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(IJEPC)**[www.ijepr.com](http://www.ijepr.com)**EMPOWERING EDUCATION: DEVELOPING A NEEDS-BASED  
LEADERSHIP MODEL FOR ORANG ASLI SCHOOLS IN  
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**DOI:** 10.35631/IJEPC.956057**This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)****Abstract:**

This research aims to empower education by developing a needs-based and explores the imperative leadership model for Orang Asli schools in Malaysia. A marginalized indigenous community facing unique socio-cultural and economic challenges. This study utilized semi-structured interviews with four experienced headteachers from Orang Asli schools which revealed six key challenges: the need for culturally specific leadership strategies, lack of formal training, emotional resilience, logistical issues in remote areas, community engagement, and socio-economic barriers. These findings emphasize the need for a culturally sensitive and context-specific leadership framework, equipping leaders to address these challenges effectively and enhance educational outcomes for Orang Asli students. While the scope is limited to a small sample, the study offers critical insights for developing leadership practices tailored to the needs Orang Asli students.

**Keywords:**

Educational Equity, Indigenous Education, Leadership Model, School Leadership, Thematic Analysis

**Introduction**

In contemporary Malaysia, the education of the Orang Asli community remains a focal point within the nation's development agenda. Despite numerous initiatives post-independence

aimed at enhancing educational standards for this community, their performance continues to lag behind that of other ethnic groups (Abdullah et al., 2013; Ibrahim, 2024). School leadership plays a pivotal role in ensuring the effectiveness of educational outcomes, particularly within marginalized communities such as the Orang Asli. Statistics indicate that Orang Asli schools encounter distinctive challenges, including remote locations, cultural barriers, and insufficient infrastructure, which negatively affect student attendance and basic literacy rates (Ismail et al., 2020; Mohd Noor et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2022). This situation necessitates leadership approaches that are attuned to local contexts and responsive to the cultural needs of the community. Traditional educational leadership models often fall short in addressing the challenges faced by the Orang Asli community; thus, it is crucial to develop a leadership model grounded in local cultural values to ensure inclusive and pertinent educational experiences. This objective aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities and is further supported by the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

Furthermore, research focusing on the leadership needs of Orang Asli schools remains scarce. Most previous studies have concentrated on general educational challenges without adequately addressing the unique cultural and socio-economic contexts of this community (Abdullah & Hassan, 2019; Sulaiman et al., 2020). Thus, the present study aims to bridge this gap by analysing the leadership needs within Orang Asli schools and proposing a model that addresses local challenges while strengthening the relationship between schools and the community. Additionally, Macfarlane et al., (2023) advocate for the integration of leadership qualities possessed by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders, positing that the rich cultural traditions and community-oriented values of the Orang Asli can enhance educational leadership by providing a more holistic and inclusive perspective. This integration may lead to improved educational outcomes.

Employing a qualitative approach, this research seeks to explore the perspectives of school leaders regarding their specific needs, with the aim of developing a practical leadership model aligned with national educational aspirations. The findings of this study are anticipated to offer guidance for school leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholders in designing more effective educational strategies for the Orang Asli community.

Moreover, a significant disparity in literacy rates and school retention persists; for example, the literacy rate among Orang Asli children stands at only 49.2%, compared to the national average of 94.9% (Shaari et al., 2024). Studies have highlighted the cultural and socio-economic factors that contribute to these disparities, such as parents' lack of formal education and the prioritization of traditional livelihoods over schooling (Hynds et al., 2016; Safwat et al., 2020). Initiatives such as culturally responsive teaching, as practiced in Jah Hut communities, have demonstrated promise by integrating traditional values and local culture into the curriculum, thereby enhancing student engagement and retention (Idrus et al., 2023).

The issues of low attendance and high dropout rates among Orang Asli students, particularly during the transition to secondary school, can be attributed to economic, social, and cultural factors. According to the Ministry of Education Malaysia, Orang Asli students experience an average dropout rate of 15% at the secondary level, significantly exceeding the national average of 3% (Ministry of Education, 2022). Furthermore, literacy rates among Orang Asli

children remain around 75%, in contrast to 94% for the general Malaysian population (Ismail et al., 2020).

