Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Socio-Educational Support and Community Engagement for Educational Development of Aboriginal Students

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Abstract
The article reports on the socio-educational support provided by local community, parents and school teachers for aboriginal students. The investigation revealed that most aboriginal parents have positive attitudes towards their children’s education. Three main themes identified in this study are: fundamental support, lack of skills and knowledge to provide socio-educational support, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Parents are found to be lacking in skills and knowledge of educational-guidance. It was found that many socio-educational programmes were carried out at the school level. Providing support for parents by taking into account culturally-responsive approaches is recommended.

Keywords: aboriginal students, drop-out, socio-educational, parental support, community engagement

Introduction
Education for aboriginal and marginalized communities is among the main agendas of many governments in the world including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Malaysia (Bishop, O’Sullivan & Berryman, 2010; Brown & Green, 2009). Rapid urban development has negatively affected the social life of aboriginal people, their traditional lifestyle and wellbeing (Brown & Green, 2009). Official statistics report that there are 427,094 aboriginal people in Australia (Director of National Parks, 2007) and a huge number of aborigines in New Zealand, Indo-
nessia and Malaysia. There are 178,197 aboriginal people in Malaysia and most of them live in remote areas (The Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 2011). Past empirical studies revealed that most aboriginal students are marginalized, living in hardship and involved in traditional economic activities (Ramle & Faridah, 2011). Statistics show that the majority of the aborigines live in the state of Pahang Malaysia (N=67,506). Aboriginal population in the Malaysian Peninsula can be divided into three main ethnic groups, namely Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay (The Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 2011).

Socio-educational Support

Many initiatives have been taken by most governments to support social welfare and provide better life for people in rural areas. For instance, New Zealand’s government has supported the *Te Kotahitanga* project to improve aboriginal education (Bishop, O’Sullivan & Berryman, 2010). In Australia, serious actions were taken to support rural and marginalized communities by implementing short and long-term programmes. Brown and Green (2009) reported that 37% of Australians live in remote, rural and regional towns. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Malaysia has been given responsibilities to manage and organize a Relocation of Aborigines project. Many empirical studies in the past found that there is a close link between socio-educational support and educational achievement (Lopez 2011). Demi, Coleman-Jensen and Snyder (2010) found that ecological system factors including socio-economic factors and school environment are factors that determine post-school enrolment among rural youth in the United States.

The factors contributing to low academic achievement among aboriginal children are: lack of socio-educational support due to socio-economic problems (Demi, Coleman-Jensen and Snyder, 2010), limited access to modern technology (Samaras, 2005), laziness and boredom, low self-esteem, lack of initiative, poverty, and lack of support from community, socio-economic factors and family issues (Hasan 1998; Kamal & Rahman 2007; Ramle & Hood 2010). Although aboriginal parents are positive about their children’s education (Kaomea 2012), they lack socio-educational skills. A special cultural-responsive curriculum for aboriginal students is supposed to be designed. Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke and Curran (2004) found that parental guidance and engagement in school activities have a direct impact on students’ educational achievement.
Methodology

The presented study aimed at understanding aboriginal communities’ and teachers’ perspectives on the development of aboriginal education. It explored aboriginal students’ and parents’ perspectives on the socio-educational support provided by various local communities and government agencies. It also explored teachers’ perspectives on socio-educational support provided by aboriginal parents. It also investigated the community engagement in aboriginal education. The study used a case study research design and it was carried out in one rural area in Malaysia. The participants in the study were 74 aboriginal students, seven teachers and 23 aboriginal parents. They were individually interviewed by the researchers. Individual interview is the best technique as it makes them feel free to talk about any issues pertaining to the topic studied. The aboriginal participants in the study were identified as Proto-Malay, Senoi and Negrito. Data was collected via interviews and document reviews. Interview protocols were designed and developed based on the research objectives. The questions were reviewed by peer experts and then piloted on a group of adults, children and teachers in Malaysia. The questions were then revised as suggested by the reviewers and pilot-test participants. The actual data collection was carried out after receiving consents from all the participants. Getting informed consents from the participants is necessary in social science research (Slepickova, Kvapilova & Bartosova, 2014). They were informed of their right to withdraw from the project anytime. Data gathered were analyzed and coded by two independent coders to gain in-depth information on the types of support provided by the community and government agencies, and the involvement of local community, parents and government agencies in aboriginal education. The inter-reliability score is more than 90%. According to Graham, Milnowski and Miller (2012), the percentage of agreement that is more than 90% can be considered as a high degree of agreement.

