Strategic Considerations for KINDERGARTENS in Leading Learning of Orang Asli Students

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Abstract

This paper discusses strategic considerations derived from findings of a grounded theory study exploring the process of leading learning among Orang Asli students. Using Glaser's Classic Grounded Theory method, the study captures learners' voices and analyses how they have survived the schooling process despite the challenges and deficit theorising surrounding them. The emerging findings make explicit five strands of roles that contributed to the success of Orang Asli primary education: parents, learners, kindergartens, primary schools and significant others. In this paper, however, the authors focus on the role of kindergartens in leading the learning of Orang Asli students. The findings capture the concerns, actions and provisions that supported Orang Asli students in transiting the home to school journey. Strategic considerations for improvement of kindergartens leading learning of Orang Asli students are discussed in context with implications for practice. By listening to learners' voices, kindergartens can reflect and raise their commitment for contextually inclusive pedagogy that avoids deficit theorising.

Keywords: Deficit Theorising, Leading Learning, Indigenous Kindergartens, Orang Asli Education, Classic Grounded Theory.

Introduction

The deficit model in education sees diversity in lifestyle, language, ways of learning, as problematic and views the deficiencies of poor, and minority group students, their families and communities as the main causes of students' school problems and academic failure (Valencia, 2010). In context with indigenous education in Malaysia, deficit theorising of past studies has often been used to explain issues of learning disengagement and low achievement among indigenous Orang Asli students in primary education. Weaknesses and gaps identified in previous research have contributed to the continuous improvement in Orang Asli education. However, there is lack of systematic study that focuses on the success of the same minoritised and disempowered group. This paper summarises an emerging theory of kindergartens leading learning among Orang Asli students and discusses strategic considerations for improvement in context with implications for practice.

Problem Statement

Orang Asli is the official name of a Malaysian Indigenous Aboriginal community. JAKOA (2017) records an Orang Asli population of 178,197 as at Year 2012. This represents about 0.6% of the total population of 32.0 million (DOSM, 2017). About 62.4% of the communities live mainly in the more accessible fringe or the rural outskirts (JAKOA, 2011), 36.9% live in the hinterland, whilst an estimated 0.75% resides among the urban population. Although referred to collectively as Orang Asli, as diverse groups of 18 indigenous ethnic tribes, they are distinguished by their respective ethnic languages and social-cultural identities (Lye, 2011; Masron, Masami & Ismail, 2013; JAKOA, 2017). Studies conducted by Noor (2012) and Rabahi (2018) indicate that Orang Asli's social and economic position situates them among the disadvantaged minorities and marginalised, the majority living beneath the poverty line.

On the education front, Orang Asli has had considerable progress since its formal primary school establishment in 1952 (Edo, 2012). However, studies have also found that Orang Asli educational achievement has not been at par with the national progress (Nor et al., 2011; Rabahi, Yusof, & Awang, 2016b; MOE, 2017). Despite close support from the Government, there are concerns that Orang Asli students are prone to dropping out and are underperforming in primary school (Rabahi, 2018; SUHAKAM, 2014; Noor, 2012). Among the reasons that have been highlighted are school accessibility and Orang Asli students' difficulties in adjusting to the formal process of schooling. Although reducing, non-attendance is still the main concern at primary, whilst dropping out remains high at transition from primary to secondary (MOE, 2017). This means significant percentage of students who have completed the primary school did not continue to secondary school. Statistics from MOE (2017) indicate that Orang Asli students' discontinuing education after completion of primary school was 36% (2008), reducing to 17% (2016).

Thus, although Orang Asli community has achieved considerable progress in education (KPM, 2008), research indicates that the educational attainment of Orang Asli children remains problematic (SUHAKAM, 2015; Wahab, Mustapha, & Ahmad, 2016). Orang Asli students' disengagement and disenchantment at primary level and beyond, indicated by dropouts, absentees and low academic achievement have triggered many initiatives to help alleviate the problems. However, despite the myriad improvement initiatives implemented by the Government, it is evident that the academic achievements of Orang Asli students have not been at par with the national progress (Yusof et al., 2017). Education is the right of every child

born (UNESCO, 2015), but despite support from the Government and other agencies, the concern is why there are still Orang Asli children who are underachieving and remain disengaged from school.

