

# Overcoming the Barriers of Indigenous Early Childhood Education through Forest Schools: A Narrative Review

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## ABSTRACT

The Indigenous People in Malaysia represent some of the earliest and most distinct communities, yet they encounter considerable challenges in achieving educational success relative to the wider population. Although education is a primary emphasis of national policy aimed at enhancing the quality of life for Indigenous communities through ongoing initiatives, their educational outcomes continue to be low and troubling. This narrative review presents insights from earlier research regarding issues and barriers in early childhood education for Indigenous children. This study investigates the potential of the forest school approach as a viable alternative for tackling these challenges and influencing the future of education for Indigenous children in Malaysia. The conversation highlights efforts and the standard of education for Indigenous communities. Four main barriers in early childhood education have been identified: the expertise of teachers, the structure of the education system, the level of community involvement, and the availability of resources. The forest school approach presents a progressive solution, especially beneficial for Indigenous children as it resonates with their practices, customs, culture, and environment.

**Keywords-** Forest School, Indigenous People, Early Childhood Education, Preschool

## INTRODUCTION

The Indigenous Peoples of Malaysia exhibit distinct cultures and traditions. Daily lives are closely connected to activities including farming, resource gathering from forests, and habitation in forested regions. Section 3 of the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 defines an Indigenous individual as one whose father is Indigenous, an adopted child, or one with an Indigenous mother, provided that they engage in the lifestyle, culture, customs, beliefs, and language of the Indigenous community. Indigenous peoples are recognized as a distinct community due to their capacity to maintain their way of life since pre-colonial times, demonstrating resilience in the preservation of ancestral traditions [1]. The formal education timeline for Indigenous children commenced in 1980 when the government assumed responsibility from the Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli (JHEOA). Article 17 of Act 134 explicitly guarantees the educational rights of Indigenous children, asserting that they shall not be denied access to any school. This provision underscores that education for the Indigenous community has consistently received attention. Access to and proficiency in education within Indigenous communities is a crucial determinant in enhancing self-development and socio-economic status. Nonetheless, many Indigenous children continue to be marginalized within the national education system [2]. This narrative review analyzes previous research on the challenges and obstacles in early childhood education for Indigenous children through a literature-based approach. Furthermore, it examines the potential of forest school approaches as an alternative means to address these barriers and influence future educational pathways for Indigenous children in Malaysia.

The questions research for this article are :

- a) What are the main issues and barriers faced in early childhood education for Indigenous children as identified through a literature-based review?

- b) What is the potential of forest school approaches as an alternative in addressing changes and shaping the future educational pathways for Indigenous children in Malaysia?

## METHOD

This study utilizes a qualitative methodology by examining journal articles obtained from diverse sources and pertinent literature. The study relies on an electronic literature review performed by three independent researchers utilizing databases like Scopus and EBSCO through the Perpustakaan Tunku Bainun University Pendidikan Sultan Idris, alongside manual searches via Google Scholar, encompassing publications from 2016 to 2023. Keywords such as Early Childhood Education for Indigenous Children, Indigenous Preschool, and Forest School were utilized either singularly or in conjunction during the search. Supplementary records obtained from cross-referencing the reference lists of identified publications were also incorporated. The collected references were examined personally and systematically arranged using Microsoft Excel.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### a) Main Issues and Barriers in Early Childhood Education for Indigenous Children