The challenges faced by Orang Asli schools are compounded by logistical barriers, as nearly 45% of these schools are located in remote areas with limited access to basic infrastructure, such as paved roads and electricity (Department of Orang Asli Development, 2023). These logistical challenges, along with cultural barriers and an absence of culturally relevant curricula, contribute to low attendance rates, with some schools reporting absenteeism rates as high as 30% (Sulaiman et al., 2020).

Consequently, this study seeks to bridge the gap in understanding leadership needs in Orang Asli schools and proposes a model that addresses local challenges while strengthening the relationship between schools and the community. In alignment with Macfarlane et al., (2023), the study emphasizes integrating both Indigenous and non-Indigenous leadership qualities, positing that the cultural traditions and community-oriented values of the Orang Asli can enhance educational leadership, leading to improved educational outcomes.

By employing a qualitative research methodology, this study aims to examine school leaders' perspectives on their unique needs, ultimately developing a practical and culturally relevant leadership model that aligns with national educational goals. The anticipated findings of this study are expected to provide critical insights and guidance for school leaders, policymakers, and stakeholders in the design.

## Literature Review

Leadership within Indigenous education transcends administrative functions, encompassing the integration of cultural values and practices that empower students through relevant and transformative educational experiences (Youngbull, 2021). Lopez-Delgado (2018) emphasizes the necessity for enhanced leadership preparation for school leaders in remote areas, advocating for frameworks that align with the values and needs of the Orang Asli community. This alignment is crucial to ensure that educational efforts extend beyond mainstream curricula to reflect the community's unique cultural heritage. Da'as (2024) supports this notion, asserting that school leaders in Indigenous communities must adopt culturally responsive approaches to foster social integration and enhance student achievement. In Danai et al, (2023) underscore the essential role of Orang Asli school leaders in promoting cultural identity through curricula that resonate with community values. Krishnasamy (2019) further highlights the imperative for leadership models that incorporate socio-cultural sensitivity to effectuate positive educational outcomes in Orang Asli schools.

The educational performance of Orang Asli students remains significantly lower than that of their mainstream counterparts, with persistently high dropout rates representing a paramount challenge (Ismail et al., 2020). These challenges underscore the necessity for leadership strategies that are cognizant of the cultural and socio-economic contexts within which the Orang Asli community operates. Othman (2022) discusses the obstacles to achieving quality education for the Orang Asli, particularly through the adoption of culturally appropriate curricula. Sulaiman et al. (2020) identify low academic engagement among Orang Asli students as a consequence of irrelevant curricula, cultural disparities, and unsupportive teacher attitudes. Furthermore, Muniandy and Nor (2024) demonstrate a positive correlation between

transformational leadership enacted by headteachers and the motivation of teachers, which is vital for enhancing school performance. Marshall and Tucker (1992) argue that transformational leaders exhibit human-oriented characteristics; they foster strong relationships and assist their followers in establishing and pursuing goals. Within the realm of Indigenous education, transformational leaders are vital for guiding both teachers and students toward positive change while addressing the unique challenges they encounter. Research by Menon and Lefteri (2021) reinforces the assertion that transformational leadership can enhance teacher self-efficacy and improve student learning outcomes, thereby providing a framework to empower educators in Orang Asli schools.

Historical analyses of Indigenous education, both in Malaysia and globally, suggest that educational approaches for Indigenous communities cannot be divorced from broader issues of poverty, democracy, and human rights (Abdullah & Hassan, 2019). Education must be conceptualized as a means of empowering the Orang Asli community to assert their social, cultural, and civic rights. Sawalludin et al. (2020) discuss the educational challenges faced by the Orang Asli, including parental unawareness and limited access to educational institutions, emphasizing the imperative to enhance educational quality. Best practices in Indigenous education highlight the vital importance of leadership models that integrate cultural considerations into educational administration. Such programs have demonstrated success in improving relationships between schools and communities, increasing student attendance, and strengthening parental support for education (Youngbull, 2021). Therefore, leadership models designed for Orang Asli schools must account for the cultural, economic, and social factors inherent to the community. These models should also adopt a transformational approach that not only facilitates students' attainment of educational objectives but also reinforces the connection between schools and the wider community.

