

# Bridging Culture and Leadership: Strengthening School Effectiveness in Orang Asli Communities

## *Merapatkan Jurang Budaya dan Kepimpinan: Memperkukuh Keberkesanan Sekolah dalam Komuniti Orang Asli*

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### Abstract

*In schools where the student population is made of mainly Orang Asli children, the job of a principal is much more than administration such as schedule or meeting management. The principal needs to understand and appreciate the culture and traditions of the local community. This cultural respect is important as without it it is very hard to create genuine trust amongst teachers, parents and community members. This paper focuses on the effect of culturally responsive leadership to school effectiveness. The research population consisted of 450 teachers from seven states in Peninsular Malaysia with the use of a multi-stage cluster sampling technique to collect the data. Structural equation modelling showed that the higher the level of cultural responsiveness of principals, the greater the overall performance of the schools ( $b = 0.457, p < 0.001$ ). A positive effect like this is seen in a number of ways. Teachers become more committed to their work, students become more interested in learning, and the community begins to put more trust in the school. This result is not only a statistical finding, but it is also reflected in what is going on in schools. When cultural respect, inclusive teaching and positive relationships with the community are practised by school leadership, the schools become more successful, harmonious and supportive places for all.*

**Keywords:** *Culturally Responsive Leadership, School Effectiveness, Educational Leadership, Cultural Diversity in Schools, Community Engagement.*

### Abstrak

*Di sekolah yang majoriti populasi muridnya terdiri daripada kanak-kanak Orang Asli, tugas seorang pengetua bukan sekadar pentadbiran seperti penyediaan jadual atau pengurusan mesyuarat. Pengetua perlu memahami serta menghargai budaya dan tradisi komuniti setempat. Penghormatan terhadap budaya ini penting kerana tanpa penghargaan sedemikian, adalah sangat sukar untuk membina kepercayaan yang tulen dalam kalangan guru, ibu bapa dan ahli komuniti. Makalah ini memfokuskan kepada kesan kepemimpinan responsif budaya terhadap keberkesanan sekolah. Populasi kajian terdiri daripada 450 orang guru dari tujuh buah negeri di Semenanjung Malaysia, dengan penggunaan teknik persampelan kelompok berperingkat (multi-stage cluster sampling) untuk*

*pengumpulan data. Analisis pemodelan persamaan berstruktur (SEM) menunjukkan bahawa semakin tinggi tahap responsif budaya pengetua, semakin tinggi prestasi keseluruhan sekolah ( $b = 0.457$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Kesan positif ini dapat dilihat dalam pelbagai cara. Guru menjadi lebih komited terhadap kerja, murid semakin berminat untuk belajar, dan komuniti mula memberikan lebih kepercayaan kepada sekolah. Dapatan ini bukan sahaja merupakan penemuan statistik, malah turut terserlah melalui realiti yang berlaku di sekolah. Apabila penghormatan budaya, pengajaran yang inklusif, dan hubungan positif dengan komuniti diamalkan oleh kepimpinan sekolah, sekolah menjadi tempat yang lebih berjaya, harmoni dan menyokong semua pihak.*

**Kata kunci:** *Kepimpinan Responsif Budaya, Keberkesanan Sekolah, Kepimpinan Pendidikan, Kepelbagaian Budaya di Sekolah, Penglibatan Komuniti.*

## INTRODUCTION

Education is not only a way for people to attain success, it also has a significant role in preserving cultural identity as well as sustainable national development. This wider meaning is recognised at the global level through Sustainable Development Goal 4 which places a strong focus on equitable, inclusive and accessible quality education for all, including minorities and indigenous populations (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2016). Although these commitments are all firmly in place, serious educational challenges still exist in many Indigenous communities worldwide. Their students tend to perform poorly, drop out early and find it difficult to integrate into the mainstream school environment (UNESCO, 2019).

Similar trends can be observed in Malaysia in national schools where there are a large number of Orang Asli students. Data shows that Orang Asli children are still facing low literacy and numeracy outcomes, low participation in school activities, and high dropout rates compared to other students in the country (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2023b). These outcomes indicate that the educational approaches may not yet be fully aligned with the cultural, social, and contextual realities of Indigenous learners. This situation underscores the importance of having better understanding of how schools can more appropriately respond to the cultural context of the Orang Asli community.