#### i. Issues in Indigenous Education

The well-being and quality of life of Indigenous Peoples in Malaysia have been emphasized within national policy agendas. Education acts as a crucial measure for evaluating the quality of life within Indigenous communities, focusing on the enhancement of social communication skills to facilitate integration with mainstream society [3]. Education transcends the confines of literacy, numeracy, and basic knowledge acquisition; it is fundamentally about driving meaningful enhancements in the quality of life and well-being of Indigenous Peoples. It is essential to take on responsibilities and commit to efforts by executing development programs that meet the basic educational needs of Indigenous Peoples to improve the quality of education. The Malaysian government, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKOA), has launched a range of educational programs and initiatives aimed at promoting the welfare and rights of Indigenous Peoples and Penan communities. Programs such as the Kelas Dewasa Ibu Bapa Orang Asli Dan Penan (KEDAP), the Kurikulum Bersepadu Murid Orang Asli dan Penan (KAP), and the Comprehensive Special Model School (K9) are specifically tailored for Indigenous Peoples [5], [6]. The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025) delineates KPM's dedication to providing high-quality education tailored to the needs of special needs students, including Indigenous students, minority groups like the Orang Asli and Penan, gifted students, and those in under-enrolled schools. The blueprint outlines strategic action plans, which encompass targeted literacy intervention programs for Year 1 students deemed “at risk,” the creation of curriculum and pedagogy research centers, and the provision of professional development courses for educators in Indigenous schools. Early childhood education is highlighted to introduce Indigenous children to teaching and learning processes, as suggested by UNESCO’s Division of Basic Education Early Childhood program, which advocates for education tailored to Indigenous children while maintaining their cultural identity [2]. This corresponds with the third strategic objective outlined in JAKOA's 2016–2020 Strategic Plan, which seeks to improve awareness of early childhood education within Indigenous communities (JAKOA, 2016).

Accordingly, the Ministry of Finance designated resources in the 2021 budget for social assistance programs and integrated village development initiatives, which encompass the upgrading and construction of 14 new preschools in Indigenous areas [7]. The objective of these initiatives is to enhance preschool accessibility, especially in isolated regions, guaranteeing that Indigenous children obtain formal education prior to their progression to Year 1 in conventional schooling. The educational initiatives implemented by KPM have demonstrated beneficial outcomes, such as a decrease in dropout rates for Indigenous students and enhancements in literacy and numeracy skills among both students and their parents [5]. Nonetheless, in spite of these favorable results, obstacles remain. Investigations have revealed challenges including the inability to achieve the objectives of the Orang Asli Education Transformation Plan, attributed to opposition to development, shortcomings within the education system, and a sense of marginalization experienced by Indigenous communities. Furthermore, the current curriculum does not adequately acknowledge or incorporate Indigenous culture, knowledge, language, and history [8]. Despite significant efforts and resources being dedicated to Indigenous education, [9] contend

that these communities continue to be marginalized within mainstream development. Although they are one of the earliest communities in Malaysia, their educational outcomes continue to be unsatisfactory [2]. The inadequate quality of education for Indigenous communities remains a pressing concern, highlighting a notable disparity when compared to mainstream society [4]. This finding is consistent with the study referenced in [3], which emphasizes that inadequate educational quality plays a significant role in the overall diminished quality of life experienced by Indigenous communities. The differences in educational quality and their disconnect from the cultural rights and needs of Indigenous Peoples continue to sustain their socio-cultural isolation. A low quality of life negatively impacts children's self-esteem, motivation, and cognitive skills, resulting in passivity and disengagement in learning environments. Consequently, [4] argue that education plays a crucial role in improving the quality of life for Indigenous Peoples. Consequently, educational attainment should be regarded as a standard for improved living conditions in the future [10].

## **ii. Educational Barriers for Indigenous Children**

To enhance educational quality, [4] emphasizes the importance of investigating the challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples. A review of previous studies reveals four critical thematic barriers that require thorough exploration concerning the improvement and evolution of educational outcomes for Indigenous children: teacher expertise, the education system, community engagement, and insufficient references.

### **Teacher Expertise**

A significant challenge in early childhood education for Indigenous children is the insufficient knowledge of current educators, especially in meeting the cultural and linguistic requirements of Indigenous communities. The dependence on cultural and linguistic alignment underscores a deficiency in teacher proficiency for effectively overseeing teaching and learning [11, 12]. As a result, it is essential for educators to acquire knowledge of Indigenous languages to guarantee that the teaching and learning experience is both impactful and significant [13]. Further emphasizes that while teachers possess basic knowledge of teaching methodologies, they lack comprehensive practical expertise specifically tailored to the education of Indigenous children. This gap stems from the ongoing need for support and training to improve teaching skills and gain new insights pertinent to Indigenous education.

