CONTEXTUALISING ORANG ASLI EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: A CASE STUDY OF POS KEMAR, PERAK

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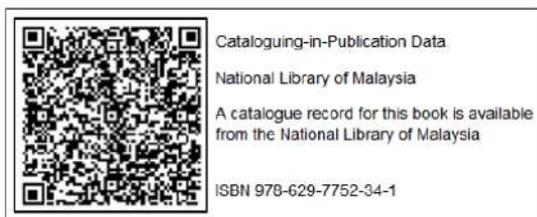
MySDG Centre for Social Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the critical issue of education inequity among the Orang Asli community in Malaysia, moving beyond monolithic views of the community by focusing specifically on the Temiar tribe in Pos Kemar, Perak. Previous research often overlooks the distinct identities and geographical challenges faced by specific Orang Asli groups. This paper aims to explore the contextual reasons for education inequity in Pos Kemar, investigate the effectiveness of the existing *Transformasi Orang Asli #57* policy, and propose elements of a contextualised education ecosystem. Employing qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with 19 Orang Asli parents from Pos Kemar, this research delves into their lived experiences and perspectives. Disparities in academic focus, lack of reporting mechanisms, and instances of racial discrimination in mixed schools were highlighted. While the Ministry of Education's 2024 report indicates an increase in transition rates to 89.86% for students moving from Standard 6 to Form1, this study suggests the need for more nuanced, community-centric policy implementation. The research will provide valuable insights for policymakers to formulate and implement more meaningful and effective education policies that acknowledge the unique challenges and aspirations of the Orang Asli community in specific geographical contexts, in a way that is not tokenistic.

Keywords: Orang Asli, Education Inequity, *Transformasi Pendidikan Orang Asli dan Peribumi*, Pos Kemar, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a cornerstone for individual and societal advancement, yet for many marginalised communities globally, access to quality education remains elusive. In Peninsular Malaysia, the Orang Asli, comprising 18 distinct tribes categorised into three main groups—Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay—represent the indigenous peoples of the country. Despite their rich cultural heritage and historical presence, they have historically faced significant challenges, including systemic exclusion and paternalistic policies. Previous studies examining educational disparities among the Orang Asli have often treated them as a homogenous entity, failing to account for the profound diversity in their identities, geographical settlements, and individual experiences of inequity. This oversight risks diluting the unique challenges faced by specific communities and hinders the development of truly effective interventions.

This paper addresses this critical gap by focusing specifically on the Temiar Orang Asli community in Pos Kemar—located in Gerik, Perak. This specific focus is driven by the community's unique geographical location, which frequently acts as a significant barrier to accessing quality education. By narrowing the scope, this research aims to identify nuanced differences between the broader narratives on Orang Asli education and the lived realities of the Pos Kemar community. Furthermore, it seeks to shed light on the implementation gaps of an existing government policy, *Transformasi Orang Asli #57*, designed to improve educational outcomes for this demographic. Ultimately, this research endeavours to provide contextualised insights for policymakers, urging them to consider the on-the-ground experiences of the Temiar people in Gerik, Perak, to formulate and implement education policies that are more meaningful and impactful for this specific community. To achieve this, the research will explore why education inequity exists among this specific Orang Asli tribe in

Pos Kemar, assess the effectiveness of *Transformasi Orang Asli #57*, and propose elements for a contextualised education ecosystem tailored to their needs.

Problem Statement

Previous studies on the topic of Orang Asli education inequity have been limited by their tendency to view all Orang Asli groups as a monolith. This can disregard individual experiences regarding inequity because, as we have seen earlier, the Orang Asli are distinct from each other in their identity, and geographical settlement areas as a start. This research aims to study the Orang Asli community in Gerik, Perak specifically because of the unique geographical location which often proves to be a barrier for the community in terms of receiving a quality education. Selecting a specific area will allow the research to identify differences between the broader studies on Orang Asli education of the past and the individual experiences of the community in Pos Kemar, Gerik, who are primarily from the Temiar tribe. It is aimed that this paper will serve as a means for policymakers to consider the lived experience of the Orang Asli community in Gerik, Perak—particularly for the Temiar tribe in Pos Kemar—to formulate and implement more contextualised education policies that are meaningful for said community, on the ground. This paper would also shed light on the implementation gaps of an existing policy meant for the Orang Asli, namely *Transformasi Orang Asli #57*.

Research Questions

1. Why is there education inequity among the Orang Asli in Pos Kemar, Perak?
2. How effective has *Transformasi Orang Asli #57* been for the Orang Asli in Pos Kemar, Perak?
3. What can a contextualised education ecosystem look like for the Orang Asli in Pos Kemar?

Research Objectives

This research aims to explore the education inequity faced by the Temiar Orang Asli in Pos Kemar, Perak and will to reach the following objectives:

1. To explore the context as to why education inequity is prevalent among the Orang Asli.
2. To investigate current government actions and its effectiveness towards the community.
3. To explore how education can be restructured in a way that is meaningful for the Orang Asli community.

BACKGROUND

Who are the Orang Asli of Malaysia?

The Orang Asli refers to the Indigenous peoples found in Peninsular Malaysia. They can be broken down into three large groups namely Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malays. There are also several tribes under these groups such as the Kensiu, Kintaq, Jahai, Mendriq, Bateq, and Lanoh tribes under the Negrito group; the Temiar, Semai, Jah Hut, Che Wong, Semoq Beri, and Mah Meri tribes under then Senoi group; and the Temuan, Jakun, Semelai, Orang Kuala, Orang Seletar, Orang Kanaq tribes under the Proto-Malay group (Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli [JAKOA], 2022). This suggests the diversity of Orang Asli, hence the importance of categorising them as such, rather than considering them a monolith. With regards to geographical location, the different Orang Asli groups tend to live in distinct areas within Peninsular Malaysia. First, the Negrito group mainly live in the northern side of the peninsular such as Kedah, Perak, as well as Kelantan, and Pahang. The Senoi group, on the other hand, is much more dispersed in terms of settlements, with different tribes living in states such as Perak, Kelantan, Pahang, Terengganu, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka,

and Johor. Lastly, the Proto-Malays are mainly located in the southern-most state in the peninsular, Johor (JAKOA, 2022).

According to Colin Nicholas (2000) in his book *The Orang Asli and the Contest For Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, the Orang Asli as an ethnic identity only came into conception after 1960 as the various indigenous groups in Peninsular Malaysia did not see themselves as a homogenous group. This, according to Nicholas, was because the perceived differences derived from the specific geographical space they lived in was enough for the different Orang Asli groups to distinguish themselves from each other.

Historically, the Orang Asli were referred to in derogatory ways such as *Orang Liar* (wild people), *Orang Mawas* (apelike people), and *Orang Jinak* (tame or enslaved people) (Nordin et al., 2016). These derogatory terms, which were used to refer to the Orang Asli during and prior to colonial times, changed during the Emergency (1948-1960) when the British colonial government sought to find a positive term in order to combat the communist insurgents who were able to garner the sympathy and support of the indigenous peoples in the forest, partly by referring to them as Orang Asal (translates literally to original people). Hence, the term Orang Asli (directly translates to natural people) was introduced and subsequently made to be an official policy for the Malay term to be used in the English Language (Carey, 1976, as cited in Nordin et al., 2016; Nicolas, 2000).

This term, however, was not easily accepted by the community given the challenge to forge a common identity among the various Orang Asli groups. Nicholas posits that the term Orang Asli therefore was a product of non-Orang Asli perceptions and ideological impositions rather than a self-defined term from the community itself. Despite this argument, the term Orang Asli has since become a normalised term

that the Orang Asli themselves have come to accept. This is evident in Orang Asli-led organisations such as *Apa Kata Wanita Orang Asli* (Amplifying the Voices of Young Orang Asli Women, in English), *Persatuan Mahasiswa Orang Asli* (Association of Orang Asli Graduates), and others that serve as platforms for the Orang Asli to voice out their concerns and advocate for their rights—including land rights, education equity, and Orang Asli representation. This demonstrates the rich history of the Orang Asli and perceptions of the Orang Asli people's identity. The use of derogatory terms to describe the Orang Asli is only one example of how they have been excluded from the rest of Malaysian or, in the colonial period, Malayan society. This exclusion is a possible cause for the lack of protection for the Orang Asli in modern-day Malaysia with regard to education, employment, and health, among others.

Orang Asli Policies in Malaysia

During the Malayan Emergency, the British colonial government established the Department of Aborigines with hopes to win over the Orang Asli in support of the government. With the establishment of this department also came jungle forts in Orang Asli areas (one of which is likely to be Pos Kemar) which provided health facilities, education, and basic consumer items for the community (Nicholas, 2021). Later, the government's "jungle forts" in Orang Asli areas were replaced by "patterned settlements" (later to be called regroupment schemes).

