

The English Language Curriculum in Malaysian Indigenous Primary Classrooms: The Reality and the Ideal

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ABSTRACT

The decision to introduce the Asli Penan Curriculum (KAP) was met with mixed reactions when it was officially announced in the Malaysian education development plan 2013-2015. This study explores the decision made by the MOE and discusses the implementation of the English KSSR in lower primary (Year 1-3) indigenous schools. Data were collected using a questionnaire and interviews and 3 documents that represent English KSSR in Malaysia: the Standard Content Document (DSK), the Standard Performance Document (DSP) and textbooks by MOE using Williams 4 paradigms of evaluation. The findings of the study showed that KSSR is less suitable for indigenous pupils in this context because the language skills set by the MOE in the KSSR are higher than what the indigenous pupils can achieve. This study also found that guidance and support for teachers in indigenous schools are lacking and that there is a need for an alternative syllabus for the indigenous schools.

Keywords: indigenous students; KAP; KSSR; language curriculum; syllabus development; current issues.

INTRODUCTION

Alongside the implementation of K9 schools, KSSR KAP is another initiative by the Ministry of Education of Malaysia (MOE) in meeting the needs of indigenous communities in Malaysia. It provides an alternative syllabus apart from the KSSR which is widely used in Malaysian primary classrooms. The decision to introduce the *Kurikulum Asli Penan (KAP)* or Penan Curriculum in the Malaysia Education Development Plan 2013–2015 however has received mixed responses from teachers in indigenous schools. The issues raised by the teachers teaching in the community, perhaps, can be capsulated into a single query: ‘Will this curriculum segregate the indigenous schools from the mainstream system?’ However data or reports on this issue are scarce making responses to the query mentioned earlier rather challenging. Studies on this matter is indeed prominent to the survival of the community. Often being described as a community with a high rate of illiteracy (Hanlen 2010, Johari & Nazri 2007), it cannot be denied that acquiring English can lead the community to a better life and future; as well as empower them in the process of developing their community. Cummins (1996) suggests that a study on matters related to indigenous communities must not be done from the side of the community but rather to the system that has been offered to them; and this study is an advocate of this notion.

MALAYSIAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM IN ACTION

KAP was approved in 2007 and pilot studies were carried out in several indigenous schools (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum [BPK 2013, Rosli, Zahedah and Lokman 2009). According to Rosli et al, (2009), the first version of KAP was designed in 5 modules and these modules were developed based on the 7 objectives as follows:

- To develop the reading, writing and numeracy skills amongst indigenous pupils.
- To inculcate ‘come to school’ habit amongst indigenous pupils.

- To raise indigenous pupils' awareness towards hygiene, safety and health.
- To promote harmonious living through interaction with people outside of the indigenous pupils' social circle
- To raise indigenous pupils' self-esteem.
- To help indigenous pupils to practise positive values in their daily life.
- To help indigenous pupils understand the social culture of their society and Malaysia.

In their study, Rosli et al. (2009) described KAP as the come-to-school-curriculum aiming to increase pupils' participation to school. The current transition between former curriculum and current one (KSSR), which took place in 2011, also did not stop the process of introducing KAP to indigenous schools. Later in June 2013, the Malaysian Curriculum Development Division (BPK) called several indigenous schools to attend a briefing on KAP. Although it is too early to state how the alternative curriculum for indigenous community would be, the earlier picture given by the BPK reflects that KAP is another fraction of KSSR, designed to suit the needs of indigenous pupils. This situation would be similar to what is being practiced in Malaysian National Chinese and Tamil Type Schools (SJKC and SJKT) where they have their own version of KSSR. This would explain the current label used for KAP which is the 'Standard Curriculum for Primary School: Asli Penan' [KSSR-KAP] by the BPK (2013).

All indigenous schools in Malaysia have used KBSR (1993-2010) and KSSR (2011-now) as their curriculum. Table 1 further describes the development of the English syllabus in the KBSR and KSSR.