The Malaysian government has come up with several efforts to enhance the quality of Indigenous education which include Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 and Orang Asli Education Transformation Programme. Even with these initiatives, the achievement gap remains large. Problems such as limited resources, learning content that does not relate to the culture, and school leaders that are not fully aware of the local culture continue to stop any meaningful progress from being achieved (Hanafi et al., 2014; Saari et al., 2023). These challenges prove that school effectiveness should not be solely based on test results. It should also reflect if the environment in the school is welcoming, inclusive and culturally respectful of their students (Lezotte, 2010; Hoy & Miskel, 2005). This understanding throws up an important question of what sort of leadership is required to create such an environment.

Research has shown the significant role of leadership in the effectiveness of schools, especially in schools working with Indigenous or minority groups (Castagno and Brayboy, 2008). Within this context culturally responsive leadership is very relevant. Culturally responsive leadership is about understanding and respecting the cultural backgrounds of students and engaging their families and communities, and making sure that school practices reflect and align with the local cultural values (Khalifa et al., 2016). International experiences demonstrate its positive effects. In New Zealand the *Te Kotahitanga* programme resulted in a better achievement of Maori students by fostering culturally responsive leadership practices (Bishop et al., 2012). In

Australia, the *Smarter Leadership programme* helped to improve the learning outcomes of indigenous students through the use of culturally responsive approaches and high expectations (Sarra et al., 2018).

Although such developments yield good results elsewhere, the study on culturally responsive leadership in Malaysia is limited. Very few research has examined the working of this leadership approach in Malaysian schools that cater to Indigenous communities (Malakolunthu, 2010b; Amin Soleh et al., 2022). This lack of local research leaves a distinct gap in understanding in terms of how leadership can better support Orang Asli students. Addressing this gap is important as culturally aligned leadership may be a key factor in reducing long standing educational disparities.

To address this need, the current study investigates the impact of culturally responsive leadership on the effectiveness of schools located in the national primary education system and in which the majority of students are from Indigenous backgrounds. This study aims to provide new understanding about the field of Indigenous education leadership in Malaysia. At the same time, the findings are expected to provide practical guidance for policy makers and school leaders who are trying to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous communities. Through this contribution the study wishes to contribute to the national aspiration of building an education system that is equitable, culturally respectful and is beneficial for all students.

### **Problem Statement**

School effectiveness is another indicator that is related to educational achievement. It encompasses not just academic achievement but integration practices, desirable school atmosphere as well as positive interaction with the community (Lezotte, 2010; Hoy & Miskel, 2005). The weak performance of many schools where students of Orang Asli take the majority of the student population remains the challenge that persists in many schools in Malaysia; thus, the high rates of dropouts and low enrolment remain a problem in comparison with indigenous mainstream schools (KPM, 2023b). Such disparities confirm that Indigenous learners are yet to enjoy the fruits of schooling on a fair level. The gap remains large despite the attempts undertaken by the Malaysian Education Blueprint in 2013-2025 and the Orang Asli Education Transformation Programme (Hanafi et al., 2014; Saari et al., 2023).

These issues point out the fact that the traditional forms of school leadership cannot be effective in this case. The fact that many leaders in schools continue to use traditional practices without considering the cultural realities of the Orang Asli communities is however still experienced. This leads to demotivation in students, lack of interest in school life and the students do not feel that they belong to the school. The connection between the school and the community is also poor that also further decreases the possibility of positive change (Lopez et al, 2022; Salleh & Abdul Razak, 2024). This cultural insensitivity has become one of the biggest causes of the hardships that even schools with high population of Orang Asli continue to encounter.

International research provides a different perspective by demonstrating that culturally responsive leadership can help to make significant improvements in school outcomes particularly in Indigenous settings. Culturally responsive leadership recognizes and appreciates the cultural identity of students, develops positive relationships with families, and influences the practices in schools to reflect traditions in the local community. When these practices exist, schools are more

likely to see better results because students feel understood, valued and supported. At the same time, the community develops a greater level of trust in the school which further boosts the learning environment (Khalifa et al., 2016; Bishop et al., 2012; Sarra et al., 2018).

