

## Contributing Factors for Academic Success in this Globalised Era: Voices from the Successful Orang Asli in Malaysia

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### Abstract

While the Orang Asli or the Indigenous People of Malaysia have been in existence since approximately 5,000 years ago, they are still lagging behind as compared to all the other mainstream ethnics, particularly the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. This study aims to listen to the voices of successful Indigenous People of Malaysia and thereafter, crystallise the contributing themes or factors from these voices. Accordingly, the research design employed is that of a phenomenology given that the research problem requires a profound understanding of a particular phenomenon -- the experiences of academic success -- common to the Indigenous People of Malaysia so as to distil individual experiences to an essential concept. Seven successful Orang Asli students willingly participated in the on-line interview by responding to the question in the Interview Protocol. Thematic analysis, performed through the process of coding in six phases to identify patterns across data sets, indicates two main themes which contributed to academic success. The first theme is that of Aspiration, the ardent wish or desire to become educationally and academically successful. The first theme on aspiration seems to be contributed by a further four subthemes, namely self-induced aspiration, family-induced aspiration, community-induced aspiration, and friend-induced aspiration. Meanwhile, the second theme is that of support and such a support is family-based, friend-based, school-based, community-based, government-based, and faith-based support, hence the six subthemes. The findings are discussed in the context of previous findings of academically resilient students.

**Keywords:** Globalisation, Orang Asli, Indigenous People, Phenomenology, Malaysia.



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### 1. Introduction

Globalisation entails the expansion of local and nationalistic perspectives to that of a broader outlook of an interconnected and interdependent world with free transfer of knowledge, technology, economy, views, ideas, values, capital or people, goods, and services across borders or national frontiers (Knight, 1997); (O'Neill and Chapman, 2015). Accordingly, globalisation accelerates worldwide interconnectedness, develops progressive integrated structures and relationships beyond nation states, and shrinks the distance and time in communication and travel which, taken together, leads to extensive and intensive global relations (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002). Globalisation, according to Marginson (1999), "has the potential to affect every part of the world, including educational institutions and programs, and the subjectivities formed in education" (p. 20).

In step with the globalisation in terms of education, Malaysia has progressed well since she gained her independence from the British in 1957. With a population of 32.4 million as of 2018 (Department of Statistics Malaysia at [www.dosm.gov.my](http://www.dosm.gov.my)), approximately 69.1% of the population are classified as Bumiputera which comprises the Malays and minority ethnics such the Indigenous People and the local indigenous of the states of Sarawak and Sabah, 23% of the population are of Chinese descent, 6.9% are of Indian descent and 1% is of other minority of non-Bumiputera ethnics. Table 1 summarises the Malaysian population in 2018 by ethnicity.

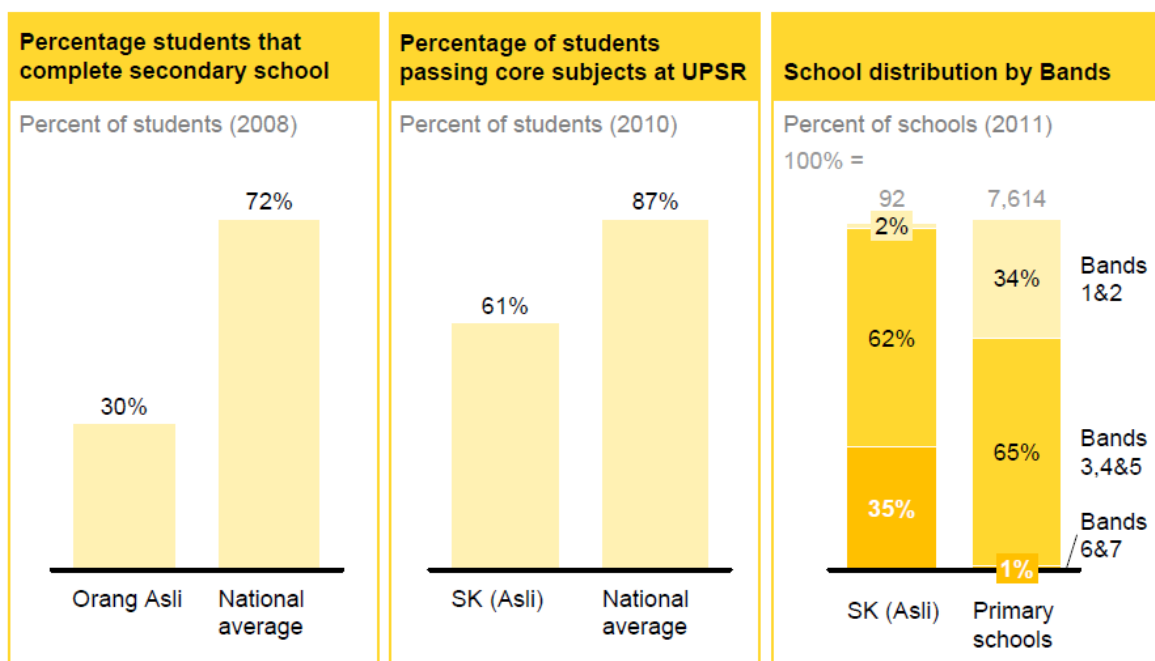
Table-1. Population in Malaysia by Ethnicity

