

## Education: Orang Asli Students' Perspectives

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### Abstract

The Orang Asli, indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia, have historically struggled to access education due to factors like geographic isolation, language barriers, and economic hardship. Efforts by the government and non-governmental organizations aim to improve educational opportunities for Orang Asli communities. Initiatives include school construction, bilingual education, and cultural sensitivity in curricula. Despite all progress, ensuring equitable access to quality education remains an ongoing priority to empower Orang Asli youth while preserving their unique cultural heritage. Orang Asli pedagogy refers to the teaching and learning methods and approaches used in education for indigenous Orang Asli communities in Peninsular Malaysia. Given the unique cultural and linguistic characteristics of these communities, Orang Asli pedagogy emphasizes eight key principles namely story sharing, map learning, non-verbal, symbols and images, land links, non-linear, deconstructing/reconstructing, and community links.

**Keywords:** Education, Orang Asli, Students, Pedagogy

### Orang Asli Students and Education

Education is an aspect that is often discussed when it comes to the Orang Asli children. It is an aspect that needs to be emphasized to ensure that Orang Asli children can achieve spiritual and physical balance, as well as equality in the community (Sawalludin et al., 2020). The education of Orang Asli children must be adapted to their life culture. Most researchers claim that education is the most important key to free the Orang Asli community from backwardness, social problems, and poverty (Sawalludin et al., 2020). Education is the biggest factor that is closely related to the decrease in unemployment rate among the Orang Asli. In addition, the continuous support and guidance given to Orang Asli children during teaching and learning (T&L) processes in the classroom helps to reduce the illiteracy rate, poverty, and life stress faced by Orang Asli children.

A study carried out by Mazzlida and Ruhizan (2016) found that one of the factors contributing to the poor performance of Orang Asli children in education is influenced by their own parents. This is because the majority of the Orang Asli community, especially parents, are not familiar with the importance of education in improving their children's quality of life. This is

because they do not receive formal education, and only a small number of them who study up to the primary school level, however, do not complete it. Most of them drop out of school early, then marry, and work for their families at a very young age. In this situation, parents are recognized as uneducated people and are unable to set a good example for their children on the importance of education in the future.

However, most of the T&L processes implemented in educational institutions primarily cater to ordinary students in the mainstream. Unfortunately, these approaches are ill-suited to the needs and culture of Orang Asli students. Therefore, it is not surprising when the mainstream education system is rejected by the Orang Asli community in Malaysia. Oliver et al (2019) stated that there is a need for enhancing T&L approaches and learning styles to elevate the quality of education and employment opportunities for Orang Asli children. In addition, various constraints hinder the educational progress of Orang Asli children, including deficiencies in reading and numeracy skills, low class attendance rates, and retention at higher education level. The constraints mentioned above are caused by five factors: i) low levels of student motivation; ii) financial problems; iii) low levels of literacy; iv) implementation of T&L that does not suit the needs of Orang Asli students; and v) inexperienced teaching staff (Bemen & Christopher, 2012; BurrIDGE et al., 2012; Oliver et al., 2013).

In relation to that, it is crucial to undertake research regarding the constraints faced by the Orang Asli community to improve the quality of education among them (Sawalludin et al., 2020). The first thing that needs to be emphasized is the phenomenon of marginalization. Marginalization exists in terms of public facilities and job opportunities. They also do not have sufficient water and electricity supplies. The roads marked by numerous potholes, include sections constructed from wood, further compounding the constraints for those without vehicles. There are no road facilities to go to schools. In fact, to reach the nearby school, the only method is to use the river because of the difficulty of using the roads. In addition, Orang Asli children experience a sense of shock when entering the school environment. This is because the environment is new to them and they need to meet individuals from different cultural backgrounds for the first time. This adjustment proves difficult and can gradually lead them to drop out. Moreover, these children, unaccustomed to parental scolding or physical discipline, may develop fear if subjected to such actions in the school environment (Sumathi, 2021). Furthermore, there are those who are bullied by other students because they are different in origin and culture. In relation to this, to avoid facing all these threats, Orang Asli children will start missing school or even choose to leave or quit school. Thus, there is a need to minimize these constraints to ensure that Orang Asli children do not continue to fall behind in the rapidly developing flow of technological change.