TABLE 1. The differences between KBSR and KSSR (BPK 2003, BPK 2012)

ASPECTS	KBSR (2003-2010)	KSSR (2011-Now)
Aims	To equip pupils with skills and provide a basic understanding of English language so they are able to communicate, both orally and in writing, in and out of school.	To equip pupils with basic language skills to enable them to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts that is appropriate to the pupils' level of development.
Objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Listen to and understand simple spoken English in certain given contexts. 2. Ask and answer questions, speak and express themselves clearly to others using simple language. 3. Acquire good reading habits to understand, enjoy and extract information from a variety of texts. 4. Write legibly and express ideas in simple language; and 5. Show an awareness and appreciation of moral values as well as love for the nation. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communicate with peers and adults confidently and appropriately in formal and informal situations 2. Read and comprehend a range of English texts for information and enjoyment. 3. Write a range of texts using appropriate language, style and form through a variety of media. 4. Appreciate and demonstrate understanding of English language literary or creative work for enjoyment. 5. Use correct and appropriate rules of grammar in speech and writing.
Themes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. World of Self 2. World of Knowledge 3. World of Story 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. World of Self 2. World of Knowledge 3. World of Story
Curriculum Contents and Skills	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Speaking, listening, reading and writing. 2. Sound system 3. Grammar in context 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Speaking, listening, reading and writing. 2. Language Arts 3. Penmanship 4. Basic literacy – phonics 5. Grammar in context
Curriculum Organization and Documents	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Syllabus (Curriculum Specification for each year) containing contents, learning outcomes and suggested activities). 2. Textbooks 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Modules according to language skills and language arts (Teachers' Guide) 2. Standard Content Document (DSK) 3. Standard Performance Document (DSP) 4. Textbook 5. Activity Book <p>(Stage 1 [Year 1-3] and stage 2 [Year 4-6]. Pupils will only start learning grammar formally in Year 3.)</p>

Assessment	Clear emphasis on summative assessment. Grades are given according to A-B-C.	School-based assessment (PBS) where teachers collect evidences from pupils' work. Pupils' development is recorded using Band 1-6 system.
Word List	Common and high frequency words that can be used and recycled in different contexts and topics.	Common words that can be used repetitively in different contexts
Educational Emphases	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thinking skill 2. Learning how to learn skills 3. ICT 4. Multiple intelligences 5. Values and citizenship 6. Knowledge acquisition 7. Preparation in the real world 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thinking skill 2. Mastery learning 3. ICT 4. Multiple intelligences 5. Constructivism 6. Contextual learning 7. Learning how to learn skills 8. Values and citizenship 9. Knowledge acquisition 10. Creative and innovation 11. Entrepreneurship

Table 1 illustrates the changes made to the syllabus in the curriculum. For example, the KSSR curriculum contents have been designed to re-highlight and emphasize language arts, phonics and penmanship (BPK 2011). For instance, with regards to the educational emphases aspect the KSSR includes 'creative and innovation', 'entrepreneurship'. From Table 1, it can be seen that the KSSR, despite changing its name from *Integrated* to *Standard*, has its roots in the former curriculum and is still integrated in nature. Ragbir (2005) describes this curriculum as an emergent curriculum which is designed according to the current needs and trends; hence explaining the additions in the 'Educational Emphases' and other features. However the most prominent changes in the KSSR would be the documents that represent each syllabus – DSK and DSP – and the procedures of assessing pupils.

Education as a matter of fact is not a static concept and has evolved from time to time (Bruner 1997). Since 1950 many researchers have proposed their ideal ways of how language syllabus should be designed and shaped. Within this period, several concepts or framework of syllabus developed. The debate was mostly centralized on two types of syllabus known as product and process syllabuses (Gray 1990, Nunan 1987). Through these two basic frameworks, we can see different concerns regarding syllabus designing (White 1988, Walt 1990). Table 2 below summarizes the prominent features of both syllabuses based on Davies' (1976, as cited in White 1988).