### **Education System**

It is argued that the curriculum and syllabus do not align with the intellectual context of Indigenous Peoples [14]. This misunderstanding fosters the belief that Indigenous Peoples are not interested in advancement and view education as insignificant. This challenge explores the changing timeline of education shaped by the socio-political dynamics of the Orang Asli community, which has significantly impacted their education system. As noted in [15], these developments have been taking place since 1995, when the focus on integration and assimilation overlooked Orang Asli culture, resulting in educational disparities, community rejection, and discrimination. The emphasis was primarily on infrastructure, neglecting the importance of recognizing their culture, indigenous knowledge, language, and history. Consequently, Indigenous children encounter stress in the conventional education system, resulting in discrimination and segregation. The consequences of this are considerable for children, serving as a key contributor to emotional stress in Indigenous youth. The study conducted by [16] provides evidence that a Senoi Indigenous preschool child exhibited moderate to high levels of stress, as indicated by the Stress Measurement Instrument.

This finding was supported by insights into the stress factors affecting Senoi Indigenous preschool children, indicating that school-related elements played a significant role in their stress levels [17]. The social issues highlighted pertain to individuals experiencing a sense of insecurity and stress within their surroundings, especially regarding their engagements with educators, administrators, and the educational framework. Although these findings might appear to be isolated, they hold considerable importance for the development of preschool children [16]. These concerns require not only psychological and emotional support but also the establishment of a tailored education system for Indigenous preschool children. This supports the perspective of [15] that the challenges encountered by Indigenous children require immediate attention, emphasizing the need for effective teaching and curriculum strategies that respect and incorporate their socio-cultural practices.

The necessity for a customized curriculum and distinct educational framework for minority groups, especially Indigenous Peoples, has been extensively discussed in recent studies [8, 18, 19, 20]. Consistent with [9], the management of teaching and learning for Indigenous preschool students should take into account the existing knowledge and experiences of the students, as well as their family background. Educators must have the ability to create and execute a teaching and learning framework that connects the standard curriculum with resources found in Indigenous communities. In alignment with this, [15] contend that Indigenous Peoples have the most profound understanding of their curriculum, suitable methodologies, and their cultural heritage. The framework for advancing Indigenous education empowers communities to meet their unique needs and attain success. In practice, a curriculum centered around home activities reveals that Indigenous students exhibit a strong interest and enthusiasm for learning about Indigenous knowledge, as elements of their lives are woven into their educational experience [21]. Consequently, it is understandable that [18] contended that the existing curriculum for Indigenous communities, like KAP, ought to be sustained and developed further over time. Nonetheless, when viewed from another angle, it is essential to revitalize the current curriculum for Indigenous Peoples, as this is perceived to play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of educational outcomes within Indigenous communities in Malaysia [14, 22].

### Community Involvement

The subsequent barrier examines the influence of parental and community engagement on early childhood education among the Orang Asli. A significant concern is the restricted access to social services and education, as the Orang Asli community frequently finds itself sidelined in decision-making processes and lacks the chance to create a curriculum that reflects their cultural context [8, 15]. The literacy challenges faced by Orang Asli children arise from the community's limited educational attainment, as numerous parents find themselves unable to assist their children in early learning and view education as a lesser priority, believing that their focus should be on contributing to the family's livelihood [3]. The absence of community engagement subtly fosters a detrimental two-way relationship among all stakeholders, which in turn impacts the efficacy of early childhood education initiatives. Furthermore, [23] identified that the absence of awareness or acknowledgment of the varying values and priorities within Indigenous families plays a significant role in fostering a profound distrust in vital services and persistent policy shortcomings. Furthermore, the lack of collaboration between parents and the community influences children's learning outcomes [24]. Consequently, tackling these obstacles necessitates a more holistic strategy, which involves enhancing parental and community involvement through the creation of a curriculum tailored to their needs, as well as reinforcing social and cultural connections between educational institutions and the Orang Asli community.

### Limited References

It is clear that a specific curriculum has been created for the Orang Asli, yet previous studies have not sufficiently explored or tackled the early childhood education requirements in relation to the Orang Asli community. There is a notable lack of studies focusing on early childhood education within Orang Asli communities, with merely 12 published works recorded from 2004 to 2019 [25]. The results primarily concentrate on matters concerning language and the preparedness for school among Orang Asli children. In a similar vein, a review conducted in Malaysia examined prior studies on the education of the Orang Asli, highlighting limitations within the Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities. This review utilized four databases in 2021: (a) Scopus, (b) the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), (c) Malaysian Citation Index (MyCite), and (d) Google Scholar. A total of 49 publications were identified from 2003 to 2020, highlighting five primary issue categories frequently examined: absenteeism and dropout rates, academic performance, teaching and learning approaches, language and educational rights, and culture and identity.