Here, a number of Orang Asli communities were resettled in areas that were more accessible to the Department officials and the security forces and yet close to, though not always within, their traditional homelands. The schemes promised the Orang Asli wooden stilt-houses as well as modern amenities such as schools, clinics and shops. They were also expected to participate in the cash economy by

growing crops such as rubber and oil palm. The strategy nevertheless proved successful in that Orang Asli support for the insurgents diminished and the Emergency formally ended in 1960. However, for the Orang Asli, this spelled the beginning of a more active and direct involvement of the state into their affairs and lives (Carey, 1976, as cited in Nicholas, 2021).

At the same time that the colonial government was providing jungle forts and resettlement areas, the Aboriginal Peoples Ordinance 1954 was introduced (later revised and known as the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1974). This legislation was a continuation of the Perak Aboriginal Tribes Enactment, which was put to force in 1939 by the colonial government, and particularly Pat Noone, a colonial officer whose policy recommendations on the Orang Asli—such as the establishment of Orang Asli Areas and Reserves—were included, as well as the position of "Protector of Aborigines" with Noone being the first to hold the position (Idrus, 2011).

Given the era in which the Aboriginal Peoples Act was enacted, it has been argued that this piece of legislation essentially served as a preventative measure against the communist insurgents from getting help from the Orang Asli, and vice-versa. For this reason, there are provisions in the Act that allow the Minister concerned to prohibit any non-Orang Asli from entering an Orang Asli area, or to prohibit the entry of any written or printed material (or anything capable of conveying a message), among others. Even in the appointment of headmen, the Minister has the final say. The Act treats the Orang Asli as if they were a people needing the 'protection' of the authorities to safeguard their wellbeing" (Nicholas, 2021). Nicholas goes on to say that despite the paternalistic nature of this Act, there are some rights that are accorded to the Orang Asli. "For example, it stipulates that no Orang Asli child shall be precluded from attending any school only by

reason of being an Orang Asli. It also states that no Orang Asli child attending any school shall be obliged to attend any religious instruction without the prior written consent of the parent or guardian" (Nicholas, 2021).

The Act, although providing the establishment of Orang Asli areas and reserves, also provides the state authority the right to order any Orang Asli community to leave and stay out of an area. This, according to Nicholas, sees the Orang Asli as "tenants-at-will" under the Act, where they are allowed to remain in a particular area only at the pleasure of the state authority. This is because the state is allowed to revoke the status of Orang Asli areas and reserves, should they wish to re-acquire the land, leaving the Orang Asli displaced with no protections such as compensation or an allocated alternative site to live in, given the fact that the state has no obligation to do so. It is therefore important to note that with regard to the administration of the Orang Asli, the final say lies in the hand of the Director-General of the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA), while in matters concerning land, the state authority has the final say.

To this, Nicholas (2021), argues that the development objective of the Act is therefore evidently subsumed by both the security motive and the tendency to regard the Orang Asli as wards of the government. This sheds light on the subordinative inclusion of the Orang Asli, if any, with regards to implementing policies that are meant to "empower" the community. Idrus (2011) argues that the Orang Asli are trapped between a protectionist law—namely the Aboriginal Peoples Act—that limits their autonomy, rights, and control over their resources given their position as wards of the state. It can also be argued that it is because of these paternalistic and protectionist laws and policies that communities such as those in Pos Kemar have a general trust deficit

towards people in positions of authority (such as the school administration for instance).

Lastly, the elephant in the room that has only recently been discussed, especially in the human rights context, is that of the exclusion of the Orang Asli under Article 153 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution. In June of 2025, the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) called for a comprehensive action plan and constitutional protection to uphold the rights of indigenous peoples. This includes its previous call for an independent National Commission on Indigenous Peoples that would advise the government on laws and policies relating to indigenous peoples, the need for a comprehensive and independent review of the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954, as well as the need for the amendment of Article 153 to explicitly recognise the Orang Asli and provide them the same constitutional safeguards and measures afforded to other indigenous communities in Malaysia—the Malays and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak (Human Rights Commission of Malaysia [SUHAKAM], 2025). With regard to Article 153, Nicholas (2021) argues that "this article posits the mandatory duty of the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong (as the rotational King is known in Malaysia) to safeguard the special position of the bumiputeras (translates literally to sons of the soil) in specific areas of economic activity, education and employment. Yet, despite being the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia, the Orang Asli are not accorded the 'special position' assured to the Malays and the Natives of Sabah and Sarawak by this article. Interestingly, the Orang Asli are only mentioned in four areas in the Federal Constitution (Nicholas, 2021):

    i.   Article 8(5) (c): which does not prohibit or invalidate "any provision for the protection, wellbeing or advancement of the aboriginal peoples of the Malay Peninsula (including the reservation of land) or the reservation to aborigines of a

reasonable proportion of suitable positions in the public
service."

ii.   Article 45(2): which provide for the appointment of Senators
"capable of representing the interest of the aborigines."

iii.   Article 160 (2): which defines an aborigine as "an aborigine
of the Malay Peninsula"

iv.   Ninth Schedule, List 1: which vests upon the Federal
Government legislative authority for the "welfare of the
aborigines."

Orang Asli Education

The education of the Orang Asli has been a subject of persistent
debate in Malaysia. Deli & Yasin (2016) highlighted some of the
pertinent issues in this area, such as the high dropout rates and the
lack of, or inadequate, continuation from primary to higher education
among the Orang Asli community. In reference to the issue of dropout,
Deli & Yasin note that in 2007, only 20-40 per cent of the community
who have completed primary school signed up for lower secondary
school (UNICEF,2007, as cited in Deli & Yasin, 2016). A decade later, in
2018, the dropout rate from primary to secondary school for the
Orang Asli was at 23.3 per cent compared to the national dropout rate
of 3.2 per cent (Tan, 2024).

Additionally, the Institute for Democracy and Economic Studies
(IDEAS) released two papers in 2020 and 2021 on the educational
inequities faced by the Orang Asli community. The first paper, titled
*Education Policies in Overcoming Barriers Faced by Orang Asli Children:
Education for all* covers the barriers and challenges faced by the Orang
Asli in obtaining a meaningful and quality education. Some important
aspects cited were related to geographical barriers namely living in
remote areas and the lack of infrastructure or utilities. In the first
category, the paper explains that the vast majority of Orang Asli live in

rural or remote areas, far from urban cities or towns. This made it difficult for children from the community to access schools. For instance, although there are schools which are relatively nearer to the villages in Pos Sinderut (located in Kuala Lipis, Pahang), travelling proved to be challenging with some children having to travel two hours via dirt roads to reach their school, which becomes a hindrance on rainy days, or another instance where children had to wake up as early as 6.00am to catch their transportation to school which is 20km away. It is because of this reason that children as young as seven years old have no choice but to live in a hostel, which has received some disagreements from parents due to safety and well-being concerns (see also Wong & Abdillah, 2018; Renganathan, 2016).

With regard to the lack of infrastructure or utilities, the paper explains that many Orang Asli communities have limited access to basic amenities such as electricity, water and sanitation, and telecommunication infrastructure such as telephone, television, and internet connectivity. To add to this, it was mentioned that the Orang Asli communities are often left out of national statistics such as the Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey that is important to provide information on the income and basic amenities of households (see also Sim et al., 2016).