TABLE 2. Summary of Product and Process syllabuses (White, 1988)

Product (Type A)	Process (Type B)
- Interventionist	-Internal to the learner
- External to learner	-Inner directed or self fulfilling
- Other directed	-Negotiated between learners and teachers
- Determined by authority	-Learners and teachers as joint decision makers.
- Teacher as decision maker	-Content is the subject that the students want to learn and its relation to the students.
- Content is 'what the subject is to the expert' and a gift to the learner from the teacher	-Objectives described afterwards.
- Objectives defined in advance	-Focus on how it is to be learned
- Focus on what is to be learned	-Assessment in relationship to learners' criteria of success
- Assessment by achievement or by mastery.	-Doing things for or with the learners.
- Doing things to the learner	

Later in the 1990s, the discourse on syllabus design once again became heated when the term 'integrated' was highlighted by several syllabus designers (Kysilka 1998, Bruner 1997, Maurer 1994). Syllabus designers realize that it takes more than just the language content,

structures and how it is done in the language classroom for language acquisition to happen. Integrated syllabus advocators argue that the needs of the society and the current trend in education should also be given similar weight when designing a curriculum. In Malaysia for instance, we have seen the introduction of the Smart School system in 1990 and the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English in 2003 as several adaptations that responded to the needs at that time (Ragbir 2005). Through this history, we believe that the flexibility in designing a syllabus is an important element. It should be seen as a continuum and attention should be given on where we place our principles in designing a syllabus on the continuum (Freeman & Anderson 2011, Nunan 1988).

To arrive at a balance point on the continuum however is not an easy task and this would be the challenge for Malaysian syllabus designers. Being a culturally and linguistically diverse country, curriculum in Malaysia must be able to accommodate these two aspects. The earlier picture given by the BPK seems to show that the development of KSSR has followed several strategies in line with the contemporary syllabus design approach. The changes as discussed in Table 2 also reflect that MOE is keeping abreast with the social changes and economic developments that are taking place in Malaysia and global. If the foregoing trends become the premise then we can consider that there is a possibility for it to work out in the indigenous context. Whilst studies on the suitability of the syllabus has received fair attention by many scholars (Moiinvaziri 2014) there has been few, if any, studies done on this issue. Hence, it is not clear how this one-size syllabus has benefited the indigenous pupils and why MOE decided to introduce KSSR-KAP. This study therefore hopes to explore the decision made by the MOE by answering the following research questions:

1. What is the perception of English language teachers towards the implementation of the English KSSR syllabus in indigenous schools?
2. What are the gaps in implementing the KSSR in these schools?
3. Should there be an alternative curriculum for indigenous pupils?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: IDEAL SYLLABUS VS REALITY

Nunan (1988) elucidates that there are several conflicting views on just what it is that distinguishes syllabus design and curriculum development. To illustrate, he highlighted several definitions based on a study conducted by Brumfit (1984, as cited in Nunan 1988). Amongst those definitions, the one defined by Allen (1984, as cited in Nunan 1988) would be helpful to clarify this issue:

... curriculum is a very general concept which involves consideration of the whole complex of philosophical social and administrative factors which contribute to the planning of an educational programme. Syllabus on the other hand, refers to that subpart of the curriculum which is concerned with a specification of what units will be taught...

Based on the definition above, KSSR would be the 'big umbrella' for the term curriculum which consists of all subjects offered in Malaysian national schools. Syllabus, on the other hand, would refer to the documents that explain what is to be taught in the classroom which is the Standard Content Document (DSK) and Standard Performance Document (DSP) of a specific subject. The study on syllabus appropriateness has also seen 'textbook' being used as the document that represents the notion (Hesham 2007, Williams 1983). In the Malaysian context, textbooks are often the interpretation of textbook writers based on written syllabi such as the two aforementioned documents. Therefore in this study, syllabus is represented by three main documents, the DSK, DSP and textbooks.

What constitutes ideal and reality in syllabus design can be discussed from several studies. Lu (2007) describes an ideal syllabus, through her studies, as a theoretically driven plan and reality as the problems that occur in putting the plan into action. Williams (1983) uses 4 main areas or schemes to evaluate the reality and ideal of a syllabus. The schemes are up to date methodology, guidance for teachers, needs of learners, and relevance to socio cultural environment (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Williams’ Scheme of Evaluation (Williams, 1983)

Aspects to be Evaluated	Explanation
Methodology	The documents should be consistent with psychological and linguistics principles underlying current accepted methods of second language teaching.
Guidance for teachers	Provide guidance to the teachers who are going to use the documents so the purposes of the documents are made clear to them.
Learner’s Needs	The documents should cater to the needs of the users. They should be at the appropriate level of the users.
The relevance to socio cultural environment.	The completeness and appropriateness of the items presented; the activities suggested for practicing the items selected; proper sequencing of the items and skills in the textbook and target set in both DSK and DSP; the relevance of its contexts and situations.

