community members to record events or issues that they feel are important and require attention, promoting self-agency (Castleden et al., 2008; Hergenrather et al., 2009; Jennings & Lowe, 2013; Wilkin & Liamputtong, 2010). Apart from that, Delgado (2015) notes that the transformative experience that participants gained during a participatory activity like photovoice is usually shared with others, which thereby becomes a source of positive news. These advantages of photovoice resonate with the transformative intention of this research, which is to address the tensions that arise from unequal power relationships in research and increasing social justice (Mertens, 2009).

According to Wang and Burris (1997), photovoice aims include to enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns, promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs. In the context of Indigenous research, the photovoice method shares similarities with what Smith (2012) refers to as a “representing” project. A representative project, which may involve Indigenous artists, writers, poets, or filmmakers, seeks to create images that convey the Indigenous spirit, experiences, and worldview (Smith, 2012). These images allow Indigenous communities to capture the complexities of their identity and offer solutions to the real-world challenges they face. For example, Castleden, Garvin, and Huu-ay-aht First Nation (2008) demonstrated the positive effects of photovoice in balancing power dynamics, creating a sense of ownership, developing trust, and addressing cultural preferences. Similarly, Wilkin and Liamputtong (2010) highlighted the empowering and culturally relevant aspects of photovoice in their study with Aboriginal health workers in Australia. Participant feedback emphasized the method’s alignment with Aboriginal cultural practices, leading to high satisfaction with its use (Wilkin & Liamputtong, 2010). In the Orang Asli context, a study by Angit (2020) employed this technique to document language practices of Orang Asli students in different domains and found that the photographs taken by the participating Orang Asli students provided

rich insights that captured the complex interplay of the languages that existed in their language ecology.

Meanwhile, sharing circles represent another culturally resonant method for conducting research with Indigenous communities rooted in the tradition of storytelling, sharing circles create a safe space for participants to share their narratives and experiences, allowing for a collective exploration of issues relevant to the community (Hunt & Young, 2021). According to Indigenous scholars Tachine and colleagues (2016), using sharing circles as an Indigenous methodological approach respects the oral traditions and interaction styles unique to Indigenous cultures. Thus by centering community knowledge and encouraging collaborative relationships, sharing circles can effectively empower Orang Asli participants to engage in meaningful dialogue about their experiences. While being similar to focus groups, Lavallée (2009) described sharing circles to be distinct in terms of the principles behind it as to recognizing that all participants including the facilitator are perceived as equals whilst treating the circle as a process for healing, growth and transformation through sharings of each person's story. Sharing circles also diverge from focus groups by placing emphasis on the need for a culturally sensitive method for Indigenous individuals to be understood deeply through how they describe their feelings, experiences and reasonings (Rothe et al., 2009). In a systematic review by Hunt and young (2021) on 29 articles that followed a community-based participatory research approach for Indigenous children, multiple instances were present on the successful blending of sharing circles in the contemporary Indigenous research literature as majority of the studies incorporated at least one aspect of sharing circles in their focus group methodologies. Hence overall, the literature on Indigenous research methods based on community participation suggests the appropriate use of photovoice and sharing circles in the present context of research with the Orang Asli communities.

Methods

Guided by principles of Indigenous research methods, our research was driven by the following research questions based on the policy recommendations that we aimed to incorporate derived from the needs highlighted in IDEAS previous publications and the readiness level of IDEAS:

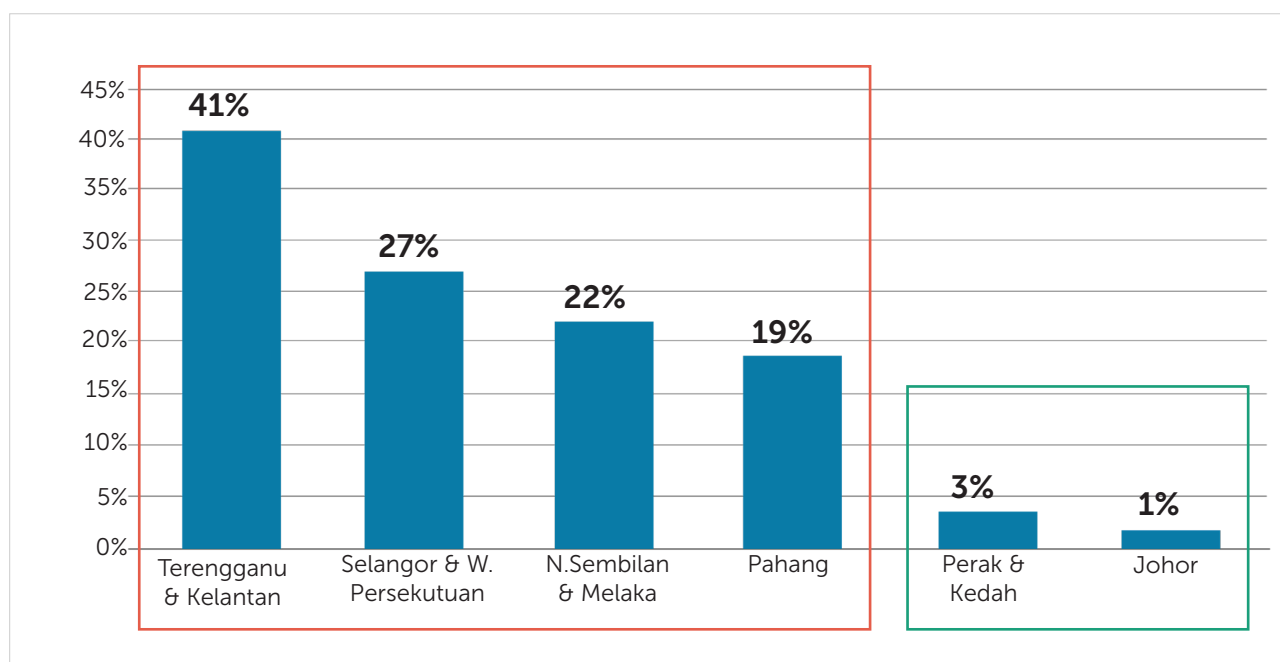
1. Centering on the Orang Asli's voices themselves, what are the talents and aspirations of Orang Asli students that need to be foregrounded?
2. What are the underlying challenges faced by Orang Asli students in navigating the education system?
3. How can active participation of Orang Asli parents and communities in educational programmes for Orang Asli students be improved?
4. How can collaborations with Orang Asli communities be approached in a more culturally responsive manner?

We aim to address the research questions outlined above by focusing on three schools in Kelantan, which are referred to in the report as SMK A, SMK B, and SK C.