Year 2018		
Ethnic	Total (in million)	Percentage
Bumiputera	22.39	69.1%
Chinese	7.45	23.0%
Indian	2.24	6.9%
Others	0.32	1.0%
Total	32.40	100.00%

The Indigenous People of Malaysia who have been in existence here since approximately 5,000 years ago are not homogeneous group as there are at least 95 subgroups, each with their own distinctive language and culture (Masron *et al.*, 2013). They represent approximately 0.6% of the total population (Lye, 2001); (Tarmiji *et al.*, 2013). It is disheartening to note that 76.9% of the Orang Asli population live below the poverty line, and among the below-the-poverty-line population, 35.2% have been classified as living in hard-core poverty, compared to 1.4% nationally (Mohd Asri, 2012); (Masron *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, their socially low and economically deprived position situates them among the disadvantaged minorities and hence, as explicitly documented in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education, 2012), they are reckoned as the minority groups with “specific needs” (Chapter 4, p.15) on the following basis:

*There are a few groups of students whose circumstances or needs are different enough from the mainstream that they are likely to fall through the gaps and not reach their full potential unless specifically catered to. These groups include ... students from indigenous and minority groups including Orang Asli ..., and children with special needs. Programmes, schools, and initiatives that cater to the additional needs of these children will allow them to benefit equally from the Malaysian education system.* (Chapter 4, p.15)

Additionally, the *Orang Asli* definitely requires the providence of “specific needs” given that they are still lagging behind and marginalised (Johari and Nazri, 2007) as compared to all the other mainstream ethnics, particularly the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. While the other ethnics have been academically, culturally and economically in step with the globalised world in a wide range of aspects, the Indigenous People of Malaysia, generally, are yet to have attained such an aspired achievement when the *Orang Asli* student outcomes were adversely reported in the Malaysia Education Blueprint in that, academically, “the drop-out rates for *Orang Asli* students is [sic] higher when compared to the national average. Only 30% of *Orang Asli* students complete secondary school less than half the national average of 72%. Compared to the national average of 87%, only 61% of students at SK *Asli* [or Indigenous Primary Schools] pass the core subjects in the UPSR [or end-of Year 6] national examinations. Only 1% of public schools are in the poor performance band (Bands 6 and 7) compared to 35% of SK *Asli* (Exhibit 4-10)” (Ministry of Education, 2012).



Source: (Ministry of Education, 2012), Exhibit 4-10, Chapter 4, p.21)

Diagram 1: *Orang Asli Student Outcomes*

Despite the fact that the *Orang Asli* education was formalized in 1952 and that a special department known as Department of *Orang Asli* Development or JAKOA (Jabatan Kemajuan *Orang Asli* Malaysia) has been established with the vision of “developing the *Orang Asli* community so that they are on par with the mainstream community” and the mission of “implementing the development in an inclusive manner to enhance the socio- economic status and

living quality towards progression by dignifying the superior heritage of the Orang Asli community” (quoted from the official JAKOA website at [www.jakoa.gov.my](http://www.jakoa.gov.my)), the academic achievements are still very much less than favourable (Edo, 2010); (Hamidah et al., 2013); (Nurbahiyah et al., 2013).