Although the four paradigms or schemes above were explained in relation to textbooks, the concepts that Williams offered, can be used to evaluate a syllabus and remain relevant to our situation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a sequential exploratory mixed method methodology. Quantitative data were obtained through a questionnaire whereas interviews provide the qualitative data.

SAMPLING

The sample for the study comprised 25 lower primary English language school teachers from various indigenous schools in one Malaysian state. Lower primary teachers here refers to teachers teaching Years 1, 2 or 3. The sample represents 68% of the total population of teachers in the study.

INSTRUMENTS

QUESTIONNAIRE

Using Williams (1983) framework to assess textbooks, a 35 item questionnaire was developed for this study. The questionnaire was piloted to two teachers and several amendments made to the items due to choice of word. For example, the term contents was taken out from question 30 for being ambiguous. Items 1-18 asked about the teachers’ reaction towards the DSK and DSP whilst items 19-35 asked about their reaction to the textbooks used in their classroom. The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine to what extent the 3 documents (DSK, DSP¹ and textbook) fulfilled the criteria as laid out in Williams’ paradigms. Example of items which deal with the documents are shown below (Table 4).

TABLE 4. Example of Items

Item No	Questions	Documents	Williams' Paradigms
2	The language learning objectives, after 6 years of schooling, are relevant and achievable by the indigenous pupils.	DSK/DSP	Learners' Needs
7	There is guidance for teachers on how to present the contents or language skills in the Teacher's Guide	DSK/DSP	Guidance for Teachers
6	The syllabus takes into account currently accepted methods of ESL/EFL teaching.	DSK/DSP	Methodology
30	Topics in the textbook are appropriate and familiar for the indigenous pupils.	Textbook	The relevance to socio cultural environment.

There were also 3 closed-ended questions asking for respondents' opinion on the need for an alternative curriculum. In total there were 35 questions in Part A and 3 closed-ended questions in Part B. The questionnaires were distributed to each school through the District Education office and via teachers' personal email. A total of 37 questionnaires were distributed but only 25 were returned.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

After the questionnaire data were collected and analysed, an interview schedule was developed to elicit in-depth data. Phone or face-to-face interviews were then held, depending on the place where the teachers were, as well as the mobility of the researcher and the nature of the task. The phone and face-to-face interviews were recorded and 5 interviewees were involved in the process. All the interviewees were teaching in different schools. All interviews were transcribed and organized into themes using thematic analysis. Questions like teachers' opinion towards their students' ability and how requirements set on the documents respond to the ability of the students were asked. Each interview lasted between 20 - 30 minutes.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

TEACHERS' RESPONSE TOWARDS THE DSK AND DSP

From Table 5, a good majority of respondents agree that DSK and DSP are two documents that have been planned properly and benefit pupils in general. This is in tandem with the percentage of teachers who strongly agreed and agreed with item 3 (92%), item 6 (76%) and item 15 (64%). The table also shows that a good majority of respondents (68%: item 10) agree that the themes (World of Self, World of Knowledge and World of Book) and the educational emphases (60%: item 11) are relevant for the indigenous pupils. The results suggest that DSP and DSK have served their purposes. However, in terms of the specific learning context of the indigenous community, the results seem to suggest that the syllabus may be less than appropriate. This is based on the finding that 68% of the respondents believe that the language skills that need to be achieved for each Year are not appropriate for the indigenous pupils' (item 14). 60% of the respondents believe that the learning objectives at the end of the six years of schooling as suggested by MOE are too ambitious for indigenous pupils to achieve (item 2). 60% of the respondents are of the view that English KSSR for lower primary does not cater for individual differences (item 9).