Needs-Based Consultations for Participating Schools

The decision to focus on Kelantan was influenced by three main rationales. Firstly, Kelantan and Terengganu were reported to have some of the highest dropout rates among Orang Asli students, with 41%, followed by Selangor and Wilayah Persekutuan with 27%, Negeri Sembilan and Malacca with 22%, and Pahang with 19%. Meanwhile, the dropout rates for Perak and Kedah were 3% (Jabatan Kemajuan orang Asli [JAKOA], 2018). It should be noted that there are approximately 12 fully Orang Asli schools (SKOA) in Kelantan (Ministry of Education, 2022).² This suggests an urgent need for more carefully tailored interventions to address the underlying causes of dropouts and provide support systems for Orang Asli students in the aforementioned states.

Figure 3: Dropout Rates after Year 6 for Orang Asli Students by States in 2018 (JAKOA, 2018; Wan & Idrus, 2021)



² Among the Orang Asli schools in Kelantan include SK Bihai, SK Pasir Linggi, SK Kuala Lah, SK Hendrop, SK Pos Brooke, SK Tohoi, SK Balar, SK Kuala Betis, SK Sri Permai, SK Pulat, and SK Sungai Rual.

The decision for the selection of participating schools was validated with a needs analysis conducted through an initial consultation with the the Ministry of Education (MOE) first at *Bahagian Pengurusan Sekolah Harian* and later with State Education Departments (JPN) at *Mesyuarat Penyelarasan dan Pengurusan bawah Inisiatif #57 Bil. 1/2022*. Aside from gauging the overall feasibility of the study and ensuing projects, the IDEAS team were advised through these sessions to focus on either Kelantan or Terengganu as they received the least attention in terms of the number of educational programmes conducted by organisations other than the MOE. Our initial stakeholder mapping exercise, which involved mapping the distribution of educational programmes for Orang Asli students, also indicated that the implementation of major Orang Asli educational programmes was more concentrated on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Thus, we selected three schools in the state of Kelantan to conduct our engagement and data collection.

Subsequently, informal consultations were also done both through phone and face-to-face sessions. Through these sessions, the IDEAS team first introduced the project’s purpose and engaged with key stakeholders including Orang Asli community spokespersons (Tok Batin, penghulu) and relevant agencies, as outlined in Table 2. This interaction was critical to understanding the unique challenges faced by the students, teachers, and the broader community.

Table 2: Summary of Conventional Needs-Based Assessment Activities

Activity	Participants
<p>Consultations</p> <p>An interactive engagement method involving individuals or groups with a stake or interest in this project.</p> <p>In total, 3 consultations were conducted.</p>	<p>The local <i>Tok Batin</i> (Village leadership), community leaders, government and non-government agencies</p>

This foundational engagement informed the next data collection phase of the research, as it provided the IDEAS team with a deeper understanding of the context in which the Indigenous research methods would be implemented.

Data Collection

Guided by the literature, we utilized research methods that were aligned to Indigenous frameworks to holistically capture the experiences, perspectives, and needs of the community. Specifically, the following techniques and activities were employed for these purposes.

Table 3: Summary of Indigenous Data Collection Techniques

Technique/ Activity	Participants
<p>Photovoice</p> <p>A participatory qualitative research and evaluation method for participants to document and share their lived experiences through photography.</p>	20 Orang Asli students from SMK A (anonymised)
<p>Sharing circles</p> <p>An indigenous method for creating safe spaces for respectful sharing.</p> <p>In total, 7 sharing circles were conducted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 sharing circle was conducted with Orang Asli students at SMK A • 3 sharing circles were conducted with Orang Asli parents • 3 sharing circles with teachers at the 3 participating schools 	20 Orang Asli students 30 Orang Asli parents 30 teachers

We elaborate more on the specific Indigenous research methods used which are photovoice and sharing circles:

Photovoice and Sharing Circles with Orang Asli Students

Drawing on the steps recommended by previous studies (Angit, 2020; Delgado, 2015; Latz, 2017; Wang and Burris, 1997), this photovoice project conducted in this particular study consisted of the following three stages.

In Stage 1, the IDEAS team, led by Dr. Suria, first conducted a 3-hour photovoice workshop in 2023 at the participating school to provide training to the participating students. Written consent was received prior to the workshop from participating students, parents, school teachers and relevant district level education departments. During the training, participants were provided with worksheets as a guide. The workshop conducted explained its purpose, rationale, and practical application, with specific sessions tailored for the Orang Asli students. During these sessions, the students were trained to take photographs using their own smartphones, and ethical considerations such as obtaining consent and respecting privacy were discussed in depth.

The students were divided into groups and were provided with mobile phones to take photographs. They were tasked with capturing images of things that held personal significance to them as Orang Asli, such as their homes, village, river, and other meaningful elements or symbols in their environments. The students were then encouraged to take photographs of their surroundings as a practice run, and share stories behind these images with the group.

In Stage 2, following the workshop, the students were given over a month to apply what they had learned and take photographs in their communities. During their school

holidays, they had the opportunity to return home and photograph events or situations that reflected their talents, challenges, and aspirations as Orang Asli students. The students worked in their groups, submitting their digital photographs, along with captions and accompanying notes.

Throughout this exercise, 66 pictures were taken by Group 1, nine photos were taken by Group 2, 12 photos were taken by Group 3 and 16 photos were taken by Group 4. During the data collection process, the team noted that some photos were taken from the Internet instead. When this was detected, those photos were excluded from the report. However, they are still included in the overall count of photos, as the act of selecting an online image reflects something meaningful about the students' lives and the aspects they wished to share, even if the image was not taken directly from their own environment.

In Stage 3, the IDEAS team returned to the participating schools for the students' photovoice presentations. After spending their holidays taking photographs in their homes and communities, the students presented their photographs and the stories behind them in sharing circles. Although some of the students felt quite shy while presenting their photographs, many of them expressed the same sentiment: that they chose to take these photos because they wanted to share insights about the unique aspects of their Orang Asli heritage with people outside of their communities.

Each group then selected five photos that they believed strongly reflected the project themes encompassing the Orang Asli students' talents, challenges and aspirations. They also shared stories behind each selected photo. The final set of photos together with the worksheets provided to the students during the photovoice workshop, along with data gathered from the needs-based assessments and other sharing circles conducted, were analysed to generate a comprehensive view of the themes emerging from the diverse communities involved in the study.

Figure 4: Slide from Photovoice Workshop Conducted by IDEAS for Orang Asli Students

**Sila tulis ini dalam buku nota anda!*

Lembaran Kerja Untuk Setiap Gambar

Saya ingin berkongsi gambar-gambar yang saya rakam dan cerita di sebalik gambar-gambar ini.