Results and Discussion

Overall data reveal that most participants gave positive responses regarding educational support and their engagement in aboriginal education. Some relevant narrative data is presented here as a way to explain their commitment and engagement. The presented study identifies several themes emerging from the data collected.
**Theme 1: Fundamental support**

The majority of the parents emphasised the importance of education for better life. Most parents hoped that having received a good education their children will stand a better chance for good jobs. Thus, there is a tendency for the aboriginal students to complete schooling and continue their studies when their parents are aware of and serious about their future career.

“Yes, I am very concerned about my children’s education. My eldest son is now in college… He studies pharmacy. My second son is now in Lower 6 … science stream. My third child has just completed Primary School Evaluation Test. My fourth and fifth children are now at the primary level. Education is very important to me. It is the key for future life” (IB22)

Many parents realised that the most important concern in providing support is not only to supply material things, but also to offer psychological support to their children.

“I have bought some school materials for my child” (IB5)
“I often take my child to school and pick my child up from school” (IB22)

The comments indicate that the parents provide fundamental support to their children such as transportation and financial assistance. However, most parents did not mention educational guidance for their children. This implies that although the parents are very supportive, they have limitation in providing useful support for their children’s education.

Some students reported that their siblings supported their studies by providing financial assistance and school uniforms. One student reported that her family encouraged her to go to school.

“My family members support me in continuing my studies and they encouraged me to go to school” (P58)

Many parents are found to provide non-academic support for their children’s education. One student said that:

“I go to school by boat. My mom and dad send me there (school) every day” (P5)

The comments cited above show that there is a close link between socio-economic factors and educational attainment. Our general observation on the over-
all aboriginal life and situation reveals that most aboriginal families have limited resources. It seems that the financial assistance provided by the government has created a culture of ‘dependency’ in the aboriginal community. Past empirical studies suggested the following initiatives and projects should be organised in order to improve educational attainment of the aboriginal students to help them generate better income: (1) involvement in craft production industry and business (Trolip & Boshoff, 2001); (2) community self-help projects (Tamuno & Iroh, 2012) and (3) community development projects (Angba, Adesope & Aboh, 2009).

Theme 2: Lack of skills and knowledge to provide socio-educational support

Although the parents in this study seemed to have high motivation and willingness to help in their children’s education, most of them have limited skills and knowledge to provide effective educational support. Several strategies that can be implemented to provide better socio-educational support are: strengthening family support structures via continuous learning programmes; establishing formal and informal networks with parents and community development projects (Romanow & Bruce, 2006); developing parents’ understanding and encouraging their participation in decision making related to their children’s education (Meyers & Jordan, 2006); establishing guidance and career clubs for marginalised students (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008); school-community partnership (Henness, 2001); and home-school transition programmes (Smart et al., 2008). Results of this study illustrate the importance of parental engagement and participation in their children’s education. Maximizing parental participation in providing support may increase social capital (Putnam 2000) among aboriginal communities.

Theme 3: Cultural-responsive pedagogy

Results also indicate that the pedagogical aspect plays an important role in improving students’ satisfaction and their interest in learning academic subjects. Two main elements that emerge from the narrative data on effective pedagogy are fun learning and teachers’ creativity.

The use of music and songs during lessons attracts students’ attention, which can increase students’ commitment to study. For instance, one student said that:

“I am happy listening to stories, music and songs in class” (P13)

Some students reported that they disliked the teacher-centred approach.
“I do not like the Sciences subject because the teacher talks a lot” (P12)

Studies in the past proved that good teaching practice attracts student attention (Florian 2012). Most students in this study said that they like teachers who are funny and have a sense of humour.