TABLE 5. Teachers' Response on the Lower Primary English Syllabus in General

	STATEMENT	1	2	3	4	5
2	The language learning objectives, after 6 years of schooling, are relevant and achievable by the indigenous pupils.	60	12	28		
3	In general, the Document of Standard Content (DSK) and the Document of Standard Performance (DSP) are well planned documents.			8	48	44
6	The syllabus takes into account currently accepted methods of ESL/EFL teaching.			24	48	28
9	The syllabus caters for individual differences (indigenous people) in home language background.	60	20	20		
10	The themes in the syllabus are related to the indigenous pupils' culture and environment.			32	44	24
11	The educational emphasizes, as stated in the KSSR, are relevant to the indigenous pupils.			40	48	12
14	Language skills set for each level are appropriate to the indigenous pupils (eg: Language skills for Year 3 are appropriate for Year 3 pupils).	68	20	12		
15	In general, each language skill is progressively presented and logically organized.			36	56	8

1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neither 4=Agree 5=Strongly Agree

TEACHERS' RESPONSES TOWARDS THE TEXTBOOK

Table 6 shows the results of the analysis on the teachers' responses towards the textbooks used. Based on the responses to item 30, a majority (60%) of the teachers strongly agreed and agreed that the topics of the textbooks are appropriate for indigenous pupils. The respondents (60%) also strongly agreed and agreed that the activities in the textbooks do reflect the educational emphases as contained in the KSSR (item 33). These results are consistent with the results in Table 6

TABLE 6. Teachers' response on the textbooks used in Indigenous schools

	STATEMENTS	1	2	3	4	5
19	Most of the time, activities in the textbook can be used with little adaptation only.		64	20	16	
21	Reading materials in the textbooks are suitable to indigenous pupils' proficiency level.		80	20		
22	The textbooks provides opportunity for indigenous pupils to learn grammar indirectly and subsequently help them to learn the grammar items formerly once they are in upper primary (Year4-6).		68	28	4	
26	Guidance on how to accommodate the lower-proficiency pupils are given in the textbook for each topic.	36	48	16		
27	Most of the suggested activities (language activities as suggested in the textbook) can be carried out in the classroom.	4	48	32	16	
28	The textbooks help to develop indigenous pupils' thinking skills.		52	28	20	4
30	Topics in the textbook are appropriate and familiar for the indigenous pupils.		12	28	40	20
33	Activities in the textbook reflect the educational emphasizes as stated in the KSSR.		12	28	40	20

1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neither 4=Agree 5=Strongly Agree

However, the finding shows that 84% of the teachers strongly disagree and disagree that the textbooks provide guidance for teachers on how to accommodate the activities to pupils of lower proficiency (item 26). 80% of the respondents also feel that the reading materials are not suitable in view of the pupils' low proficiency (item 21) and 64% of the respondents feel that most of the time they need to adapt the activities in order to meet their pupils' needs (item 19). The findings in this part resonate with the ones from Table 6 where most of the respondents believe that the level of each skill is pitched higher than what the pupils can comprehend. Perhaps, this could explain why a good number of respondents strongly disagreed and disagreed with item 22 (68%), item 27 (52%) and item 28 (52%). It is possible that the mismatch in the level of skill hampers efforts to prepare pupils to learn g. The results above are consistent with data from the interviews held, which suggest that teachers find difficulty in using textbooks in their teaching context.

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND HOW GREAT ARE THEY?

Two themes arose from the interview data, that is: the level of language skills is pitched inappropriately and the lack in guidance and support for teachers. Table 7 provides sample comments from the interviews that suggest the level of language skills is pitched inappropriately. This finding is consistent with data from the questionnaire.

THE LEVEL OF LANGUAGE SKILLS IS PITCHED INAPPROPRIATELY

TABLE 7. The level of language skills is pitched inappropriately

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">- The skills are too high for them... so activities in the text book cannot be used.- Yes at times the activities are too difficult for them... only some of them can read so... if the basic is not there than how could we expect the pupils can participate in the activity... right?- Because the level of the skills are set at the wrong level for indigenous people so we do not use textbook in our school- Maybe the level is high... so indigenous pupils cannot follow it...- The target outcomes ... cannot be achieved... because they cannot even participate since Year 1.- Phonics can be used... the sounds of 'A' ... penmanship... but reading is too difficult... the texts are high level...- The development of indigenous pupils' language proficiency through KSSR is slow |
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According to the respondents, the main reason for the mismatch in the level of skills is because of the low literacy level among the indigenous pupils when they first begin school. Table 8 provides sample comments from the respondents that attest to the pupils' low literacy level when they begin their formal education. Among the reasons put forth by the respondents for the level of literacy are problems with distance and transportation which curtail the pupils' participation in preschool as well as the fact that the pupils are not familiar with a printed system of writing as such a system in the indigenous language is still lacking. The lack of a printed system of writing in particular, affect the reading skill development of indigenous children because they are not used to a printed system. Several respondents add that due to such a limitation, most of the pupils are still illiterate when they enter Year 1 and thus teachers mainly focus only on developing pupils' ability to recognize and blend letters. The reality is the textbook and activities are prepared for students who come into Year 1 with some literacy ability and are thus too advanced for these pupils. This is a gap that needs to be overcome by the syllabus designers.