Leadership in Indigenous education necessitates culturally responsive frameworks that address the specific needs of Indigenous communities, such as the Orang Asli in Malaysia. Lopez-Delgado (2018) stresses the urgent requirement for specialized leadership preparation, particularly for those operating in remote and underserved areas.

A pivotal theoretical framework relevant to this study is the theory of Culturally Responsive Leadership (Gay, 2002). This form of leadership is essential for fostering a sense of identity and belonging among Indigenous students. Khalifa et al. (2016) emphasize that culturally responsive school leadership entails recognizing and addressing the distinctive cultural needs of students to promote an inclusive educational environment. Similarly, Gilliard and Moore (2007) highlight the necessity of integrating family and community culture into the curriculum to enrich the educational experiences of Native American students. McCarty and Lee (2014) elaborate on the critical role of culturally sustaining and revitalizing pedagogy in supporting Indigenous education sovereignty. Khalifa et al. (2016) further provide a comprehensive synthesis of culturally responsive school leadership practices, demonstrating their significance in diverse educational contexts. Krishnasamy (2019) advocates for leadership models that embody socio-cultural sensitivity to tackle the distinct educational challenges faced by Orang Asli schools.

Leadership in Orang Asli schools must adopt culturally responsive strategies to effectively address the unique challenges encountered by these communities. By incorporating cultural, economic, and social dimensions, such leadership can enhance academic engagement and

achievement while empowering Orang Asli students to preserve their cultural identity. Gorman (2025) emphasizes the necessity of developing culturally responsive leadership capabilities to support Indigenous communities, thereby ensuring equitable educational access for all students. Additionally, the Learning on Country program in the Northern Territory has garnered recognition for effectively blending Western and Indigenous learning models, leading to significant improvements in educational outcomes for remote Indigenous students. Education should not be perceived solely as a means to academic success; rather, it should be acknowledged as a powerful tool for community empowerment and social integration. McCarty and Lee (2014) advocate that culturally sustaining and revitalizing pedagogy is crucial for supporting Indigenous education sovereignty, simultaneously fostering both academic achievement and cultural preservation. Gilliard and Moore (2007) discovered that the incorporation of family and community culture into early childhood education programs on Native American reservations cultivates a sense of belonging and community among students. Furthermore, the Learning on Country program exemplifies the benefits of integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into the curriculum, resulting in enhanced educational and employment outcomes for indigenous students.

### **Research Objectives**

This study aims to delineate the prerequisites for the development of a culturally relevant leadership model tailored for Orang Asli schools, specifically addressing the community's unique cultural, geographical, and socio-economic challenges. Conducting a comprehensive needs analysis will serve as a solid foundation prior to the design and subsequent evaluation of the leadership model in later phases. The principal objectives of this study are as follows: to identify the essential requirements necessary for the formulation of a leadership model that effectively addresses the cultural, geographical, and socio-economic challenges faced by Orang Asli schools.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Research Design***

In alignment with the study's objectives, a qualitative research design was adopted. This approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of social realities by focusing on the subjective and specific experiences of individuals, thereby capturing the processes of meaning-making from their perspectives (Bryman & Bell, 2003).

The data collection phase extended over one month and involved Orang Asli schools representing varying degrees of remoteness, categorized as rural categories 1, 2, and 3. The study strategically selected schools from multiple states with substantial Orang Asli populations, specifically Kelantan, Perak, Selangor, and Johor, to ensure a comprehensive representation of the diverse geographical and socio-cultural contexts that influence educational practices within these communities. This selection process ensured a balanced representation of geographical diversity, while the scheduling of interviews was meticulously arranged to accommodate the participants' availability and the operational schedules of the schools. Each interview session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, providing sufficient time to delve deeply into the research questions at hand.



***Instruments, Assessment, and Data Collection Procedures***

The primary instrument employed in this study was a semi-structured interview protocol, meticulously designed based on an extensive literature review to ensure it effectively captured the core requirements for developing a leadership model tailored for Orang Asli schools. This instrument underwent a pilot study to assess its validity, following the guidelines established by How et al. (2021), ensuring its relevance and appropriateness for the target population.