Figure 1. Number of Orang Asli students enrolled in national schools (2011 – 2017) (Wan, 2020)
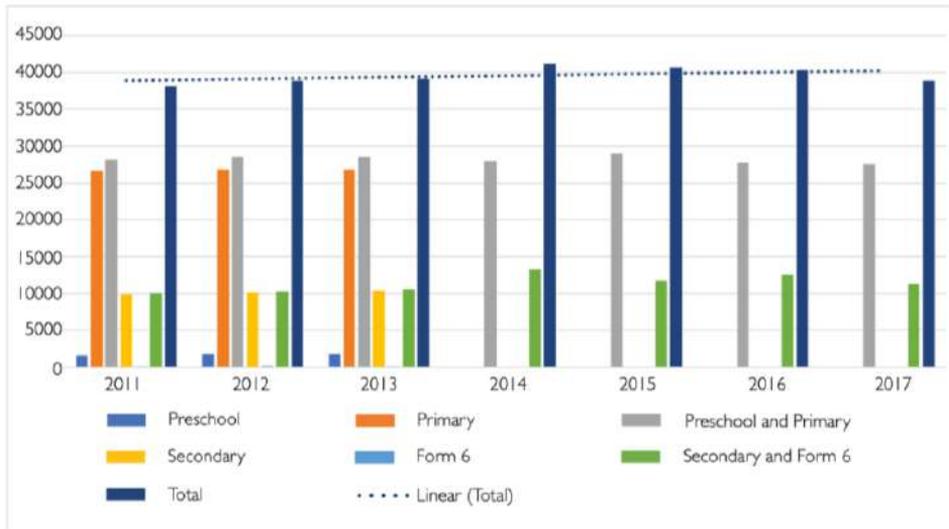
Figure 2. Transition and dropout rates of Orang Asli students after Year 6 (Wan, 2020)
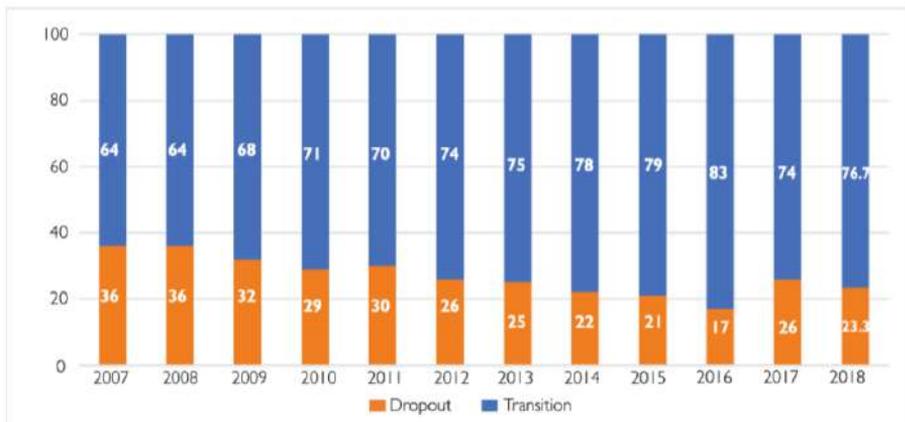
The figures above depict the enrolment and dropout rates of Orang Asli children. As shown, enrolment rates for preschool and primary school among the Orang Asli have been relatively stable throughout the years of 2011 to 2017. However, the transition rates from primary

to secondary school, despite increasing from the pre-2010s, seem to remain persistent even as recent as 2018. There is also concern of this being severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Child Frontiers et al., 2020).

Bearing in mind the hurdles faced by the communities, the Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced the Transformasi Pendidikan Orang Asli dan Peribumi or Transformasi Orang Asli #57 in 2012 under the then Deputy Prime Minister and MInister of Education, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin. This policy was developed with five pillars in mind, namely Collaboration, School Leadership, Teaching and Learning, Orang Asli Transition Management, and Orang Asli Attendance Management. The first pillar looks at the collaboration between government agencies, local communities, higher education institutions, and local authorities. The second pillar focuses on school leadership such as school headmasters/headmistresses, and senior administrative staff from schools such as the *Penolong Kanan* (Assistant Principals) with hopes to empower them in transforming their individual schools. Next, this policy aims to strengthen teaching and learning in Orang Asli schools via fun-learning and pedagogical strengthening programmes through the third pillar. The fourth and fifth pillars aim to address and overcome the transition and attendance issues that are widespread among Orang Asli communities vis-à-vis their education.

Despite there being a lack of data regarding Orang Asli enrolment and dropout rates post-COVID, the MOE's 2024 annual report showed that the percentage of pupil transition—from Standard 6 to Form 1—increased to 89.86%. This is a gradual increase from the rate in 2022 (85.43%) as well as 2021 (87.81%). This improvement is attributed to outreach programmes as well as *Jom Belajar* or Let's Learn programmes. The *Jom Belajar* programme was introduced by MOE in 2020 and included *Program Khas Murid Orang Asli* (Special Programme

for Orang Asli Students) and *Chup Bidui Sikulah* (translated from the Bateq language to Let's Go to School)—both of which are meant to provide basic literacy lessons for students who have not attended school. This could also be attributed to the increase of K9 and K11 schools as well. According to the current education minister, Fadhlina Sidek, the MOE will continue to expand Comprehensive Special Model 9 (K9) and Comprehensive Special Model 11 (K11) schools—schools that host students from kindergarten to Form 3 (15 years old) for K9 schools, and from kindergarten to Form 5 (17 years old) for K11 schools—nationwide involving Orang Asli and indigenous children to prevent them from missing out on education (Malay Mail, 2024).

Figure 3. Transition rates of Orang Asli students (2021 – 2023) (MOE, 2024)
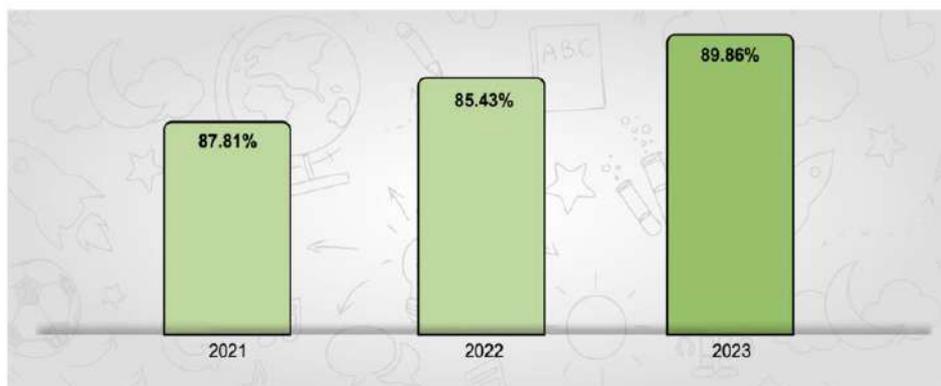
Source: Daily School Management Division

RPS Pos Kemar

Rancangan Penempatan/Pengumpulan Semula (RPS) or the *Orang Asli Resettlement Programme*, refers to one of the early efforts of the Government of Malaysia in developing indigenous communities in Peninsular Malaysia (Ronzi, Sharina, & Joy, 2019). Pos Kemar is a settlement area for the Temiar tribe in Gerik, Perak. Located around the Temenggor Lake, which is also a hydro-electric dam, Pos Kemar is 80 kilometres from Gerik, Perak via boat and car. Pos Kemar also has

a rich history, as it was a British military base (known as Fort Kemar then) in the north during the Malayan Emergency which lasted from 1946 to 1960 (Wombell, 2011). It was during that time that the Orang Asli from Kemar were recruited as soldiers under the Senoi Praaq (People of War) regiment, which was subsequently incorporated as part of the Pasukan Gerakan Am (PGA) or the General Operations Force (JAKOA, 2022).

The construction of the school in Pos Kemar (SK RPS Kemar) was completed in 1965 under the stewardship of the Jungle Squad under the PGA and the *Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli* (Department of Orang Asli Affairs, JHEOA), the former name of JAKOA. In 1993, the school was redesignated under the Ministry of Education and the school was formally known as SK RPS Kemar. Finally, in 2012, the school was expanded to become a Comprehensive Special Model 9 (K9) school which hosts students from kindergarten to Form 3 (15 years old) (SK RPS Kemar, 2023).

Inequality vs Inequity: What is the Difference?

Inequality has been the term used in mainstream articles and discussions of education for many years. In simpler terms, it refers to the differences in treatment that a person may experience due to aspects such as race, religion, and socioeconomic background. With regard to this, there are several key concepts which are important to uncover. These include (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [UNESCAP], n.d):

  i. Inequality of outcomes: Referring to disparities in material dimensions of human wellbeing such as income and wealth. This is usually measured by income or consumption metrics.

ii.   Inequality of opportunity: Referring to unequal access to fundamental rights and services to sustain and improve one's livelihood. This includes education, healthcare, and digital access.

iii.   Group-based inequalities: Referring to systemic disparities between groups with shared identities. This is also known as horizontal inequalities that are often deeply entrenched and rooted in history and colonialism.

These concepts of inequality provide insights to the inequalities faced by the Orang Asli in several forms. First, within the scope of the inequality of outcomes, the Orang Asli face major disparities with regards to income. For instance, data obtained from JAKOA in 2021 suggests that 89.4% of the Orang Asli were living in poverty. This is striking considering the national poverty rate in 2022 being 6.2% (Eswaran, 2024). On the other hand, in the area of inequality of opportunities, as pointed out earlier, the Orang Asli are severely excluded and underrepresented, especially with regard to legal protections and affirmative action policies that could significantly uplift the community with regards to education and economic opportunities, among others. This of course is also related to the aspect of group-based inequalities owing to the British colonial government's paternalistic policies which ultimately widened inequalities among the Orang Asli due to their voices not being a key part of decision making with regards to policies that impact their lives.