However, the studies on the relationship between culturally responsive leadership and school effectiveness in Malaysia are very minimal. Most of the available research has been concentrated on a multicultural setting, or general school settings (Malakolunthu, 2010; Amin Soleh et al., 2022), whereas school settings comprising a majority of Orang Asli students have received significantly less attention. This gap is important as without local evidence policies and leadership practices may not address the real needs of Indigenous students. As a result, the full potential of culturally responsive leadership to improve Orang Asli education and reduce long stood inequalities has not been fully realised.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Background**

Culturally responsive leadership is becoming a noted method of taking into consideration the educational needs of culturally diverse students, especially students of Indigenous and minority backgrounds. It is not only normal school administration. It revolves around how leaders see, respect and appreciate cultural identities of their students. Leaders are expected to foster an inclusive school culture and to have strong relationships with families and the community because these relationships build trust and increase engagement (Khalifa et al., 2016). Culturally responsive leadership focuses more on practices that are culturally relevant, rather than conventional models of leadership that focus more on uniformity. It brings the values of the culture into the decision making, teaching practices and the administration of the schools. It also has a good theoretical foundation. It draws from critical race theory and culturally responsive pedagogy and then applies these ideas in a leadership framework (Lopez et al., 2022). Through this foundation, culturally responsive leadership works to promote social justice by challenging structural barriers that disrupt student learning. Its effect is supported by evidence on international studies. In the case of Te Kotahitanga programme in New Zealand, leadership by acknowledging the cultural views of the Maori students enhanced the academic performance of the students (Bishop et al., 2012). In the case of Australia, Stronger Wiser Leadership strategy was used to enhance relationships and expectations among Indigenous students that resulted in better performance and growing trust levels in the community (Sarra et al., 2018).

The school effectiveness concept defines the extent in which the school meets its educational goals and how effective it is in offering a safe, fair and conducive learning environment (Lezotte, 2010; Hoy and Miskel, 2005). The effectiveness of schools is not directly determined by the results of exams. It also encompassed teacher attitudes, positive school climate, parent involvement or capacity of all students to achieve success despite their background (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). According to the Effective School Model by Lezotte, the qualities include a strong instructional leadership, order and high expectations of the students. These aspects are regarded as important to school performance.

The significance of cultural context is easier to understand by applying the Ecological Systems Theory introduced by Bronfenbrenner in 1979. This theory explains that relationships between students and their broader social and cultural environments affect learning and school

success. In the case of Indigenous education, school effectiveness is enhanced when school leaders incorporate cultural values into teaching and other school practices. When school leaders align the daily practices with the cultural background of their students, students exhibit a greater motivation to learn and parents are more willing to work together and there is an overall increased trust in the school. These positive effects are particularly significant for schools catering for marginalised communities (Khalifa et al., 2016). This relationship is again supported by international findings. The *Te Kotahitanga* programme demonstrated significant gains in the achievement of Maori students by way of culturally responsive leadership. Schools in Australia that adopted similar approaches found that they had a better school climate and improved academic results (Sarra et al., 2018). In North America, culturally responsive education has been shown to improve equity and effectiveness with indigenous learners (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

Despite these encouraging outcomes, research in Malaysia of the direct relationship between culturally responsive leadership and school effectiveness is very limited. This lack of local evidence is important because there is often a cultural mismatch between practices in schools and those of Indigenous students and these practices influence their academic outcomes. Schools with high Orang Asli enrolment often face such a challenge, but the leadership approaches necessary to respond to this have not been sufficiently explored. This makes it necessary to investigate the role that culturally responsive leadership might play in supporting the educational effectiveness in the Indigenous context. Past reviews and studies continue to point out the relevance of this leadership approach. Khalifa et al. (2016) reported that culturally responsive leadership is an important component of equity driven school reform, especially when leaders collaborate closely with communities. Lopez and colleagues also found that culturally responsive leadership is a factor in both academic and non-academic success in Indigenous settings. Although the role of leadership has been recognised by the Ministry of Education in the period between 2013 and 2025 through the Malaysian Education Blueprint, most of the studies concentrate on mainstream or multicultural schools (Malakolunthu, 2010; Amin Soleh et al., 2022). This results in a great gap in knowledge about culturally responsive leadership in schools in which Orang Asli students are the majority and thus calls for and the relevance of the present study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the knowledge that culturally responsive leadership play an important role in shaping the effectiveness of schools. This relationship becomes particularly meaningful in the context of Indigenous education where the cultural alignment between school practices and the lived experience of the students may affect motivation, engagement and overall achievement. School effectiveness can be viewed as the degree to which a school is effective in achieving its general purpose. This purpose is not limited to the academic results only but also includes the development of the character of students, social interaction and the overall wellbeing (Lezotte, 2010; Hoy & Miskel, 2005).