TABLE 8. Reason for the mismatch in level of skill

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Pupils' language proficiency is very poor...- Those attend pre-school have been exposed to ABC- out of 30 only 3 can read in year 2 ... in Year 3 only 10 pupils... half of the pupils attended LINUS (BM).- No exposure towards English at home.- Yes there are pupils who still do not recognize ABC when they begin Year 1.-Parents only ask their children to attend the school but they do not introduce ABC to their children.- We need to ensure indigenous children are introduced to literacy as early as possible. |
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LACK OF GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS

A second theme that emerged from the interview data was the lack of support and guidance for teachers in implementing the curriculum. Table 9 provides sample comments that suggest that the guidance and support provided are still not sufficient.

TABLE 9. Lack of guidance and support for teachers

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - During the course we were given information on KSSR ... maybe the course will be effective for use... if they bring examples from indigenous schools as well. - Supposedly there should be in-house training but... it is not conducted. - Apart from the course we can only get information from the internet... - The internet is limited so normally I will get the information once I am at my house (The respondent went back to his house during weekends). - Panel members don't work together as a team... - Schools and JAKOA should work together... The link needs to be improved - There is no one standard material for indigenous pupils made by the PPD or JPN so teachers need to make it on their own. - Only certain part in the guide book... that can be used
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Most of the interviewees concur that the syllabus for indigenous pupils in this context requires special attention from the designers. As such, more than sufficient guidance should be given to the teachers because they are teaching in a community that practices a different culture from their own. Guidance is needed to ensure that the information from the top is implemented at the lower end. From the interviews, several respondents mentioned that, at times, the courses to explain the concept of KSSR and how to implement it do not meet their objectives. According to one of the interviewees also, the teachers' guide book rarely provide enough suggestions on what can be done to accommodate the needs of indigenous pupils. Often the teachers need to prepare the materials under challenging circumstances; such as the lack of materials and slow internet connection. A proper syllabus that responds to the needs of its users is important because it is not merely a form of support for the teaching that is planned in the classroom but also a form of guidance in the construction of appropriate teaching materials (Prabhu 1987). It is also believed that cooperation between the school, parents, state and district education office (JPN and PPD), NGOs and teachers should be enhanced for the betterment of education for indigenous children.

SHOULD AN ALTERNATIVE ENGLISH SYLLABUS BE APPLIED IN THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY?

In the last bit of the questionnaire, this study asked the respondents' opinion on whether there should be an alternative curriculum tailored for indigenous community such as the KAP as suggested by the MOE. The response to the question is as seen in Table 10 below:

TABLE 10. Should an alternative English syllabus be applied in the indigenous community?

No	Item	Yes	No
1	I agree with the implementation of only-KSSR in indigenous schools.		100
2	I agree that an alternative curriculum should be implemented to indigenous schools.	100	
3	The implementation of KSSR and KAP should be done side by side just like how LINUS is implemented in the KSSR (Pupils should be streamed according to their ability; there will be indigenous pupils learning through KSSR and another group will be learning through KAP at school).	48	52

Based on Table 10, a majority of respondents disagree with the implementation of only KSSR in indigenous school. They believe that an alternative syllabus should be introduced and practised in order to ensure that the indigenous pupils can be more competitive with other communities in Malaysia. However, the response on how the syllabus should be implemented is rather varied.

Another point of contention that arose from the interviews was the question of segregation. While most respondents agree that there should be an alternative syllabus, some respondents cautioned that the alternative syllabus must not lead to segregation of the indigenous community from the rest of the country. Table 11 provides sample comments that show that some respondents believe the current syllabus to be isolating in nature.