GAMBAR ANDA

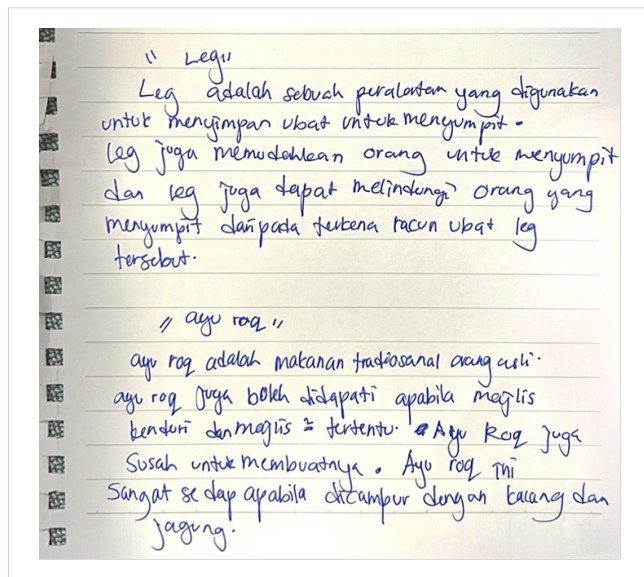
Cerita di sebalik gambar ini:

Tajuk gambar: _____

Form fields for student information:

- Nama: _____
- Umur: _____
- Kampung: _____
- Sekolah: _____

Figure 5: A Handwritten Note Written by an Orang Asli Student to Describe and Explain Photos taken for the Photovoice Activity

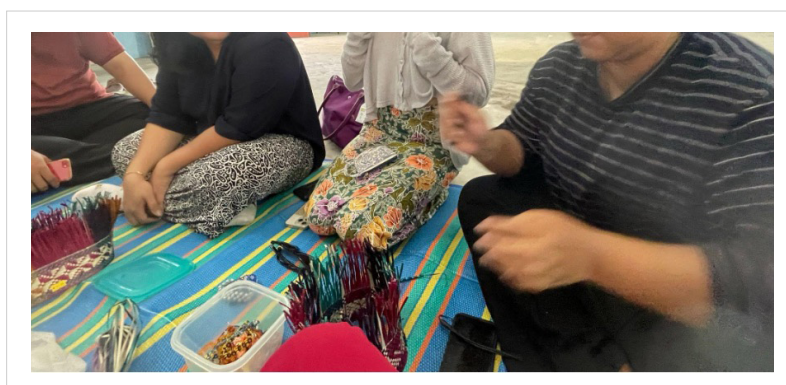


Sharing Circles with the Community

The research involved separate sharing circles with two distinct groups of stakeholders: Orang Asli parents and teachers in Kelantan. These sessions were designed to capture the unique perspectives of each group. Participants were recruited through word-of-mouth, local community groups, and partnerships with key stakeholders, ensuring that the recruitment process was deeply embedded within the community.

The sharing circle with Orang Asli parents took place in local community centres in Kelantan. The setting was informal and intimate, designed to make participants feel comfortable and respected. In the spirit of highlighting local Orang Asli knowledge and expertise, the IDEAS team also had a weaving lesson with a local Temiar weaver and a community representative prior to the sharing circles. This was also meant to introduce the IDEAS team to the local community in a more informal manner.

Figure 6: Weaving Lesson with Local Temiar Weaver



The sharing circle session was guided by Dr. Suria, who initiated the discussion, encouraged participants to share their experiences through storytelling which is a core aspect of the community's cultural traditions. The conversation unfolded naturally, without a structured turn-taking format. Some parts of the discussion were translated, as several participants expressed themselves more comfortably in Temiar language. While younger participants were quieter during the session, some later followed up via WhatsApp, contributing further insights to the conversation. The sharing circle was emotionally open and participants shared deeply personal stories, sometimes with tears.

The sharing circle with teachers followed a similar structure but was held in a different setting. The teachers' sharing circle revealed different challenges and viewpoints, reflecting their unique roles and experiences within the educational system. Through all the sharing circles, notes were taken by the facilitator and research team to document key points, observations, and participant reactions in real time.

Figure 7: Setup of Sharing Circle Conducted



Data Collection Process

To ensure that data collection was both culturally sensitive and methodologically rigorous, a combination of handwritten notes and audio recordings was employed. Audio recordings were used to capture the richness and nuance of the conversations, while handwritten notes were taken by the facilitator and research team to document key points, participant reactions, and observations in real time. In situations where audio recording was not permitted, handwritten notes alone were used to respect cultural preferences and maintain participant comfort.

The data collection process aimed to balance the need for accurate documentation with respect for the participants' comfort and cultural practices, ensuring that both the methodological integrity and the participants' dignity were upheld throughout the study.

Data Analysis

For the data derived with the participating students, the Orang Asli student participants took part in the analysis process by discussing some of their photographs they had generated during the sharing circle session itself. The sharing circle served as a foundation for the overall data analysis for the remaining photographs that were not discussed during the sharing circles.

After the sharing circle, the analysis process entered its second phase, which involved analyzing the visual data and notes of sharing circles. In this stage of analysis, content analysis of the photos was conducted, and this process adapted steps for analysing photovoice data recommended by Angit (2020) and Delgado (2015):

- Coding of data: Features of the photographs were identified and noted down as codes.
- Narrowing: Codes were matched according to its relevance with research objectives for ease of use
- Identification of cross-cutting themes: Recurring codes were identified and grouped as themes.
- Contextualising: Stories were derived based on the themes by matching them with the participants' voices.

The above steps were also applied for the data derived from the sharing circles and needs-based assessment activities encompassing consultation sessions and multi-stakeholder workshops. Our Orang Asli community expert Dr Suria led the analysis to ensure that the findings were culturally accurate and meaningful. Sensitive or confidential information within the notes were identified, ensuring that participants' privacy was respected throughout the research process. By engaging with Orang Asli community members in both the data collection and analysis phases, it was ensured that the findings were not only reflective of the community's voice but also cultivated a collaborative, respectful relationship throughout the research. This approach also contributed to the overall cultural appropriateness of the study, aligning with Indigenous values of community engagement, confidentiality, and mutual respect.

Multistakeholder Workshops

Following the sharing circles with community members and teachers, multistakeholder workshops were held to present the preliminary findings of our research as part of our team's member checking process. Member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation, is essential for confirming the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000; McMahan & Winch, 2018). This technique involves returning the data or results to the participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their lived experiences. These findings highlighted the strengths, aspirations, and

challenges shared by Orang Asli students, community members, and teachers during our engagement sessions and data collection activities. Their feedback has been incorporated into our findings. Workshop participants were then invited to co-create proposals for educational interventions based on these findings.

Table 4: Summary of Member Checking Activities

Activity	Participants
<p>Multi-stakeholder workshops</p> <p>Workshops conducted with teachers, Orang Asli parents and representatives from the three schools focused on creating a respectful and collaborative space to discuss challenges and possible solutions.</p> <p>In total, 2 multi-stakeholder workshops were conducted.</p>	<p>Orang Asli parents, community leaders, teachers, representatives from non-government agencies</p>

Figure 8: Multistakeholder Workshop Conducted by IDEAS for Teachers of Orang Asli Students in Kelantan



These workshops, as part of the member checking process, played a critical role in refining the findings and ensuring that the research accurately represented the community’s perspectives. By engaging in this collaborative process, we were able to incorporate valuable feedback into our findings, further solidifying the credibility of our results. This process also laid the foundation for the next phase of intervention planning.