***Interview Process***

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, honouring the preferences of the respondents. Prior to the interviews, written consent was obtained from all participants to ensure ethical compliance. Each session was audio-recorded with the participants permission, and comprehensive transcripts were prepared for subsequent analysis.

***Source of Data***

Data were gathered from headteachers of Orang Asli schools, who were carefully selected through purposive sampling to capture a wide range of geographical and contextual variations. This method facilitated a nuanced understanding of the challenges and educational practices encountered across different school settings.

***Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations***

To uphold the confidentiality of participants, strict measures were implemented to ensure that identities and responses would remain anonymous. Informed consent was obtained not only from individual participants but also from school authorities prior to data collection. Additionally, ethical clearance was secured from the relevant institutional review board, ensuring full compliance with established ethical research standards.

***Data Collection Process***

The data collection process spanned one month, during which interviews were conducted at locations chosen by participants to enhance their comfort and convenience. The interview schedules were meticulously coordinated to align with participants' availability, minimizing disruption to their professional responsibilities while allowing for a thorough exploration of the research themes.

This careful adherence to ethical and procedural standards ensured the integrity of the data collection process and fostered a sense of trust and cooperation among participants, which is crucial for obtaining rich and reliable qualitative data.

***Thematic Analysis in Context***

In the analysis of qualitative data, thematic analysis was utilized with the support of NVivo20 software, ensuring a systematic approach to identifying and interpreting patterns within the data. The analytical framework comprised several critical steps, each designed to enhance the rigor and reliability of findings.

***Data Codification***

The first step involved the verbatim transcription of interview data, ensuring that the participants' responses were captured in their original context. Following transcription, the data were systematically coded into smaller units, with a focus on recurring words or phrases that

emerged as significant to the study. This initial coding phase was essential for breaking down complex narratives into manageable components, facilitating deeper analysis.

### ***Theme Development***

Once the coding process was complete, relevant codes were grouped and consolidated into primary themes. Key themes identified included "Contextual Needs," "Leadership Guidelines," and "Logistical Challenges." These overarching themes were crafted to encapsulate the core issues faced by leaders within Orang Asli schools, providing a structured framework for understanding the multifaceted challenges and opportunities present in these educational settings.

### ***Data Triangulation***

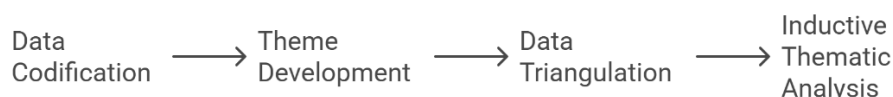
To enhance the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was employed through respondent validation of their respective interview transcripts. This critical step ensured that participants had the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of the recorded information, thereby mitigating potential researcher bias and enhancing the objectivity of data interpretation. By incorporating participant feedback, the analysis was enriched, fostering a collaborative approach to understanding the data.

### ***Inductive Thematic Analysis***

The analytical process culminated in an inductive thematic analysis, which allowed for the identification of dominant patterns emerging from the data. This inductive approach facilitated a deeper engagement with the participants' perspectives and experiences, leading to meaningful interpretations that aligned with the primary objectives of the research.

In summary, the methodologies employed in this thematic analysis ensured that the findings not only contributed significantly to the understanding of leadership dynamics within Orang Asli schools but also supported the development of a contextually relevant and culturally sensitive leadership model. This rigorous analytical framework underscores the importance of participant voices in shaping educational leadership practices tailored to the unique context of Orang Asli communities.

Data saturation is achieved when no new themes or information emerge from additional interviews. In this study, this process was determined through repetitive analysis of the interview transcripts, where the researcher found that the main themes had been identified and no additional information was obtained even after the final interview was conducted. This process ensures that the data collected is sufficient to meet the study's objectives and address the research questions.



**Figure 1: Data Analysis Process (Braun & Clarke, 2006)**

## Findings

The findings identified six major themes derived from data analysis, namely: (i) Specific Leadership Needs for Orang Asli Schools, (ii) The Necessity of Guidelines and Specialised Training, (iii) Leadership Preparedness, (iv) Logistical and Safety Challenges, (v) Community Support and Diplomacy, and (vi) Socio-Economic Challenges. These themes were extracted through thematic analysis of interview transcripts with headteachers from Orang Asli schools.