Therefore, proactive measures need to be drawn up and implemented to assist the Indigenous People of Malaysia so that they will be rescued from the bondage of academic failure and marginalised society, and be brought into the successful mainstream. The review of the literature indicates that, while many studies have collected the perceptions and views of parents, educators, and school administrators, few have explored the voices of successful Indigenous People with regard to the factors which had contributed to the academic success. Failure to do so is a serious oversight (Williams et al., 2017). Hence, this study aims to listen to the voices of successful Indigenous People in Malaysia and thereafter, crystallise the contributing themes or factors from these voices. It is an earnest hope that these crystallised factors from the successful Indigenous People would serve not only as a motivation, but also as a guide to other Indigenous People in Malaysia, in particular, so that they can also be equally successful in this globalised era.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

Given that the aim is to explore the phenomenon of academically successful Indigenous People by giving voices to them to articulate the factors that contributed to their academic success on the basis of their own personal experience, the most suitable research design is that of a phenomenology, which is also known as an educational qualitative research design (Creswell, 2009); (Creswell, 2013); (Marshall and Rossman, 2010); (Patton, 2015). Equally, (Creswell, 2013) theorizes that the best criteria to determine the use of phenomenology is when the research problem requires a profound understanding of a particular phenomenon such as *human experiences* (i.e., the experiences of academic success) common to a group of people (i.e., the Indigenous People) so as to distil individual experiences to an essential concept.

### 2.2. Sampling and Instrumentation

Creswell (2013) suggests that the studied group should consist of 3 to 15 individuals. The more diverse the experiences of participants, the harder it will be for the researcher to find the underlying essences and common meanings attributed to the studied phenomenon. Accordingly, the appropriate sampling technique used is that of purposeful sampling whereby information-rich cases individuals or groups of individuals who are knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell and Plano, 2011). In addition to knowledge and experience, the availability and the willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner, according to Bernard (2002) and Spradley (1979), are equally important.

### 2.3. The Interview Protocol Takes the Following Form

*Congratulations! You are the Indigenous People who have successfully entered the University. I would be truly grateful to you if you are able to share your experiences and success stories for the benefits of other young Indigenous People. Please enlighten and relate your personal examples/stories the factors which have contributed to your academic success.*

### 2.4. Data Collection Procedure

Firstly, the approval from the institutional review board was obtained before the study commenced. Secondly, the list of university IP students with their email addresses at a higher institution was obtained from the President of the Undergraduate Orang Asli Club, or PERMOA (*Persatuan Mahasiswa Orang Asli*). While the interview protocol consisting of the main question was posed to the successful Indigenous People, 7 students or interviewees -- denoted as IP-1, IP-2, IP-3, IP-4, IP-5, IP-6, and IP-7 who were undergoing the Bachelor of Education programme -- willingly participated in the on-line interview by responding to the question in the Interview Protocol.

### 2.5. Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was used as the main analysis procedure to analyze the phenomenological data acquired through online responses. Essentially, thematic analysis was performed through the process of coding in six phases to identify patterns across data sets that were important to the description of a phenomenon and are associated to the specific research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The six steps for conducting a thematic analysis has been summarised in Table 2.

Table-2. The Six Steps of Thematic Analysis

Step of Thematic Analysis		Description
1.	Familiarizing with your data	Read all the online responses, making notes and marking ideas (i.e. potential/initial/tentative themes) for coding.
2.	Generating Initial Codes	Categorise the recurring words, phrases, or thoughts across the data set, and code each category.
3.	Searching for Themes	Sort or collate codes into potential themes, and gather all data relevant to each potential theme.
4.	Reviewing and Refining Themes	Consider the relationship between codes, between themes, and between different levels of themes such as main overarching themes and subthemes within them, and subsequently, identify overlapping themes or uncoded text, refining and revising each category.
5.	Defining and Naming Themes	Compare themes and find high degree of consensus (95%) or joint agreement between codes, which tell the overall story. Names for each theme is intelligibly given and clearly defined. Coding decisions that differ will be discussed and modified accordingly in terms of content and wording.
6.	Writing up the Results	Write a scholarly report of the final analysis which relate back to the research question and literature. It must include clear themes and subthemes with supportive verbatim quotes (or, vivid, compelling extract examples).