Findings

In summary, these interactions have revealed the following findings that can be mapped to three of our previous policy recommendations:

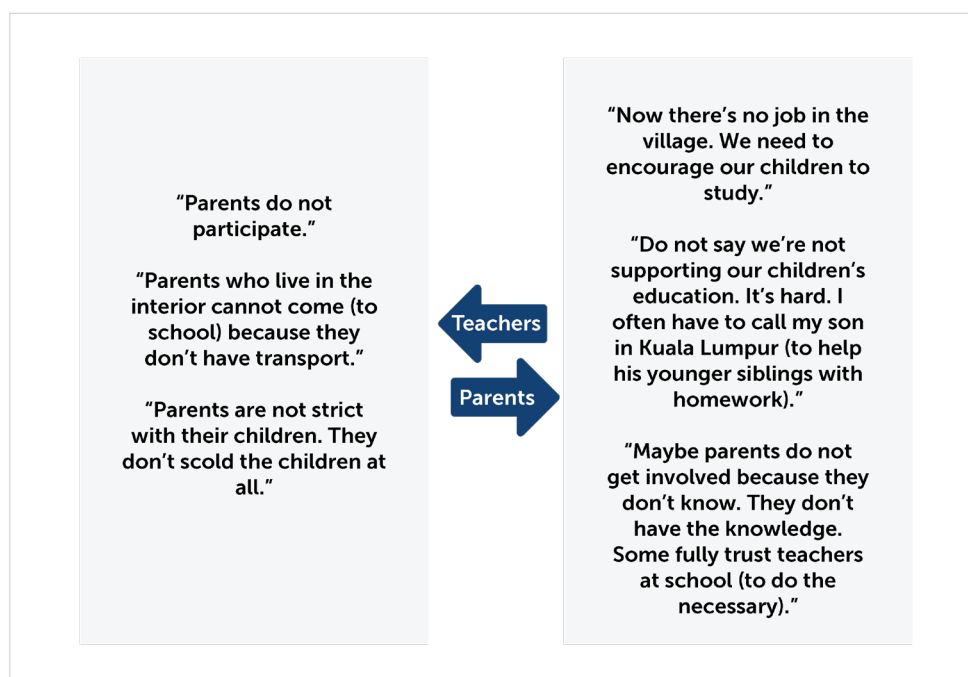
1. Weaving Connections: Building Trust Between Orang Asli Communities with Schools and JAKOA
2. Celebrating Strengths: Elevating the Narrative of Orang Asli
3. Exploring Roots: Understanding the Underlying Causes

The subsequent sections delve into each of the findings in detail.

Weaving Connections: Building Trust Between Orang Asli Communities with Schools and JAKOA

A key finding is the need to strengthen partnerships between Orang Asli parents, schools and JAKOA to improve the implementation of educational programmes and interventions for Orang Asli students. Meaningful involvement of Orang Asli parents is critical in creating a supportive environment for Orang Asli children. Additionally, schools can draw upon the community's expertise and knowledge to enrich the learning experience for students. Parental involvement emerged as a prominent aspect during discussions, with both teachers and parents sharing contrasting perspectives on this matter.

Figure 9: Misunderstandings between Teachers and Parents



While the participating Orang Asli parents welcomed the home visits conducted by teachers, they also believed that teachers should go beyond merely interacting with them at their doorsteps to establish more meaningful connections and strengthen school-community partnerships. According to them, it is crucial for teachers to demonstrate a willingness to experience Orang Asli ways of living as a means to bridge the current gap, as commented by one of the *Tok Batins* (or Orang Asli community leaders) below. This also underscores the importance of mitigating power imbalances between schools and communities to ensure meaningful interactions.

“We invite teachers to come and stay with us; live like how we live, understand us, understand our way of life.”

In terms of mode of communication, parents expressed astonishment at the underutilisation of WhatsApp as a communication platform, given their perception that it was widely adopted within the community. It is pertinent to acknowledge that residents residing in remote interior areas may encounter challenges with internet connectivity, potentially contributing to this communication gap. However, parents residing in one area that we covered asserted reliable internet access and availability via WhatsApp.

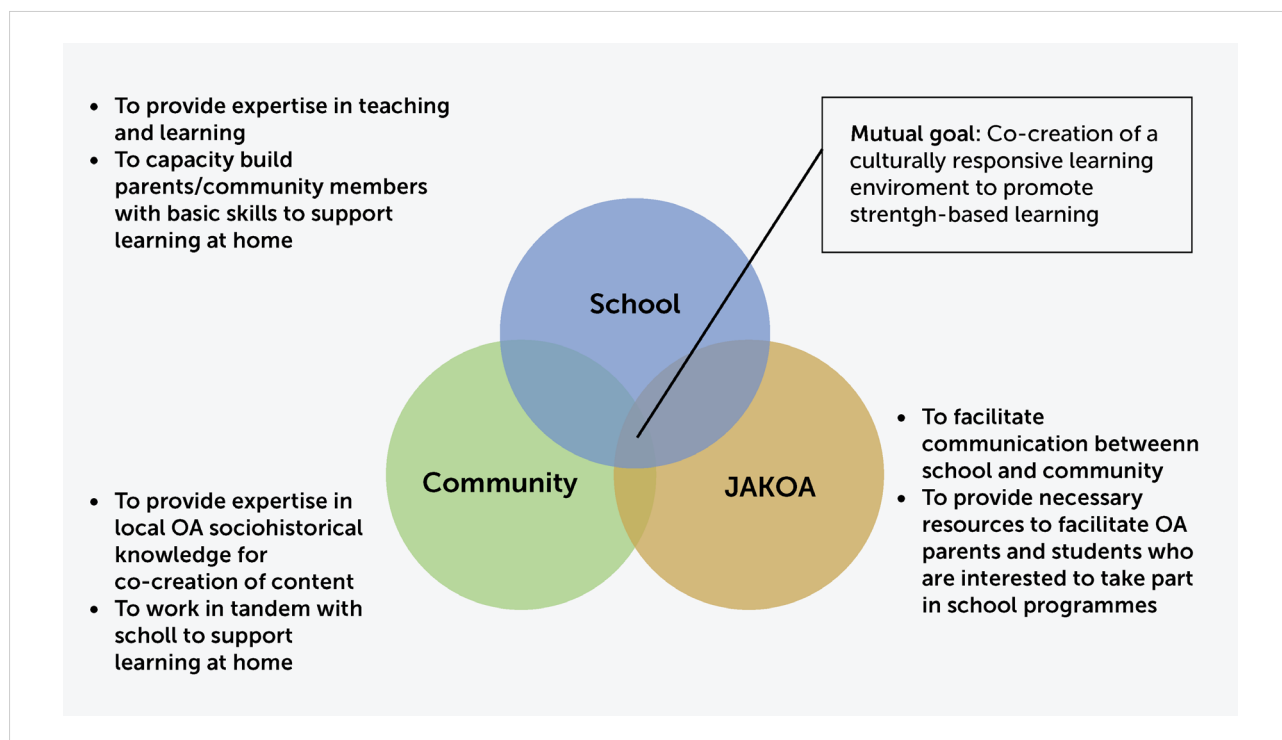
Interestingly, several contrasting narratives were derived from the teachers. For example, teachers reported attempts to engage parents through WhatsApp, yet received no responses. Additionally, when it comes to direct visitations to Orang Asli’s homes, some teachers recounted their experiences visiting parents and noted successful resolutions of absenteeism cases through discussions during these visits. For many teachers, this programme represents the sole opportunity to gain insight into their Orang Asli students’ home environments. Participating in this programme has also helped teachers to understand the geographical barriers faced by many Orang Asli students and parents. However, teachers lamented that due to funding constraints, the programme is not regularly organised by the school.