The concept of inequity, on the other hand, refers to situations that are unjust and unfair. It is quite commonly used in relation to healthcare and education, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Schmelkes (2020) highlighted that inequity is one of the most serious problems in education globally with multiple causes and consequences including differences in access to schooling, retention,

and learning. She further explains that despite there being progress in the absolute and relative numbers of enrolled students, disparities between the richest and poorest, as well as rural and urban dwellers, have not diminished. It is also crucial to point out that although solutions in relation to equality would be providing the same resources to all students, equity goes a step further by providing more resources to those who are in need of such resources or assistance. In the case of the Orang Asli, it can be argued that more resources should be mobilized in order for them to catch up from years of systemic disadvantages.

Significance to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Leaving no one behind is the central theme and promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study looks specifically at Orang Asli education, which relates to SDG 4 (Quality Education), as well as SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Under SDG 4, this study particularly relates to target 4.1, which seeks to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes by 2030. This is especially relevant given the hurdles faced by the Orang Asli with regard to dropout rates and the inadequate continuation from primary to secondary education. On the other hand, for SDG 10, this study is concerned with target 10.3, which seeks to ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome. This target is relevant because the study takes into account the various interrelated issues that impact Orang Asli educational inequity—including limited access to basic amenities such as electricity, water and sanitation, and telecommunication infrastructure, as well as the historical contexts that have brought about the alienation of the Orang Asli in terms of legal protections.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this research, qualitative methods were employed to gather meaningful data from Orang Asli parents, including some who work at SK RPS Kemar, located within Pos Kemar. Both primary and secondary data were used in this research. First, secondary data was collected through previous studies and reports on Orang Asli education with data such as literacy rates, dropout rates, and other relevant information on Orang Asli education. Primary data was then gathered via semi-structured surveys—which were administered via verbal interviews—where parents were asked questions in three areas— Education Inequity, the Transformasi Orang Asli policy, and a Contextualised Education for the Orang Asli. Given the lack of internet in Pos Kemar, the survey questions were printed on paper and provided to the participants. The research team also decided to conduct verbal interviews, using the survey questions as guides, to confirm or ask further questions where relevant. This approach of conducting interviews with the participants would also allow participants with lower literacy levels to participate in the research.

Figure 4. Qualitative Methods
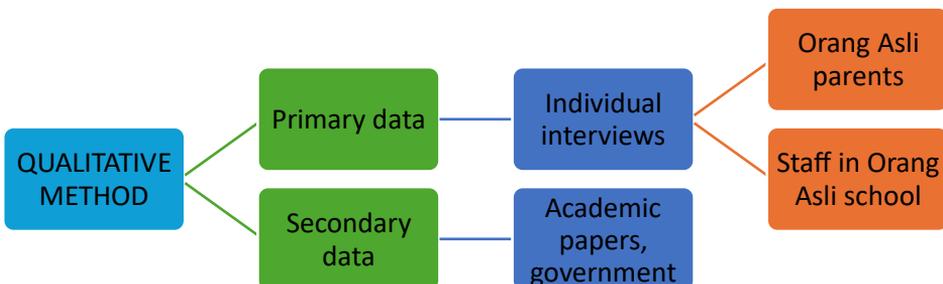
Figure 5. Research Stages
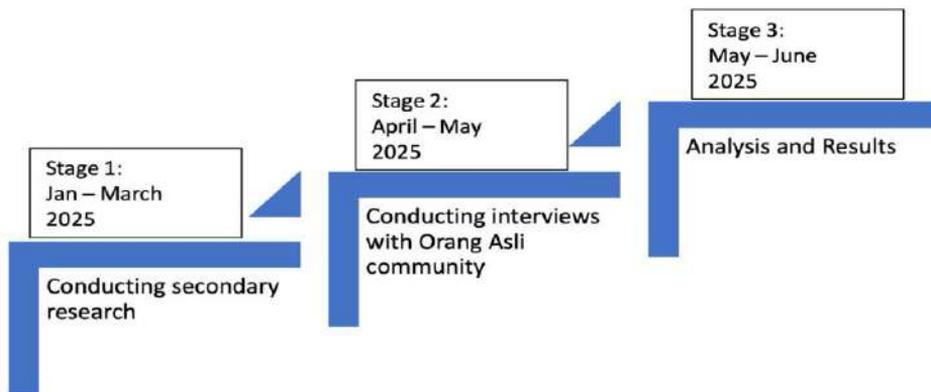
As demonstrated in the figures above, the entire research process is divided into three (3) stages. Stage 1, was scheduled to be conducted between February to March 2025, was the duration where research was conducted via secondary data to identify the statistics and other relevant data. Stage 2 is a two-pronged approach where interviews were supposed to be run with the community to collect the group dynamics and opinions from parents within the Orang Asli community. The last stage, Stage 3, was two-pronged as well where the researcher conducted the analysis as well as worked on extrapolating the results.

The survey questions were divided into three (3) sections—Education Inequity, the Transformasi Orang Asli policy, and a Contextualised Education for the Orang Asli. In the first section, Education Inequity, the participants were asked questions regarding:
- Whether the quality of education in Orang Asli schools were comparable to non-Orang Asli schools
- Whether Orang Asli students were treated differently compared to non-Orang Asli students (in Orang Asli schools like SK RPS Kemar or mixed schools where Orang Asli and non-

Orang Asli students study alongside one another—often in high school)

- Whether Orang Asli students were treated better in Orang Asli schools, compared to non-Orang Asli schools
- Whether Orang Asli receive a quality with regards to reading, writing, and arithmetics (from the parents' perspective)

The questions mentioned above were chosen to look into the relationship of racial differences and education inequity. This is particularly relevant given that school policies, teachers' expectations, as well as relationships with peer students play a role in reinforcing discrimination in education for children—especially from minority groups (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2022).

The second section, the Transformasi Orang Asli policy, is concerned with Orang Asli parents' perspectives on their:

- Familiarity with the policy
- Understanding of the objectives of the policy
- Engagements (if any) with the school or Ministry of Education regarding the policy
- Differences between Orang Asli and non-Orang Asli schools with regard to attendance, teaching & learning, as well as transition to high school

The aforementioned questions were selected specifically to identify whether the Transformasi Orang Asli cascaded to the ground level, especially with parents who are identified as a key stakeholder in implementing this policy. This is important considering this policy emphasises the need to engage with parents and school managements on the ground level in order for the policy to be contextually implemented.

In the third section, a Contextualised Education for the Orang Asli, the participants were asked questions such as:

- Perceptions on the current education system, in terms of reading, writing, and arithmetics
- How to improve the current education system
- How the school leadership and teachers can be empowered to transform the school
- What kind of teaching approaches are needed to ensure a quality education
- Whether parents need to be involved in school decisions that impact students
- How Orang Asli students can be encouraged to attend school and transition to high school

The questions above were determined to obtain input from parents regarding the current education system, their suggestions on how the current education system can be improved according to their needs, and their involvement in school.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher was able to gain access to Pos Kemar—which is usually accessed via boat through the Trojen Jetty—through the permission of the Chairman for the *Jawatankuasa Pembangunan dan Keselamatan Kampung Orang Asli* (JPPKOA) or the Orang Asli Development and Security Committee. This is because the researcher was formerly a teacher in SK RPS Kemar as a Teach For Malaysia Fellow from 2022 to 2023. This also helped the researcher to develop a sense of trust and familiarity among the parents, which allowed the research team to interview the parents in Pos Kemar.

Ensuring the ethical conduct of this research, which involves parents from the Orang Asli community, is crucial. To safeguard their

wellbeing and uphold their rights, the researcher sought their explicit consent, explaining to each interviewee that they could decide to remove any part of their responses deemed too sensitive or terminate their interview, in the event that they are uncomfortable with any of the questions asked. This research strictly adhered to ethical guidelines, emphasising voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity.

A translator who is proficient in Bahasa Temiar (which is the mother tongue or first language in Pos Kemar) was also present to facilitate effective communication, ensuring that the participants' views are accurately captured. The researcher also presented the survey questions to the Chairman of the JPKKOA in Pos Kemar to identify whether said questions and methods met the ethical standards fit to conduct research for a marginalised group like the Orang Asli and was subsequently given the green light from the head of the community to conduct this research.

Limitations of the Study
Throughout the process of putting together this paper, several limitations arose. Firstly, it is important to note that the number of research participants (19) is a relatively small sample size, which means that findings might not encompass the lived experiences of all parents in Pos Kemar, Perak. Next, given the scarcity of data on Orang Asli education, particularly on yearly literacy and dropout rates, and the primary reliance of anecdotal evidence to paint a clearer picture of the lived experiences of diverse Orang Asli communities, the research and its findings could not be as in depth as the researcher would have liked it to be. This suggests a strong need for better sharing of information with regards to the performance of education for the Orang Asli community for policymakers, civil society, as well members of the community to take action in addressing the unique

challenges that are faced by the Orang Asli with regards to education. Lastly, due to scheduling conflicts and delays in obtaining permission to enter Pos Kemar, there were several delays in the stages of research.