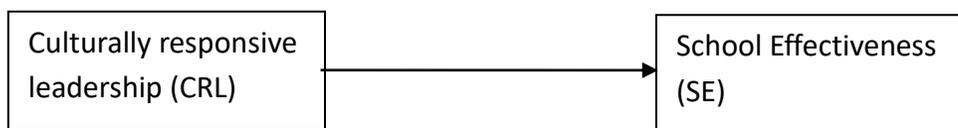
Effective schools typically exhibit characteristics including a positive learning environment, high expectations of students and positive relationships with the community. However, in the schools, most of whose students are Orang Asli, academic grades and examination results cannot be the sole measure of effectiveness (Castagno and Brayboy, 2008). These schools must also be evaluated based on the extent of their cultural relevance because when the identity of Indigenous is not attended to, students tend to lose interest in learning and become less engaged which eventually determines their academic performance (Hanafi et al., 2014; Saari et al., 2023).

Theories in educational leadership help to explain how the effectiveness of schools can be increased when culturally responsive leadership is practised. The Effective School Model by Lezotte emphasises the important role leadership plays in setting high expectations and building strong relationships between the schools and their communities. The Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner emphasizes that the learning of students is influenced by the social and cultural settings that surround them. When these two perspectives are viewed together, it becomes evident that culturally responsive leadership can play a major role in improving the performance of schools. School leaders who match their practices with the cultural background of the community build strong relationships with students, families and the wider community. This alignment promotes a more positive learning environment and encourages higher levels of trust and cooperation.

As a way to build on these ideas, the conceptual framework in this study suggests that culturally responsive leadership has a direct influence on school effectiveness in national schools where Orang Asli students constitute the majority of the school population. The framework implies that when school leaders practise culturally responsive leadership, they contribute to building learning environments that are more relevant, inclusive and supportive. These conditions then contribute to better school effectiveness as illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework*



### **Purpose of the Study**

This study has two significant contributions. From a theoretical perspective, it contributes to the ever-growing body of literature on school leadership by looking at the direct influence of culturally responsive leadership on school effectiveness in the context of Indigenous education in Malaysia. This focus can help contribute to the understanding of the role of leadership that respects and values culture, and how this can influence educational outcomes, particularly for Orang Asli societies with extremely minimal evidence. It is this body of knowledge that should be fortified to further build a more comprehensive understanding of what contributes to successful schooling in the Indigenous context.

Regarding the practical perspective, the findings can be useful in making certain recommendations to the policy makers, school administrators, and teacher training institutions. The experience of this study can be applied into enhancing the strategies that are more accommodating and consistent with the actual requirements of the Orang Asli students. In a broad sense, when schools adopt practices that value cultural identity and involve families and communities as significant stakeholders school effectiveness may be enhanced. This advancement is not only denoted by better academic achievements, but also in better relationship between schools and the communities within which they operate.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The present study used a quantitative and cross-sectional survey design technique to explore the impact of culturally responsive leadership on the effectiveness of schools in national primary schools where Orang Asli pupils are in the majority in Peninsular Malaysia. The sample included 1452 teachers from 85 schools in seven states having high Orang Asli enrolment. A multistage stratified cluster sampling approach was adopted for fair representation from regions. Based on Krejcie and Morgan sample size guideline and requirement of structural equation modelling, minimum sample size required was 384 respondents. In the end, 500 teachers took part, which was sufficient statistical power for the analysis.