Simultaneously, teachers across the three schools expressed a desire for greater parental involvement in school programmes, encouraging parents to participate in any capacity they felt comfortable with. Additionally, teachers showed an interest in learning more about Orang Asli knowledge and cultural practices from parents and community members. They opined that gaining insight into Orang Asli cultural practices and languages would enhance their effectiveness in their roles at school.

Regardless, both parties agreed that JAKOA could take a more active role in co-creating an inclusive learning environment for Orang Asli children. This necessitates consistent and meaningful engagements between parents, schools, and JAKOA to establish common goals and clarify the roles of all parties in achieving them. When asked about the roles they would like to play in such a partnership, many parents expressed a desire to acquire basic skills to support their children’s learning at home, supplementing their formal education at school. Hope for more active partnerships with JAKOA is also expressed by teachers, believing that strategic resource-sharing between teachers, parents, and JAKOA could

lead to successful implementation of interventions or programmes. Figure 10 envisions this strategic partnership.

Figure 10: Building Active Supporting Partnerships around the School for Orang Asli Education



Celebrating Strengths: Elevating the Narrative of Orang Asli

Our interactions revealed a pressing need to redefine learning for Orang Asli students, shifting beyond traditional assessment measures and focusing on a strengths-based approach. Learning, in this context, should be understood as a dynamic process encompassing both formal and informal meaning-making, drawing on students' strengths and aspirations for the future.

It was emphasised that for learning to be effective and meaningful for Orang Asli students, the experience should not be confined to conventional academic learning environments and expectations alone. Apart from prioritising culturally relevant content, it was also recommended that approaches promoting experiential learning and place-based learning be incorporated into students' schooling experience through their learning environments, as shared by parents who participated in the community-sharing circles:

"From the child's psychological perspective, if there's a similar environment to their home present at school, they would attend school... such as the idea of rearing chickens at school... if the school can do something like that, (they) would feel at home, (school) would be like a second home."

“Another primary school has a small garden, with birds. They have a small garden where they keep animals, such as rabbits...and there are flowers and plants... students could go to the garden for outdoor activities so they wouldn’t just wander around.”

“If we look around here, there are bushes. They’re not safe for young children. So if possible, projects like these should be done... they attract children, the children won’t get bored just sitting in classrooms. And it’s also a form of early agripreneurship education.”

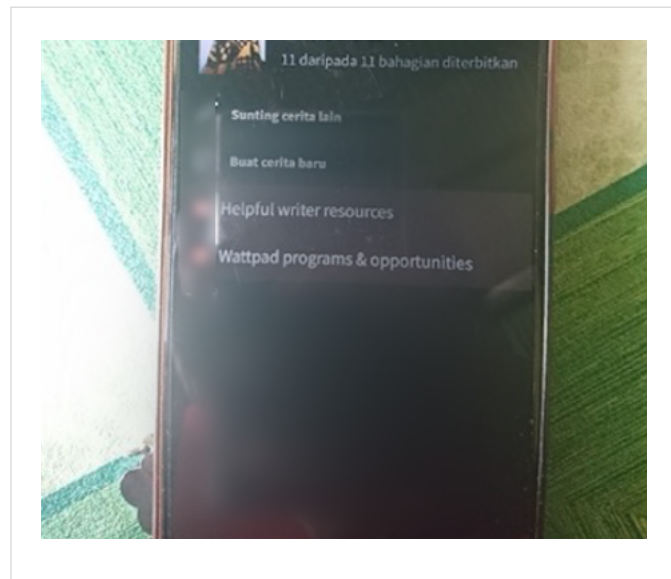
By acknowledging the diverse interests, talents and resources that Orang Asli students bring to their education, a strengths-based approach focuses on empowering them by leveraging these strengths. These sentiments are echoed by the teachers across all three schools. According to the teachers, carpentry, entrepreneurship, agripreneurship, as well as visual and performing arts are some of the areas of learning that could be made available to the students. Most teachers claimed that they had observed great potential among Orang Asli students in these areas. They believed that this skill-based approach could not only help students master basic literacy skills but also equip them with real-life skills useful for their future.

“Schools should allow Orang Asli students to grow vegetables and build ponds. However, we have to follow the national syllabus.”

While the teachers agreed that basic literacy skills (3M) remained crucial and relevant, they believed these skills should be taught inductively, through more hands-on and skill-based activities. One teacher even urged IDEAS to communicate this need to policymakers and other stakeholders:

“IDEAS should communicate this to the top level. Exam-oriented, classroom-based learning is not relevant here (in Orang Asli schools).”

These insights from teachers align closely with the perspectives expressed by the Orang Asli students themselves, particularly in relation to the importance of hands-on activities. The teachers’ recognition of the potential for students to excel in areas such as carpentry, entrepreneurship, and the arts mirrors the students’ own aspirations and interests, as highlighted in the photovoice data. Below, we present the voices of the students through their photographs and accompanying reflections, which offer a deeper understanding of their talents and aspirations.

Figure 11: Photovoice Data from Orang Asli Student

"I really enjoy reading novels. I've read quite a few, including online ones. Some stories I've read include love, nature, and animal stories. I've also written a novel online on Wattpad titled, '[Redacted for anonymity]'. It's about a life filled with tragedy but ultimately finding happiness. I aspire to be a novelist."

Figure 12: Photovoice Data from Orang Asli Student

"In the village, we enjoy making handicrafts. For example, (we make) baskets, woven mats, and so on. Some people in the village sell their handicraft products."

Figure 13: Photovoice Data from Orang Asli Student



"The most famous vegetable. This is a picture of cassava shoots. These cassava shoots thrive abundantly. Cassava shoots are one of my favourite foods. I enjoy cooking cassava shoots... it can be said that I am quite skilled in cooking cassava shoots in various dishes, such as stir-fry, curry (anything that we know)."