ANALYSIS & RESULTS
Demographic Breakdown
The individuals surveyed for this paper were from a community in RPS Pos Kemar in Gerik, Perak. Overall, there were nineteen (19) interviewees for this survey—63% were Female and 37% were Male. Notably, all interviewees are parents of at least one child currently attending school. Among the parents, two participants work in the local school within Pos Kemar (SK RPS Kemar), while one respondent is a village head or *Penghulu*. With regard to age, they were of ages ranging from 26 years old to 59 years old, a large portion of whom were 31 years old (16%).

In terms of the interviewees' individual areas, they come from Kampung Bal (5.3%), Kampung Jarau Lama (5.3%), Kampung Rantau (31.6%), and Kampung Katong (57.9%). In terms of distance from the individual Kampungs to the school, Kampung Katong, Bal, and Jarau Lama are considered much nearer to the school as compared to Kampung Rantau. That said, the findings of the survey might reflect challenges for students to get to the school, reflected by the distance between their villages to the school. On their highest academic qualifications, 52.6% of interviewees had disclosed that they dropped out of school (a combination of primary and secondary), while 31.6% finished high school, and 5.3% who finished STPM. One respondent (5.3%) holds a master's degree.

Figure 6. Map of the Villages in Pos Kemar (Adapted from SK RPS Kemar, 2023)

Education Inequity

When asked about education equity in RPS Pos Kemar, 52.6% answered that there is no education equity in Kemar as compared to schools outside of Kemar (specifically referring to non-Orang Asli schools). From this, some noted that the school in Kemar did not focus much on academics, but instead on sports. On the other hand, 31.6% answered that there is education equity, meaning that the quality of education and opportunities in Kemar are the same as schools outside of the area. Additionally, 10.6% were unsure of what to say about the

quality of education as well as the opportunities in other schools as compared to that in Kemar, while 5.3% answered that the school in Kemar is much better than that of schools outside of Kemar as it focuses on programmes and sports which interest the Orang Asli students.

Interviewees were then asked on the treatment of Orang Asli students in Orang Asli schools (also known as *Sekolah Murid Orang Asli/SMOA*) as compared to the students in mainstream schools. This comparison was able to be captured from the interviewees given that a majority of parents and their children have had experiences studying in an Orang Asli school in primary school—be it in Pos Kemar or otherwise—as well as a mainstream school in secondary school. This is especially so before the introduction of the K9 and K11 schools. From this, 58% of interviewees answered that the treatment of Orang Asli students was different, while 5% believed that the students were treated the same regardless of their schools. Among those who believed that the treatment of Orang Asli students were different, it was noted that the academic performance within Orang Asli schools were lacking when compared to non-Orang Asli or mixed schools; some also noted the fact that there was no reporting mechanism within Orang Asli schools which could lead to the school administration not considering parents' feedback. Meanwhile, 16% felt that the treatment of Orang Asli students depended on guidance from the community or NGOs, support from parents, and the ability of students to adapt in different environments. Lastly, 21% were unsure of the difference of treatment for Orang Asli students within Kemar and outside of the area.

When followed up on how Orang Asli students are treated differently in non-Orang Asli schools, some notable responses were that in non-Orang Asli schools, there exists some form of racial discrimination. One parent noted that one of their children who studied in a mixed

school—where students of different ethnicities study together—in Gerik was teased by other students who used stereotypes such as "Orang Asli people eat pork" which made their child uncomfortable. Another parent felt that some students and teachers teased their child on racial grounds as well, calling the Orang Asli a people who were only reliant on handouts, among others. This parent went on to say that the school in Pos Kemar is therefore much better as it is a fully Orang Asli school. However, an issue that does arise in Pos Kemar is that parents' complaints or grievances are not taken seriously by teachers, according to this parent. Some other responses included the fact that schools outside of Orang Asli villages provide opportunities for Orang Asli students to mingle and therefore forge friendships with other races, and that treatment wise, it is about the same in Pos Kemar barring teaching and learning (which is considered better in non-Orang Asli schools).

Interviewees were then asked regarding whether Orang Asli students receive a quality education (focusing on literacy and numeracy). In this regard, 37% of interviewees believe that Orang Asli students receive an education that is satisfactory. Despite the answer that the current education quality for Orang Asli students is sufficient, they noted that improvements are still needed. This, according to them, can be addressed via extra tuition classes to supplement lessons that are conducted in the classroom. There were also parents (10%) who were unsure and did not have any comments on the quality of education for Orang Asli children.

The remaining interviewees (53%) believed that the current quality of education for Orang Asli students imminently needs improvement. Among these responses, a common theme emerged in that most of the interviewees felt that the school administration in Kemar was focusing less on academics (i.e. teaching in the classroom), and more

on co-curricular activities (i.e. sports competitions, practices). This, in the interviewees' view, have led to Orang Asli students not able to fully grasp academic skills, especially with regard to basic literacy and numeracy. One parent noted that their child who was in Form 3 (15 years old) was still unable to read and needed to spell words out to be able to read a sentence. However, this parent also noted that their child does not consistently attend school.

When probed further, the parent cited that their child was too lazy to attend school. Although it is interesting to note that when the parent was asked to elaborate on why their child was not interested in attending school, they answered that it was because their child had felt scared to go to school after seeing a friend getting disciplined by one of the teachers. Another parent stated that even though some students attend school every day, many cannot master what they have learnt. In contrast, one respondent, who is a parent and local from Pos Kemar as well as a teacher in the school, mentioned that many students still face issues in literacy and numeracy due to many of them not attending kindergarten. This makes it harder for the aforementioned students to catch up with their peers and the syllabus once they are in Year 1 of school (7 years old). Several parents also touched on the challenges that teachers and school administration face such as the insufficient number of teachers in the school, the lack of additional tuition classes, as well as the lack of remedial classes or *kelas pemulihan*. When followed up on the number of remedial classes the school in Pos Kemar has, the respondent pointed out that there is only one remedial class for the whole school. The respondent also suggested better streamed classes based on students' ability to ensure that teachers can meet students where they are.

Transformasi Orang Asli #57

When asked on whether the interviewees have heard of the Transformasi Pendidikan Orang Asli dan Peribumi policy, 53% disclosed that they had not heard of the policy, while 37% answered that they have heard about the policy. Meanwhile, 10% answered that they were unsure on whether they have heard of this policy. The interviewees were then asked on their opinions as well as their understanding of the policy. A considerable number of interviewees (79%) disclosed that they did not have a clear understanding of this policy and were not able to explain neither their perspective of the policy nor their opinions about it. Conversely, the remaining 21% described the policy as one that:

- *"is meant to improve academic performance of Orang Asli students in school and to ensure full attendance until they reach Form 5 (17 years old)"*;
- *"includes programmes for Orang Asli children to succeed in the future"*;
- *"is meant to ensure that Orang Asli students are provided an education at the same level as other students and for Orang Asli students to be given opportunities to thrive outside their villages like Pos Kemar"*; and lastly
- *"involves programmes aimed at addressing literacy issues (through PIKAP) and pedagogical approaches (such as Rimbagogi) based on different situations and contexts"*.

One interviewee disclosed that they found information about this policy via TikTok instead of the school or Ministry of Education while another noted that they have heard of this policy but, as far as they are aware, the school did not implement this policy.

Interviewees were then posed a question regarding whether the school in Pos Kemar, or any Ministry of Education officials had talked

about the pedagogical approaches used in the classroom for Orang Asli students. Out of the 19 interviewees, 80% disclosed that neither the school nor the Ministry had discussed pedagogical approaches that are used in the classroom, while 10% were unsure of whether these pedagogical approaches were mentioned as they do not frequently attend PIBG (Parent-Teacher Association) meetings. Several interviewees noted that discussions on the pedagogical approaches should be conducted during PIBG meetings, however, most discussions that happen during these meetings are of school programmes, sports activities, as well as school attendance and the need for revision at home.

At the same time, 10% of interviewees noted that pedagogical approaches for Orang Asli students were discussed with them. One of the interviewees, who is a teacher at the school in Kemar, further elaborated that teachers from SK RPS Kemar and other Orang Asli schools were sent for training on pedagogical approaches that can be incorporated in their own schools, which included the Rimbagogi module. Another respondent added that the school had mentioned plans to improve education and teaching in classes but there was yet to be progress on this. One of the issues that this respondent noted was on the lack of remedial classes.