Past studies have focused on identifying factors leading to the problem, and a deficit and blaming approach to resolving the problems. There is less known research that has delved into how others among the same community have progressed successfully through the same challenges. Thus, we are motivated to investigate the experience of successful Orang Asli students with the aim that the findings will contribute to the body of knowledge about these students overcome the multi-dimensional deficits and challenges that surround them. In its entirety, the study has discovered the significant roles of Parents, Learners, Kindergartens, Primary Schools, the Government and Significant Others in leading the successful education and learning of the students (Rabahi, 2018; Rabahi, Yusof & Awang, 2015; Rabahi, Yusof & Awang, 2016a, 2016b; Rabahi, Yusof & Awang, 2017). This paper however will focus on and discuss the findings of how kindergartens are involved in leading the learning of Orang Asli students.

Method
Rabahi (2018) and Rabahi, Yusof and Awang (2016) describe in detail, the Classic Grounded Theory (CGT) method used in the main study. The study captures the voices of successful learners and analyses how they have survived the schooling process despite the challenges and deficit theorising surrounding them. Experiences are captured in in-depth unstructured interviews with sixteen (16) student participants who have reached the tertiary level education. The emerging findings make explicit five strands of roles that contributed to the success of Orang Asli primary education: parents, learners, kindergartens, primary schools and significant others. Parents and learners' role have been described in Rabahi, Yusof and Awang (2015; 2017). In this paper, the authors highlight the role of kindergartens in leading the learning of Orang Asli students and propose strategic considerations for continuous improvement.

Findings
Kindergarten or preschool education in Malaysia is delivered through four main establishments: Pre-schools (The Ministry of Education), Taman Bimbingan Kanak-Kanak KEMAS (The Ministry of Rural and Regional Development), Perpaduan Kindergartens (The Department of National Unity and Integration of the Prime Minister's Department), and private kindergartens. The main purpose of the kindergarten's establishment was to ensure that children in the country are provided with the facility and opportunity to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills appropriate for their ages of between four to six years old (KEMAS, 2016; JPNIN, 2016). The Ministry has set out national curriculum for kindergartens or pre-schools to incorporate six main components: Language and Communication, Cognitive Development, Spiritual and Moral, Socio-Emotional Development, Physical Development, and Creativity and Aesthetics (MOE, 2016).

Kindergartens for the Orang Asli community are established by the Government within the Orang Asli villages and managed by KEMAS. KEMAS (2016) states its kindergarten concept as 'Learning through Play', accommodating the children's natural inclination to play, whilst simultaneously exploiting their curiosity and willingness to try. From this starting point, the

kindergarten curriculum is extended to mastering the four basic skills of reading, writing, counting, and reasoning to prepare the children for school, within the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia.

The findings capture the role of kindergartens, their concerns, actions and provisions that supported Orang Asli students in transiting the home to school journey. Kindergartens were concerned with meeting their own expectations as well as those of the stakeholders (the Government, Community, Parents and Learners). The emerging theory of kindergartens leading learning explains resolutions to the concerns, through the processes of initialising, facilitating, accommodating and generating learning, illustrated in Figure 1.
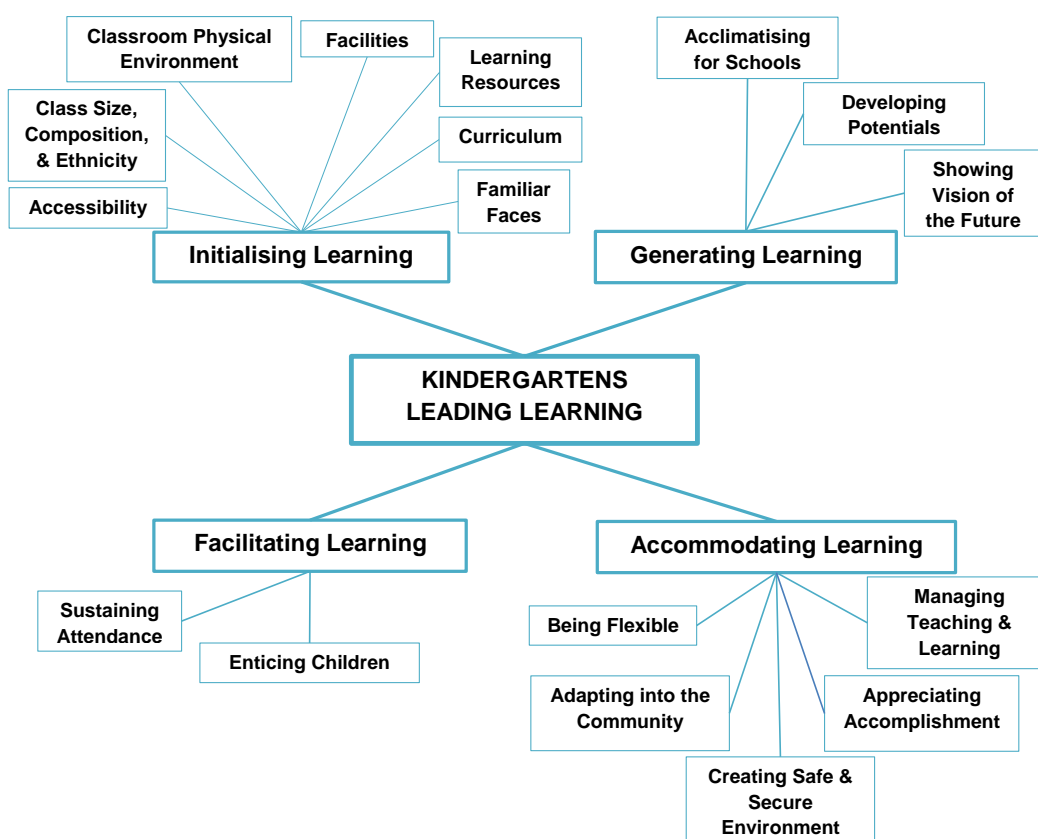