Data were obtained through structured questionnaire that consisted of two major constructs. Culturally responsive leadership was measured with 22 items based on Amin Soleh, including leadership behaviour, school climate, teacher development and community engagement. School effectiveness was measured from selected items of Lezotte's Effective Schools Model which included the items of clarity of goals, high expectations, monitoring of progress and learning opportunities and community relations. All items were scored on a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. A pilot test confirmed that the reliability values were greater than 0.70 using Cronbach alpha. Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to investigate construct validity.

Ethical clearance was sought from the Ministry of Education as well as state and district education offices before data collection started. The questionnaire was conducted online using Google Forms and distributed to the teachers through school counsellors. Participation was voluntary and anonymous and each teacher was only permitted to submit one response. Data collection was carried out for two weeks and the desired sample size was achieved.

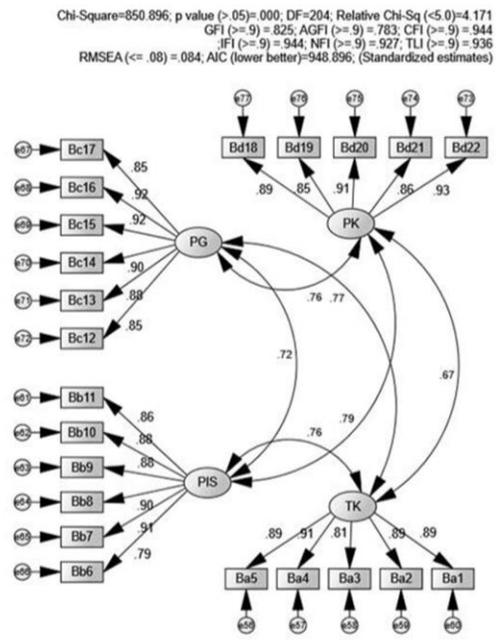
The data were analysed in two statistical software namely, Statistical Package for Social Science Version 26 and AMOS. Descriptive statistics of mean and SD were calculated first to compute the levels of culturally responsive leadership and school effectiveness. The measurement model was then confirmed using confirmatory factor analysis. Finally, structural equation modelling was applied to test the direct impact of culturally responsive leadership on school effectiveness. Model fit was assessed based on various indicators for model fit, including root mean square error of approximation, comparative fit index and goodness of fit index.

**RESULT**

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to validate the measurement model for culturally responsive leadership, which had four dimensions as shown in Figure 2. The standardized factor loadings varied from 0.76 to 0.93, which was larger than the recommended minimum of 0.60. These results showed that the items were good indicators of the respective dimensions. The model also showed a good fit with the data as shown in the following indices: kh2 of 850.896 with 204 degrees of freedom, kh2 divided by df of 4.171, GFI of 0.825, AGFI of 0.783, CFI of 0.944, NFI of 0.927, TLI of 0.936 and RMSEA of 0.084. The composite reliability values were all greater than 0.80 while the average values for variance extracted were greater than 0.50. These results supported the existence of convergent validity. The correlations between constructs also passed the criteria for discriminant validity. Together, these findings confirm that culturally responsive leadership is a reliable and valid multidimensional construct that can be used for further analysis in relation to school effectiveness.

A similar confirmatory factor analysis was carried out to validate the measurement model for school effectiveness which consisted of five dimensions as shown in Figure 3. The standardized factor loadings were between 0.61 and 0.94 and all were above the recommended standard load of .60, which indicated that the items were reliable indicators of their respective factors. The model showed acceptable fit with kh2 equals 1822.208 and 485 degrees of freedom, kh2 divided by df equals 3.757, GFI equals 0.797, AGFI equals 0.765, CFI equals 0.886, NFI equals 0.864, TLI equals 0.887 and RMSEA equals 0.078. Convergent validity was shown by all composite reliability values greater than 0.80 and average variance extracted values greater than 0.50. Discriminant validity was also supported as the square root of average variance extracted of each construct was larger than the correlations among the constructs. These results indicate that school effectiveness is a reliable and valid multidimensional construct that is suitable for testing its relationship with culturally responsive leadership.