Additionally, both teachers and parents stressed the importance of nurturing and developing Orang Asli talents beyond the school level, citing numerous instances of emerging talents and achievements from their three schools. At SMK A, one highlighted achievement was the school's English language choral speaking team, which integrated elements of Orang Asli culture into their storytelling. At SK C, teachers proudly shared stories of Orang Asli students' talents in performing arts, such as dancing and singing. Meanwhile, at SMK B, teachers expressed pride in their Orang Asli star cricket players. One of the school leaders, a principal, emphasised the importance of encouraging more Orang Asli students to compete beyond the school and district levels to develop their confidence and unleash their true potential. Similar stories were shared by some parents during our engagement with them.

Despite these success stories, teachers also expressed concern that many Orang Asli talents lacked self-confidence when competing beyond the school or district level, especially against non-Orang Asli students.

"In the district-level sepak takraw competition, the team became the champion because they played against other Orang Asli students (within the same district). But when they proceeded to the state level (where they had to compete against non-Orang Asli teams), they became anxious and could not perform."

There is an awareness of the differences between Orang Asli and non-Orang Asli individuals. However, the acknowledgement of their indigeneity is evidenced in a positive light through the photovoice data which provided insights into their worldview. Many of the photos captured and shared by the participating students reflect a common theme which is a strong connection with their land and natural environment. For example, the following photos were chosen by the participants to represent their Orang Asli identities:

Figure 14-20: Photovoice Data from Orang Asli Student



"We want to talk about flowers. This flower is very beautiful, fragrant and easy on the eye. The area is not beautiful without the flowers. Taking pictures of flowers is our passion to become a photographer."



"We want to share a story about the vegetable garden of various vegetables we grow—especially sweet potato leaves. Sweet potato leaves are the main vegetable for us Orang Asli, from the sprouts to the tubers."



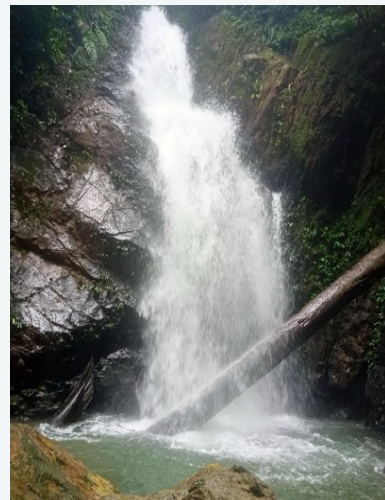
"Leg is a tool that is used to store medicine to be blown. Leg also makes it easier for people to blow and the leg can also protect people from being exposed to the poison of the leg medicine."



"Ayu roq is a traditional Orang Asli food. Ayu roq can also be found at weddings and certain events. Ayu roq is difficult to make. Ayu roq is very tasty when mixed with beans and corn."



My father's pitcher plant



Our forest



Our "jelmol" (mountain)

In addition, we have gathered valuable insights from civil society organisations including programme implementers and funders. Through workshops with these individuals and organisations engaged in on-ground initiatives, a challenge identified by many implementers is the need to cultivate a mindset that views the Orang Asli community not merely as recipients or beneficiaries of programmes, but as active partners. Striking a delicate balance to avoid assuming a 'saviour' role and imposing external agendas, implementers emphasised the significance of adopting a relational approach and prioritising the voices of the Orang Asli community.

Uncovering Roots: Understanding the Underlying Causes

Following the findings on the ideal strength-based educational framework for Orang Asli students, our focus shifts to another significant finding: the challenges potentially hindering students' active engagement in education. Stories of economic hardship affecting education were shared by Orang Asli parents, as, exemplified by the following:

"The biggest challenge is our financial constraints. Some have to quit school early to earn a living for the family. They help parents at the oil palm plantations. They go to the orchard. Not everyone has a stable income."

Similarly, Orang Asli students depict their family's socioeconomic conditions through the photovoice exercise:

Figure 21: Photovoice Data from Orang Asli Student



"... every morning and evening, my parents would go tapping rubber to support our livelihood. The income from selling the rubber they tap does not exceed RM 300. That's barely enough for our daily meals."

Figure 22: Photovoice Data from Orang Asli Student



“Paddy is our source of income in the village. We work on this paddy because our roads to the city are not in good condition, such as when it rains, which causes our roads to be muddy and we cannot use motor vehicles, and so on. We’re going to sell this rice to outsiders and in the city. This rice is our income. We work on this paddy for our own benefit and so there’s no need for us to go to the city to buy rice.”

Most teachers appeared to empathise with the Orang Asli parents and students. It is noteworthy that teachers with longer teaching experience in Orang Asli schools demonstrated greater sensitivity towards the challenges faced by Orang Asli students and their families compared to newer teachers. One teacher made the following comment, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of these challenges.

“We have to solve the parents’ economic issue first.”

In addition to economic struggles, the lack of access to clean water posed a significant challenge. Some parents highlighted that this infrastructure issue, often overlooked, had a detrimental impact on Orang Asli students’ learning at school. Without access to clean water, students were unable to properly wash their school uniform, resulting in them wearing unclean uniforms to schools. Parents claimed that many Orang Asli children had been subjected to bullying because of this, leading to frequent school absences. Furthermore, parents stated that teachers, most of whom do not reside in the area, were not fully aware of the extent of this issue.

In relation to teachers not being fully aware of struggles faced by Orang Asli children in school, parents also noted the teachers’ lack of understanding of their children and their emotional distance. This was also acknowledged by the teachers themselves of their lack

of familiarity with Orang Asli culture and knowledge partly due to the lack of access to the communities. Teachers also mentioned that they need JAKOA's support in building closer relationships with Orang Asli communities.

“JAKOA cannot leave this to us alone.”

In one of the schools, teachers mentioned that they sometimes rely on JAKOA's support to reach students and parents who live in the interior.

“If (the village) is nearby, we (teachers) will go by ourselves. If it's far away, we'll go with JAKOA and YB. We'll be sharing the funds.”

In this regard, teachers believed that with a more strategic resource-sharing between schools and JAKOA, the involvement of Orang Asli parents could be enhanced. For instance, to increase parents' involvement during school activities, teachers suggested that JAKOA could offer transportation for parents, especially those residing in the interior.

“JAKOA could help manage transportation for parents.”

Teachers also highlighted a previous initiative by JAKOA that they believed to be beneficial for the students.

“JAKOA used to organise motivational programmes or sharing sessions led by successful Orang Asli students, which are eye-opening for the students.”

The lack of familiarity with Orang Asli culture and knowledge has heightened the day-to-day challenges for teachers at Orang Asli schools. Nearly all teachers admitted feeling ill-equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively teach and support Orang Asli students, whose needs differ significantly from those of non-Orang Asli students. Consequently, teachers found it difficult to connect with their Orang Asli students. As a result, misconceptions about Orang Asli students persist, potentially leading to the implementation of solutions to their challenges that lack the necessary sensitivity.

Another insightful finding from our interactions with teachers and parents revolves around the tension between Orang Asli students and their non-Orang Asli counterparts, recognised as one of the underlying challenges within the formal educational setting for Orang Asli students. Despite its persistence, this tension has not been widely explored in the literature. The following comments from teachers illuminate this issue.