Figure 1: Kindergartens Leading Leaning

The following sections explains the theory, processes, and the conceptual properties of each process.

Initialising Learning
The concept initialising is derived from its used in computing, which is about setting the values or putting in the condition appropriate to the start of an operation. Initialising learning in the context of participants' kindergarten experience is represented by accessibility, class size, ethnicity, classroom physical environment, facilities, learning resources, curriculum, and familiar faces. Table 1 explains in brief the conceptual properties of kindergartens initialising learning.

Table 1
Initialising Learning Conceptual Properties

Accessibility
The establishment of kindergartens within the Orang Asli scattered communities has enabled easy access to this crucial early years' education. Ease of access affect parents' decision and children's attending kindergarten. Students from further and remote villages depend on parents' perseverance to ensure attendance.
Class Size, Composition and Ethnicity
Notwithstanding the varied class size, kindergarten experience provides Orang Asli students with the initial opportunity to interact with others, both familiar and non-familiar, as well as to interact with those who are 'different', in age and ethnicity in a formal learning environment.
Classroom Physical Environment
The Government established kindergartens have standardised the internal environment of their classrooms. Kindergartens adopt a flexible learning environment for Orang Asli students. Students could sit at the table, sit or lie down on the floor, according to their preference and comfort.
Facilities
Provision for teachers' accommodation ensures teacher-on-time presence in class, especially for teachers who are from outside the community travelling to kindergartens via poor access route. Playing field provides students the space for physical activities, which for Orang Asli students emulate the free environment of the community. Facilities such as teachers' accommodation and playing field also provide opportunities for community interaction that can positively impact on enhanced home school link as well as opportunities to promote awareness on the importance of education.
Learning Resources
Learning resources include living (animals, plants and human) and non-living objects (such as models and toys), consumables (food, coloured pencils, glue) and non-consumables (non-food items, books), and information and communication technology (television, computer) fruits on the walls, television, musical instruments, living plants, and rattan . Participants experienced formal lessons that were interspersed with informal learning opportunities during meals and play time. Jawaid (2014a; 2014b) encourages teachers to exploit food-time and play-time to initiate conversations that could focus on physical, language, social, emotional and spiritual development.
Curriculum
Initialising learning includes kindergartens having a curriculum appropriate for the children's age, physical ability and interest. In context with indigenous students, the Australian Government (2016) promotes play-based learning, recognising the importance of communication and language as well as social and emotional development, inclusive of aboriginal students' need. The curriculum exploits the children's love of singing, playing musical instruments, having food and play-time to provide learning opportunities for communication and language.
Familiar Faces
Familiar faces mean no tears. Kindergartens that allow the presence of comforting faces such as parents (notably mothers), siblings, relatives and friends help students to settle easily in unfamiliar environment. Familiar faces include Orang Asli teachers from the community.