Moving on, the interviewees were also asked on whether the school leadership in Kemar or Ministry officials had mentioned Orang Asli students' transition to high school. From the interviewees, 58% answered that the transition of Orang Asli students into high school is mentioned. This is generally discussed during PIBG meetings. Given SK RPS Kemar's categorization of a K9 school (meaning to say that the school hosts students from kindergarten until Form 3 or 15 years old), students on their final year within this school are briefed on the transition from Pos Kemar to their next school, which in most cases

would be a high school in the town of Gerik, Perak, or in some cases a vocational school in Gerik (*Kolej Vokasional Gerik*).

According to the parents, this process is entirely handled by the school as well as JAKOA in terms of student registration, transportation to Gerik, as well as uniforms and stationery. One parent also noted that the school involves individual village heads or the *Penghulu* regarding the transition process from SK RPS Kemar to the students' new school where they will spend another two years before graduating with a Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) at Form 5 (17 years old). It is also important to note that the school in Pos Kemar will be re-categorised to become a K11 school to further ease this transition process.

On the other hand, 37% disclosed that neither the school nor the Ministry engaged them with regards to Orang Asli students' transition to high school. According to the interviewees, the school does not usually consult parents much as the children are informed during school, and since the transition process is handled by the school and JAKOA, they are not too involved in the process. Notably, one parent mentioned that alternatives other than the usual schools or institutions that the school and JAKOA deal with, are not presented to parents; while another parent addressed that discussions on students transitioning to high school often only happen within the school through PIBG meetings, and rarely in the villages where the parents are. Lastly, 5% disclosed that they were unsure on the topic as their child is still in primary school.

Next, interviewees were also asked on whether teachers or school leadership in Pos Kemar discuss the attendance of Orang Asli students with parents. In this regard, the majority of interviewees (84.2%) indicated that the school does discuss attendance of students with parents. This is usually done during PIBG meetings as well as outreach

programmes where the teachers and leadership pay visits to each village in Pos Kemar to tackle the issue of dropouts by talking to parents and students at least once a year. This, according to the parents, helps convince their children to go to school, however another parent disclosed that the change in behaviour for students to attend school is often short lived. One respondent also noted that since many of these discussions happen during PIBG meetings, those who cannot attend often are not aware of initiatives from the school with regards to attendance. Conversely, 15.8% disclosed that they had not been approached by the school on the topic of student attendance.

Moving on, interviewees were asked their opinions on the differences in attendance for Orang Asli and non-Orang Asli schools. From this, 68% answered that there are stark differences between the attendance of students in Orang Asli schools compared to those in non-Orang Asli schools. Many of the interviewees admitted that in Pos Kemar, for example, cases of truancy are quite common, which is a shared issue in other Orang Asli schools as well. One respondent added that the school is not entirely to blame for this, however, some students do not receive warning letters despite missing school for many times. This has been brought up in PIBG meetings, however, there has not been any follow up regarding the matter. Another respondent added that there are differences between villages within Pos Kemar as well, whereby those who are from villages nearer to the school are more likely to consistently attend school while those from the farther villages are not fully able to do so. It is important to note that SK RPS Kemar does have a hostel for students, however, some do not prefer it as an option. One parent also notes that it is much easier for their children to attend school in Pos Kemar due to vehicles provided by JAKOA to send students to school and to send them back home at the end of the school period. On the flipside, 21% of

interviewees answered that attendance is the same whether it is in Orang Asli schools or non-Orang Asli schools, while 11% were unsure of what to answer for this question.

The interviewees were subsequently polled on their opinions regarding the effectiveness of the school in teaching Orang Asli students, the effectiveness of the school in ensuring that students transition into high school, as well as the effectiveness of the school in making sure that students consistently attend school. The results of these polls are as follows:

Figure 7. Perspectives on the school's effectiveness regarding school teaching and learning

19 responses
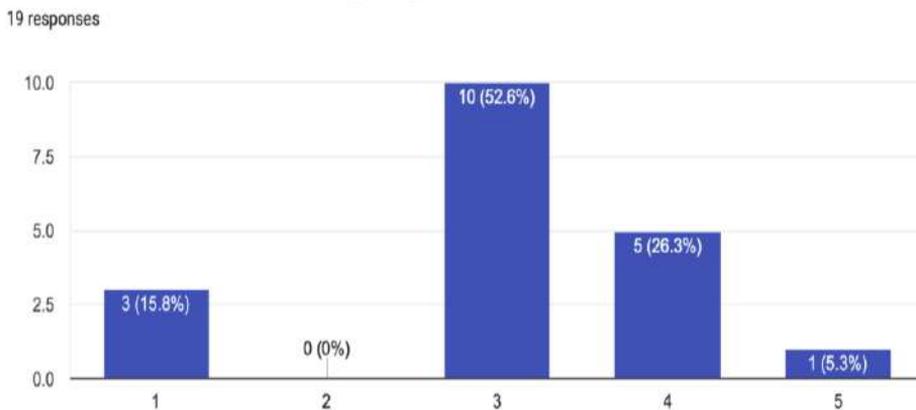
When polled on the effectiveness of the school (SK RPS Kemar) with regard to teaching Orang Asli students, the majority of interviewees (52.6%) answered that they felt the school was doing moderately well. Meanwhile, 26.3% disclosed that the school was doing a good job at teaching the students. Notably, 15.8% felt that the school was doing poorly in teaching Orang Asli students. Lastly, 5.3% answered that the school was doing excellently in this regard.

Figure 8. Perspectives on the school's effectiveness regarding students' transition

19 responses
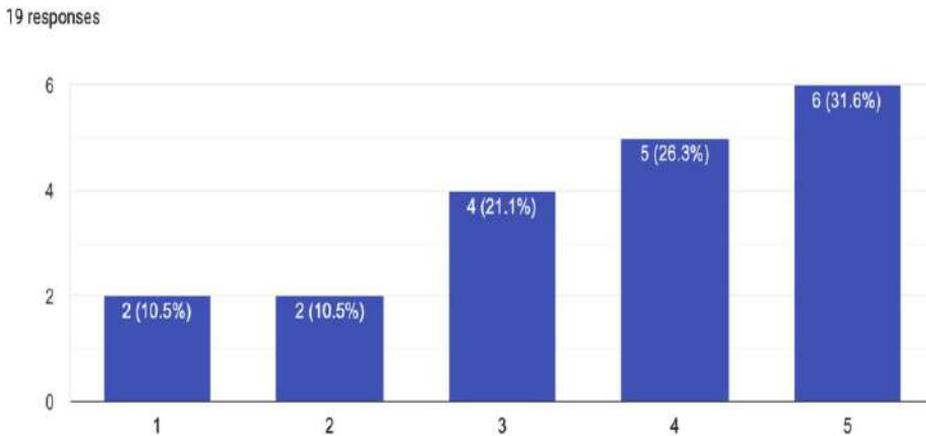
With regard to the school's effectiveness in ensuring their students transition to high school, 31.6% felt that the school was doing an excellent job at ensuring that students transition to high school. Moving on, 26.3% believe that the school is doing well in this regard while 21.1% disclosed that the school is doing an average job at ensuring that students transition to high school. Additionally, 10.5% of interviewees answered that the school was doing below average in this area. At the same time, 10.5% of interviewees disclosed that the school was doing a poor job at ensuring students transition to high school. One respondent, who was working in the school, elaborated that out of close to 100 students, only about 60% transition to high school. Another respondent added that not many in the villages are aware of the various opportunities for students. The respondent added that although most of the information regarding the policy are online, many are still disconnected from the internet in their villages. This also applies to government programmes or aid where people are meant to register, however, many do not apply for them as there is a lack of clarity and explanation on the ground.