### **Orang Asli Pedagogy**

Pedagogy for Orang Asli students has its own uniqueness as compared to pedagogy for mainstream students. There are various studies on the pedagogy of Orang Asli students (Shajahan, 2015). Based on Marker (2006), the pedagogy of Orang Asli students is based on the environment around them. According to Battiste (2005), Orang Asli students' pedagogy generally refers to learning through experience, observation, listening, minimal intervention, storytelling, modeling, instruction, connecting to community values, unique experiences, and learning how knowledge can change situations. Battiste (2005) concluded that education

refers to the process of change, is nature-centered, and generally refers to wholeness in order to achieve a level of harmony between the individual and nature.

This is the basis of tradition in the education process for all heritages and cultures. Therefore, the study carried out by Battiste (2005) on the pedagogy of Orang Asli students has become the basis for developing a framework for the education of Orang Asli students. There are eight pedagogical patterns that teachers can use to gain a deeper understanding of the knowledge possessed by Orang Asli students and apply in the context of the classroom. This pedagogy was produced by educators from the Orang Asli community with an emphasis on their cultural authenticity in the T&L processes. This pedagogy is based on a variety of culturally embedded learning practices, where teachers and students can use appropriate T&L-based approaches implemented in the classroom (Lester, 2023). It should be noted that these eight pedagogical approaches are not classified as learning styles that are commonly applied to all students. This is because these eight pedagogical approaches are interrelated. Thus, this existing relationship makes the pedagogy being produced more meaningful. So, once the relationship is explored, teachers will be able to find in-depth information about the Orang Asli students, which is only accessible through practical implementation as opposed to exchanging information verbally. Therefore, a detailed description of the eight pedagogies is given in the next paragraph.

### **Story Sharing**

Storytelling is a learning pattern that has been documented as one of the learning approaches that requires a person to perform narration of the information to be conveyed for the purpose of conveying and changing the information (Stairs, 1994). This learning has been implemented by Orang Asli adults to convey information to their children. Carrying out narration, summarizing, and teaching based on narration are meant to ensure that students are actively involved in the information analysis process (Wheaton, 2000). This element is the basis for the entire subject for the purpose of delivering information. Storytelling is the main pedagogy in educational aspects for students from various cultural backgrounds (Egan, 1998). Fig. 1 presents a story-sharing pedagogy symbol for Orang Asli students.



Fig. 1 *Symbol of story-sharing pedagogy for Orang Asli students*  
(Source: <https://www.8ways.online/>)

### **Learning Maps**

This learning process refers to the entire form of structure in texts, activities, and programs made visual for Orang Asli students. Teachers use pictures and visualizations to map the process for students to follow. Therefore, for the pedagogy of Orang Asli students, teachers and students develop a holistic and accurate diagram to present the connection with the tasks to be carried out. This diagram becomes the basis of reference for Orang Asli students to learn information or experience something (Hughes & More, 1997). Fig. 2 represents the learning map pedagogy symbol for Orang Asli students.



Fig. 2 Symbol of learning maps pedagogy for Orang Asli students  
(Source: <https://www.8ways.online/>)

### Non-Verbal

Kinesthetic or practical learning is an element of the learning style of Orang Asli students (Robinson, 1999). The second dimension, apart from this learning style, refers to the role of body language, which is one of the pedagogies for Orang Asli students, and the use of non-verbal communication, which is an element used for Orang Asli students' learning (Harris & Malin, 1994). However, this element focuses more on reducing the reliance on giving instructions to Orang Asli students. This is because they are more focused on performing actions through the process of imitation and performing activities practically. Fig. 3 represents a non-verbal pedagogy symbol for Orang Asli students.