Facilitating Learning

Kindergartens facilitate learning by providing the means and conditions to promote, assist and support Orang Asli children to remain engaged during their kindergarten years. The means and conditions that contribute to the process of kindergartens facilitating learning are elaborated through its conceptual properties: sustaining attendance and enticing children, in Table 2.

Table 2
Facilitating Learning Conceptual Properties
Sustaining Attendance
Sustaining attendance is influenced by parents, proximity to kindergarten, convenience, and fear of strict teachers. It reflects the added value kindergartens provide, to sustain the students' presence in the classroom, for example, when students must go to kindergartens because they have no choice since parents are at work. Some students do not miss class due to fear of fierce teachers.
Enticing Children
The property 'enticing children' emerges from interrogating the data with the question: What makes the students want to be in the kindergarten? The findings indicate that kindergartens enticed students by having the environment, provisions, activities and opportunities that enable them to experience the joys of being in class. The variety of experiences that make participants eager to be in the classroom include having friends, food, fun, opportunities that give rise to children feeling clever and feeling special, participating in school events, visits and trips.

Accommodating Learning

The concept of accommodation is analogous to that used in describing the adjustment of the lens of the eyes, at various distances, to keep an object in focus. In kindergartens, the process of accommodating involves adapting, adjusting, reconciling, and to make changes to keep learning in focus, indicated by how kindergarten teachers adapted and made the necessary changes in leading students. Accommodating learning is indicated by teachers being flexible, adapting into the community, creating safe and secure environment, appreciating accomplishment, and managing teaching and learning. Table 3 explains in brief the conceptual properties of kindergartens accommodating learning.

Table 3
Accommodating Learning Conceptual Properties

Being Flexible An incident in a classroom gives rise to the concept of teachers 'being flexible'. Being flexible is about teachers accommodating parents into classroom, uncommon in Malaysian context, and allowing students their space for learning in comfort, emulating the home environment of students. Clarkin-Phillips and Carr (2012) assert that offering opportunities for parents to attend to a range of their child's needs in early childhood centre increases the ability and the inclination of families to engage with their child's learning. Allowing familiar faces in class enables students to overcome fear of separation as they start kindergarten.
Adapting into the Community Non-Orang Asli teachers adapt themselves within the context of their roles in unfamiliar environment and unique community culture. Hanafi, Ahmad & Ali (2014) highlight the difficulty of teachers from outside the Orang Asli community to adapt and adjust to the lack of basic needs in isolated villages; arguing that a teacher from outside the community must have a strong self-identity and agency to provide impact in Orang Asli education. Thus, the ability to adapt into the community is crucial for Non-Orang Asli teachers unfamiliar with living in an environment that is culturally different, lacking basic as well as communicative facilities.
Creating Safe and Secure Environment Creating safe and secure environment includes making changes to the physical environment, so that students are protected from harm. Emotionally, participants experience caring and consoling, as well as a contrast of 'fierce' and loving teachers. Caring is the feeling of being with a good teacher. Approachable is when students feel comfortable with their teachers both inside and outside the classroom.
Appreciating Accomplishment In appreciating accomplishment, teachers make space to display children's accomplishment, such as completing a task successfully. Studies such as Jawaid (2014b) highlight the benefits of celebrating and displaying students' work in the classroom. Displaying and talking about their work send message to students that their work and their learning is important.
Managing Teaching and Learning Accommodating learning is by adapting the teaching and learning process to cater for the physical, social, emotional and cognitive needs of students. Physical consideration includes provision for supplementary meals and vitamin to ensure that students are physically fit and ready for class. Accommodating socio-cultural capital of the community in classroom, contributes to students' social and emotional well-being, such as use of students' home language to explain new concepts. How well students learn depends on how well teachers are able to manage their classroom climate (Ziegler, 2017) and by adopting learner-centred approach (Jawaid, 2014a; 2014b). Balancing freedom and discipline, teachers adapt and change the classroom environment (seating arrangement, classroom layout, space utilisation) and pedagogical approach to provide safe and secure environment, inclusion (Florian & Beaton, 2017), behaviour control whilst extending potentials.