### *Theme 1: Specific Leadership Needs for Orang Asli Schools.*

The findings indicate that effective leadership in Orang Asli schools necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the unique cultural and traditional nuances of the local community. It is imperative for leaders to be well-versed in cultural norms and to navigate communication challenges within this specific cultural context. For instance, one respondent (GB\_P1) pointed out the necessity for leaders to be aware of community taboos, such as avoiding direct scolding of students, which contrasts with mainstream approaches. Instead, persuasion is deemed more effective: "Orang Asli students cannot be hit or scolded. Instead, persuasion works better."

Another respondent (GB\_P3) stressed the importance of mastering basic tribal languages, such as Temiar, to build stronger relationships with the community, stating, "I encourage teachers to learn basic Temiar phrases, such as greetings, to show respect and foster trust." Similarly, respondent GB\_4 highlighted the need for leaders to understand the community's structure, culture, beliefs, and values to nurture harmony between the school and the community. This sentiment is echoed by another respondent (GB\_P2), who noted, "Leaders must immerse themselves in Orang Asli culture, including their rituals, not to practice them but as a sign of respect." Overall, the respondents concurred that a deep understanding of the community's culture significantly aids in preventing cultural conflicts, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of leadership within Orang Asli schools.

### *Theme 2: The Necessity of Guidelines and Specialised Training*

The study revealed that the absence of clear leadership guidelines significantly complicates the adjustment process for newly appointed leaders confronting the distinctive challenges inherent to Orang Asli schools. Prominent codes associated with this theme include the lack of operational documents and explicit guidelines, which respondents indicated hampers their ability to comprehend the roles and requirements specific to the context of Orang Asli education. For example, one headteacher remarked that the deficiency of established guidelines extended the time needed to fully understand the needs of both the community and the students (GB\_P1). Moreover, the necessity for comprehensive training modules emerged as a critical concern, with respondents advocating for targeted training that encompasses areas such as student psychology, the management of logistical challenges, and strategies for fostering community relationships. These insights accentuate the imperative for well-defined guidelines and specialised training initiatives to adequately support new leaders in their roles, as emphasized by respondent (GB\_P2).

### *Theme 3: Leadership Preparedness*

The study highlighted mental and emotional preparedness as essential components of effective leadership within Orang Asli schools. Key codes, such as mental readiness and emotional resilience, underscore the necessity for leaders to exhibit considerable endurance when confronting the challenges associated with remote educational settings and inadequate basic



facilities. For instance, one headteacher (GB\_P3) noted the imperative of being prepared to reside in secluded areas, often distanced from family and lacking fundamental amenities, including access to clean water, electricity, and reliable communication services. Additionally, the importance of possessing a profound knowledge of local customs and taboos emerged as a significant theme. Respondents emphasized that a comprehensive understanding of the community's cultural practices is crucial for fostering and sustaining harmonious relationships. This finding underscores the critical need to equip leaders not only with mental fortitude but also with a deep cultural knowledge, as highlighted by respondent (GB\_P2). Such preparations are vital for ensuring that leaders can effectively navigate the complexities of their roles in these unique educational environments.

#### ***Theme 4: Logistical and Safety Challenges***

The analysis identified logistical and safety issues as significant barriers to effective administration in Orang Asli schools. The code pertaining to challenging logistics revealed that school leaders often endure lengthy and strenuous journeys to reach their institutions. For example, one headteacher (GB\_P3) shared that travel could take several hours, navigating through muddy and hilly terrain, which complicates daily operations and impacts overall efficiency. Furthermore, the code concerning safety threats emerged prominently, with respondents highlighting the risks posed by wild animals, such as tigers and elephants, which endanger the well-being of teachers, students, and school leaders alike. This concern is compounded by inadequate infrastructure, including insufficient housing for teachers and limited access to essential supplies, further exacerbating the challenges faced in these remote educational settings. These findings underscore the urgent need for enhanced logistical support and safety measures to ensure that leaders can effectively fulfil their roles and responsibilities in Orang Asli schools. Addressing these obstacles is critical for fostering an environment conducive to learning and effective administration.