**Figure 2**  
*CFA of Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL)*



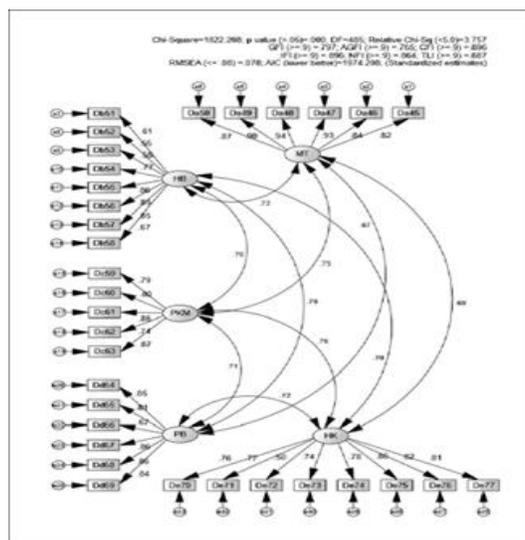
The levels of culturally responsive leadership and school effectiveness reported by teachers were very high in both cases (Table 1). The mean score for the culturally responsive leadership was 6.00 and standard deviation was 0.77 which is in the very high range of 5.80 with 7.00. Similarly, the mean score for school effectiveness was 5.85 with a standard deviation of 0.67 which is also a very high level. These results show the teachers approximated their school leaders as very sensitive to cultural contexts and respectful of the identities of the Orang Asli students. At the same time, teachers saw their schools as performing quite well and having strong connections with the surrounding communities.

**Table 1**  
*Levels Based on Variables*

Variable	Overall Mean	SD
Culturally Responsive Leadership	6.00	0.768
School Effectiveness	5.85	0.669

The findings of the structural equation modelling confirmed the proposed relationship between the culturally responsive leadership and the school effectiveness. The outcome of the analysis showed that the direct relationship between the culturally responsive leadership and the school effectiveness was significant since the coefficient of their relationship was 0.457 and the probability value was less than 0.05. This result indicates that the culturally responsive a school leadership is, the higher the school performance in schools dominated by the Orang Asli students. A significant percentage of the variance in school effectiveness was also explained by the model which is an indication that culturally responsive leadership is a good and powerful predictor of school success in this case (Table 2).

**Figure 3**  
*CFA of School Effectiveness (SE)*



**Table 2**  
*Direct effect analysis*

Hypothesis	Path	Estimate ( $\beta$ )	S.E.	Beta	C.R.	p	Decision
H1	Culturally Responsive Leadership → School Effectiveness	0.457	0.436	0.048	9.144	p < .001	Supported

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the current study demonstrate that the culturally responsive leadership practice impacts positively on the school efficacy in schools where Orang Asli students constitute the majority of the population. The results of structural equation modelling received the hypothesis with significant coefficient (0.457) and result on the probability of less than 0.001. This finding means that when culturally responsive leadership practices increase, then the effectiveness of the school increases. This pattern is consistent with the Effective Schools Model proposed by Lezotte in 2010 which emphasizes leadership as the foundation through which high expectations are set, community involvement is fostered and positive school climates are created.

The findings also support the previous argument by Hanafi, Ahmad and Ali who explained that improving access to schooling is not the sole solution to the educational difficulties faced by Indigenous students in Malaysia. Instead, schools need a leadership understanding and respect for cultural identity. The high scores achieved in both culturally responsive leadership and school effectiveness in this study indicate that the teachers perceived that cultural sensitivity in leadership has contributed to the success of a school, particularly in terms of safe learning environments and relationships with the surrounding communities.

International evidence also supports the importance of culturally responsive leadership. In New Zealand, the *Te Kotahitanga* programme showed that culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership do improve the learning outcomes of Māori students. Similarly, in Australia the *Stronger Smarter Leadership* programme attributed culturally responsive leadership to improved performance of Aboriginal students. These examples demonstrate that the positive influence of culturally responsive leadership is not unique to one country. The current study enhances this understanding by extending it to Malaysia by demonstrating that culturally responsive leadership is pertinent and effective in schools with high numbers of Orang Asli students.

From an empirical perspective, this study adds considerable new evidence since very few studies have discussed about culturally responsive leadership as direct predictor of school effectiveness in the Indigenous Malaysian setting. Previous studies have been largely focused on either mainstream or multicultural schools and there is a lack of knowledge on the impact of leadership within Orang Asli-majority schools. The current results contribute to bridging this gap by demonstrating that culturally responsive leadership is a significant intervention that can be used to enhance school results among indigenous communities.