Generating Learning

Generating learning encapsulates the acts of making meaning and making sense of real life experience. It involves predicting and knowledge transfer, which is the ability to apply real life experience and prior learning to new situations and achieve a vision (Wittrock, 2010). Kindergartens provide Orang Asli students the opportunity to experience and make sense of life beyond home, provide the climate and interactions to generate learning and gave students their initial baseline in academics, social and emotional skills for primary schooling. Table 4 explains in brief the conceptual properties of kindergartens generating learning comprising acclimatising for school, teachers developing potentials, and showing vision of the future.

Table 4
Generating Learning Conceptual Properties
Acclimatising for School
Acclimatising is through experiencing outside community, interacting with similar and non-similar others, and testing self-beyond-home in extending identity. Experiencing outside community eases initial days in primary school due to having familiar friends from the kindergarten. Similar others are children from the same community using similar home language; whilst non-similar others are those from other communities such as other Orang Asli tribes, other ethnics, as well as interacting with non-familiar adults such as teachers from other ethnicities, giving students glimpses of future interactions and reducing fear of the unknown. In extending identity, kindergartens provided students new ground to think about themselves - about what they 'can do' and what they 'cannot do' – and to test the limits imposed upon them. Acclimatising process enables seamless transition into Year 1 of schooling.
Developing Potential
Kindergartens develop potentials by providing the ground and climate for students to cultivate leadership and cooperative learning, develop self-esteem, and extend learning. In cultivating leadership and cooperative learning, students learn to start and lead activities. Developing self-esteem is linked to feeling clever, feeling special, winning competition, receiving prizes and gifts for achievement, and graduating. Whilst, extending learning is about kindergartens adding to the students' prior learning through interactions with teachers, friends and the curriculum.
Showing Vision of the Future
Primary schools located adjacent to kindergartens provide students glimpses of their future. Students look forward to joining their senior kindergarten friends in primary school. Activities jointly organised by kindergartens and primary schools also provide kindergarteners interactions with future schools.

Conclusion

In conclusion, kindergartens provided Orang Asli children with transits for acclimatisation, preparing the young learners for formal education, experiencing a school environment that was unlike home. In kindergartens children were partially transformed to students. They were given targets and were expected to be responsible to achieve the targets. The emerging theory of kindergartens leading learning describes how kindergartens prepared Orang Asli students for formal education. The theory is elucidated through four leading learning processes: Initialising Learning, Facilitating Learning, Accommodating Learning and

Generating Learning. The theory explains how kindergartens set the condition that initialised learning, created enticing factors that contributed to the joy of being in kindergarten and promoted climate that facilitates learning. In addition, kindergartens accommodated learning through teachers who were flexible, able to adjust to students' need, making changes in order to create physically and emotionally safe and secure environment, whilst managing teaching and learning that was learner-centred. Last but not least, kindergartens generated learning by giving students the space and time, enabling students to explore their potential and to acclimatise, socio-emotionally as well as cognitively, before setting off to primary school. Kindergartens show Orang Asli children, vision of achievable future that could move them out of the deficit blanket.

Strategic Considerations for Continuous Improvement
The theory emerging from learner's voices reflects moments and incidents that have significant impact on the students during their learning process. Consequently, kindergartens and teachers can consider the theory and its properties as baseline for self-assessment and to explore strategic potentials that can be implemented for continuous improvement. In initialising learning, ease of access and conducive setting will influence Orang Asli parents' decision about sending children to kindergartens. Kindergartens are encouraged to consider curriculum that incorporates dynamic working practices which allow children to choose what they want to do and talk about with each other, and teachers to support learning and development through play-based provision, reciprocal relationships, intentional and responsive teaching (Wood & Hedges, 2016). In facilitating learning, adopt strategies that will sustain and entice students into the classroom. Whilst, in accommodating learning teachers can embrace the idea of being flexible to students' needs, adapting to new contexts, creating a safe and secure environment, exploiting students' socio-cultural strengths and accomplishments, in a learner centred-approach to managing teaching and learning. Palviainen and Mard-Miettinen (2015), and Haukas (2016) assert that supporting each child's culture and home language lead to children feeling safe and accepted, flourishing language and literacy skills, and enhanced learning engagement. Finally, in generating learning, kindergartens provide the climate for students to acclimatise, develop potentials through activities and interactions with 'new' others, allowing students to test their limit as they discover their emerging self. Also, in generating learning, kindergartens are encouraged to show students visions of their future. Finally, kindergartens can identify strategies that are immediately 'doable' for steps towards better learning, inclusive and contextual educational experience, and overcoming deficit thinking.

Acknowledgement

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