Figure 9. Perspectives on the school's effectiveness regarding school attendance
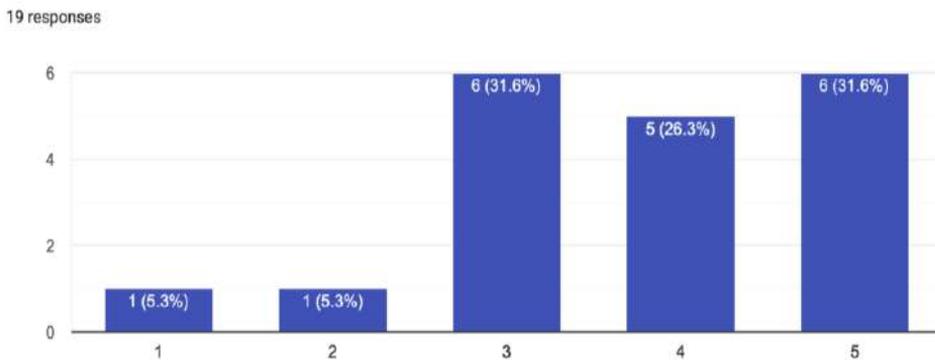
As illustrated in the figure above, in terms of the effectiveness of the school regarding school attendance, 31.6% felt that the school is doing very well at ensuring that students in Pos Kemar attend school consistently. At the same time, the same number of interviewees (31.6%) believed that the school is doing moderately well in this area. Next, 26.3% of interviewees answered that the school is doing above average at ensuring school attendance among students. Lastly, 5.3% of interviewees disclosed that the school was doing a below average job, while another 5.3% felt that the school was doing poorly in this area. One respondent added that school initiatives in this regard must be improved as some students choose not to attend school out of fear of elephants within the villages or in specific cases, conflicts with their teachers where the students feel afraid of their teachers when they are scolded. Another respondent praised the school's efforts through its outreach programme; however, this program tends to only have momentary impact which would require continuous improvement.

Contextualised Education Ecosystem for the Orang Asli
On the topic of a more contextualised education ecosystem for the Orang Asli, interviewees were asked their views on the current education system for their children (focusing on literacy and

numeracy). The majority of interviewees (47%) felt that the current education system is enough. However, they did note that improvements are required. One respondent shed light on the fact that the school does not have any computer classes for the students to catch up with the digital technology that is already widely used and stressed the importance of having such classes for the benefit of students beyond school. One parent felt that although the current education system is sufficient, additional classes or tuition classes are needed to further strengthen students' understanding; while another parent felt that the presence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) would be beneficial for the students and the community as well. It is important to note that organisations such as SOLS 24/7 and Teach For Malaysia have run relatively long-term programmes which parents have acknowledged to have helped their children in their academics. According to several parents, one such case is when a SOLS 24/7 tutor taught students English, close to ten students were able to pass the subject in school. Lastly, one interviewee, who works at the school, disclosed that the Ministry of Education is currently working on literacy programmes in collaboration with SK RPS Kemar. This programme will focus on literacy classes in the villages within Pos Kemar while the school focuses on providing more remedial classes for students. At the same time, the school will be working on providing materials and resources for students to bring back to their homes for homework and revision, among others. Additionally, the respondent added that there needs to be a top-up of classes considering the high student-to-teacher ratio that is evident in the school.

Conversely, 42% believed that the current education is unsatisfactory for Orang Asli students. One parent, who is a *Penghulu (*village head), commented that English is one of the subjects in which Orang Asli students are the weakest. They added that despite students learning this language for 11 years in school, many are still unable to converse,

let alone read in English. Another parent suggested that the school needs a special needs programme (*sekolah khas* in Malay) or a larger remedial programme to address the low literacy that is evident among Orang Asli students in Pos Kemar. Several parents also felt the current education system is insufficient owing to the fact many students, when asked by their parents on what they had done in school, report that they participate in programmes or watch TV. Lastly, 11% of interviewees were unsure on what to comment on this question.

When asked on how they felt Orang Asli education could be improved, a noticeable pattern emerged: 53% mentioning the need for additional or tuition classes for students in their respective villages, as well as the school. One parent added that there used to be additional classes for students in school, but it was cancelled. On top of this, one parent added that students should also be able to bring their textbooks back home for additional revision but are unable to do so now due to concerns of students tearing or losing their textbooks. This suggestion, coincidentally, is in the works for the school, as mentioned earlier by one respondent who works at the school. On the other hand, 37% of interviewees did not have any further comments on this. Additionally, one parent felt that what is needed to improve Orang Asli education is the explanation of opportunities for students beyond school (e.g. tertiary education, employment). Lastly, another interviewee believed that the District Education Office (PPD) should monitor teachers in the school to ensure that the quality of education is consistently upheld.

The Interviewees were then asked their opinions on how the school leadership can be empowered to transform the school. In this regard, one of the interviewees who works at the school recommended that the school needs at least 12 more teachers as the current number of educators is not enough to handle all students. The respondent added

that teaching materials would have to be improved as well, considering most teaching materials within the school are offline materials due to internet limitations in Pos Kemar. That said, the internet in the area should be improved as well, to ensure that learning is more fun for the students with the existence of the variety of online resources that are available. Additionally, 12% of the interviewees added that the teachers should learn the Bahasa Temiar (the mother tongue for those living in Pos Kemar), for them to be able to better communicate with the community and students. This should also be employed, according to one respondent, in tandem with in-service training to provide teachers with additional insights on how to better educate the Orang Asli students. Another interviewee felt that the school should have a pool of substitute teachers to replace those who have other commitments outside of school including sports competitions, or teacher training. This is to ensure that students are able to learn even when their teachers are not present.

Next, interviewees were enquired on what kind of teaching was needed to ensure that the students in Pos Kemar receive a quality education. A majority of interviewees (47%) felt that the kind of education needed is one that focuses on additional classes or tuition classes to address any concerns that students may have during their class within school hours. This is more beneficial if it is conducted within individual villages for convenience of parents and students. Additionally, 27% cited career fairs or field visits such as school visits outside of Pos Kemar—including sports and arts competitions—as a suggestion to improve the quality of education. This, as elaborated by several parents, would allow Orang Asli students to experience other perspectives and gain exposure on educational and employment opportunities. Next, 16% of interviewees believed that the addition of activities such as "play-based learning" would allow for students to be more engaged while learning. Lastly, 10% felt that what is needed

includes computer classes for students to be able to use current technology which would benefit their lives after school.

Interviewees were then asked whether parents needed to be involved in the school's decision making when it involves students. To this, an overwhelming majority (84%) answered that it is important for parents to be involved in making decisions that impact students. The interviewees who answered this emphasised that it should be a collaborative effort between the parents and teachers, since parents want to know about their children's progress too. One respondent added that without parents' involvement, there would be communication issues with regard to the decisions made by the school for students. Several interviewees also shed light on the fact that the school could get valuable insights from parents with regards to pedagogical approaches and challenges faced.

Another interviewee, who works at the school, added that currently each village has a representative appointed to help disseminate information via WhatsApp. Although the information that is usually shared revolve around activities and meetings as opposed to attendance and issues faced by students, which is something several parents felt is needed. Next, 11% of interviewees felt that parents do not need to be involved in the school's decisions as long as their children are able to graduate and obtain their SPM. Lastly, 5% were unsure on this question.

The interviewees were also asked regarding how Orang Asli students could be encouraged to consistently attend school. Some suggestions from interviewees included motivational talks to raise awareness on the importance of attending school, having engaging activities as part of their daily lessons, continuous outreach programmes in their individual villages, as well as addressing concerns such as bullying in

schools among students. One parent suggested that the school could also have daily updates with parents and the *Pengulu* (heads) of each village with regards to attendance. Additionally, several interviewees added the current context of the school as well where transportation (shuttle service using pickup trucks), hostels (although limited), as well as uniforms and stationery are provided for students at the beginning of the school year. One of the interviewees who works at the school also noted that one way the school administration tries to encourage students to stay in the hostels and come to school was by compiling students' food preferences and reflecting them in the canteen and hostel food hall menus. For example, if students preferred nasi lemak, the school would ensure that students are served this at least once or twice a week.

Finally, interviewees were enquired on how students could be encouraged to transition into high school. Several parents disclosed the need for awareness programmes for students for transitioning to high school, while one parent highlighted the need for high school education (until Form 5) to be mandatory for all students. Some interviewees advocated for the need to discuss alternatives and choices for students and parents to choose from. One example given was the opportunity for Muslim students to pursue their high school education in a Tahfiz, or an Islamic religious school in Kuala Lumpur. Another parent felt that different parties like JAKOA, MOE, the school, and the community should work together in ensuring that all students continue their education.

A respondent also highlighted the need to get to the root cause of why students choose not to continue their education. Lastly, a respondent who works at the school highlighted the importance of consistently engaging with parents or guardians. The respondent noted that the outreach programmes have stagnated in terms of effectiveness in

bringing students back to school. However, the respondent disclosed that the school is working on conducting motivational programmes for students and parents to ensure that everyone is on the same page. At the same time, they would be looking at individual cases and ensuring that no student is left behind in terms of their education. This is because some parents work outside of Pos Kemar and leave their children under the care of other family members.