## 2.6. Findings

Based on the analysis of seven interviews with academically successful Orang Asli Indigenous People in Malaysia, the findings revealed the factors (or themes) which have contributed to their academic success. Two themes emerged from the interview data: Aspiration and Support. Each theme has corresponding subthemes that are elaborated in the subsequent paragraphs.

## 2.7. Theme One: Aspiration

One of the resounding themes emerged from the interview data is that of aspiration – the ardent wish or desire to become successful, and in this case, educationally. The Orang Asli interviewed aspired to become successful, manifested in their successful entry or applications to the universities. The aspiration which these Orang Asli people have seems to be induced or prompted by several parties, ranging from self, family, community, and friends, hence the four subthemes.

### 2.7.1.1. Self-Induced

Aspiring him/herself to be on par with people of other mainstream races seems to be an important factor which propels the aspirant further, especially in taking the necessary action to achieve what has been aspired. For example, when a person aspires to have a better career and be successful, he/she will work harder as commented by an interviewee:

*I hope to get a better career ... and am able to be successful like other [mainstream] people. ... I will complete all the homework given by my teachers. (IP-1)*

Such self-induced aspiration is shared by yet another interviewee who remarked the importance of self-induced aspiration, particularly in assuring oneself and focussing one's mind towards realising the aspiration as follow:

*Self-factor is very important and it has contributed to my success. I always assure myself and my mind that I need to learn new things and study hard and become a knowledgeable teacher. I have a dream to be a teacher who will contribute to my race (IP-6)*

### 2.7.1.2. Family-Induced

The successful thoughts and desires could also be triggered by the thought of being successful simply for the sake of one's family. Realising that the family is economically deprived and that in order to bring the family out of poverty, one needs to study hard and be not only successful, but also be a role model for one's siblings as pronounced in harmony by four of the interviewees.

*I hope to be change the destiny of my family towards a better direction, [and] ... hope to be a good example for my younger siblings to emulate. (IP-1)*

*I want to be successful so that I can change the destiny of my family and make them happy and prosperous (IP-02)*

*When I see my family is at the very low standard of living and very poor, I really want to help my family and bring my family out of such poverty. All these make me want to work hard and be successful. (IP-3)*

*I want to be successful so that I can be a good role model for my younger siblings. (IP-07)*

### 2.7.1.3. Community-Induced

The thought for one's marginalised community, the yearning to alleviate the community to the level which is on par with other mainstream races, and the desire to help one's community in addressing the pressing problems such as the high dropout rate from school among Orang Asli children could also induce the aspirational thought to be successful in study. Such community-induced aspiration was shared among 5 interviewees who remarked that:

*If we succeed [academically], we can change the perceptions of others towards Orang Asli community. We can succeed just like other [mainstream] ethnics although we are minority. (IP-1)*

*When I see my Orang Asli community is being marginalised and oppressed due to lack of knowledge, I really feel that I have the responsibility to help and champion for my community. That's why I must study harder [and be successful] (IP-2).*

*I have seen so many Orang Asli failed in school and are not able to continue their studies. This makes me want to help them (i.e., Orang Asli in my community) so that the Orang Asli community can stand tall, as tall as other [mainstream] races. (IP-3)*

*I look forward to being a successful educator who will help solve the dropout problem among Orang Asli community ... I will also be able to plant the awareness among the Orang Asli parents in the Orang Asli community regarding the importance of education [and these parents] ... will send their children to school so that our community will progress and develop. (IP-6)*

*Since I grew up in this community and they supported me morally, I want to be successful so that I can bring progress to my Orang Asli village and community. (IP-7)*

### 2.7.1.4. Friend-induced

The successes of friends from similar or different races may also initiate aspirational thought of being successful, and hence, translating such aspiration into action. The theme of friend-induced aspiration seems to emerge and supported by the following responses of the interviewees.

*I have seen many of my friends who are successful and I want to be successful like them. (IP-2)*

*Seeing the successes of my friends really makes me want to be as successful as they are. (IP-3)*

### Theme Two: Support

The second resounding theme emerged from the interview data is that of adequate support, be it financial or moral. The aspiration in becoming successful which these Orang Asli people have seems to have emanated from the family, community, friends, schools, and government, hence the five subthemes.