TABLE 11. The current syllabus is isolating in nature

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">- The current syllabus is more segregating... they cannot follow... but if the alternative can promote achievements to indigenous people... why not?- Segregation could also happen in the current syllabus...- It is better to have a syllabus that meets their needs... at least they can use and relate it to their own situation.- When we use a syllabus that is more familiar for them... we can encourage pupils' attendance to school.- Alternative curriculum also will help them to develop their basic literacy skill which will be very useful when they are in secondary school.- They are struggling to follow the mainstream curriculum... they might think it would be better for them to follow their parents into the jungle... at least they can make money. |
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The contention that the current syllabus is isolating in nature is supported by analyses from JAKOA (Indigenous Development Department) where it was shown that less than 15% of Year 6 indigenous pupils passed UPSR English in 2012; and this figure has not improved from previous years (JAKOA 2010, JAKOA 2011, JAKOA 2012). The interviewees believe that an alternative curriculum will provide a sense of achievement amongst indigenous pupils because it would be tailored to meet their needs. However, the interviewees add that the syllabus designers must ensure that the alternative syllabus should also be about bringing the indigenous pupils back into the mainstream curriculum once they are in secondary or tertiary levels. If this becomes the main objective of the alternative syllabus, this study believes segregation will not happen to the indigenous pupils.

CONCLUSION

To date, there have been several studies trying to describe the indigenous pupils' achievement in education (Abdul Sukor et al 2011, Johari & Nazri 2007). Whilst the previous studies have described the school environment and teachers as the key factors, this study focused on the syllabus used in the classrooms. This study found that a good majority of the respondents disagree with the implementation of the current syllabus due to various reasons and they are in support of an alternative curriculum. This paper highlights two dominant problems: the level of language skills is pitched inappropriately and the lack of guidance and support for English language teachers. Whilst the majority of the respondents agree that the social context in the syllabus is suitable for the indigenous community, the other three paradigms (methodology, guidance for teachers and learners' need) as mentioned by Williams (1983) do not seem to fit into the situation.

This study found that the level of literacy of indigenous pupils when they first start schooling and the cooperation between teachers, the school and outside community are the

two gaps that need to be addressed by the syllabus designers. This situation has created what is believed to be a domino effect in the indigenous pupils' learning experience. Pupils who do not know how to read but are required to participate in high level literacy activities may feel threatened because they do not have the basic skills to be involved actively (Harmer 2007, Moon 2004). This is indeed a pertinent issue to be addressed since involvement at university level requires even higher literacy skills from the students (Rosniah 2006). Similarly, in a special context, ample guidance and support should be given to teachers either in the form of teachers' guidebook for indigenous schools or community support where teachers from different indigenous schools share materials and discuss professionally (Eggen and Kauchak 2004).

This study, therefore, would like to suggest that the age of attending preschool for indigenous pupils in this context be made compulsory at 5 years old; instead of 6. This is to ensure that when the pupils begin their Year 1 they would have already had the basic skills for them to participate in the lesson. It must be understood that not all indigenous kids have the luxury of being exposed to alphabets or numbers at their home (Mohammad Johdi and Abdul Razaq 2009).

Second this study would like to suggest that cooperation between education stakeholders should be strengthened. Team work between panels, schools, education officers, NGOs and parents should be cultivated because the indigenous community is a special community that requires more attention from the stakeholders. Grant and Ray (2013) assert that home, school and community collaboration can accelerate the education development of a community. Third, more field research, from the government and NGOs should be encouraged in order to get a better picture of the achievement of indigenous pupils. This would help to provide better information and data to syllabus designers on where and how to start; so as to set proper learning outcomes for the indigenous community.

Since this study is conducted in one of the states in Malaysia, this study wish to refrain from over generalizing the findings to the whole population of indigenous schools in Malaysia. However this study does represent a group of teachers teaching in a challenging environment and background from a particular part in Malaysia that merits our attention. A similar study, therefore, needs to be conducted however using a different variable – KSSR-KAP. It would be interesting to see how teachers respond to this version of syllabus and further highlight parts that need attention from the stakeholders. Efforts to improve the education of indigenous people in Malaysia should also be continuously supported and encouraged by all parties concerned. To sum up this research posits that an alternative curriculum for indigenous students is something that warrants due attention.

ENDNOTES

¹ This study was conducted in 2013 where later in 2014 these two documents has been merged and called as DSKP

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