“Orang Asli students are comfortable being with their Orang Asli friends only.”

Interestingly, teachers in one of the schools also observed that certain Orang Asli students of interracial parentage tend to avoid interacting with their fully Orang Asli peers. They appear to feel embarrassed by this association. Supporting the teachers' observations, parents also recounted similar instances that spotlight the tension between Orang Asli and non-Orang Asli students.

“Bullying is a problem. Non-Orang Asli children do not want to befriend Orang Asli children.”

“It’s not good to segregate Orang Asli students and non-Orang Asli students. In the past, we used to be together, they used to mix with us...”

It is pertinent to highlight that no tensions were reported among students enrolled at SMK A, where 80% of the student body are Orang Asli students. As confirmed by both teachers and parents, Orang Asli students typically do not experience racial tensions when they constitute the majority.

Thus, in planning policies and programs that recognize these underlying challenges, it is essential to address their intersectionality, which gives rise to symptomatic issues such as low attendance rates, high dropout rates, and academic underachievement. However, our engagement with other organisations has revealed the tricky navigation with funders and addressing their expectations, notably the expectation for immediate return on investment (ROI) and their reluctance to support programme development without tangible results. Given that funders often request results within a short time frame, implementers have had to explain the significance of sustainability in programme implementation, emphasising the long-term impacts of interventions targeting the underlying causes. Managing these partnerships has proven challenging, as funders and implementers often have distinct desires and priorities, complicating the process of streamlining the objectives and budget allocations of these programmes.

Discussion and Recommendations

Recognising the impact of varied perspectives on policy development and the implementation of educational practices for Orang Asli students (Vass, 2013), this report aims to shift away from the deficit discourse paradigm. Instead, it seeks to offer best practices that address the diverse needs of Orang Asli students through the development of comprehensive learning strategies and the implementation of accountability measures tailored to community-specific objectives within the education landscape. Therefore, it is imperative to realign intervention programmes with the aspirations of various Orang Asli communities, thus affording them agency in shaping their educational environments.

Utilising various techniques to engage stakeholders across different levels, this initial phase of our project has uncovered the following key findings:

1. Trust should be fostered between Orang Asli communities and other stakeholders
2. The strengths of the Orang Asli students and culture should be prioritised
3. Underlying causes of Orang Asli education outcomes should be addressed

The project findings offer valuable insights for the project team and relevant parties of importance in our preparation for our project's implementation phase. In the next phase of our project, we move beyond gathering insights and data to focusing on translating these findings into practical actions and interventions. The experiences and perspectives shared through *Voices from the Ground* have provided valuable lessons for shaping intervention strategies that are not only grounded in the lived realities of Orang Asli communities but also aligned with their aspirations for educational equity. This transition into the implementation phase is where we will apply the recommendations that have emerged from the findings, with a particular focus on realigning intervention programs to meet the specific needs of Orang Asli students and communities.

As we move towards this next step, it is crucial that the lessons learned during the research phase inform the practical design and execution of educational programs on the ground. Therefore, we present the following discussion and recommendations addressing our initial research questions, grounded in the experiences shared by teachers, parents, and community members, to guide the planning and implementation of intervention programs that will have a lasting impact on Orang Asli education:

1. Prioritize multifaceted talents and aspirations of Orang Asli students through incorporation of Indigenous pedagogies

In response to the research question on what are the talents and aspirations of Orang Asli students that need to be foregrounded, the present paper reiterates the importance of departing from the deficit discourse that often labels Orang Asli students as underachievers within the narrow definition of learning that focused solely on academic achievement, the planned intervention programmes should highlight the students' talents and skills. Drawing from students' interests and strengths identified in our findings, activities within the programmes should aim to further develop Orang Asli students' abilities through culturally responsive approaches. Such educational programmes will provide Orang Asli students with more meaningful and relatable learning experiences. Moreover, participating students are expected to acquire transferable skill sets, enhancing their readiness for the future.

It is strongly recommended that Indigenous pedagogies are incorporated into programme designs for the Orang Asli students for a strength-based focus. As discussed in our past policy report, policies and programmes for Orang Asli education should shift away from a deficit discourse to one that is positive or strength-based (Wan, 2020). A deficit discourse attributes gaps in educational achievement solely to a community's culture and lifestyle. In contrast, a strength-based approach focuses on culturally responsive teaching (Bishop, 2010), which involves 'making school learning relevant and effective for learners by drawing on students' cultural knowledge, life experiences, frames of reference, languages, and performance and communication styles' (Education Hub, 2019).

Hence, celebrating the strengths of Orang Asli students and their unique cultural contexts is essential for promoting a more inclusive and effective educational framework. By shifting from a deficit perspective to a strength-based approach, learning can be redefined as a

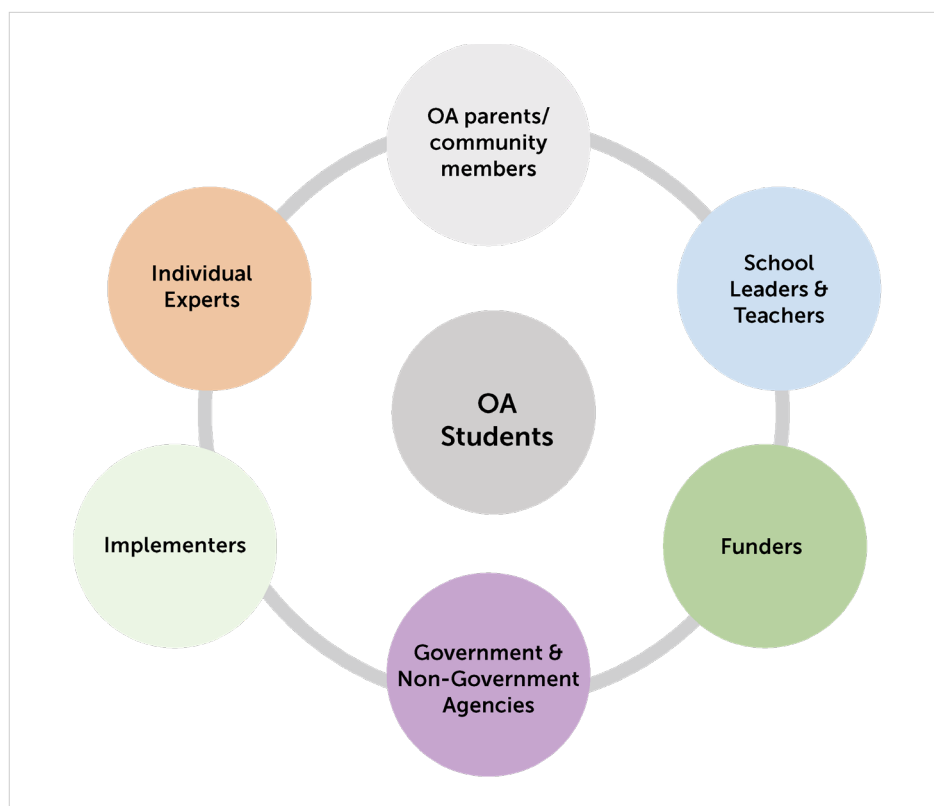
dynamic process that integrates students' cultural knowledge and real-life experiences. This approach not only nurtures individual confidence, but also strengthens Orang Asli identities and heritage at the same time acknowledging their agency in pursuing educational pathways. The insights gathered highlight the potential within the Orang Asli community to thrive when provided with culturally responsive and experiential learning opportunities. However, to fully harness this potential, it is crucial to address the underlying challenges that may hinder students' active engagement in education.