DISCUSSION

Overall, it has become clear that one of the key reasons as to why there is education inequity in Pos Kemar, and arguably among the Orang Asli in general, is due to the long-term impacts of colonialism and the subsequent alienation of the Orang Asli in terms of key legal protections. In terms of the *Transformasi Pendidikan Orang Asli dan Peribumi* policy, it can be said that although it has been a good starting point and platform to address the persistent challenges that the Orang Asli face in terms of education (literacy, attendance, and transition among others), the prominent policy gaps have resulted in a lack of clarity between the different parties that are meant to work together. These policy gaps are not new to education providers, however, given constraints such as the lack of internet access, as well as a lack of clarity with regards to the implementation of programmes under the *Transformasi Pendidikan Orang Asli dan Peribumi* policy, there has yet to be measures to address such gaps. As a whole, from the results of the interviews, several areas emerge—systemic alienation, policy communication gaps, as well as the community-school relationship.

Systemic Alienation

The systemic alienation of the Orang Asli has been a long-standing issue, stretching to the colonial era. As mentioned above, this has caused significant challenges for the Orang Asli especially in terms of

understanding and advocating for their rights. Firstly, the exclusion of the Orang Asli from Article 153 of the Federal Constitution puts them at a disadvantage as they are legally not entitled to the special positions that are granted to the Bumiputera of Peninsular Malaysia as well as the Orang Asal from Sabah and Sarawak. This was also evident in Pos Kemar, at a smaller scale where several parents' comments on their children's education were that they were not aware of the alternatives that they could go to, as well as opportunities to pursue tertiary education and economic participation outside of Pos Kemar.

Policy Communication Gaps

From the interviews in Pos Kemar, it was clear that many parents were not aware of the *Transformasi Pendidikan Orang Asli dan Peribumi* policy. The involvement of parents is of importance considering that parents and Orang Asli community members are key stakeholders and success factors identified by the Ministry of Education for the policy, particularly under programmes or activities such as the Cakna Ibu Bapa (*Attentive Parents*) programme*,* and the *Khidmat Komuniti* (*Community Engagement*) programme*.* For instance, in the policy's plans to increase students' attendance, parents are the main target groups for awareness raising programmes to convince students to consistently attend school. Given the emphasis of Orang Asli parents and community as important target groups in the policy, it is necessary for the parents and the community to have some understanding of what the policy is and its implications to their children.

In the interviews, when asked regarding the parents' awareness of the policy, 53% disclosed that they had not heard of it, 37% answered that they had heard about the policy, while 10% answered that they were unsure on whether they had heard of this policy. However, when

prompted on what this policy entails, close to 80% could not answer the question. The issue of policy communication gaps is one that is pervasive as well. In 2019, a policy brief from the University of Nottingham Malaysia found that the traditionally adopted top-down communication model where policies and decisions are communicated to schools via states departments and districts office, usually through MOE circulars through a 'cascade' model leads to limitations due to selective 'filtering' at the state, district, and school levels (Bush, et al., 2019).

Community-School Relationship

From the interviews, it was clear that there exists some form of a trust deficit among the parents in the community towards the school. This is likely due to the lack of communication that happens between both parties, barring annual PIBG meetings or outreach programmes. Several parents also highlighted that when they brought their grievances to the school through PIBG meetings, they were not taken seriously, highlighting a need for stronger reporting mechanisms.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the interviews as well as the secondary research conducted, several policy recommendations are prescribed as follows:

1. **Relationship & Trust Building Among Parents and the School**: The study highlights a notable concern among parents in Pos Kemar regarding the lack of reporting mechanisms for grievances, leading to a perception that their feedback is not taken seriously. Building trust, therefore, is crucial, especially given the historical context of paternalistic government interventions, as discussed in the Background. Schools in Orang Asli communities must actively engage parents, taking

their input seriously and integrating their perspectives into school governance and ultimately their children's education. This involves regular, accessible communication channels (such as WhatsApp that is currently being used), continuing existing community outreach programmes, and ensuring that school staff are culturally sensitive and responsive to parental concerns. When parents feel heard and respected, their engagement in their children's education would increase, leading to better involvement and collaboration, which is a key pillar in the Transformasi Orang Asli policy which is Collaboration.

2. **Reporting Mechanisms for Grievances with the School**: As directly voiced by parents in this study, the absence of clear and effective avenues for expressing grievances or providing feedback leads to frustration and a sense of disempowerment. Therefore, implementing formal, transparent, and accessible reporting mechanisms within Orang Asli schools is essential. These mechanisms should be culturally appropriate, which can be done by involving community leaders (*Penghulu*), to ensure that parents feel comfortable raising issues without fear of backlash. Such mechanisms would not only address specific problems but also build accountability within the school administration, fostering a more responsive and parent-friendly educational ecosystem.

3. **Create a Cross-Sector Coordination Mechanism between MOE, JAKOA, and NGOs**: Although this was not part of the scope of this paper, it was a recurring theme among parents which highlighted the benefits of having collaborations between the school and civil society organisations—including external opportunities for students to showcase their talents

through Teach For Malaysia. The complex challenges faced by Orang Asli in education demand a coordinated response from various stakeholders. In that case, a cross-sector coordination mechanism involving the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA), and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) is important. This mechanism would streamline approvals for educational initiatives, provide regular updates on policy implementation progress between the Ministry, state, district, and school actors, as well as establish feedback loops. These feedback loops would allow for continuous learning and recursive problem-solving, ensuring that policies are adapted and refined based on real-world experiences and outcomes in communities like Pos Kemar. This collaborative approach would prevent fragmented efforts, ensure resources are optimally utilised, and lead to more sustainable and effective interventions. This was highlighted in a paper by IDEAS entitled "*Actors on the Ground: Mapping Orang Asli Education Stakeholders*" (Durrah, Sabrina, & Suria, 2025), which highlights that this is an actionable policy recommendation that goes beyond Pos Kemar as well.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the persistent and multifaceted nature of education inequity faced by the Orang Asli community in Pos Kemar, Perak, highlighting the critical need to move beyond a generalized understanding of the Orang Asli's educational challenges. By focusing on the specific experiences of the Temiar tribe in this unique geographical context, this research has revealed that 52.6% of surveyed parents perceive a distinct lack of education equity compared to mainstream schools. This sentiment is rooted in concerns over academic focus, the absence of effective feedback

mechanisms within Orang Asli schools, and disheartening instances of racial discrimination experienced by Orang Asli students in mixed-raced educational settings.

While the Ministry of Education's (MOE) 2024 annual report indicates a positive trend in Orang Asli student transition rates, reaching 89.86%, and attributes this to programmes like "Jom Belajar" and the expansion of K9 and K11 schools, the qualitative insights from Pos Kemar suggest that these broad improvements may not fully address the deeply entrenched inequities and the specific concerns of individual communities. The historical legacy of paternalistic policies, as seen in the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1974 and the exclusion of the Orang Asli under Article 153 of the Federal Constitution, continues to perpetuate a system where their voices are often marginalized in decision-making processes. The documented poverty rate among Orang Asli at 89.4% in 2021, starkly contrasted with the national poverty rate of 6.2% in 2022, further illustrates the profound socioeconomic disparities that inevitably impact educational access and outcomes.

This research, although limited by its sample size of 19 participants and data scarcity, provides a compelling argument for a more contextual and community-centric approach to Orang Asli education policy. Future interventions must actively engage with and incorporate the lived experiences of specific Orang Asli communities, ensuring that policies like the *Transformasi Orang Asli #57* are not merely implemented on paper but translated into meaningful, equitable, actionable and culturally sensitive educational ecosystems on the ground. Addressing the challenges in Pos Kemar will require a joint effort to foster genuine partnership, dismantle systemic barriers, and allocate resources based on the principle of equity, rather than

equality alone. Only then can the vision of a truly inclusive and quality education for all Orang Asli children be realised.

STATEMENTS AND DECLARATIONS

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This paper addresses the critical issue of education inequity among the Orang Asli community in Malaysia, moving beyond monolithic views of the community by focusing specifically on the Temiar tribe in Pos Kemar, Perak. Previous research often overlooks the distinct identities and geographical challenges faced by specific Orang Asli groups. This paper aims to explore the contextual reasons for education inequity in Pos Kemar, investigate the effectiveness of the existing Transformasi Orang Asli #57 policy, and propose elements of a contextualised education ecosystem. Employing qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with 19 Orang Asli parents from Pos Kemar, this research delves into their lived experiences and perspectives. Disparities in academic focus, lack of reporting mechanisms, and instances of racial discrimination in mixed schools were highlighted. While the Ministry of Education's 2024 report indicates an increase in transition rates to 89.86% for students moving from Standard 6 to Form1, this study suggests the need for more nuanced, community-centric policy implementation. The research will provide valuable insights for policymakers to formulate and implement more meaningful and effective education policies that acknowledge the unique challenges and aspirations of the Orang Asli community in specific geographical contexts, in a way that is not tokenistic.

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