## 2.1. Family-Based

The successful Orang Asli interviewees have indicated that their academic success was derived from the family-based support which comes in various forms such as encouragement, advice and admonishment, willingness to render any help needed at anytime, and financial, which taken together, may be broadly classified as moral and financial. The following quotes from the interviewees provide the credence for the subtheme of family-based support.

*My parents always advise me to work hard and they are willing to do anything for me so that I am successful in my study. (IP-1)*

*My family always give the support so that I can be successful in education. Although my family does not have good educational history, they always ask me to study hard. Although my mother was educated up to primary year 3 and my dad has never attended school (i.e., uneducated), they encourage me to study hard to become a successful person and our family will have a better life and [my success] will be a good example for the Orang Asli community. My family will fulfil whatever needs that I have so that I can study well. For example, my parents are willing to take me [to school or anywhere for extra tuition classes and school programs] and give me whatever educational need so that I can be successful in education. (IP-2)*

*My family always gives me the moral and financial support in every aspect and every stage of my education. (IP-5)*

*My parents give me lots of support and motivation, and my elder brother always gives me support whenever I feel like giving up. (IP-6)*

## 2.2. Friend-based

Another source of support that the Orang Asli interviewees received was that from their friends which include their classmates, schoolmates, and village-mates who were of their age or even older. The friend-based support ranges from lending academic help in teaching, discussing, lending of notes, advising, collaborating to complete school work or assignments, to going through good times and bad times together. The following quotes from the interviewees provide the credence for the subtheme of friend-based support.

*I have friends who have helped me in my study ... I consult them, discuss with them, and ask them to teach me when I have difficulties in my study. Also, whenever I am absent from the school, I will borrow their notes to revise. (IP-1)*

*My peers help me to succeed. After SPM and after completing the matriculation program, they inform me of the university application, interview, and other matters [pertaining to the entry into university]. (IP-2)*

*Friends are very important because we motivate one another ... we go through good times and bad times [or thick and thin] together ... we complete assignments together especially when teachers give group assignments. (IP-07)*

### 2.3. School-Based

Support from the school, particularly the teachers seems to be the resounding subtheme that emerged from the interview data. The successful Orang Asli interviewees reminisced the support that they received from their teachers such as giving advice and help pertaining to their current study and tertiary study, conducting extra classes after school hours, familiarising them to the techniques in answering examination questions, offering motivating and comforting words in times of need, and imparting extrinsic motivation in the forms of rewards and recognition. The following quotes from the interviewees provide the credence for the subtheme of school-based support.

*My teachers always give me advice and help me in my study. ... They give extra classes in the afternoon (after school hours) and also during the weekends. ... They give use past examination questions to solve ... My school organises academic programs and camps which I will attend. ... My school counsellor talks to me about the paths that I can choose after SPM. (IP-1)*

*My school teachers helped me so much ... They make me aware of the importance of education, [and] ... motivate me. ... They expose me to the outside world and always give positive words that help me to study till university level. (IP-2)*

*My school gave a lot of rewards and recognition for those who did well in school. This really makes me want to study harder. (IP-4)*

*My teachers will never be bored in giving me help and support until my academic performance increases. (IP-5)*

*Teachers play an important role in my success. They [the teachers] give me knowledge ... teach me ... [and] reprimand me if I do wrongly in my homework. [Besides] ... teachers in my school encourage and support me so that I can enter the university. ... My school even gives me the opportunity and cooperation when I wanted to go the school to carry out the educational programs which are required of me by my current university. (IP-07)*

### 2.4. Community-Based

The Orang Asli interviewees recalled the support that they received from their own community, without which they would not be successful today. The values shared within the Orang Asli community such as diligence have also been cited as an attributing factor which leads to their success in study. The following quotes from the interviewees provide the credence for the subtheme of community-based support.