Fig. 3 Symbol of non-verbal pedagogy for Orang Asli students  
(Source: <https://www.8ways.online/>)

### Symbols and Images

Symbol and image-based learning for Orang Asli students refers to how teachers should use all available capacities and skills to develop meaningful symbols to support the learning of new concepts, especially for Orang Asli students. It involves the use of concrete and abstract imagination. This differs from the pedagogy of learning maps because learning maps focus more on symbols at the micro level of the content than at the macro level. Fig. 4 depicts symbols and images of pedagogy symbols for Orang Asli students.



Fig. 4 Symbol of symbols and images pedagogy for Orang Asli students  
(Source: <https://www.8ways.online/>)

### Land Links

Groups, localized and environmentally and culturally embedded, form the basis of the community link learning pattern. For Orang Asli student educators, the level of motivation to learn is contained within their own community, while the teaching process addresses the values and community of the society (Stairs, 1994). Fig. 5 illustrates the land link pedagogy symbol for Orang Asli students.



Fig. 5 *Symbol of land links pedagogy for Orang Asli students*  
(Source: <https://www.8ways.online/>)

### Non-Linear

Non-linear learning refers to producing innovation and understanding of T&L processes through a lateral thinking process or by combining systems (Bilto et al., 2020). In this regard, the learning process should not be implemented in a roundabout or indirect way; rather, contradictions should be avoided by identifying similarities and creative potential among diversity of views and knowledge. Fig. 6 illustrates a non-linear pedagogy symbol for Orang Asli students.



Fig. 6 *Symbol of non-linear pedagogy for Orang Asli students*  
(Source: <https://www.8ways.online/>)

### Deconstruct/Reconstruct

This way of learning refers to the learning of Orang Asli students, which is holistic, global, supportive, and independent. This refers to the T&L processes being implemented as a whole rather than piece by piece (Harris, 1984). Indigenous students are able to master activities and texts starting with the entire content structure, as opposed to a step-by-step learning approach (Hughes, 1987; Stairs, 1994). Consensus based on previous research states that Orang Asli students focus more on T&L that emphasizes the entire concept or task before referring to the detailed parts (Hughes & More, 1997). Fig. 7 represents deconstruct/reconstruct pedagogy symbol for Orang Asli students.



Fig. 7 *Symbol of deconstruct/reconstruct Orang Asli students' pedagogy*  
(Source: <https://www.8ways.online/>)

**Community Links**

This learning refers more to the learning process associated with the land and place of birth. The strength of the connection between Orang Asli students' homeland and their learning has been widely documented (Battiste, 2002; Shajahan, 2005). The pedagogy of Orang Asli students is tied to the ecology and land of their birth, acquired through the culture and environment in which they live. Fig. 8 shows the community link pedagogy symbol for Orang Asli students.



Fig. 8 Symbol of community links Orang Asli students' pedagogy  
(Source: <https://www.8ways.online/>)

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the education of the Orang Asli community in Peninsular Malaysia is a complex journey marked by both challenges and progress. These communities have historically faced obstacles such as geographic isolation, language barriers, and economic hardships in accessing quality education. Efforts have been made by the Malaysian government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and educational institutions to address these challenges. Initiatives such as bilingual education, culturally responsive teaching, and place-based learning have been implemented to make education more accessible and relevant for Orang Asli students. However, much work remains to be done to ensure equitable access to quality education for Orang Asli children while preserving their cultural heritage. Ongoing collaboration and dialogue among stakeholders, including the Orang Asli communities themselves, are essential to further improve educational opportunities and empower them to thrive academically and maintain their unique identities. Orang Asli education remains an important area of focus, not only for the betterment of these communities but also for the broader goals of diversity, inclusion, and cultural preservation in Malaysia.

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