The findings outlined above indicate that there are notable gaps in the existing research regarding the implementation and effectiveness of early childhood education specifically within the Orang Asli community. The Malay proverb 'if you want to bend a bamboo, do it from the shoot' highlights the importance of focusing on early childhood education. In a similar vein, the foundational education of Orang Asli children is crucial for their developmental learning processes [10].



## **b) Exploring the Potential of Forest Schools as a Pathway for Educational Transformation**

Considering the challenges and obstacles outlined, it is essential to investigate alternative strategies that resonate with the cultural identity and educational requirements of Indigenous children. One notable approach is the forest school model, which prioritizes nature-based learning and experiential education. This method is acknowledged for its capacity to boost engagement, improve cognitive and social abilities, and foster a more inclusive educational setting for Indigenous children. [22] highlight that an environmentally conscious learning approach can significantly benefit the education of Indigenous peoples, assisting educators in utilizing innovative and engaging teaching methods to improve the skills of Indigenous students. Academics engage in discussions regarding the concept of forest schools, examining it from multiple viewpoints related to terminology and implementation [27, 28, 29]. Nevertheless, these viewpoints exhibit commonalities regarding a natural setting and an experiential learning approach utilized in forest schools [30, 31, 32, 33], highlighting the comprehensive growth of children [34, 35]. Forest schools employ a learning process that draws directly from the natural environment, providing advantages for individuals of all ages by fostering confidence and self-esteem through hands-on experiences. Forest schools provide numerous advantages for children. Positive emotional development in children can be fostered through enjoyment and play in a forest school setting, as indicated by [37]. This supports [35], emphasizing the positive effects of forest schools on teaching and learning, and reinforcing children's inherent curiosity and eagerness to explore and learn. This indirectly fosters the growth of children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills through play-based experiential learning [38].

The holistic approach of forest schools encompasses the all-encompassing development of children through inquiry-based discovery, nurturing imagination and creativity, boosting self-confidence and self-esteem, enhancing social interaction and teamwork skills, and promoting physical health [34, 35]. Forest school programs offer children the chance to interact with multiple languages, integrating mathematical, scientific, and other educational processes present in the school curriculum. A number of studies provide evidence that forest schools are an effective method for early childhood education [31, 34, 37]. It is argued that integrating forest school programs into early childhood education and Indigenous education curricula is essential, highlighting the importance of incorporating forest schools into mainstream educational settings. Findings from [39] support this, as the developed forest school framework for primary school teaching and learning identified five elements: (i) Indigenous music, (ii) Indigenous medicine and herbs, (iii) Indigenous crafts, (iv) Indigenous hunting tools, and (v) forestry. The findings demonstrate a clear connection between the elements of forest school and the environmental knowledge held by Indigenous communities. While it may not receive widespread recognition in Malaysia, the forest school learning approach is particularly well-suited for students [14]. This reinforces the notion that the implementation of forest schools has been practiced globally, frequently emphasizing early childhood education more than in Malaysia, where the focus is mainly on Indigenous primary school students [40].

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Ultimately, the forest school approach serves as an alternative method for children, offering a comprehensive strategy for child development and learning. It fosters personal growth by considering the unique differences among children [35]. In addressing changes and developing character for future education, the forest school approach represents progress; it is particularly well-suited for Indigenous children, aligning with their practices, customs, culture, and environment. Furthermore, this approach ought to serve as a crucial framework that underpins the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025), ensuring the delivery of pertinent contextual education that addresses the needs of Indigenous students while remaining in harmony with the national education curriculum [36]. In order to promote sustainability and enhance well-being and quality of life for the Orang Asli community, there is a recognized necessity for a comprehensive investigation into early childhood education within the context of this community in Malaysia. This seeks to enhance and broaden empirical evidence while subtly pinpointing current gaps. Furthermore, there is a proposal for the creation of a forest school-based learning framework or program tailored for Orang Asli preschool children. This initiative would include ongoing support and training for educators, alongside active participation from the Orang Asli community. This, consequently, establishes the educational requirements of the Orang Asli community as a central concern.

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