#### ***Theme 5: Community Support and Diplomacy***

The effectiveness of leadership in Orang Asli schools is significantly shaped by the level of community support and the leader's capacity to cultivate diplomatic relationships. The code reflecting involvement in community activities illustrates that active participation in local cultural and social events fosters trust between school leaders and the community. For example, one headteacher (GB\_P2) noted that their engagement in community initiatives has notably strengthened the bond between the school and its surrounding community, thereby enhancing collaboration and mutual understanding.

Moreover, the code pertaining to administrative assistance to parents highlights those leaders frequently assist families in navigating the complexities of school administrative processes, such as student registration. Respondents, including GB\_P3, indicated that leaders often voluntarily undertake these responsibilities to ensure that students have uninterrupted access to educational opportunities. This proactive approach not only improves parental engagement but also reinforces the leader's role as a supportive figure within the community. These insights underscore the critical importance of community involvement and relationship-building in promoting effective leadership within Orang Asli schools. By fostering strong ties with the community and actively supporting parents, school leaders can create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment that benefits both students and their families.

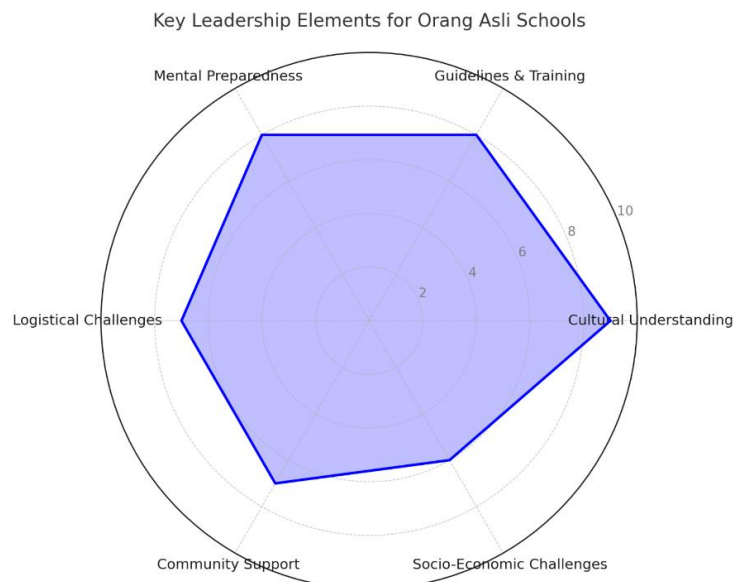
**Theme 6: Socio-Economic Challenges**

The study highlights socio-economic challenges as a significant factor affecting the education of Orang Asli students. The Orang Asli community is predominantly classified as living in hardcore poverty, which is evidenced by the codes related to poverty and lack of resources. These socio-economic conditions lead to students being deprived of essential items such as uniforms, stationery, and other basic necessities necessary for their education. Respondents, including GB\_P1 and GB\_P3, indicated that school leaders often pursue additional support by forging partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and external agencies to address these pressing needs.

Additionally, the code for low awareness of education reveals a prevailing mindset among some parents who perceive education as unimportant for their daily lives. This attitude significantly contributes to low student attendance rates, further exacerbating the challenges faced by these communities. To combat this issue, respondents (GB\_P1, GB\_P3) emphasized that school leaders must take proactive measures to enhance community awareness regarding the value of education. They suggested implementing awareness campaigns and involving parents in school activities to foster a greater appreciation for the educational process.

These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and community engagement strategies to alleviate the socio-economic barriers to education in Orang Asli communities. By addressing both material needs and perceptions of education, school leaders can play a pivotal role in improving educational outcomes for Orang Asli students.

This radar chart illustrates the priorities of six main themes identified through thematic analysis of interviews with headmasters of Orang Asli schools.



**Figure 2: Key Leadership Element for Orang Asli Schools**

The data presented in this radar chart aims to help identify key patterns from the interview transcripts. The scores in the radar chart reflect the level of priority assigned to each element based on the respondents' perspectives. These scores are calculated based on the frequency and

emphasis of the identified themes during data analysis. Each score displayed in the radar chart is generated through a systematic data coding process, where each theme is analyzed to measure its significance in the context of leadership within Orang Asli schools. This chart is intended to provide a visual representation of the key elements that influence the effectiveness of leadership, highlighting the most critical themes.