2. Leveraging established networks to address underlying challenges faced by Orang Asli students in navigating the education system

The challenges faced by Orang Asli students in navigating the education system are multifaceted, rooted in both systemic issues and socio-cultural barriers. As observed in this project, socioeconomic factors such as poverty, lack of access to basic resources like clean water, and social exclusion continue to affect Orang Asli communities. These persistent issues, consistent with our previous reports (Wan, 2020; Wan & Idrus, 2021), have a direct impact on the educational outcomes of Orang Asli students, creating obstacles that hinder their ability to fully engage in and benefit from the education system.

Thus, addressing the underlying challenges faced by Orang Asli students requires a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the complex interplay of socioeconomic barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and the need for meaningful engagement among all stakeholders. Systemic issues that hinder the academic success of Orang Asli students need to be targeted for long-term, sustainable progress of educational programmes.

In light of these challenges, a key recommendation is to build stronger, more collaborative partnerships between schools, communities, and other stakeholders. The multi-stakeholder network that has been established during the first phase of the project represents a significant step forward in ensuring the sustainability and success of future intervention programs. Strengthening these relationships and expanding the network will be crucial in addressing the systemic issues that affect Orang Asli students. By leveraging the diverse capacities of these partners, we can work towards a more comprehensive and holistic approach to education for Orang Asli students. The following diagram visualises the established network

Figure 23: Multi-stakeholder Network for the Project

This diverse network of partners, leveraging its distinct capacities, will propel our initiatives towards the attainment of our shared goals. It is important for external stakeholders, including elected officials, programme funders, teachers, administrators, CSOs, and programme implementers, to recognize and acknowledge the unique challenges faced by Orang Asli students. Understanding these challenges at the local level will help ensure that the intervention programs are not only culturally responsive but also designed to address the specific needs of the community.

To truly address the underlying challenges, the implementation of these intervention programs must go beyond addressing academic performance alone. A multifaceted approach is needed, one that considers the complex interplay of socioeconomic barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and the need for meaningful engagement with all stakeholders. Educational programs should not only focus on academic achievement but also on addressing the broader issues that affect the wellbeing and overall development of Orang Asli students. For sustainable progress, long-term strategies must target these systemic issues, ensuring that the educational success of Orang Asli students is not undermined by the broader socio-cultural and economic barriers they face.

3. Improving meaningful participation of Orang Asli parents and communities in educational programmes through school-community trust-building activities and partnerships

The insights gathered reveal a pressing need for meaningful engagement between Orang Asli parents, teachers, and JAKOA, moving beyond superficial interactions to establish genuine partnerships. Building strong, trust-based connections is essential for enhancing educational outcomes for Orang Asli students. Both parents and teachers share the common goal of supporting Orang Asli children's education, yet misunderstandings and communication gaps must be addressed to build trust. Active participation from JAKOA is vital in facilitating these partnerships, ensuring that all stakeholders collaborate towards shared objectives. Ultimately, strengthening these connections will not only benefit Orang Asli students academically but also empower their communities, creating a supportive framework for holistic development and cultural pride. In parallel with these efforts to build trust and collaboration, it is equally important to celebrate the strengths of Orang Asli students and to redefine the educational narrative surrounding them.

Since the project's inception, we have prioritised fostering trust through sustained, mutually beneficial interactions and emphasising trust-building activities within the participating Orang Asli communities. Our commitment to trust building will extend beyond mere information exchange and providing platforms for Orang Asli voices. We will advance towards a collaborative model that promotes a more equitable sharing of decision-making power among programme implementers, schools, and Orang Asli parents/communities. A key strategy involves the active participation of community representatives in implementing the intervention programmes. This deliberate inclusion aims to instill collaboration and ensure greater equity in the decision-making processes, reflecting our intention to promote self-determination and healing of the Orang Asli communities wherever possible. Recognising the importance of building stronger peer relationships within the school context, it is also highly recommended for the intervention programmes to involve non-Orang Asli students as well.

4. Approaching collaborations with Orang Asli communities in a more culturally responsive manner

The findings from this project align with previous studies, such as those by Wan and Idrus (2022) and Angit (2020), revealing a significant gap in mutual understanding between teachers and Orang Asli parents. Despite sharing a common objective of improving educational outcomes for Orang Asli children, there is a persistent lack of familiarity and trust between the two parties. This ongoing tension highlights the need for immediate attention to strengthen the school-community partnership, which is crucial for creating a conducive learning environment for students from marginalized communities (Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Wan & Idrus, 2022). The importance of bridging this gap is further emphasized by initiatives like Inisiatif #57, which necessitates building of a stronger, more collaborative relationship between schools and Orang Asli communities.

To address these challenges, a key recommendation is the implementation of a culturally responsive capacity-building approach that empowers both teachers and Orang Asli community members. One effective strategy for achieving this is the training-of-trainers (ToT) model. This approach involves training teachers in pedagogies that are specifically designed to meet the learning needs of Orang Asli students while simultaneously equipping Orang Asli parents and community members with the skills to actively support their children's education. This dual approach ensures that both teachers and community members are equipped with the tools necessary for promoting educational success in a culturally responsive manner.

As teachers and community members undergo this training, they can later become trainers themselves, passing on the knowledge and skills to others within their communities. This expansion of the ToT model, in which trained individuals take on the role of mentors, will help extend the program's reach and build a broader, more sustainable capacity within the community. To further enhance the effectiveness of this model, incorporating elements of professional learning communities (PLC) is recommended. This will create an ongoing space for teachers and community members to engage in continuous learning, share knowledge, and collaborate towards common goals. As part of this process, teachers will also be encouraged to form their own PLCs, normalizing a culture of collaborative learning that extends beyond the duration of formal training.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this report deliberates on the insightful findings derived from our engagements with communities of importance across various levels. Anchored within a research framework that resonates with the values and concerns of Orang Asli communities, this project endeavours to serve as a guide on the effective implementation of Orang Asli education programmes. We advocate for a strength-based approach founded upon a collaborative framework and the integration of Indigenous knowledge, transcending the mere mitigation of symptomatic educational challenges faced by Orang Asli students. This report showcases how our interactions and insights gained from engaging with the Orang Asli community will guide the execution of the programmes, alongside our strategies for ensuring their sustainability in the future.

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