“He (teacher) is funny. He always makes me laugh” (P17)

The findings of the presented study are consistent with the findings of the previous research on the effectiveness of teaching strategies which linked students’ enjoyment and happiness with a higher level of their engagement in lesson activities (Awang, Ahmad, Wahab & Mamat 2013; Das, Dewhurst and Gray 2011).

Results of this study revealed that some teachers use corporal punishment towards students who break the school rules and regulations.

“Some teachers are so angry when we do not complete our homework and make noise in the classroom. He always canes students who are noisy in the classroom” (P62)

Teachers need to be creative in order to make the teaching and learning processes enjoyable. Variation of techniques used has been reported as one of the successful elements in teaching and learning. Experiential learning, for instance, may make a lesson attractive.

“I was happy when the teacher carried out the lesson outside of the classroom” (P17)

“We feel happy when the teacher conducts lesson outside (as) we will get more data and information through observation” (P54)

“We feel bored when a teacher teaches us in the classroom … some teachers do not organise classroom activities” (P60)

Results of this study show that most teachers are committed to helping their students. Some teachers visit their students at home as a way of motivating them.

“Last time, one teacher visited me at home. He asked me to attend school” (P66)

“Teachers give me a present if I come to school … the teacher gives chocolate and biscuits” (P71)
The use of modern technology, including information and communications technology (ICT), in carrying out a lesson is another important approach as it makes students happy and motivates them to participate.

“We also feel happy when our teachers use the computer in the lesson. Using photos and pictures is also very attractive” (P14)

Students are more likely to be involved in lesson activities if the lesson is organised effectively, fun and enjoyable (Awang 2012). The use of modern teaching aids encourages students’ participation (Laba, 2015). Utilising traditional materials for aboriginal children might be also helpful as they integrate the lesson content with the students’ cultural life. This also includes the use of native language in social interaction with aboriginal students (Usborne, Peck, Smith & Taylor, 2011). This approach is in line with the aboriginal education improvement suggested by Bishop et al. (2010).

**Contribution to Pedagogical Knowledge: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

The presented study reveals that culturally responsive pedagogy is a must in improving aboriginal students’ engagement in school activities. Teaching and learning activities in schools are supposed to include socio-cultural elements such as their life-style, beliefs, norms and languages. Dei et al. (2000) emphasized that culturally responsive educators are supposed to understand their position in carrying out the teaching and learning process. Past studies revealed that cultural elements play significant roles in determining the successfulness of schooling. Ockenden (2014) found that four main factors contributing to disengagement of students from school activities are students’ previous negative experiences with school; poor teacher–student relationships; racism; poor self-perception of academic ability; poor transition from primary to secondary school; earlier lack of educational success. An awareness of how socio-cultural elements impact on the learning process is essential. Ladson-Billings (2011) stresses the importance of positive perception of students’ abilities in the learning process. Social students are considered as assets rather than deficits (Ladson-Billings 2011). As socio-cultural elements are fundamental for culturally responsive pedagogy, local community engagement and positive support are essential for improving aboriginal students’ engagement in school activities. Bishop, O’Sullivan & Berrryman, (2010),
developed a *Te Kotahitanga model*, which is based on the Maori students’ cultural elements and their voices on the human rights and responsibilities in education. The *Te Kotahitanga model* aims at developing a cultural-responsive pedagogy. It was largely used to enhance educational attainment among the Maori community in New Zealand. The model posits that teaching will be more effective when teachers integrate ethnic identities and culture within the subject contents. Based on the data from the presented study as well past literature, it may be fair to state that culturally responsive pedagogy is one of the pedagogical strategies that are supposed to be taken into account while designing the curriculum for aboriginal education.

**Conclusions**

Overall, this study shows that aboriginal parents have provided various socio-educational support for their children. As most parents have limited knowledge on educational guidance, specific programmes for help are needed. In order to promote awareness and instruct aboriginal parents on educational guidance, a specific programme focusing on both aspects is suggested. Teachers’ initiative to make the teaching and learning processes effective is also needed. This highlights the importance of pedagogical content knowledge.

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**References**