The findings of this study are visually represented in a radar chart that categorizes six key themes, each shedding light on the challenges and strategies necessary for effective leadership in Orang Asli schools. The primary objective of this research is to develop a needs-based leadership model tailored to the unique context of these communities. The critical elements identified include cultural understanding, mental preparedness, community support, and the management of logistical and socio-economic challenges, emphasizing the comprehensive approach required for effective educational leadership.

Each axis of the radar chart corresponds to a vital element necessary for successful leadership, with scores indicating the relative importance or impact of these elements based on the findings:

1. **Cultural Understanding (Score: 9):** This element is deemed the most critical, highlighting the necessity for leaders to possess a profound understanding of the cultural norms, traditions, and taboos of the Orang Asli community. Culturally sensitive leadership is paramount for fostering trust and collaboration.
2. **Guidelines & Training (Score: 5):** The absence of clear leadership guidelines and specialized training presents challenges for new leaders. The need for comprehensive training modules that focus on communication and management skills is essential to equip leaders for their roles.
3. **Mental Preparedness (Score: 8):** Leaders must cultivate mental and emotional resilience to navigate the challenges posed by remote living conditions and limited resources. Preparedness for isolation and adaptability to difficult environments are crucial traits for effective leadership.
4. **Logistical Challenges (Score: 7):** Geographic isolation and safety concerns, including difficult terrains and potential threats from wildlife, present significant obstacles. Developing effective logistical strategies is vital to mitigate these challenges and ensure smooth school operations.
5. **Community Support (Score: 7):** Establishing trust and fostering diplomatic relationships with the community are imperative. Active participation in cultural and administrative support activities can strengthen the bond between the school and the community, enhancing collaborative efforts.
6. **Socio-Economic Challenges (Score: 6):** Poverty and a low awareness of the importance of education within the Orang Asli community adversely affect student attendance and engagement. Leaders are called to address these socio-economic barriers through partnerships with external organizations and the implementation of awareness campaigns.

In conclusion, these findings underscore the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by Orang Asli schools and the strategic approaches required for effective leadership. By prioritizing cultural understanding, enhancing training, and addressing logistical and socio-economic issues, educational leaders can significantly improve outcomes for Orang Asli students and their communities. By focusing on these aspects, the resulting leadership model can empower education in Orang Asli schools and contribute to the academic success of their students.

## Discussion

In recent years, the issue of education within the Orang Asli community has garnered significant attention due to the persistent achievement gap compared to other groups (Sawalludin et al., 2020). A critical factor contributing to this disparity is the necessity for specific leadership approaches tailored to the unique context of Orang Asli community schools. Leadership that is culturally attuned and sensitive to local traditions can effectively mitigate cultural conflicts and strengthen the relationship between schools and the community (Harun et al., 2020). For instance, findings from the study highlight the importance of using tribal languages, such as Temiar, in daily communication as a fundamental element in building trust within the community. Consequently, the proposed leadership model must integrate cultural elements as a foundational principle.

Regarding guidelines and specialized training, this study revealed that the lack of clear guidance documents hinders school leaders from adapting to the unique challenges present in the Orang Asli community, particularly for new leaders who may be unfamiliar with local socio-economic and cultural dynamics. The absence of structured guidance can result in educational strategies that do not align with community needs, thereby impairing leadership effectiveness (Ramli, 2024; Chew et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the study recommends the development of intensive training programs that encompass aspects of student psychology and logistical management. Such programs are essential to equip school leaders with the necessary skills to navigate the complexities of leadership within diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts. By addressing these training gaps, school leaders will be better positioned to implement effective strategies that resonate with the community, ultimately contributing to improved educational outcomes for Orang Asli students.

In summary, a culturally informed leadership model, combined with robust training and guidance, is imperative for bridging the educational achievement gap within the Orang Asli community. This holistic approach will not only foster trust and collaboration but also empower leaders to address the specific challenges faced by these schools, paving the way for sustainable educational improvements.