*Our Orang Asli community emphasises on diligence and they always give me whatever assistance needed so that I can be successful in my study (IP-5)*

*Even now as a university student, whenever I go home for the holidays, my local community people always support and praise me ... [and this] really makes me want to be more excellent and successful. (IP-07)*

### 2.5. Government-based

The Orang Asli interviewees also acknowledged the support that they received from the Malaysian Government, particularly the JAKOA (i.e., Department of Orang Asli Development). The support rendered by the JAKOA takes the form of disbursing scholarships, providing the needed learning resources, and organising motivational educational programs. The following quotes from the interviewees provide the credence for the subtheme of government-based support.

*JAKOA has helped me a lot. They (JAKOA) gave me a scholarships and a laptop which allow me to study well and be successful. (IP-2)*

*The government has given the Orang Asli students like me lots of assistance such as financially and learning resources so that we are on par with other races in this country. (IP-5)*

*Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) has given me financial support and also has organized motivational programs. I will not come to the university if I do not have any assistance from JAKOA (IP-07)*

### 1.6. Faith-induced

There was a voice from the successful The Orang Asli who professed that her success was attributed divinely to God the Almighty who constantly provides help and strength to her. This underlies the importance of one's faith, irrespective of the religion or denomination which one embraces. She succinctly remarked that:

*Religion contributes to my success. I always believe that there is a God who helps me and gives me strength (IP-4)*

## 3. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from the analysis of interview data of the successful Orang Asli Indigenous People of Malaysia indicated two main themes which contributed to their academic success. The first theme is that of Aspiration, the ardent wish or desire to become educationally and academically successful. The first theme on aspiration seems to be contributed by a further four subthemes, namely self-induced aspiration, family-induced aspiration, community-induced aspiration, and friend-induced aspiration. Meanwhile, the second theme is that of support and such a support is family-based, friend-based, school-based, community-based, government-based, and faith-based support, hence the six subthemes. These themes and their corresponding subthemes are summarised in Table 3.

**Table-3.** Themes and Subthemes which Contribute to the Success of Indigenous People

	Theme		Subtheme
1.	Aspiration	1.1	Self-induced Aspiration
		1.2	Family-induced Aspiration
		1.3	Community-induced Aspiration
		1.4	Friend-induced Aspiration
2.	Support	2.1	Family-based Support
		2.2	Friend-based Support
		2.3	School-based Support
		2.4	Community-based Support
		2.5	Government-based Support
		2.6	Faith-based Support

These seven successful Orang Asli Indigenous People, currently undergoing the undergraduate degree program in a higher learning institution, could be regarded as academically resilient students -- defined as students who are academically successful despite coming from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (Waxman *et al.*, 2003). The findings of previous studies indicated that there are several factors which have been regarded as significant predictors of academic resilience. These factors include (1) relationships that provide care and support (both within and outside the family); (2) intrinsic motivation; (3) positive self-concept and academic self-efficacy; (4) internal locus of control; (4) nonparental sources of support or counsel from peers, siblings, and teachers; and (5) the availability of community organisations and services (Martin and Marsh, 2009); (Masten and Obradovic', 2006); (Morales, 2010); (Sturtevant, 2014); (Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw, 2008); (Wang *et al.*, 1994).

The two major themes supported by ten subthemes derived from this study seem parsimonious when the findings from the previous studies could subsume under. For example, the intrinsic motivation, positive self-concept and academic self-efficacy, and internal locus control could be subsumed under the first theme on aspiration and its related subthemes. Meanwhile, the relationships that provide care and support, nonparental sources of support or counsel from peers, siblings, and teachers, and the availability of community, organisations and services could be subsumed under the second theme on support and its related subthemes.

Therefore, firstly, the Orang Asli Indigenous People in Malaysia need to be given the opportunity to be aspirants with the belief that they would be successful in future. Such contention is supported by Linderman (2010) who has empirically verified the proposition that a direct positive relationship exists between the career aspirations of seventh grade students and their academic achievement. Secondly, the support mechanism should be in place to assist the Orang Asli so that they are able to succeed. Iglesias *et al.* (2014) have found that a person's perceived social support did have an impact on his or her academic achievement.

Finally, in this era of globalisation, the Orang Asli should not have the feeling of being marginalised and oppressed. Instead, aspiration needs to be cultivated and that adequate financial and moral support, at the very least, needs to be provided so that these Orang Asli would be on par with the mainstream races in terms of educational success and career prospect.

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