Practically, the findings attract the interest of the necessity to incorporate the cultural responsiveness into the professional growth of school leaders. There should be policies that promote leadership practices that promote equity, advocacy and cooperation with the Orang Asli

communities. Such practices do not only support social justice but also education effectiveness. Overall, the findings suggest that culturally responsive leadership can play an important role in narrowing the long-standing achievement gaps experienced by Orang Asli students and supporting Malaysia's inclusive education aims as outlined in the Education Blueprint for the period from 2013 to 2025 and in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Several limitations should be noted when interpreting the results of this research. First, the research used a cross-sectional survey research design which limits the researcher's ability to determine a cause-and-effect relationship between culturally responsive leadership and school effectiveness. Although evidence obtained through structural equation modelling showed a strong association, it is important that longitudinal studies be conducted to investigate whether culturally responsive leadership has long term impacts on school outcomes over time.

Second, the study was based on self-reported responses from teachers. Such data might be affected by response bias or social desirability, despite the fact that anonymity was guaranteed and reliability tests were acceptable. To enhance future research, mixed method approaches using classroom observations, interviews and document analysis could be employed for triangulation of findings and further validity.

Third, the study concerned in particular the national schools in Peninsular Malaysia where the Orang Asli students form the majority. This is important context because of the long-standing educational inequalities faced by Orang Asli communities; however, the findings may not necessarily be applicable to other Indigenous groups or multicultural school settings in Malaysia. Comparative studies with Indigenous communities in Sabah and Sarawak would help to widen the applicability of results.

Finally, the study examined only direct effect of culturally responsive leadership on school effectiveness. While this relationship is meaningful, it is possible that there are additional mediating and moderating variables that may help to explain the mechanisms through which culturally responsive leadership contributes to school success. Future studies may investigate factors such as teacher cultural competence, parental involvement or school resources to get a better understanding of this relationship.

Despite these limitations, the study provides useful empirical evidence of the role of culturally responsive leadership to enhance school effectiveness in Orang Asli majority schools. Addressing such limitations in future research will strengthen the evidence base and provide support for the development of more comprehensive strategies for improving Indigenous education in Malaysia and in other countries with similar challenges.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

This study investigated the effects of culturally responsive leadership on the effectiveness of schools in national primary schools where Orang Asli pupils are the majority of the school population in Peninsular Malaysia. The findings clearly showed the positive and significant impact that culturally responsive leadership has in relation to the effectiveness of schools, showing that leadership that is based on an understanding of cultures is able to strengthen a school. Teachers reported moderate to high levels of culturally responsive leadership and school

effectiveness, and the results of the structural equation modelling analysis supported the view that culturally responsive leadership is a significant predictor of school effectiveness.

From a theoretical perspective, the study is added to the current body of knowledge on school leadership through empirical evidence on the relevance and applicability of culturally responsive leadership in the Indigenous Malaysian context where research has been limited. The present study's focus on making culturally responsive leadership a critical factor influencing school effectiveness supports findings from an international sample, as reported by Bishop and colleagues, Khalifa and colleagues, and Sarra and colleagues. It also extends these insights by demonstrating that the same principles are true in schools serving Orang Asli communities.

Practically, the findings highlight the importance of integrating cultural responsiveness into the leadership development program and policy. When school leaders understand and adopt the Orang Asli cultural values in their day-to-day activities, they will be positioned in a better position to develop an inclusive school environment, establish more effective relationship with communities and enhance the performance of students. The findings are aligned with the ambitions of the Malaysian Education Blueprint between 2013 and 2025 as well as Sustainable Development Goal 4 which focuses on inclusive, equitable, quality education to all children.

Comprehensively, the research gives a strong message according to which culturally responsive leadership is not the issue of equity and social justice, but rather it is a major determinant that influences the performance of education. Schools that have Orang Asli students could strive to reduce historical education gaps and transition to more inclusive national education system by embracing education leadership practices that are culturally relevant. Research on culturally responsive leadership in future ought to view emerging environments and conditions in Malaysia to extend the current knowledge on the ways leadership can aid in the attainment of equity and effectiveness in various learning environments.

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