Culturally responsive leadership approaches are pivotal in fostering adaptive and community-centred administration, particularly within the context of the Orang Asli community (Shamatex, 2023). A crucial yet often overlooked aspect of effective leadership in these remote areas is the mental and emotional preparedness of school leaders. The unique pressures stemming from the challenges of remote locations, including inadequate basic facilities such as electricity and internet access, further complicate this scenario. Arnold et al. (2024) highlights those leaders in such environments must cultivate high emotional resilience to

navigate these difficulties effectively. Consequently, any leadership model developed for Orang Asli schools must prioritize resilience and incorporate mechanisms for psychological support tailored to the needs of school leaders. This focus is essential for equipping them to manage the stressors associated with remote administration and to promote their overall well-being.

In addition to emotional resilience, logistical and safety challenges significantly impact school administration in these regions. Difficult access routes characterized by hilly and muddy terrain, coupled with threats from wildlife such as tigers and elephants, present formidable barriers. To address these challenges, the implementation of systematic risk management strategies is imperative. Cele (2016) emphasizes that adequate infrastructure such as teacher housing and efficient transportation plays a vital role in enhancing the effectiveness of school administration. Moreover, the importance of community support and diplomacy cannot be overstated. Effective leadership in Orang Asli schools requires not only sound administrative strategies but also the ability to cultivate diplomatic relationships with the community. Building trust and collaboration with local stakeholders is essential for fostering an environment conducive to educational success.

As conclusion, a comprehensive leadership model for Orang Asli schools should integrate culturally responsive practices, emotional resilience support, systematic risk management, and community diplomacy. By addressing these multifaceted dimensions, leaders will be better equipped to navigate the unique challenges of their context, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes and strengthened community ties.

The importance of culturally responsive leadership in strengthening community ties is further supported by Weinstein et al. (2020), who found that leaders' active participation in traditional rituals and social activities significantly enhances trust between schools and the community. This involvement aligns with broader findings indicating that engagement in cultural activities fosters a stronger connection between educational institutions and the communities they serve. In the context of the Orang Asli community, socio-economic challenges present formidable barriers to educational transformation. These challenges underscore the critical role that school leaders play in addressing the multifaceted issues impacting educational access and success. Research by Ahmad et al. (2021) highlights the necessity of government initiatives to mitigate the economic and social barriers faced by this community. However, it is equally essential for school leaders to take proactive measures to address basic needs deficiencies, such as providing uniforms and stationery, which directly influence student attendance (Sawalludin et al., 2020). To effectively alleviate these burdens, school leaders must adopt strategic approaches that include collaboration with external agencies and stakeholders. By fostering partnerships and seeking additional resources, school leaders can improve access to education and support the holistic development of the Orang Asli community. Such collaborative efforts not only enhance educational outcomes but also contribute to the overall well-being of the community.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the necessity of developing a holistic and responsive leadership model tailored to the unique needs of Orang Asli schools. This model should encompass culturally responsive practices, proactive engagement with socio-economic challenges, and strategic partnerships, thereby ensuring that leaders are equipped to foster both educational success and community resilience.



## Conclusion

In summary, this study highlights the critical need for a nuanced understanding of the specific requirements of Orang Asli schools in order to develop a more inclusive and responsive leadership model. It emphasizes that school leaders must be well-versed in the cultural context, traditions, and unique challenges faced by the Orang Asli community. Key components such as psychological support, specialized training, and clear operational guidelines are essential for enhancing leadership effectiveness, particularly in remote locations characterized by socio-economic difficulties. The research underscores that the educational success of the Orang Asli community is heavily reliant on culturally responsive leadership practices and the establishment of strong, trust-based relationships between schools and local communities. Furthermore, the study identifies the necessity of risk management and the improvement of basic infrastructure to address the logistical and safety challenges encountered by school leaders in these areas.

Community engagement and collaboration with external entities, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government agencies, emerge as vital strategies for addressing students' basic needs and raising awareness about the importance of education. These insights are particularly valuable for the Ministry of Education Malaysia, as they can inform the formulation of policies and strategies tailored to the unique challenges of Orang Asli education. The findings of this study can guide the Ministry in the development of targeted leadership training programs, enhancements to school infrastructure, and the fostering of collaborations with external stakeholders. This holistic approach is essential for ensuring sustainable educational outcomes for Orang Asli communities, ultimately supporting national educational objectives while contributing to the effective and sustainable development of these communities.

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